

Maddalena Ventura: an impressive case of hirsutism in a painting of Jusepe De Ribera (1631)

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Jusepe de Ribera (Xàtiva, 1591–Naples, 1652), also called “Spagnoletto”, was a Spanish painter and printmaker. As one of the most prolific interpreters of Tenebrism, the style of representing violent contrasts of light and dark, where darkness becomes a dominating feature of the image, he is considered one of the greatest followers of the art of Caravaggio and one of the greatest protagonists of European painting of the Seventeenth century.

This picture titled “Maddalena Ventura con il marito e il figlio” (Maddalena Ventura with her husband and son)

or “Bearded Lady” is an oil painted in a wood panel dated 1631, commissioned by the Viceroy of Naples, Fernando Afán de Ribera, and exposed at the Fundación Casa Ducal de Medinaceli of Toledo.

In the central part of the picture is depicted a 37-year-old lady, affected by hirsutism. The woman, called Maddalena Ventura, is portrayed with the husband during the breast-feeding of her child. Contemporary documents report the development of hirsutism during the pregnancy. She was originally from the Italian region of Abruzzo and moved to Naples called by the Viceroy, as object of curiosity for the court, representing the “paradox” of the woman with a male appearance. This hirsutism that can be interpreted as a manifestation of ovarian or adrenal diseases, is here probably represented by Ribera as artistic exacerbation of the reality.

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical approval This paper does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

Informed consent No informed consent.

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