

Violence in Art:  
Essays in Aesthetics and Philosophy

Edited By  
Darren M. Slade

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To all the traumatized artists who've had to survive and thrive  
with violence in their own life.  
You are an inspiration.

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**R**obert Elrod is a self-taught artist who loves monsters. He's drawn them in graphite, ink, and colored pencil. He's painted them with watercolor, acrylic, and oil. He has a passion for the misunderstood creatures of the world ... all worlds. He grew up reading comic books and loving Ray Harryhausen movies. His head has always been in the clouds and you can see it in his art.

Robert is probably best known for contributing to *The Thing: Artbook*, *Ghostbusters: Artbook*, *Aliens: Artbook*, and *Bernie Wrightson: Artbook—A Tribute* ... all from Printed in Blood Publications as well as having work juried into *Infected by Art* Volume 6.

Robert has created book covers and interior illustrations for small-press publishers and authors, as well as his own self-published comics. He's currently doing illustrations for ten literary classics for backers of his Kickstarter project but looks forward to dark interludes with his own creations. You can see more of his work at [www.robertelrodlc.com](http://www.robertelrodlc.com).



*Undead Diary (2010)*



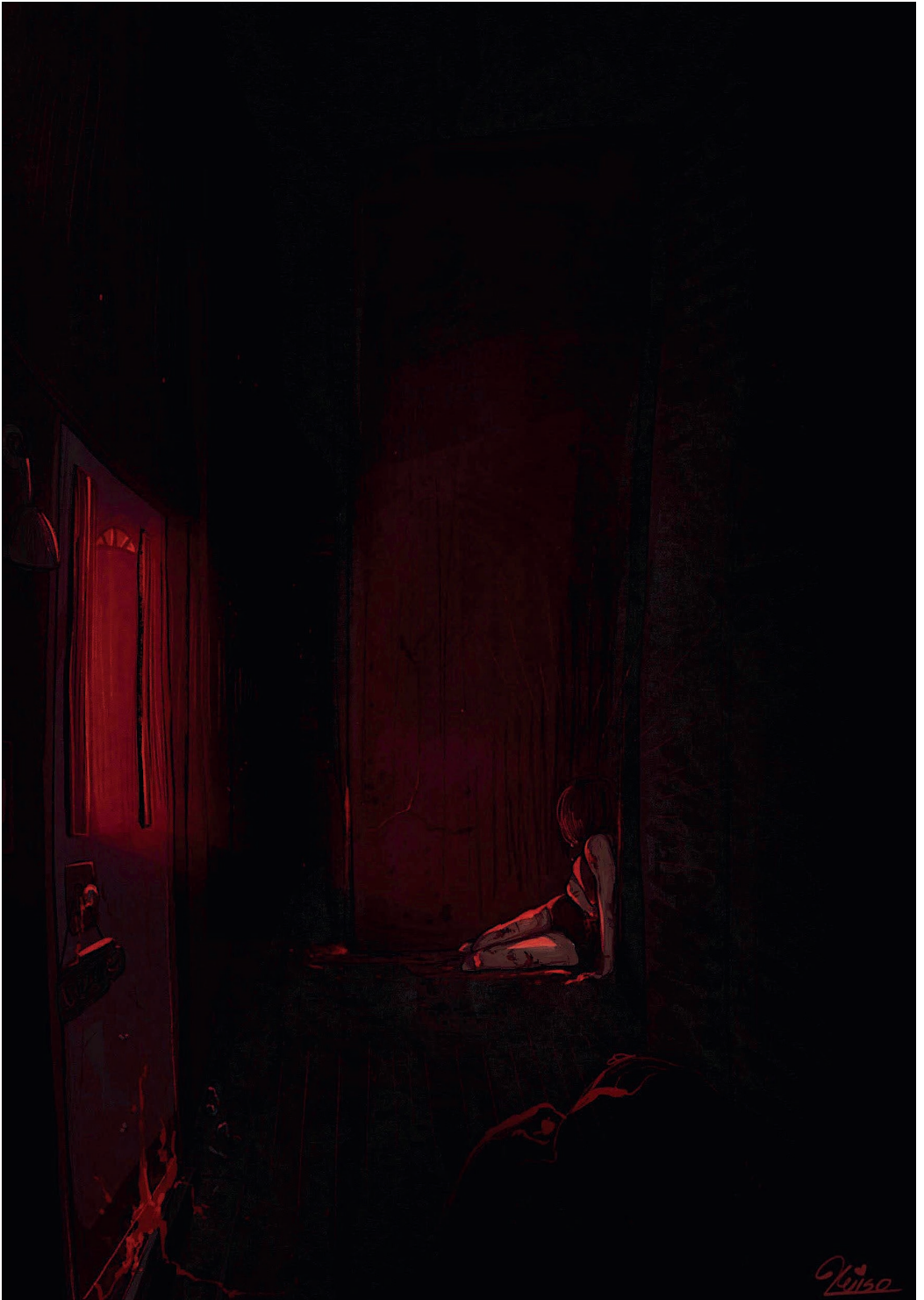


**M**y name is Evangeline, but I commonly go by the name [Keiiso](#) for my digital paintings. I am a freshman in high school and have been making art since 2018. Having never truly taken an art class before, the paintings I create are the product of self-teaching, though I hope to have a career in this field one day. Other art forms such as dancing, pottery, and music have all been momentary interests of mine, but nothing has stuck as well as digital art. I also take great interest in writing, with my art usually inspiring the stories I create. Art for me has always been something I've struggled with and found comfort in; it's what I pour myself and my emotions into that gives me a sense of freedom. I did have to overcome many hills of "I'll never be as good as that artist" and "How come those people can draw so much better than me?" As my skills developed and I stepped out of my comfort zone, my creations more accurately resembled the paintings in my head. I truly began to love my illustrations.

I derive my inspiration from both [Instagram](#), where my artist friends reside, and portraits of idols. In general, my art doesn't conform to any particular style because it's constantly changing and evolving. Some days my art could be soft and pastel, some days wild and sketchy, and some days confusing with bright, saturated colors that feel straight out of a fever dream. I hope that is how people will look at my art: As the raw emotions that I originally poured into them.



*Home is Not This Bottomless Pit (2022)*



## **The History and Philosophy of Depicting a Violently Crucified Christ**

Darren M. Slade

**T**he first depiction of Jesus' death appears in mythographic literary form through the Gospel of Mark, approximately four decades after the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>1</sup> And much like all artistic depictions that followed it, the Gospel accounts are theological interpretations of the actual event itself. Richard Viladesau notes,

The gospels' accounts of the passion are already a form of 'aesthetic' theology: that is, they are dramatic narratives, structured to bring out theological perspectives and interpretations of the historical fact of Jesus' suffering. They give us not a plain description but a theological rereading of the facts.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, the historical violence and horror of crucifixion can be lost on both artists and observers alike. Artistic depictions of Jesus' death, whether in paintings, sculptures, or other mediums, are some of the most grotesque displays of human cruelty in history. But because seeing a man dying on a cross has become so ubiquitous throughout the world, people are now desensitized to its display of violence. This affront to traditional aesthetics and decorum is what makes crucifixion art so unique in both art history and art philosophy. Now, as a case of intriguing irony, crucifixes have transformed something

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<sup>1</sup> Sloyan, *The Crucifixion of Jesus*, 99–100. For historical information on Jesus' crucifixion, see Theissen and Merz, *The Historical Jesus*, 440–73.

<sup>2</sup> Viladesau, *The Beauty of the Cross*, 22.

horrendously violent into something (according to theologians and Christian ethicists) that exemplifies virtue and beauty.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, viewing depictions of Jesus' crucifixion in positive terms has not always been the case. Indeed, in the ancient church, Christians originally thought it was inappropriate. Martin Hengel once described the situation by writing, "The relative scarcity of references to crucifixion in antiquity and their fortuitousness are less a historical problem than *an aesthetic one*."<sup>4</sup> In other words, Christians generally thought it to be in poor taste to depict Jesus being tortured and murdered, yet the violent scandal of Jesus' death has since been lost on modern observers. The purpose of this essay is to detail precisely how (historically) and why (philosophically) crucifixion art became an aesthetically appropriate form of piety. The thesis of this chapter is that crucifixion art serves a didactic function both theologically (to inspire belief in and imitation of Christ's self-sacrifice) and doxologically (to inspire cultic devotion to God). As a case of "moral beauty," crucifixion art represents philosophical notions of the ultimate Good, which allows onlookers to personally witness and then appropriate that ultimate Good into their own being. Five sections will help support this thesis: 1) a brief exploration of crucifixion in ancient history; 2) the beginnings of crucifixion art in the early church with an emphasis on its scandalous nature; 3) the different patterns and historical falsities in crucifix portrayals throughout church history; 4) the theology behind crucifixion art; and 5) the philosophy behind believers displaying a torture victim as an object of religious veneration.

