

## NOT JUST A PRETTY FACE : SAINT SEBASTIAN IN RELIGIOUS ICONOGRAPHY AND MAGICAL TRANSFORMATION

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"Saint Sebastian is the outstanding example of the emphatically sexy saint ..." So writes Anne Hollander (*Seeing through Clothes*, 1978, 1993) in discussing the erotic freight carried by nude figures of martyrs in Christian art. The saint whose body is riddled by arrows raises fascinating and, I believe, important questions for religion and the visual arts. In my own case my interest stems, on the one hand, from studying religious iconography including the saints of Christianity and of other religions. On the other hand, these traditional images have been modified over the centuries, culminating in changes brought by modern culture and postmodernity, with the impact of the mass media, the consumer society and "the saturated self" (Kenneth Gergen, 1991). The relation of the sexualized body to the spiritual will be discussed in the concluding section of this paper. First of all we shall trace the development of the image of Saint Sebastian over the two millennia of Christianity, based on the following selection of illustrations from the history of art.

### Sebastian : the developing Christian image

Sebastian appears first as a bearded warrior, as evidenced in an early Byzantine mosaic which was taken from Constantinople to Rome in the year 680 (*New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1967, vol.13). It depicts him as a mature figure, said to be an officer from Milan in the Praetorian guard of the emperor Diocletian. During the severe persecution launched against the Christians in 297-305 AD, the Roman emperor learned that Sebastian was a Christian and condemned him to be shot with arrows by his fellow soldiers.

A millennium later, among the many depictions of this scene of martyrdom from the Renaissance in Italy, a 15th century bronze plaque by Donatello shows the strong-bodied Sebastian tied to a post. (At this close range the archers with long bows can hardly miss!) A little angel in between at the centre is inspiring the saint whose bowed head already has a halo.

From the same Renaissance period the Flemish painter Hans Memling shows a much more tender, clean-shaven youth in a forest setting; his elegant torso and unfastened garments make him a quietly desirable figure as well as a victim to his tormentors.

However, the ancient martyrologies recounted his recovery from the arrows of this first martyrdom. A noble Roman matron, Saint Irene, nursed him back to health. To show the power of Christ, Sebastian then presented himself to the emperor; this time Diocletian had him beaten to death and thrown in a sewer, as depicted by another Flemish painter, Josse Lieferinx.

Not only by such stories in hagiography did the cult of St Sebastian become popular; the saint was also sought as an intercessor against epidemic diseases. The Romans credited him with the cessation of the plague in the year 680. It could be that the arrows symbolized both the force of the divine wrath in the plague and also the protective answer in the form of nails (which the Romans saw as a sacred-magical means of nailing down ill-luck). This helps to explain Giovanni del Biondo's painting from the late 14th century when Florence had lost half its population in the Black Death. Here the archers are in Florentine dress. Sebastian is pierced by over thirty of their arrows, but he retains a calm Christ-like face as a tiny angel brings him a golden crown of the martyr's glory.

Sebastian's martyrdom became a popular subject of painting in the Italian Renaissance of the 15th century. Andrea Mantegna produced an influential type of the saint, almost like a statue, amid classical ruins and a landscape laden with symbolism; in this version he is pierced by fourteen arrows, two through the head. The saint has transcended earthly pain. This is the message also in the painting by Antonella da Messina where the executioners have departed in the heat of the Italian midday sun, turning the lonely death into a thing of beauty. Again, Matteo di Giovanni shows Sebastian with twelve arrows in him, yet managing still to stand lightly poised and with a strange smile. He is triumphant in his martyrdom which is symbolized by both the palm and crown

which he is holding, as well as by the arrows which have made him a martyr.

Nevertheless the grim reality and violence of such a death do not disappear, as evidenced in the action picture by Antonio del Pollaiuolo (1475), a huge altarpiece now in the National Gallery, London. Elsewhere the artist's engravings showed men slaughtering one another with swords; here human cruelty is shown in the muscular figures cranking up their crossbows and pulling taut their longbows. In the altar-panel by Titian (1522) it is in the response of Sebastian that the muscularity emerges, struggling like the classical figure of Laocoon or like Titian's own Christ crowned with thorns.

