



Rembrandt van Rijn,
"Self Portrait
at the Age of 63,"
1669, National Gallery,
London.

The Picture of Health

By Ferdinand Protzman

**The picture of health – truth or fiction?
Pictures can conjure up the dream of perfect health or cover up
the realities of sickness and disease.**



Health in pictures: a not just aesthetic reflection of illusion and truth.
Henry Peach Robinson, "Fading Away," 1858, combination albumen print.
George Eastman House, Rochester, N. Y.

In his enigmatic "Self Portrait at the Age of 63," Rembrandt van Rijn depicts himself seated, hands folded across his belly, gazing at the viewer. Warm light illuminates his wrinkled face. What may be a smile lurks around his closed mouth. A pinpoint of white paint in one eye provides an incandescent twinkle, a beacon of inner life. Hooded by its drooping lid, the other eye is a black hole. Whether the artist is happy or sad cannot be determined. But the man appears to have been in reasonably good health at the time of the painting.

Almost two centuries later, an English painter and etcher named Henry Peach Robinson employed a new medium, photography, to depict another aspect of health in "Fading Away," an albumen print from 1858. His photo shows a young girl dressed in white, propped up on pillows in a chair, accompanied by her parents and sister. No pain is evident on the child's smooth face, yet from the expressions and body language of her family – her father stands at a window, back to the camera, shoulders hunched in grief – it is clear she is dying.

Both pictures, in terms of their subjects' health, are deceptive. To create "Fading Away," Robinson cast real

people in a visual fiction, a composite photograph made from five negatives whose subject was, in the artist's words, "a fine healthy girl of about fourteen, and the picture was done to see how near death she could be made to look." When it appeared, the photo shocked the public; Robinson was condemned for portraying the death of a child.

As for Rembrandt, his lips hide teeth and gums so ravaged by sweets that research in 1980 by two American dentists concluded he was a "dental cripple." When he painted the picture in 1669 – one of the last of some 75 self-portraits he created – his aching mouth was likely the least of his problems. A few months after finishing the painting, he died.

Rembrandt and Robinson, of course, intended to create art rather than document actual health. That an artist would create a picture of health that is manipulated, superficial and deceptive, concealing as much as it reveals about the subject's actual state of body and mind, is no surprise. Health, in the broadest sense of an individual's physical and mental well-being, is a complex confluence of processes influenced by all manner of biological and environmental factors and inevitably ending in death.



The Coppertone Girl, a seemingly ageless icon of American advertising.

That complexity cannot be seen when we look at ourselves or others. Only the surface layer of physical appearance is visible, displaying unreliable pictures from which health or illness can merely be inferred.

Pictures that conceal more than they reveal

What is surprising is that the approach to depicting health hasn't changed much since Rembrandt's or Robinson's day. Despite the evolution of photographic and telecommunications technologies over the years, pictures purporting to show health are still superficial and conceal more than they reveal. Considering Rembrandt's self-portraits as a single body of work recording his physical and psychological condition over the course of his adult life or viewing Robinson's picture as an illustration of his era's social mores, a case can be made that 21st century depictions of health are, by comparison, more superficial.

Instead of the honesty with which Rembrandt captured the effects of age, illness and daily life on his face and body, or Robinson's stogy recreation of genuine human tragedy, we are confronted in magazines, newspapers, movies, videos and television with a seemingly endless parade of robust, healthy people. With few exceptions, photography, the dominant medium of our time, unrivaled

in its power to provide precise, accurate imagery under almost any conditions, has not been used to illustrate or explore the complex realities of health but to create a homogenous ideal of health unshadowed by sickness, violence or death. In the collective self-portrait of the mass media, health is depicted only as healthy people.

Like photography, medicine and so many other things, health has become an industry. Because of this, photography's vast potential to reveal what health means, to depict not just wellness, but the full range of pathologies and pitfalls affecting an individual's health, has been superseded by its power to sell products.

Pictures as incitement to prevention

To depict the deleterious health effects of cigarette smoking, for example, what could be more powerful than a clear, full-color photograph of blackened lung tissue ravaged by tumors? Such pictures exist, of course, although they seldom appear outside of medical publications because they are an incitement to prevention, which is a good thing from a public health standpoint but problematic for the industries – agriculture, tobacco, machinery, transport, retail, medicine, insurance and funeral – which make billions from smoking.

Would it help us to better prepare for sickness and aging if pictures stopped showing idealized images and showed the actual state of health of real people?



Andy Warhol,
"Self-Portrait with Skull,"
1978, silkscreen enamel
on synthetic polymer
paint on canvas,
The Menil Collection,
Houston, Texas.

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The pictures of health most people see on a daily basis show healthy people as portrayed by professional photo models or comely amateurs. We don't know their actual state of health. We do know them by their products' names: the "Gerber Baby," the "Cosmo Girl," or in the pre-photography era the "Coppertone Girl," or the "Campbell Soup Kids." They are appealing stereotypes. The models' skin and hair glows, their eyes are clear, they are never too plump or too skinny and they are well-dressed and usually engaged in some pleasant activity. Unlike Rembrandt, their smiles display white teeth and pink gums. Even in pharmaceutical ads, we never see the actual body part, think erectile dysfunction, which the drug directly affects. The health industry's picture of health is about a desired result, not a process with an attendant failure rate.

By implication, these images present health as a permanent condition in which the functioning of the body and the mind is or should be, if one applies the right doctors, procedures, techniques and products, optimal. Cancer, broken bones, aging, obesity, a large nose, small breasts, everything can be fixed. No need to witness the messy repairs taking place. Is it any wonder that so many people seem unable to confront health issues when a glance in the mirror of mass media tells them nothing is wrong?

As history shows, the health industry did not invent this superficial picture, but it has often distorted it for its own purposes, dangling the carrot of vitality in front of a target audience that must be unhealthy since there is little profit in selling remedies to people who are not

ailing. Perhaps it is simply human nature to avoid looking closely at the physical and mental state of ourselves or those around us. Even if the health industry stopped showing an idealized image of health in favor of the actual state of real people, it might not help us to be better able to prepare for, react to and accept sickness or the changes in health that accompany aging. Denial has power. It is easier to look at a picture of a carrot than reach for or eat it.

No easy way to depict the complexity of health

For the industry, a more realistic picture of health carries obvious risks. Health is finite. Like Andy Warhol, in his "Self-Portrait with Skull," a 1978 silkscreen on canvas that he based on a Polaroid print, we live with death looking over our shoulders. Dwelling on that fact could undermine the public's will to consume. There is also no quick, simple way to show health to the masses as a fragile, organic and emotional equilibrium resulting from a welter of interrelated processes functioning simultaneously, to explain that the happy stasis of the ideal health picture is, in biological terms, unattainable.

Attainability is critical. If health cannot be attained, neither can it be obtained. Industries, wholesalers, retailers would have nothing to sell. Sans sales, we're all in the soup, reduced in economic terms to the kind of single cell organisms that first emerged from the primordial ooze. Then again, the picture of health, like all pictures, is still developing in the earth's mysterious emulsion of light and air, even if we can't or won't see it. ■