### **The Violence of Crucifixion**

It is important first to understand the truly violent nature of crucifixion as a form of capital punishment. The use of crucifixion against criminals likely first developed among the Persians, Medes, and Athenians in the seventh century BCE before it was adopted by Alexander the Great in the late fourth century and, subsequently, the

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<sup>3</sup> See for example, Lefler, "Cruciform Beauty," 33–55.

<sup>4</sup> Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World*, 38; emphasis added.

Roman Empire.<sup>5</sup> Whereas earlier societies crucified a corpse *after* executing someone, the Romans were the first to popularize using it as a means of torturing and then killing slaves, non-Roman citizens, and people from the lower classes, sparing only the upper classes and nobility from the humiliation of this gruesome death. As a matter of course, the Romans particularly enjoyed crucifying Jews en masse, sometimes hundreds or thousands at a time (Josephus, *Ant.* 17.295).<sup>6</sup> James Edwards notes,

Crucifixion was a punishment reserved for non-Roman citizens in which excessive cruelty was unleashed on the lowest and most defenseless classes of society—slaves, violent criminals, and prisoners of war. At the defeat of the slave rebellion under Spartacus in 71 B.C. Crassus had more than six thousand slaves crucified along the Via Appia between Capua and Rome.<sup>7</sup>

The horrors of crucifixion cannot be understated. As William Edwards explains, the victim (*cruciaris*) often suffered and died slowly over a period of several days. Once dead, their remains were left on the cross to rot while vultures and wild beasts devoured their flesh. What made crucifixion so ghastly was not the severity of blood loss or the flogging that might have taken place beforehand. Rather, depending on how a person was positioned, death would come slowly from several different ways, including exhaustion asphyxia, hypovolemic shock, or heart failure.<sup>8</sup>

With Jesus in particular, Frederick Zugibe (who ascribes to the traditional view that Jesus was first flogged and then nailed through his hands and feet) describes the ordeal at length:

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<sup>5</sup> The term “crucifixion” throughout pre-Christian Greek, Latin, and Jewish literature may have been a generalized term for “suspension” and not always a reference to a specific method of execution. Only after the death of Jesus did “crucifixion” become a term indicating punishment on a cross. See Samuelsson, *Crucifixion in Antiquity*, 143–260.

<sup>6</sup> Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, 945–46.

<sup>7</sup> Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 468.

<sup>8</sup> Edwards, “On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ,” 1455–63. Cf. Zugibe, “Two Questions About Crucifixion,” 35–41.

After his arrest, Jesus was scourged by Pilate's soldiers utilizing a *flagrum* composed of leather tails bearing metal weights or bone at the tips. As the *flagrum* was swung at Jesus' flesh, its tips penetrated his skin, causing trauma to the nerves, muscles and skin. Jesus became exhausted, with shivering, severe sweating, frequent seizures and a craving for water. Hypovolemia, or loss of fluid, occurred as a result of sweating, blood loss and pleural effusion (the early stage of fluid accumulation around the lungs) from the trauma caused by the scourging. It is likely that even before reaching Golgotha, Jesus entered a state of traumatic shock brought about by the scourging, by the irritation of the nerves of the scalp by the cap of thorns from the Syrian Christ Thorn plant, and by being struck several times.

As Jesus trudged up the hill to Golgotha in the hot sun, sometimes carrying the crosspiece on his shoulders, sometimes falling under its weight, being struck as he moved along his painful route, water loss continued and his condition of shock worsened. Upon reaching the crest of Golgotha, Jesus was nailed to the cross with large, square iron nails driven through both hands into the cross. The probable resulting damage to the sensory branches of the median nerve caused a pain known medically as *causalgia*, one of the most exquisite pains ever experienced. The nails through the feet also elicited great pain. Both injuries caused additional traumatic shock and hypovolemia, or water loss. The hours on the cross, with the weight of the body pressing on the nails in the hands and feet caused episodes of excruciating agony every time Jesus moved. Traumatic shock would have been exacerbated by these episodes and by the unrelenting pain in the chest wall from the scourging. The excessive sweating induced by the ongoing trauma and by the hot sun would have further reduced blood volume, causing hypovolemic shock.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Zugibe, "Two Questions About Crucifixion," 40–41.

Thomas Miller depicts the episode further:

The nerve injuries induced by the nails were responsible for excruciating pain from the resultant causalgia, unlike anything that you or I can comprehend. Every movement, no matter how minor, triggered paroxysms or pain. Further, changes in temperature, sunlight, and even breezes were additional triggering mechanisms.<sup>10</sup>

As such, the public display of crucifying someone was intended to strike fear into onlookers (Quintilian, *Decl.* 274). Not surprisingly, then, ancient writers would describe the act as the most excruciating, cruel, disgusting, and extreme form of punishment ever invented by humans (cf. Cicero, *Verrine Orations* 2.5.165). Thus, ancient pagan writers mocked the shamefulness of Christians who would worship an executed criminal as a deity.<sup>11</sup>

### The Beginnings of Crucifixion Art

The extreme horrors of crucifixion demand asking how and why such violent imagery would become an appropriate symbol for religious piety. The earliest identifiable examples of Christian art did not appear until about the turn of the third century, meaning that the wider Christian community either deliberately abstained from or were unable to produce largescale artwork for the first two hundred years of church history.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, there was a general disdain for ancient artforms among Christian leaders, who suggested that the devil was responsible for certain artistry (cf. Tert., *Idol* 3). According to Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150–215), for example, humanity’s love of art, especially pornographic and pagan art, was one reason that humanity fell into idolatry, fornication, and the worship of images. He once wrote, “The moment art flourished,

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<sup>10</sup> Miller, *Did Jesus Really Rise from the Dead?*, 78–79. For a full description of the medical horrors of crucifixion, see pp. 61–86.

<sup>11</sup> Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, 947; Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World*, 7–10.

<sup>12</sup> Ferguson, *Church History Volume One*, 168–69.

error increased” (*Protr.* 4).<sup>13</sup> This period of church history emphasized the ascetic ideals of austerity, nonindulgence, and being heavenly focused. As a result, elaborate depictions of Jesus, particularly in statue and iconographic form, did not arise until later into the fourth century. In fact, when emperor Constantine’s sister, Constantia, requested an image of Jesus, Eusebius of Cæsarea (ca. 263–340) appeared shocked that anyone would request such a thing, particularly since the incarnation was only temporary and the human Jesus was not the true form of the divine *Logos* (*Ep. Constantia*).<sup>14</sup> As late as 313, during the Spanish synod at Elvira, some Christian communities were forbidden from employing religious artwork entirely, declaring, “Pictures ought not to be in churches, nor that which is worshiped and adored to be depicted on the walls” (Canon 36).<sup>15</sup> Even Eusebius pronounced the use of artwork in churches a violation of divine law specifically because an image of the divine essence is impossible to replicate (*Epist. ad Joh. Hieros.* 9).

Of course, the fact that Christian art is still found on frescoes in ancient catacombs, as well as early *domus ecclesiae* (e.g., the mid-third century Dura Europos church in Syria) and ancient sarcophagi (particularly with use of more simplistic images like fish, doves, ships, anchors, lyres, and fishermen) indicates that Christian art had gained acceptance for Christian ceremonies among much of the general population, although there was still an effort to avoid violent, intemperate, pornographic, and idolatrous associations (see esp. Clem. Alex., *Protr.* 4).<sup>16</sup> At this stage, the most common artistic depiction was of the Last Supper and the *ichthys* (fish) symbol.<sup>17</sup> When Christians did draw or paint biblical figures, the most common characters were Jonah, Lazarus, Adam and Eve, and Jesus as either the Good Shepherd or of him performing miracles with a magician’s wand in hand. The sacrifice of Isaac even appeared in early iconography as a type for Jesus’ crucifixion before the time of

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<sup>13</sup> English translation appears in Clement of Alexandria, “The Exhortation to the Greeks,” 104.

