Reply

Longevity of prominent European painters, writers, mathematicians and composers

Sir—We appreciate the comments of Abastado and Chemla in this issue and in Dequeker’s Editorial [1] accompanying our article [2]. We documented that European old master sculptors lived significantly longer than old master painters. We attributed this difference in longevity to the difference in energy expenditure between the two professions, postulating the enhanced activity of sculpting may increase immune function and protect against infectious diseases. However, both Abastado and Chemla, and Dequeker [1] prefer an alternative explanation. They wish to attribute the difference in longevity to the presence of heavy metals in paints leading to significant toxicity and disease. However, inherent in their explanation is that survival of painters is compromised by their craft. To date, there is no evidence that painters lived significantly shorter lives than people in other professions.

To investigate this possibility, we examined three other professions [3–8], employing the same criteria used for painters and sculptors [2], the only exception being that individuals must have lived at least to the age of 23, the youngest age at which a painter or sculptor died. Statistical analyses were performed as previously described [2]. As seen in Table 1, there is no difference in longevity among writers, mathematicians, composers and painters. The average age of death for all writers, mathematicians and composers (62.3 ± 0.7) is nearly identical to that of painters (63.6 ± 0.9). However, the longevity of all four groups is significantly less than the longevity of sculptors (66.6 ± 0.9) [2], a finding that reflects the uniqueness of the art of sculpting. These results also support the contention that the difference between painters and sculptors was not the result of the toxicity of paints.

Another issue raised by Dequeker [1] was that artists like Michelangelo can easily master both painting and sculpting. However, this ability to achieve recognition in both painting and sculpting was accomplished only by very few artists, Andrea del Verrocchio, Antonio and Piero del Pollaiuolo and Gian Lorenzo Bernini being the most prominent. The vast majority of European artists showed great fidelity to a single discipline, either painting or sculpting.

The authors apologise for not citing in their original publication the work of Abastado et al. [9] and Simonton [10]. We thank Drs Abastado and Chemla for publishing their reply in this issue of Age and Ageing. Simonton examined 1,632 eminent Japanese who lived between 450 and 1883 A.D. [10]. Among the fourteen major categories of achievement, painters accounted for 12% of the population while sculptors represented 1% of the population. Simonton found that sculptors lived approximately eight years longer than painters. We urge those interested in our work to read these thought-provoking papers.

Table 1. Age at death of prominent European painters, writers, mathematicians and composers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Profession</th>
<th>Years</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Old master painters</td>
<td>63.6 ± 0.9 (262)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writers</td>
<td>61.9 ± 1.1 (199)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematicians</td>
<td>63.5 ± 1.5 (115)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Composers</td>
<td>61.6 ± 1.6 (68)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results represent mean ± S.E.M. The number of individuals is in parentheses. The longevity of old master painters is taken from our article [2].


doi:10.1093/ageing/afn38