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psychiatry
in pictures



Diego Velazquez (1599–1660). Portrait of Juan Calabazas (Calabacillas) (1637–9)

Picture selection and text by Dr Miriam Barrett

This portrait by Velazquez is of Juan Calabazas, also called 'The Fool from Coria' and nicknamed Calabacillas or 'pumpkin-head'. He was court jester first to Prince Don Fernando and then to the naturally melancholic King Philip IV. Some claim he had autism but it is probable that he had infantile hypothyroidism, resulting in growth retardation and intellectual disability. Velazquez as court painter and royal servant shared the life of these so-called 'dwarfs', 'fools' and 'jesters' (or *truhanes* in Spanish) and was able to show them with empathy and respect in his paintings. Velazquez's choice of subject for this portrait provides a historical perspective of how people with intellectual disability, and/or short stature, were regarded 400 years ago. They were present in large numbers at the Spanish court of Philip IV, as at other European courts. They were maintained in accordance with a charitable tradition extending back to the Middle Ages. Although this often resulted in the creation of a kind of human menagerie for the amusement of the court, some individuals came to be appreciated for their wit, arousing affection and at times achieving considerable fame and privileges. Under cover of jest they would often tell their lords and masters home truths, suppressed within the strictures of the court, and were free to parody the rigid etiquette by which the courtiers and courtesans were bound.

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