<sup>14</sup> Pelikan, *Jesus through the Centuries*, 85–86.

<sup>15</sup> English translation appears in Schultze, “Art and Church,” 305–6.

<sup>16</sup> González, *The Story of Christianity*, 99–100; Ferguson, *Church History*, 169–70.

<sup>17</sup> González, *The Story of Christianity*, 100.



Constantine.<sup>18</sup> Pictorial scenes were usually of figures praying, being baptized, or eating the eucharist. Consequently, the crucifixion of Jesus was not a common depiction before the fifth century, and three-dimensional sculptures of any kind appeared only sporadically by the third century, becoming a common feature much later in the second millennia. Only after Constantine popularized the symbol of the cross (without corpus) among the Roman military did it become a symbol of triumph.<sup>19</sup> For example, one sarcophagi from Rome displays people mourning at the foot of a Latin-shaped cross, but there exists no crucified body. Rather, an eagle with outstretched wings lowers a victory wreath (with the chi-rho monogram for Jesus Christ) onto the top of the cross. Two birds, representing souls, sit on each side of the crossbeams as their beaks either pick at or help solidify the victory wreath.<sup>20</sup>



*Lateran Museum: Passion Sarcophagus at Rome, Italy (Fourth Century)*

Before appearing in artwork, Christians as early as the second century believed in the magical virtue of making the “sign of the cross” (*signum crucis*) on their bodies whenever they woke up, ate, bathed, left home, or passed a pagan temple (Cyprian, *Ep.* 58.9; Cyril of Jer., *Hier., Cat. Lect.* 13.36). Having turned into a talisman, the superstitious practice became so well-known that Tertullian (ca. 150–212) had to defend against accusations that Christians actually worshipped the symbol of the cross because (as

<sup>18</sup> See Jensen, “Isaac as a Christological Symbol,” 6–12.

<sup>19</sup> Ferguson, *Church History*, 170–71, 456; Viladesau, *The Beauty of the Cross*, 41–45.

<sup>20</sup> Effenberger, *Früchristliche Kunst und Kultur*, 58.

is still the custom today) believers repeatedly fashioned pieces of wood into the shape of a cross (*Apol.* 16; *Nat.* 1.12).<sup>21</sup> Soon, Christians began painting the sign of the cross on their foreheads and on doors, prompting people like Julian the Apostate (331–363) to charge them of engaging in the same idol worship that they claimed to denounce.<sup>22</sup> In time, Christianity became known as *religio crucis*, the religion of the cross; and any depiction, shape, or construction of the shape was believed to be a type of amulet that possessed miraculous healing or protective powers.<sup>23</sup>

Once the church received imperial support through funds and land in the fourth century, Christian art became more common and more elaborate. Basilicas now contained ornate marble and mosaic designs (the primary medium in the Eastern Church), but there was still no real focus on the crucifixion. When Jesus did appear in art, it was as a teacher, lawgiver, or seated in glory as ruler of the cosmos.<sup>24</sup> Only later in the middle Byzantine era, around the late ninth century, did Christian art really flourish. By this time, church liturgy and feasts were more structured according to a set calendar, and the Exaltation of the Cross was now featured as one of the church's nine fixed annual celebrations. As relics became a requirement for consecrating new churches, so too did monasticism rise to produce and sell works of religious art.<sup>25</sup> Eventually, the cross, in various shapes and designs, became a symbol for military victory. Hence, some depictions of Jesus have him dressed in Roman military garb carrying the cross like a weapon, as in the fifth century mosaic found in the Archiepiscopal chapel at Ravenna.

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<sup>21</sup> Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 269–70.

<sup>22</sup> Julian the Apostate, *Against the Galileans*, 23–24; Viladesau, *The Beauty of the Cross*, 41–49.

<sup>23</sup> Pelikan, *Jesus through the Centuries*, 96–100.

<sup>24</sup> González, *The Story of Christianity*, 127; Ferguson, *Church History*, 253–54.

<sup>25</sup> Ferguson, *Church History*, 343–44.



*Archiepiscopal Chapel at Ravenna, Italy (Fifth Century)*

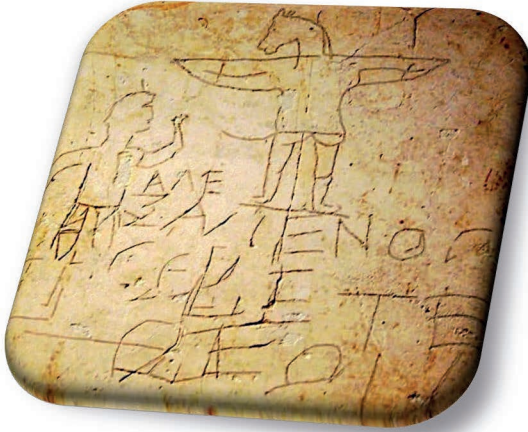
As Philip Schaff related, “Soon after Constantine’s victory over Maxentius by the aid of the Labarum [in 312 CE], crosses were seen on helmets, bucklers, standards, crowns, sceptres, coins and seals, in various forms.”<sup>26</sup> Elsewhere, Schaff quoted John Chrysostom (ca. 349–407) as writing,

The sign of universal detestation ... the sign of extreme penalty, is now become the object of universal desire and love. We see it everywhere triumphant; we find it on houses, on roofs, and on walls, in cities and hamlets, on the markets, along the roads, and in the deserts, on the mountains and in the valleys, on the sea, on ships, on books and weapons, on garments, in marriage chambers, at banquets, upon gold and silver vessels, in pearls, in painting upon walls, on beds, on the bodies of very sick animals, on the bodies of the possessed ..., at the dances of the merry, and in the brotherhoods of ascetics.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 270.

<sup>27</sup> Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 561.



*Graffito of Alexamenos (Rome, Italy)*

What the evolution of Christian art demonstrates is that the earliest Christians were uncomfortable with viewing the execution of their personal deity. In the fourth century, Christian art typically illustrated a lamb next to or on the cross (instead of Jesus himself). Others merely showed Jesus holding the cross (but not crucified on it).<sup>28</sup> The implication is that it took several centuries, and the abolishment of crucifixion as a method of capital punishment in the fourth century, before Christians would become comfortable with creating and viewing images of an impaled Christ. In fact, it took the eighty-second canon of the *Concilium Quinisextum* of 692 to demand that Western Christians use a human figure to represent Christ instead of using symbolic images like a lamb.<sup>29</sup> It was at this point that crucifixion art became inherently creedal, meaning that a human figure was specifically intended to affirm orthodox Christologies against the rise of heretical Monophysite and Monothelite sects at the time.

One of the earliest known depictions of the crucifixion is a late second century (Gnostic?) carving on a jasper gem that portrays a naked and crooked figure impaled on a cross, which is likely mocking the proto-orthodox belief in Jesus' actual death (as

<sup>28</sup> Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 272, 562.

<sup>29</sup> Jefferson and Jensen, *The Art of Empire Christian*, 191, esp. n84.

opposed to belief in Jesus' illusory death held by many Gnostics).<sup>30</sup> Appearing around the same time, the Graffito of Alexamenos (also known as the "travesty crucifixion"), is a graffiti etching into a marble slab that depicts a man (Alexamenos) worshipping a crucified person with the head of an ass.

In Greek, the graffiti reads, "Alexamenos worships [his] God."<sup>31</sup> At the time, it was customary for Romans to mock Jews by claiming their God possessed the head of an ass. This insult simply carried over to Christians (cf. Tertullian, *Apol.* 16). Likely being the absolute earliest extant depiction of Jesus crucified, this graffiti etching intended to ridicule the early Christians' worship of Jesus as divine. Because Christianity was such a nonsensical and shocking religion to outsiders, pagans had a difficult time comprehending how rational people could believe their deity was executed by the state through crucifixion.<sup>32</sup>

Another early depiction, complete with Jesus' dying body, appears in the relief of the timber door of Santa Sabina, dating (at the earliest) to the middle of the fifth century. Just like most early representations, Jesus is shown alive and with no sign of suffering.<sup>33</sup>



*Basilica di Santa Sabina at Rome, Italy (Fifth Century)*

<sup>30</sup> Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, 947.