These themes of violence and pain on the one hand and triumphant faith on the other achieve a new synthesis in the Baroque age. In its early stages, the young El Greco around 1576 painted the monumental nude figure of the saint who kneels on a rock and gazes steadfastly upwards. In his last years before his death in 1614 El Greco painted the saint standing dramatically before the landscape of Toledo in central Spain. Already pierced by seven arrows, he withstands the torment of the body with a gaze directed beyond the visible scene. As viewers we can see only the natural scene and the power and beauty of the saint's earthly body; we cannot see his vision, but we are led by the upward movement of his gaze to identify with the body and by being led through it to share the saint's devotion. A similar approach is to be seen in El Greco's depiction of St Francis in ecstasy (1590-95; in Dublin). Although in a dozen other paintings of this theme El Greco showed explicitly the vision experienced by Francis receiving the stigmata, here he shows simply the marks on the hands of the emaciated saint who trembles in the intensity of fervour. Indirectly, but all the more powerfully, we are drawn into his spiritual vision. This is an example of what I call the experience of "magical transformation" in art and religion; through the imagination we switch suddenly to an alternative vision of reality which may subsequently transform our everyday life. An El Greco saint is "rapt in expectation of his destiny" (C. Aznar), caught up in his individually unique vocation.

Later in the 17th century the Spanish artist Zurbaran's St Sebastian (1631-40) shows only the ghastly death of the saint tied to a broken tree in a stark setting; there is no sign of ecstasy as he dies.

With Guido Reni the Italian Baroque brought an element of melodrama to the depiction of saints and heroes. While this enjoyed two centuries of popularity, Reni's smoothness provoked distrust among art critics from the 19-20th centuries: "The classicism of his languidly yearning saints, rolling their eyeballs to the light of heaven, seemed trite and formulaic". That is a quote from Robert Hughes who, however, goes on to appreciate the brilliance and intensity of Reni's work. From his paintings of Sebastian, two early ones are dated 1615-19 (a version of one being in the Auckland City Art Gallery, NZ); another comes twenty years later, 1639-40. These all depict a nearly nude Sebastian and may qualify him as "the sexy saint". They suggest to some critics that Renaissance and Baroque artists were exploiting religious themes as an excuse to portray male nudity. But Reni should, I now maintain, be understood more comprehensively in the light of the Baroque synthesis of body and spirit. More will be said of this in the conclusion.

One more example of this period comes from Rubens' vast altarpiece in Antwerp, 1628, depicting the Virgin and Child being adored by saints in heaven. St George in his armour stands by St Sebastian who is unclothed and holding his palm of victory and quiver of arrows. Sebastian's confident muscular stance expresses both the martyr's reward and the triumphant note of Baroque religious art.

## Modern changes

We now turn to art of the last two centuries where Sebastian has been featured in new ways and for rather different purposes. The French Revolution proved to be a turning-point in the European break with "establishment tradition" in religion and the arts. For instance, an engraving by Peree in Paris around 1791 centres on a figure which could at first glance be taken for the posture of St Sebastian. But it turns out to be "Regenerated Man" of the new age. At last man can give thanks to the Supreme Being for having regained the "rights of man" in this world. He has felled the tree of inherited privilege, and divine lightning strikes the abandoned crown. Just as Marat was portrayed by the artist David as a secular saint of the Revolution, so the Baroque figure of Sebastian could become a secularized protagonist of liberty, equality, fraternity.

The struggle continued in France in the 19th century. Republican and socialist ideas were espoused by the artist Courbet who saw the artist as a high priest of society. Because he suffered from severe criticism as a result, a caricature by Nadar in 1856 portrayed him in "The Martyrdom of St Courbet, Master Painter", standing proudly like Sebastian, despite the fourteen arrows.

