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Visual Forms, Visceral Themes

Understanding Bodies, Pain, and Torture in Renaissance Art

Despite its relevance to modern discussions, the scholarly treatment of torture in art is relatively infrequent. This project explores, through the visual evidence of artistic works, the implications of Renaissance philosophies surrounding the human body in the context of pain and particularly the physical suffering endured during torture. By examining varying techniques of representing the human form across an array of artistic media, this article strives to illuminate the struggle between the rise of scientific naturalism and prevailing currents of spiritual dualism when considering the question of the body in torment. In highlighting the artist as narrator of Renaissance society's moral, spiritual, and political tropes, this research sheds additional light on Renaissance humanity's understanding of itself in the intensified instances of physical suffering at the hands of the state. In analyzing images of torture in light of Renaissance understandings of the body, this article seeks to contribute a more contextual perspective on these types of representations to the ongoing academic dialogue.

As the members of society entrusted with the craft of interpreting and visually representing events and transcendent experiences, Renaissance artists were in a unique position to not only study and observe the workings of the human form, but to demonstrate the conceptions of their societal milieu that surrounded the body and its significance for both the individual and the community at large. As the concept of genius emerged during the Renaissance and artists were increasingly seen as and portrayed themselves to be the recipients of divine inspiration, those who were trained in the creative crafts and possessed skills that made their works worthy of widespread renown became integral to the purveyance of ideas through visual means and significantly shaped the impressions of society at large about religious stories, historical events, and political practices.¹ As Moshe Barasch, on Renaissance philosopher Bocchi's recognition of the emphasis placed on physical expressions in art, writes: "The work of art, by making us grasp its expressive character instantaneously, wields a certain power over our minds and souls."²

Studies of the human body in the Renaissance are particularly interesting because artists of this time period were confronted with conflicting roles and expectations: on the one hand they were charged with depicting the human experience as it pertained to spiritual truths, on the other they faced the increasing responsibility to accurately observe and document the natural world. Where this dichotomy is particularly salient is in depictions of instances of suffering. Pain links the body to the physical world and solidifies the corporeality of an individual; in torture the infliction of pain is transformed into a systematized kind of art form of its own. Artistic representations of torture are therefore poignant studies in the manifestation of philosophies of the body and pain: snapshots of the body at its breaking point provide evidence of the prevailing worldviews (scientific, spiritual, or a mix of both) held by the artists who created them. Though it is one thing to depict that form as gripped by the agonies of suffering; this sort of portrayal carries with it a whole other set of commentaries about

human-societal relationships. The systematic infliction of pain by the state, or *torture*, muddies these relationships even further. An assault on the individual's integrity, rather than just his or her physical presence, torture fulfilled various roles in the context of the individual's spiritual wellbeing, the community's security, and the cementing of the state's power. Renaissance artists, in a visual language discernable by all, demonstrated prevailing conceptions of torture in the context of a shifting understanding of the human body.

For the early moderns, torture held much more significance than just as a means of punishing individuals who had transgressed the laws of the Church or governing body. By putting criminals through physical ordeals and ensuring proper punishment for their wrongs, leaders of the state were able to fulfill their responsibility to the spiritual wellbeing of their populace. In a society where legality was so inextricably linked with religious sensibilities, crimes carried more weight from a spiritual sense than we generally conceive of them as having today. For a criminal to fail to repent his or her crime was a moral stain on the community as a whole. As officials were responsible not only to their people but also to God, ensuring the moral good standing of their city or town was their utmost responsibility. Securing a confession and reinforcing the severity of the transgression through pain made torture an effective way, in the eyes of early modern leaders, of atoning for the citizen's sins on behalf of the rest of the community. Similarly, it was seen as serving the practical purpose of deterring potential criminals, under the threat of the violation of their own bodies, from transgressing the law. The side effect, also, of consciously and subconsciously reinforcing the power of the state likewise had its obvious advantages for the rulers of early modern populations.