<sup>31</sup> Ἀλεξάμενος σέβεται [αὐτὸν] θεόν.

<sup>32</sup> Viladesau, *The Beauty of the Cross*, 19–20.

<sup>33</sup> Schultze, "Crucifix," 313.

There is also an early crucifixion scene in a Syrian copy of the Gospels from the year 586. As J. O. Westwood described it, “Our Saviour being clothed in a long loose shirt, reaching from the neck to the feet, with a slit on each side for the arms, and one in front; whereas, the thieves have only a short garment across the middle of the body....the arms of the crucified figures are disproportionately long, and the heads throughout the drawings are much too small.”<sup>34</sup>



*The Rabbula Gospels at Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana in Florence, Italy (586 CE)*

Philip Schaff related another early instance where “Gregory of Tours (d. 595) describes a crucifix in the church of St. Genesius, in Narbonne, which presented the crucified One almost entirely naked. But this gave offence, and was veiled, by order of the bishop, with a curtain, and only at times exposed to the people” (see *Liber miraculorum* 1.23).<sup>35</sup> This latter episode may reflect just how scandalous crucifixion art (and nudity) was to the early church.

### *Scandalum Crucis*

While depictions of the crucifixion appear infrequently in the first thousand years of church history, a focus on Jesus’ dying body was most prominent within the Franciscan Order of Western Christianity

<sup>34</sup> Westwood, *Palæographia Sacra Pictoria*, 2–3.

<sup>35</sup> Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 272.

beginning in the thirteenth century.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, there exists no mention of depicting Jesus dying in either the Nicene or Chalcedonian eras, particularly since educated Romans avoided talking about the barbarism of crucifixion.<sup>37</sup> The reason it took almost a thousand years for Christianity to accept violent images of Jesus is because of the *scandalum crucis* (the offensiveness of the cross).

The notion that God in Christ could have suffered the humiliation and torment of crucifixion was not only a contradiction in concepts for ancient (and some modern) people to conceive (cf. *Barn.* 5.5), but the very idea that God would forsake and condemn the Christ (cf. Deut. 21:22–23; Gal. 3:13), only to ask his followers to worship him after his execution, was beyond religiously insulting.<sup>38</sup> The very idea of God dying was absurd (1 Cor. 1:18–25). Ancient writers, such as Celsus (late second century) and Julian the Apostate, mocked Christians for their worship of a crucified deity, resulting in many early theologians and apologists attempting to rationalize an otherwise embarrassing doctrine (see esp., the Gospel of Peter).<sup>39</sup> Aloys Grillmeier remarks,

Christ sweating blood for fear and having to be strengthened by an angel (Luke 22.43f.) was already found particularly objectionable and a number of biblical manuscripts in fact omit this ‘shameful’ event...How could Jesus still be above the angels if one of them had to give him aid?<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Ferguson, *Church History*, 498.

<sup>37</sup> Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, 946.

<sup>38</sup> Unlike crucifixion, the reference to hanging or impaling someone “on a tree” (ESV) in Deuteronomy 21:22–23 was likely not the actual form of execution. Rather, following ancient Assyrian and Egyptian practices, the hanging was a way to display the corpse of criminals *after* they had been executed (cf. Josh. 8:29; 10:26–7; 2 Sam. 4:12; 21:8–13). This practice is most evident when reading the claims of ancient Assyrian kings “hanging” captives of war, which is depicted in Assyrian battle art as impaling the bodies of their victims with a stake. However, unlike the Egyptians (cf. Gen. 40:19), the Assyrians, and the later Romans who left the body on display to decompose, Mosaic law required Jews to bury the corpse the same day as execution (see Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 198).

<sup>39</sup> Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, 71–72.

<sup>40</sup> Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, 71.

Viladesau explains further,

For sophisticated Hellenistic society, the notion of a suffering god was ridiculous: an obviously mythological conception. For the adherents of popular religion, Jewish or gentile, the notion of a savior who was himself defeated by the powers of evil was equally absurd.<sup>41</sup>

Indeed, later Gnostic and Islamic beliefs would explicitly denounce the notion that God allowed the Messiah to suffer such a humiliating death.<sup>42</sup> It was this scandalous doctrine that likely prevented ancient Christians from depicting the crucifixion in artwork for several centuries. Nevertheless, once crucifixion art became commonplace, identifiable trends began to appear throughout church history.

### **Patterns in Crucifixion Art**

The earliest Christian artwork was far more symbolic and allusive of biblical scenes than they were descriptive. This trend forced believers to employ their imagination in order to experience those aspects of spiritual reality not easily attainable with the rational mind.<sup>43</sup> Only a few generations later, beginning in the fourth century, Christian art became more “historical” in nature. At this point, Christians depicted Jesus with the same characteristics as pagan deities and culture heroes.<sup>44</sup> This may help explain why most early Christian art did not portray Jesus with certain elements of derision, such as portraying him suffering or wearing a crown of thorns. Theology, of course, played a decisive role in determining Christian artforms. For example, Greek Orthodoxy focuses more on the divinizing of human nature through the incarnation, whereas Western Catholicism (and subsequently, Protestantism) emphasized the atoning sacrifice of Jesus. In the Middle Byzantine East (ninth

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<sup>41</sup> Viladesau, *The Beauty of the Cross*, 20.

<sup>42</sup> See for example, Irenæus, *Haer* 1.24.4; *Treat. Seth* 55–56; *Apoc. Pet.* 81; Qur’an Surah 4:157–58.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Barth, “Mortal Beauty,” 69–78.

<sup>44</sup> Ferguson, *Church History*, 170, 254.



to eleventh centuries), Jesus was depicted in the interior dome ceilings of the basilicas as *Christos Pantokratōr* (Christ the All-Powerful), as though he were a Roman emperor. Basilicas did not portray him as *Iēsoun ton estaurōmenon* (Jesus the Crucified). Indeed, depictions of Christ in majesty (seated on a throne as Ruler and Judge) was the most common theme from 800–1200, especially in Romanesque architecture and iconography.<sup>45</sup> Soon, however, crucifixion became the most prevalent theme in church art.<sup>46</sup>

There are four dominant phases in the history of crucifixion paintings: the Eastern Byzantine style, the Medieval Catholic (or Gothic) style, the Renaissance period, and the modern era. As Mikhail Sergeev explains, the Byzantine era lasted for a thousand years and emphasized portraying Christ in a figurative, glorified manner according to the Classicism of antiquity. During this period, the artwork was far more symbolic than historical, oftentimes (in accord with the *Gospel of Peter* 4.10) removing any sign of pain and suffering. Jesus was typically depicted as an emotionless human figure. The point of depicting Christ on the cross in this way was to elevate the divine status of both Jesus and his execution.<sup>47</sup>



*Double-Sided Icon with the Crucifixion from Thebes, Greece (9<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> Century)*

<sup>45</sup> González, *The Story of Christianity*, 127–28; Ferguson, *Church History*, 205, 346–47, 456.

<sup>46</sup> Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art*, 99.

<sup>47</sup> Sergeev, “Crucifixion in Painting,” 27.

At this stage of development, crucifixions were not *artwork* in the sense of existing for enjoyment and appreciation. Rather than be an end unto itself, religious “art” was intended primarily as a tool to aid the faithful in their devotions and meditations.<sup>48</sup> The customary practice was to show Jesus as youthful, beardless, and Roman in appearance (the so-called Apollonic “beautiful Christ” motif, which expressed the common Hellenistic conviction that beauty and youthfulness are inherent to the divine essence).