This example from the age of popular newspapers and politics points to the ways in which traditional art works are changed by reproduction in printing and the mass media. As John Berger points out (*Ways of Seeing*, 1972), images lose their unique authority and can be used by anybody for their own purposes and interpretation, once they are reproducible and deployable in different contexts.

With modern 20th century art, the artist is free to draw on the image and posture of Sebastian, perhaps to identify personally with some of the ethos and perhaps also to turn it in a different direction. An instance of the latter is Edvard Munch, the Norwegian advance-guard of expressionism. In his "Self-portrait in hell" 1895, his gaze is directed not heavenwards but at the viewer to convey his own angst, pessimism and personal neuroses. Munch was influenced by the philosophies of Nietzsche, vitalism and nature. The link with the cult of nature through seaside sun and swimming appears in his later painting of "Bathing men" at the Baltic homosocial resorts, emphasizing the health and energy of the male athletic nude.

A more explicit identification with St Sebastian is found in the British artist Eric Gill; his small sculpture of the saint, 1919, is based on his own body as the model for the figure.

The expressionist theme of human suffering appears in a German painting by Willy Jaeckel, from the time of the carnage of World War I, in 1915. In a setting suggesting the "no-man's land" of battlefields, Sebastian is tied to a stark tree and looks downward in despair. A more challenging response to humanity's problems is given from a socialist viewpoint in East Germany, the former DDR, in 1981 by Annette Peuker-Krisper. She depicts Sebastian as a middle-aged man whose nude body is pierced by seven arrows. His face looks anguished yet stoical, as if he were contemplating long-term plans for liberating humanity beyond his immediate suffering.

Some recent artists have drawn out not political but explicitly sexual identifications from the traditional image. David Wojnarowicz is a New York anti-establishment artist active in gay

rights controversies. His 1982 painting "Yukio M: St Sebastian" presents the torso of the saint as a blue background, with four arrows pointing to the small sexual figure of a Japanese youth at the centre. This suggests a twofold appeal of the Sebastian image here; the beauty of his body is related to homosexual love, while his suffering from the arrows can be felt in ostracism encountered by the gay community.

The "Sebastian" of Fiona Pardington, from Auckland, NZ, 1987, presents a contrast in the form of a black-and-white photograph of a male body from the back view. From the waist down it is covered with some thirty tiny paper cut-outs of "cupids", putti with bows and arrows. These express heterosexual eroticism from a feminist standpoint. In an interview the artist has described her own "pagan" belief in "a power which is a dualism of male and female principles and harmonies" but not the "anthropomorphic Christian god".

The final illustration includes some of the previous themes within the all-consuming appetite of advertising. The product name "Kouros" goes back to the ancient Greek statue of the naked youth with the calm archaic smile. This current advertisement from the 1990s can be linked in terms of art history to the Renaissance-Baroque tradition of depicting the male body; it echoes Michelangelo's "David" and in particular the Sebastian pose with the nude torso and upturned gaze. The gaze is, however, this-worldly rather than heavenwards. The bronzed figure could be a lifeguard scanning the waters for swimmers needing help; more likely, he is scanning the beach for talent and adventure; he stands free for action, not bound or in torment like Sebastian. The photo has been so angled that the viewer's gaze is led downwards rather than upwards, presumably enhanced by the advertised scent. Its appeal is to admiration for the male body and its sexual potential and desirability, all in the light of a blue sky and warm sun. It appeals to the cult of naturism and sun-worship. But ideologically these are here made to serve the modern consumer society and a mass-media humanism geared to enjoyment of "la dolce vita". Again, John Berger (1972) has drawn attention to the use and exploitation of the arts by such ideological forces.

