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A case of erythroderma in an oil painting at Tate Britain

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Editor,

The oil canvas “Punch or May Day” (1829) by British painter Benjamin Robert Haydon (1786-1846) is exhibited at Tate Britain in London [1,2]. The painting theatrically depicts a colorful London-street scene not far from St Marylebone church during May Day a bit after noon. The crowd attends Punch and Judy puppet show in the middle of the street and blocks the coaches’ traffic (**Figure 1**). Among the 25 characters in this painting, a seeming aged-man

wearing a creamy white coat and top hat stands out. He has his pocket picked deftly by a small hand while gawping [2]. His skin tone contrasts from the other characters nearby, who have a light or dark skin. He displays a bright diffuse facial redness without any normal appearing skin. A closer look shows additional details such as deep wrinkles on the forehead and on the corner of eye (Crow's feet), sparse frontal and temporal alopecia, graying hairs, and no visible eyebrows or eyelids. The skin seems dry, but not scaly, the lips are thin and the hands are red-orange (**Figure 2**).

The painting analysis was performed as previously described [3,4]. The author first screened paintings at Tate Britain for 30 seconds from a distance of 1 m, concentrating on face, hands and all exposed skin, and then stepped closer for details analysis. The character has features suggestive of chronic erythroderma: bright redness, lack of visible eyebrows and of eyelids, marked wrinkles, sparse alopecia, and thin lips. The redness is not evocative of rosacea. Besides, artists usually suggest alcohol-associated facial redness with additional clues in the painting like alcoholic beverages. Several characters have here stylistic redness on the cheeks [4], which support that the striking redness of this man is not a stylistic choice. Differential diagnoses include here adult atopic dermatitis, chronic actinic dermatitis, pityriasis rubra pilaris or Sezary syndrome. In the literature, Dequeker *et al* identified a possible case of mycosis fungoides in a painting by Lambert Lombard [5], but we failed to find other case similar as the present one. With all the cautions and limitations surrounding the practice of iconodiagnosis, Haydon may have portrayed here an individual with chronic erythroderma.

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Figure legends

Figure 1. Punch or May Day (1829), Benjamin Robert Haydon, Tate Britain. Photo © Tate

Figure 2. Detail view. Notice the diffuse redness of the face, wrinkles, lack of eyebrows and eyelids, sparse alopecia and redness of the hand.

Haydon N00682 GV 20-12-2016 ©Tate

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