Unlike the highly dignified portrayal of Byzantine art, the Medieval Catholic (or Gothic) era emphasized Jesus’ humanity by depicting his suffering on the cross. This is when the more iconic features of crucifixion art emerge, showing both Jesus’ head and body slumped downward as his eyes are closed. The focus on Jesus’ immense suffering, particularly with portrayals of his wounds and bloodshed, took what was originally symbolic and made the event far more realistic for observers.<sup>49</sup> The Middle Ages saw a more heroic depiction of Jesus on the cross in order to relate most effectively to the barbarian tribes who had recently converted to Christianity.<sup>50</sup> During this time, Medieval paintings of the passion traditionally had a gold background so as to direct all attention to the central human figures of the event. This pattern eventually changed during the Renaissance when more elaborate backgrounds were introduced.<sup>51</sup>

As Everett Ferguson notes, crucifixion art is more visible in the Western tradition than in the East, but only after the medieval, Byzantine, and Romanesque periods. It was during the Gothic period of Western Europe (beginning in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries) that the focus shifted from Christ in majesty to Christ in painful passion. The theme of Jesus’ suffering developed in eleventh century Christian art, but it did not ascend to theological and philosophical prominence until the thirteenth century. It was during this period that crucifixion art changed dramatically to focus on the Gothic “Man of Sorrows” where the tortured body of Jesus is on full

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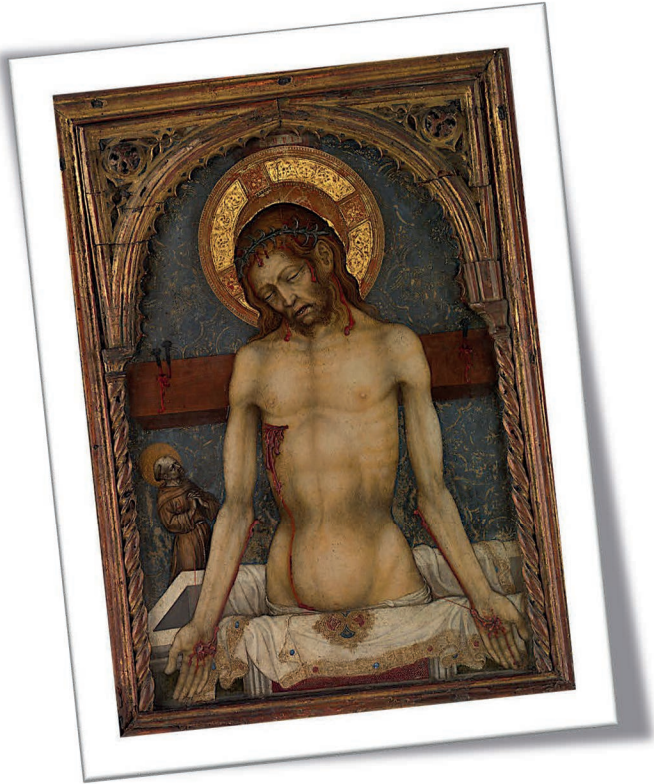
<sup>48</sup> Saunderson, “Biblical and Non-Biblical Elements in Italian Renaissance Representations,” 92.

<sup>49</sup> Sergeev, “Crucifixion in Painting,” 27–28.

<sup>50</sup> Viladesau, *The Beauty of the Cross*, 60–62.

<sup>51</sup> Saunderson, “Biblical and Non-Biblical Elements,” 92.

display, as opposed to the Romanesque royal nature of Jesus on the cross that had portrayed him as a passionless sovereign. Now, Jesus was fully human and violently suffering on the cross.<sup>52</sup>



*The Man of Sorrows by Michele Giambono (ca. 1430)*

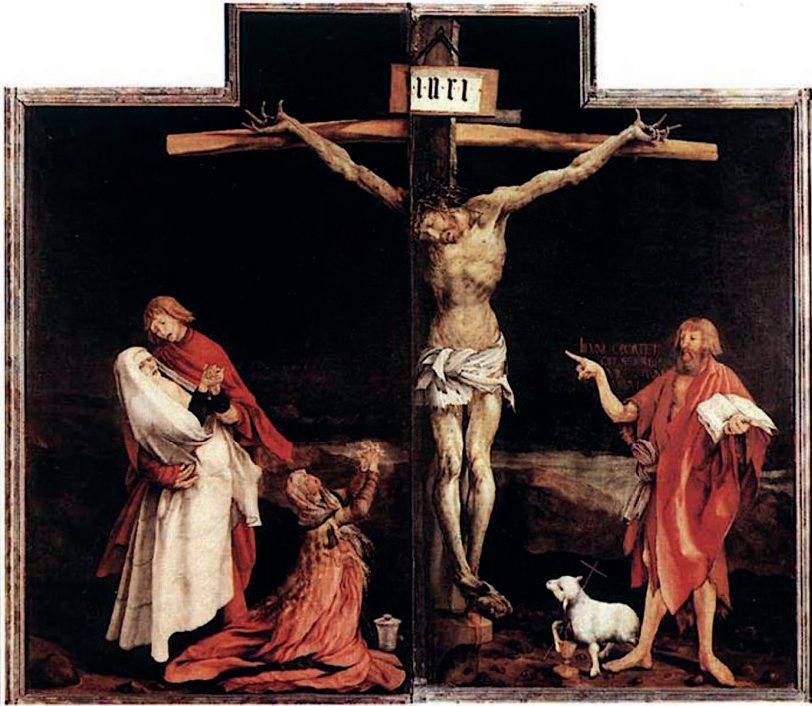
With the Renaissance era, the emphasis was on historicizing the crucifixion event by incorporating more of the Gospels’ “historical details” into the paintings, as well as capitalizing on the mathematics of illusionistic perspective with key witnesses to Jesus’ death. While earlier paintings did include figures for Jesus’ mother, the Apostle John, the centurion, and the Pharisees, Renaissance artists attempted to make the entire episode far more convincing than previous eras.<sup>53</sup> The depiction of Mary and John at the foot of the cross was most importantly a method for helping believers see

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<sup>52</sup> Ferguson, *Church History*, 497–99.

<sup>53</sup> Sergeev, “Crucifixion in Painting,” 28.

themselves in the painting.<sup>54</sup> Relying on earlier religious traditions and apocryphal stories from post-biblical literature, what is interesting to note is that Renaissance paintings are remarkably diverse in their depictions of the crucifixion. The people present at Jesus' death, the manner in which Jesus is impaled on the cross, the setting and environment, the design, color, and erection of the cross, and the inscriptions on the edifice all vary widely.<sup>55</sup>



*Isenheim Altarpiece Crucifixion by Matthias Grünewald (ca. 1515)*

One area of church history that Sergeev does not address is the Reformation period when iconoclasm propelled many Protestants to reject cultic devotion to crosses and to resist possessing crucifixions in general. In the sixteenth century, for instance, Protestants in Switzerland tore down a large crucifix in the village of Stadelhofen near Zurich, disembodimenting the artwork and

<sup>54</sup> Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 325.

<sup>55</sup> Saunderson, “Biblical and Non-Biblical Elements,” 89–112.

then burning it.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, as Ryan Smith clarifies, Protestants tended to view crosses as a reflection of Catholic superstition and idolatry; but a dramatic change occurred later in the middle of the nineteenth century during intense feuds between American Protestants and Catholics. As Catholicism rose to greater prominence in the United States, Protestant churches began incorporating Catholic crosses (though, not crucifixes) into their worship practices and church décor partly as a way of acquiring more congregants.<sup>57</sup> The major difference between a cross and crucifix, of course, is that the latter portrays Jesus' physical body. A cross is blank with no physical form depicted. Still to this day, many segments of Protestantism, especially within American evangelicalism, have a theological resistance to depicting Jesus impaled on a cross. As Georgia minister and folk artist, Howard Finster (1916–2001), explained about his own religious sensibilities, Jesus did not end his ministry on the cross. Rather, Jesus is risen and, therefore, should not to be portrayed as still dying on a stake.<sup>58</sup>

This theological refocus away from the corpse of Jesus is reminiscent of early Christian art in church history where depictions of the cross were associated with Jesus' victory over death itself. However, unlike certain Protestant sensibilities today, Western depictions of Jesus dying on the cross were a way to combat both Eastern iconoclasm and Docetic beliefs that asserted Jesus only appeared to have suffered in human flesh.<sup>59</sup> Interestingly, it was a common argument among iconoclasts that Jesus could not and should not be portrayed as dying because the body of Christ is now incorruptible, transcendent, and immortal, which no artist can rightly depict (Nicephorus, *Ref. Icon.* 3.38). Any attempt to portray Christ's divinity would result in blasphemy. Any attempt to portray Christ's humanity would result in heresy for minimizing the doctrine of the hypostatic union.<sup>60</sup>

Finally, Sergeev explores the modern secular era's rendition of crucifixion art by focusing on twentieth century expressionistic

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<sup>56</sup> West, "Tearing Down the Images," 25.

<sup>57</sup> Smith, "The Cross," 705–34.

<sup>58</sup> See Knippers, "Howard Finster," 27–36.

<sup>59</sup> Viladesau, *The Beauty of the Cross*, 46–49.