## Reassessment : Biblical-Christian roots

At the conclusion of this survey we seek some overview and, if possible, some direction for understanding and evaluating the various depictions of Sebastian: from Christian warrior to magical protector, from "sexy saint" to secular hero and to an image for modern erotic and consumerist models. Does this mean that the image of the saint is an ever-changing "signifier", open to endless reinterpretations? The evidence of past centuries and more especially of modern changes seems at first sight to answer "yes". We can indeed appreciate the human creativity and inventiveness seen in changing art-forms. At the same time modern knowledge confers, along with such freedom, a fuller understanding of the roots in religion and culture which confer some continuity amid the changes to the Sebastian image. We are no longer bound to conform to past traditions; yet we cannot, as history-making beings, ignore the history out of which humanity has come. So my answer, in brief, would follow three lines.

First, the image of Sebastian derives from the Christian view of human life as a union of body and spirit. It is rooted thereby in the Hebrew biblical conviction of the goodness of creation. It is further modelled on the sufferings of the crucified Christ; the human life of Jesus is received in Christian faith as the embodiment of God's purpose. We have seen examples of Sebastian depicted with Christ-like features. The saints are not simply heroic role-models; they are recipients of grace who reflect the divine self-giving. Despite phases of ascetic denial of the body, the developing traditions of Christianity and the arts maintained these emphases on the body and could also reinforce them, as in the Renaissance rediscovery of the classical nude in painting and sculpture. For this reason I value much in the Baroque synthesis of Gothic spirituality and Renaissance worldliness. This is a dynamic and exciting synthesis; it keeps one guessing and fascinated by the interplay of heavenly longing and the appeal of the body and its sexuality. The Sebastian image offers full scope for this perennial experience in Christianity.

Secondly, I seek an understanding of the human experience which has a key element in common with the startling image of the body of Sebastian bristling with arrows. This is what I have called "magical transformation". This is the common experience which we all share of alternating in our imagination from the

everyday given activities of bodily life to other worlds and visions; the latter may prove to be abortive fantasies or sometimes to be new forces for shaping our lives. The realms of religion and art bring forth abundant examples. We have seen how El Greco highlights both the reality of the body and also the power of the vision which transforms the whole being of the saint in a state of ecstasy; his saints are highly individual special cases, yet also models of what can affect more ordinary lives also. Such experiences of transformation are represented in memorable art forms which build up a tradition of powerfully influential "archetypes" over the years. (Here I refer to "archetypes" in the sense of historically emerging figurations and icons, not primarily in the Jungian psychological sense.) The Sebastian image is one such archetype which continues to fascinate and influence people.

Thirdly, I see a challenge to education in our culture to appreciate images such as Sebastian, whether they appear in churches, art-galleries or advertising. It is not just a matter of knowing a bit about religious history, art history or modern media. We need to gain some feeling of empathy with these figures, including their bodily postures, and especially with the experiences, longings and tensions underlying their images. One misfortune in the past has been that saints and religious figures have been presented in hagiography as too perfect and "straight-ahead" heroes, immune to the tensions and temptations which humankind is heir to. They then become increasingly idealised and beyond the experience of people in the midst of life.

What I see in the archetypal figure of St Sebastian is a human figure uniting an earthly and sexual body with spiritual vision and longing. It is a unity-in-tension which typifies the lifelong concern of every human being to work out constructively. It is not true to the archetype to present Sebastian as purely spiritual and "innocent". Nor, at the other extreme, is he to be reduced to a purely worldly hero or seductive sex-object, heterosexual or homosexual. Sebastian is not just a pretty face, nor just a pretty body. The unity of body and spirit in the image is needed as a counter to the mindless polarizations of our age. It is inclusive and able to appeal to the deep feelings of different types of personalities and life situations.

A richer and more sensitive cultural life would help people find their way through these typical tensions of life with guides and models on the relation of sexuality, death, power and religion. Through families, schools, churches and modern media we need to

encourage the "tutored imagination" (Paul Pruyser, *The Play of the Imagination*, 1983). I personally look for a rediscovery and renewed commitment to the religious roots and framework of faith, along with openness to modern experiences and questions and a readiness to learn from cultures and religions beyond Christendom. Whatever one's views on religion, there is much to be done here. There may be pitfalls surrounding the "sexy saint", but in this unity of body and spirit the image of Sebastian stands in a vital tradition.

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