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Domenico Ghirlandaio

An Old Man and His Grandson (ca 1480-1490)

THE IDENTITIES of the 2 figures in this painting by Domenico Ghirlandaio are unknown, but the picture conveys such a close relationship between them that it has long been assumed that they are grandfather and grandson. Ghirlandaio was among the busiest and best-known painters in Florence in the late 15th century—Michelangelo trained in his workshop—and this work was almost certainly commissioned by a wealthy Florentine family of that era.

Art of the time was moving beyond strictly religious subject matter. This painting can be considered an early psychological portrait, with a bit of landscape included in the window at the upper right. Its main theme seems to be bonding across the generations. Ghirlandaio provides visual clues suggesting a comfortable intimacy between the older man and the boy: their chests touch, the man's embracing left arm is reciprocated by the boy's left hand resting on his chest, and the man's kindly downward gaze is returned by the boy's attentive look up at him.

In his book on the family (*Della Famiglia*), Renaissance author Leon Battista Alberti wrote "... everyone says that small children are the comfort and delight of their fathers and of the old people of the family."¹ Broader social factors also contributed to the high value placed on children. In contrast to the grace and sophistication of Renaissance art, medicine and public health of the time were primitive. Periodic epidemics of plague decimated cities, wiping out much of the work force and threaten-

ing the existence of entire extended families. Married women were under pressure to repopulate the family and community by being almost continuously pregnant, exposing themselves repeatedly to the pain and serious risks of childbirth. Mortality rates among infants and children were very high; historians estimate that about half of all children died before they were ten years old. Under these harsh conditions, families were especially pleased to have a healthy boy who could continue the family name and help sustain the family economically on reaching adulthood and for whom no dowry would be needed. But a healthy girl could also help with domestic chores and raised the prospect of creating advantageous new links between families through marriage.

So, what about the grandfather's nose? Evidently, he had a rhinophyma, a cosmetically disfiguring but otherwise benign condition thought to be the end stage of rosacea, a common facial dermatosis. Although the man's head may be tilted at a relatively flattering angle, his deformed proboscis is still right in the center of the picture. It is thus a stark example of the shift during the Renaissance away from the idealized, generic human faces typical of earlier religious art toward the more naturalistic, distinctive faces of real individuals—warts and all.

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1. Alberti LB. *The Family in Renaissance Florence*. Watkins RN, trans-ed. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press; 1969:50.