<sup>60</sup> Pelikan, *Jesus through the Centuries*, 86–89.

painters. For these artists, the symbolism of the crucifix has a universal significance that transcends both the historical and theological dimensions of earlier periods. What is important are not the doctrines associated with Christ's death or even the historicity of the event itself. Instead, the importance is rooted in the symbol of self-sacrifice or, as Sergeev describes it, "redemption through righteous suffering." Through vivid shapes and colors, as well as large sizes and powerful brushstrokes, crucifix expressionism does not seek to communicate the salvific elements of Jesus' death but, rather, its ability to provide an existential social commentary on the profound implications of a universal, subjective spirituality.<sup>61</sup> The crucifixion has since become less dogmatic and more creatively individualistic as a way of elevating all faith traditions. Through Jesus' suffering and death, people can envision a purer type of love that can overcome the compassionless hypocrisy of the world today. It is the artist's commentary that is conveyed, not necessarily the message of the church or the Bible.<sup>62</sup>



*Crucified Tree Form—The Agony by Theyre Lee-Elliott (1959)*

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<sup>61</sup> Cf. Lüthi, "Moderne Kunst," 307–12 and Steensma, "The Image of Christ," 30–37.

<sup>62</sup> Sergeev, "Crucifixion in Painting," 28–36.

This focus on spiritual needs, as opposed to apologetic, intellectual, or dogmatic details, is not new in Christian art. Indeed, from its beginnings, church art has both complemented *and* strayed from theology in order to communicate a self-reflective spiritual message to believers (“aesthetic theology”), be it through architecture, paintings, sculpture, or other modes of art.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, since the late Middle Ages, artists have expressed their own personal (and sometimes mystical) spiritual piety.<sup>64</sup> The result is now a trend in crucifixion art that is less concerned with outward aesthetic beauty and more concerned with communicating a beautiful *message* through the sordid ugliness of Jesus’ humanity.<sup>65</sup>

Case in point is the cruciform bronze sculpture, *Le Christ d’Assy*, by Germaine Richier, which was originally placed in the church of Notre-Dame de Toute Grâce, Assy. The church was collecting modern religious art for the sake of admiring “art as art” rather than confine itself solely to the dictates of dogma and tradition. *Le Christ d’Assy* reflects the contemporary emphasis on creativity, imagination, and autonomy while still being informed by tradition. What is most striking is that it was sculpted by an atheist who used the Jesus figure in order to deny belief in the incarnation.<sup>66</sup> Commentator Jonathan Koestlé-Cate describes the Jesus figure as,

a desiccated, lacerated, and near-featureless figure, whose posture incorporates the cross into the figure of Christ, his outstretched arms effectively becoming the horizontal crossbar. Germaine Richier’s uncompromising aesthetic was derided by its critics as a scandalous profanation and sacrilegious deformation of sacred art.<sup>67</sup>

The result was an outcry of opposition that led to the sculpture’s temporary removal from the church.<sup>68</sup> For religious defenders of the

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<sup>63</sup> Viladesau, *The Beauty of the Cross*, 3–7. See also, Lefler, “Cruciform Beauty,” 33–55.

<sup>64</sup> Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 326–27.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Seubert, “Contemporary Art,” 27–39.

<sup>66</sup> Carpenter, “Among the Long, Black Rafters,” 6–7.

<sup>67</sup> Koestlé-Cate, “A Man of Sorrows.”

<sup>68</sup> Wilson, “Germaine Richier,” 51–70.

piece, though, the emphasis centered on the tortured human body of Jesus, who was a living embodiment of the sacrifice described in Isaiah 53:2–3.<sup>69</sup> What secular artwork today helps exemplify is the tendency for artists throughout church history to insert ahistorical elements into the crucifixion narrative.



*Le Christ d'Assy* by Germaine Richier (1950)

### Historical Falsities

It is no surprise that the imaginative and creative nature of art lends itself to depicting (and then inserting) apocryphal details and historical inaccuracies among the wider church culture. In many

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<sup>69</sup> Rubin, *Modern Sacred Art*, esp. 51–52; Koestlé-Cate, “A Man of Sorrows.”



cases, it was the Catholic Church that encouraged some of the falsities in order to promote its particular brand of Western Christianity.<sup>70</sup> As one example, the historical shape of the “true cross” that Jesus died on is not actually known. In fact, there are over four hundred variations of the cross in Christian art and symbolism.<sup>71</sup> While Westerners are most familiar with the Latin style cross, which usually depicts two intersecting beams of unequal length (†), many ancient and medieval illustrations portray the act of crucifixion completely different from each other. Indeed, the Hebrew, Greek, and Latin term for “cross” simply denotes a stake on which someone could be impaled, hanged, tied, or nailed.<sup>72</sup> Because of the sparsity of information in the Gospels, the manner of Jesus’ execution could have simply involved an upright vertical stake (*crux acuta*), a three-armed *Tau* or T-shaped cross, a Y- or (less likely) X-shaped cross (*crux decussata*), the Greek + cross of equal arm length, or the classical four-armed cross (*crux immissa*) seen in church statues and staffs today (cf. Josephus, *J.W.* 5.449–51). Ancient cross symbols and paintings from Christian catacombs (and elsewhere) were merely symbolic approximations of what *could have been* the shape of Jesus’ cross, but even these artistic depictions varied in form.<sup>73</sup>

With each design, the actual size, height, and length of the posts are unknown to historians, which is evident in the wide range of artistic depictions of the cross over the centuries. Nor is the presence of a seat (*sedile* or *pēgma*) or footrest (*hypopodium* or *sppedaneum*) known, either. However, the most plausible design was the T-shaped cross (*crux commissa*) as argued in the first/second century Christian text, *Barnabas* 9.8, as well as suggested in the second century by Justin Martyr (*Dial.* 91.2). The T-shaped cross was, after all, the most common style and easiest to manufacture for the Romans.<sup>74</sup> Despite the second century implication of Irenæus (*Adv. haereses* 2.24.4), it is likely that the

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<sup>70</sup> See for example, Varasdi, *Myth Information*, 70–71 and Saunderson, “Biblical and Non-Biblical Elements,” 89–112.

<sup>71</sup> Apostolos-Cappadona, ed., *Dictionary of Christian Art*, s.v. “Cross.”

<sup>72</sup> Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, 945, esp. n23.

<sup>73</sup> Cf. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, 947.

<sup>74</sup> Cf. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, 947–49, 951–52.

Latin style design common today actually evolved out of the ubiquitous use of the chi-rho monogram (the Greek letter *P* overlaid onto the letter *X*), which was used for Jesus' name in the ancient church.<sup>75</sup> It became customary for early Christians to overlap the two letters to form a cross-like design (☩). By the end of the fourth century, the chi-rho was replaced with a monogrammatic cross of an inverted *X* to form the upright + shape, which was then overlaid onto the Greek *P* (rho). Eventually, at the beginning of the fifth century, the *P* was removed, leaving only the Latin-style cross in its wake.<sup>76</sup>

One of the more common features in crucifixion art is the *titulus* "INRI" above Jesus' head, which declared the reason (according to the Romans) for Jesus' crucifixion: *Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum* ("Jesus the Nazarene, Ruler of the Judeans"). The use of the acronym INRI has been inscribed on various forms of religious artwork, but its representation of the crucifixion event (based on John 19:19) is likely an apocryphal interpolation. While condemned criminals may have carried a *titulus* describing the reason for their execution (cf. Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.44), it is questionable whether it would have been affixed to the top of the vertical beam since this is not attested anywhere else in the relevant ancient literature.<sup>77</sup> What makes the scene difficult to believe is not the presence of a *titulus* in the first place; it is the literary expansion of the sign itself. For example, Mark 15:26 (the earliest Gospel record) has the sign reading only, "The King of the Jews." Later Gospel versions expand the sign to read, "This is the King of the Jews" (Luke 23:38) and then "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews" (Matt. 27:37). By the time the story is retold in the Gospel of John near the end of the first century, the *titulus* reads, "Jesus, the Nazoraean, the king of the Jews," in three separate languages (Aramaic, Latin, and Greek), which is almost six times longer than the original version found in Mark.<sup>78</sup> Indeed, the trilingual nature of Jesus' crime, though not uncommon in the ancient world, is almost certainly symbolic as a way of demonstrating either Jesus' universal

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<sup>75</sup> See Saunderson, "Biblical and Non-Biblical Elements," 94–98.

<sup>76</sup> Viladesau, *The Beauty of the Cross*, 182n57.

<sup>77</sup> Haenchen, Funk, and Busse, *John*, 192.

<sup>78</sup> Oakeshott, "King of the Jews?," 125–35.

kingship or the world's universal condemnation of him.<sup>79</sup> The point is that the story behind the INRI inscription is likely not based on factual history.<sup>80</sup>

For yet another example, the most well-known historical falsity is the depiction of Jesus being nailed to the cross (usually with exactly three nails) through the palms of his hands and one piercing both of his feet, based purely on John 20:24–27 (cf. Luke 24:39; *Gospel of Peter* 6.21). What is interesting is the 1968 discovery of an ancient crucifixion victim by Israeli archaeologists. The remains of this person indicate that the *cruciarium* was tied to the crossbeam (*patibulum*) while only the person's heels were nailed laterally to each side of the vertical stake (*stipes*).<sup>81</sup> Although the use of nails for affixing Jesus' arms to the cross is likely historical, nailing both his hands *and* feet is less certain because some early written descriptions indicate feet were tied to the stake in most cases (cf. Ephraem, *Comm. Diatessaron*). Indeed, depicting Jesus with nails in his feet may be an apologetic effort to portray Jesus as fulfilling messianic prophecy (Ps. 22:17) just like Justin Martyr did in describing a horn-like seat on the cross (*Dial.* 91.2).<sup>82</sup> Moreover, the earliest Christian depictions do not show nails in Jesus' feet, such as in the ivory relief from northern Italy (ca. 420–430) and the mosaic wood relief on the door of Saint Sabina in Rome (ca. 432). If Jesus' feet were nailed, then it is likely they were each impaled to the *side* of the stake with two separate nails. Hence, those early crucifixion art that do show nails in the feet also show the use of two nails, not one (*Sibyl. Orac.* 8.319–20).<sup>83</sup> The notion that there was a total of three nails is likely the result of fables told by Constantine's mother, Helena, and not based on historical fact.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 611; Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 549.

<sup>80</sup> See also, Weissenrieder, Wendt, and von Gemünden, eds., *Picturing the New Testament*, 53–66 and Saunderson, “Biblical and Non-Biblical Elements,” 107–9.

<sup>81</sup> See Zias and Sekeles, “BA Report,” 190–91.

<sup>82</sup> See Samuelsson, *Crucifixion in Antiquity*, 296–97.

<sup>83</sup> Hewitt, “The Use of Nails in the Crucifixion,” 29–45; Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, 949–51.

<sup>84</sup> See Drijvers, *Helena Augusta*.



*Crucifixion, Casket Panel of Maskell Passion Ivories (ca. 420-430 CE)*

Of course, in the Gospel passion narratives, there is no mention of nails being used on Jesus nor are his feet placed on top of each other. In fact, some of the earliest depictions of the crucifixion have Jesus' feet either separated or placed side by side, which continued until at least the 1200s.<sup>85</sup> It was not until the High Middle Ages of the thirteenth century that the four-nailed figure was replaced by a three-nailed Christ.

Historically, the problem is that many crucifixion victims were tied to their stakes, not nailed (as is often painted for the two robbers next to Jesus); and those who were impaled with nails were likely punctured through the radial and ulnar wrist bones or some other spot, not the center of their palms (as traditionally depicted of Jesus). The weight of Jesus' body would have simply torn the nails right through his palms (even if Jesus had a seat or footrest to help his posture).<sup>86</sup> Interestingly, even Ethiopic depictions of the crucifixion have the nails piercing Jesus' wrists instead of the palm of his hands.<sup>87</sup> Despite these historical inaccuracies, depictions of

<sup>85</sup> Schultze, "Crucifix," 313–14.

<sup>86</sup> Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, 949–50. Cf. Zugibe, "Two Questions About Crucifixion," 41–43.

<sup>87</sup> Saunderson, "Biblical and Non-Biblical Elements," 101–2.

Jesus dying on a cross continue to serve its primary purpose of communicating a particular theological message to believers.

### Theology in Crucifixion Art

Literarily, the New Testament uses the imagery of crucifixion as a metaphor for the radical acceptance and discipleship of Jesus Christ. Thus, Jesus' remark that a genuine follower must "deny himself and take up his cross" (Matt. 16:24, ESV) reflects a willingness to suffer and even die for Jesus' teachings. Moreover, the symbolism of being "lifted up" on a cross (John 3:14; 12:32–34) is reinterpreted as a sign of Jesus' glorification. Simply by virtue of the Son of God enduring the horrors of crucifixion indicates that the Gospel imagery is meant to reverse the *scandalum crucis* by portraying it as an exalted form of self-sacrifice and devotion to God (cf. Heb. 12:2).

In the Pauline Epistles, it is not the historical details of the crucifixion on display but, rather, the resultant theological significance of the event. For example, in Pauline theology, the cross not only symbolizes obedience to God (Phil. 2:8), but it also embodies the folly of human wisdom regarding what is expected of deity (1 Cor. 1:17–18). As the bearer of human sin, Jesus' crucifixion becomes a metaphor for grace whereby the legal condemnation of human imperfection, not God, is killed in the process (Col. 2:14). The metaphor is extended elsewhere to include crucifying the hostility between Jews and Gentiles (Eph. 2:16). Thus, what is meant as a tool for destruction is now (symbolically) an instrument for uniting people (Col. 1:20). Theologically, the New Testament's artistic use of cross imagery is meant to encourage believers to live according to Jesus' teachings and no longer act as a slave to sin, which for the Apostles was the more serious form of execution—spiritually speaking (1 Pet. 2:24).

Both the Gospel and Pauline portrayal of the cross are the basis for later crucifixion art, intending to reverse the *scandalum crucis* by depicting self-sacrifice, radical devotion, atonement theology, and a new understanding of the nature of God. As such, much crucifixion art displays theological symbolism that is not immediately perceptible to modern viewers. For example, many images of the crucifixion scene appear alongside the sun, moon, and

stars, which signifies Christ's sovereignty over the universe (cf. Jer. 31:35).<sup>88</sup> In Scripture, this heavenly triad is meant for exaltation purposes through its association with the nation of Israel (Gen. 37:9), apocalyptic despair (Isa. 13:10; Ezek. 32:7; Matt. 24:29; Rev. 8:12), and even the resurrection of the dead (1 Cor. 15:41). From the Byzantine era onwards, many crucifixion scenes displayed other allegorical figures and objects surrounding the cross. These elements include personifications of the victorious Gentile church over the old Jewish synagogue, as well as figures for Adam and Eve (representing original sin), skulls and crossbones (representing Golgotha), serpents (representing temptation and the *protoevangelium*), and even chalices (representing the Holy Grail).<sup>89</sup> The inclusion of Adam may also reflect an old folk story that Adam was also buried at Golgotha, forever linking Adam and Jesus together in one geographical spot.

Early on, the Byzantine church had to contend with some Christian tendencies (later pronounced heretical) that denied Jesus' actual humanity (e.g., Docetism). However, the early church also did not want to give the impression that Jesus lacked divinity, though unlike other deities he still suffered and died. The result was a sort of compromise in artistic depictions. Picturing Jesus being crucified symbolized that God really did become incarnate in human flesh, yet these same Byzantine artists depicted Jesus in a serene manner with an inner peace in order to communicate the glorification of God during his own murder.<sup>90</sup> Instead of depicting the historical realities and horrors of crucifixion, the Christian church (from the first century onwards) sought to depict Jesus' death through the eyes of spiritual faith that focused on divine incarnation. As such, Jesus does not appear to suffer or die in these images. His disposition on the cross is one of triumph.<sup>91</sup>

Beginning around the eleventh century, and then rising to prominence in the thirteenth, the suffering humanity of Jesus became a dominant feature of Western theology. Both liturgy and feasts focused especially on the *corpus Christi*, as well as on Jesus'

<sup>88</sup> Sergeev, "Crucifixion in Painting," 28.

<sup>89</sup> Schultze, "Crucifix," 314.

<sup>90</sup> Viladesau, *The Beauty of the Cross*, 49.

<sup>91</sup> Viladesau, *The Beauty of the Cross*, 38.

injuries on the cross.<sup>92</sup> Artists in the Medieval Catholic period often exaggerated Jesus' suffering, especially through disproportionate amounts of blood pouring from each of Jesus' main puncture wounds. The theological point was the immense gravity of humanity's sins and the horrific sacrifice needed for Jesus' death to cleanse humanity.<sup>93</sup> This emotionality of crucifixion is captured exquisitely in the work of Matthias Grünewald (featured above), such as his 1510 *Basel Crucifixio*. As Stephanie Brown describes it, the painting "is feverish, convulsive and saturated in suffering."<sup>94</sup>

In contrast to tragic depictions of Jesus, the Renaissance period saw a return to minimizing his wounds and agony on the cross with only small traces of blood. This sort of artistic treatment intended to distinguish the fair-haired Jesus as virtuous, innocent, and eternally beautiful (a theme of Renaissance painting in general). Hence, the pre-crucifixion flogging was almost never made visible on Christ's body. Jesus' appearance is made to look as unblemished as possible. Where blood is shown in larger quantities, its presence symbolizes the sin-cleansing effects of Jesus' sacrifice.<sup>95</sup>

Significantly, crucifixion art had also been used to promote so-called "false," "heretical," or unpopular doctrines. For instance, seventeenth century Jansenistic crucifixes were those pieces of art where Jesus' arms are only partially extended. The lack of fully outstretched arms was symbolic of Jansenism's predestinarian belief that Christ died only for a select few rather than all of humanity.<sup>96</sup> In a similar fashion, Medieval depictions of the passion sometimes included what is now considered an anti-Semitic trope in religious art, the so-called "last tormentor of Christ." Based on John 19:28–30, the image of a man offering Jesus vinegar while on the cross was meant to further notions of apostatical deicide while depicting Jews

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<sup>92</sup> Ferguson, *Church History*, 498; Viladesau, *The Beauty of the Cross*, 70–86.

<sup>93</sup> Brown, *Religious Painting*, 7; Sergeev, "Crucifixion in Painting," 27.

<sup>94</sup> Brown, *Religious Painting*, 45.

<sup>95</sup> Saunderson, "Biblical and Non-Biblical Elements," 104–6.

<sup>96</sup> For more details on Jansenism, see Chantin, "Le jansenisme convulsionnaire," 153–66.

as unrepentantly cruel.<sup>97</sup> The point is that crucifixion art has been, at its core, theological in essence and purpose. This then helps provide an answer as to why (philosophically) it became fashionable to display a murder victim for religious devotion in the first place.

### **The Philosophy Behind Displaying a Torture Victim**

The philosophy behind displaying crucifixion art is traceable most noticeably to the iconodule, Gregory the Great (590–604), who helped articulate what would later become the church’s official stance on images, relics, and icons (*Ep.* 9.208). The basic premise is that visual art can often stimulate and inspire believers more than simple preaching or reading Scripture. In seeing righteous acts performed visually, believers are prompted to embrace and imitate those same acts. Images lead by example, encouraging the faithful to worship the specific prototype being represented.<sup>98</sup> In other words, religious iconography, especially crucifixion art, has a didactic function, being designed to educate the faithful about correct belief and practice while also reminding believers to be mindful of their Creator.<sup>99</sup> Indeed, it was common in the Eastern Church to assume that these images contained the spirit of those pictured, much like the body contains a soul, so as to inspire cultic veneration and devotion to God.<sup>100</sup>

By glorifying the morbid torture and execution of a human being, crucifixion art embodies an ascetic philosophy of mortification, which refers specifically to the act of dying to lesser goods in order to pursue a higher calling and relationship with God. It is believed that the physical state of the body also affects the state of the soul. To punish (and even kill) the one helps strengthen the other. The goal of bodily mortification is to purify one’s life so as to teach believers how to delight (predominantly) in God rather than

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<sup>97</sup> Jordan, “The Last Tormentor of Christ,” 21–47; “The Erosion of the Stereotype,” 13–44.

<sup>98</sup> Viladesau, *The Beauty of the Cross*, 5–6.

<sup>99</sup> See Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 322–25.

<sup>100</sup> Cf. John of Damascus, *Oratio de sacris imaginibus* 114.



earthly attachments and pleasures.<sup>101</sup> Not surprisingly, then, the cross itself has been an ancient and universal symbol for the conjunction of life and spirituality (the vertical bar) with death and materialism (horizontal bar). It often represents the meeting place of heaven and earth.<sup>102</sup>

Accordingly, the use of Christian art in ministry and worship is predominantly (and perhaps solely) for the purpose of educating the laity on the ultimate ethical act of self-sacrifice.<sup>103</sup> Crucifixion art is meant to teach the beauty of self-sacrifice, the virtue of suffering, and the nobility of martyrdom.<sup>104</sup> As Viladesau explains,

The crucifixion as murder was ugly; as martyrdom it was beautiful. Physically it was ugly; spiritually—in its meaning, self-sacrifice for others—it was beautiful. What happened to Christ was ugly and horrid; his willingness to undergo it was beautiful....

But there are theologies of the cross that go farther: not only Jesus' self-sacrifice was beautiful, but the fact of its happening was beautiful, because necessary. Even the evil of the crucifixion is in some way taken up into the beauty of the divine plan.<sup>105</sup>

The lasting result is that crucifixion art becomes omnitemporal in its communication of a spiritual and ethical message. Regardless of the anachronisms or apocryphal details inserted into many of the portrayals, the sacredness of the event remains perceptible to present-day viewers. And whether Jesus is depicted as a first century Jew, a Roman culture hero, a medieval European, or a modern abstraction, crucifixion art transcends linear time so as to bring observers into direct contact with the passion of Christ.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Miles, "Mortification," 270–71.

<sup>102</sup> Apostolos-Cappadona, s.v. "Cross."

<sup>103</sup> Cf. Mariaux, "L'image selon Gregoire le Grand," 1–12 and Cottin, "Ethique et esthetique," 5–17.

<sup>104</sup> Cf. Pelikan, *Jesus through the Centuries*, 104–8.

<sup>105</sup> Viladesau, *The Beauty of the Cross*, 12.

<sup>106</sup> Vicelja, "Religious Iconography," 222; Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 327.

Most importantly, the crucifixion event becomes a case of “moral beauty,” the self-created action of artists who infuse their work with beauty, as well as the good moral actions that this beauty helps to stimulate. The underlying philosophy is that the ultimate Good is, in fact, also aesthetically beautiful in art. Ultimate Beauty and ultimate Good are interconnected.<sup>107</sup> Hence, by interpreting the crucifixion of Jesus as an act of the ultimate Good (i.e., self-sacrifice, love, etc.), depictions of this event must likewise be inherently Beautiful. The work permits the beholder to experience a type of enfleshment or incarnation of moral beauty, allowing the art to penetrate and even pass judgment on its onlookers.<sup>108</sup> The ultimate goal is *conformitas voluntatis*, the conforming of the human will to the divine will as believers are submerged into the mystical aspects of Christ dying in glory. Ulrich Luz describes the context,

Pictures have their own power. They work on the viewers by means of their colors and their forms. They familiarize the viewers with the people they portray so that they are drawn to them or repulsed by them. By supporting and merging with the inner pictures that people have when they hear the story of the passion they strengthen their effect.<sup>109</sup>

### Conclusion

The transforming of a gruesomely violent image of a murder victim into a message of love and beauty may be one of the strangest ironies in art history. Having originally been deemed inappropriate, scandalous, and even blasphemous for many early Christians, it took the church more than a millennium before it became comfortable with the idea of portraying Jesus’ death on the cross. Once crucifixion art did become fashionable, the church went through several distinct trends in what it thought was aesthetically, theologically, and historically appropriate for depicting the execution of the Son of God. The result has been a lingering

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<sup>107</sup> de Raymond, “La beauté morale,” 425–37.

<sup>108</sup> Cf. Austin, “Art et salut,” 101–14.

<sup>109</sup> Luz, *Matthew 21–28*, 327.

philosophy of “moral beauty” whereby displays of the crucifixion intend to educate the faithful in correct beliefs, as well as inspire believers to imitate Christ’s self-sacrifice. Crucifixion art conveys the beauty of suffering and the virtue of martyrdom. By observing the death of Jesus in real time, viewers now have the opportunity to witness an example of the ultimate Good and, thus, embody ultimate Beauty within themselves.

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