While torture took care of legal responsibilities for the rulers, it was also seen as beneficial for the criminal. Ordeals undergone in pursuit of securing a confession (the "release" of truth) assumed a cleansing quality and were a way to overcome the body's monopoly on the soul, which, naturally drawn toward the good in

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the early modern conception, would undoubtedly want to confess in opposition to the depraved worldly body's wishes. Depending on whether or not the sinner repented his or her crimes, the pain suffered at the hands of the torturer and the executioner either echoed the cleansing trials of Purgatory or was a preemptive taste of the pains of Hell. Assuming repentance and remorse, torture and painful execution were a way for the criminal to take on similar qualities as martyrs or Christ, thereby making salvation more likely. Conversely, if no repentance occurred, the pain that the criminal suffered would have been justified as an enactment of God's wrath and a reinforcement of the divine order. Either way, the state had done its duty in terms of acting as the spiritual guardian of its citizens.

Part of the explanation for early modern acceptance of torture rests implicitly in their understanding of the dualistic relationship between body and soul. This separation may, in fact, have served as a coping mechanism for suffering. As Nigel Spivey points out in *Enduring Creation*, "... dualism also serves as a sort of psychosomatic defense. If the human self lies beyond flesh and bones, then harm upon humans is hard to inflict."³ This concept is carried out visually in Michelangelo's *Dying Slave* (and numerous others of the same transcendent ilk) (Figure 1).⁴ In this sculpture, a male nude, bearing only subtle suggestions of armor and toned to anatomical perfection, stands *contraposto* with his head falling back in a gesture of submission. His embrace of death is evident in the sleepy visage of his face and the relaxed and heavy quality of his limbs, the overall impression of his stance being that of one ready to sink gently into a position of sleep. The physical suffering of the captive is overshadowed by the seemingly exultant and erotic release of his soul from its earthly bonds. Indeed, even his lifting of his tunic is suggestive of disrobing to a state of purity and innocence in preparation for death. Though pain was a useful tool for extracting the truth from uncooperative bodies and took on a purifying role in the case of the convicted criminal, the "true" person, in the form of the soul, would remain unscathed in spite of physical duress, even throughout the process of torture and execution.

Nevertheless, the power of bodily desecration as a deterrent for potential criminals was uncontested. The concept of one's body in torment was such a powerful one that it was not uncommon for images of the criminal undergoing his or her physical punishments to be painted in places of high traffic for all to witness, to the shame and infamy of the transgressor. In the sense that it functioned as a record of the ability to overcome, punish, and dispense with society's miscreants, the artistic representation of torture served a purpose for the community as a whole as an indicator of the domination of the bodies of criminals by the state and was a means of psychologically punishing the transgressor by making use of the rigid conceptions of honor that pervaded the early modern mindset.⁵

In some instances, images were effective punishments in and of themselves. David Freedberg expands on "images of infamy," noting that their official use in Italy began in the late 1200s.⁶ Though such a method was generally reserved for cases when a corporal execution was not possible (as in instances when the criminal fled), images of infamy had their place definitively in law codes of the period: "*Item*: It is decreed and ordained that anyone who does



Figure 1
Michelangelo Buonarroti, *The Dying Slave*, ca. 1513-14.
Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, NY.

anything against the preceding [statutes] should be painted on the Palazzo Communale, by the Commune and at the expense of the Commune; and that his name, forename and the charge [against him] should be inscribed beneath him in large letters."⁷ Freedberg suggests that "the legal aim ... was the deprivation or impugning of reputation and status"⁸ Interestingly, the creation of these images reflected on the painter's character as well as his subject's.⁹ Because notions of honor were intimately connected to an individual's involvement, even conceptually, with sinful dealing, "[s]uch a stigma attached to the job that no painter of sound morals could be seen to be associated with it."¹⁰

Two high-profile victims of execution at the hands of the state that pervaded the awareness of all Renaissance Christians were the two thieves held to have been crucified alongside Christ. Acting as examples of the execution of typical, high-profile criminals in the first century, depictions of the crucifixion of the thieves evolved throughout the medieval and early modern periods. Because the scene was such a common topic for representation, art-



Figure 2
 Lucas Cranach the Elder, *The Crucifixion; Calvary*, 1502.
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 Metropolitan Museum of Art.
 Image source: Art Resource,
 NY.

ists felt the need to distinguish themselves in their interpretation of the image in some way. This often took the form of elaborate and inventive ways of “crucifying” the criminals, at times even going beyond what would have been physically feasible for executioners to implement. Their contortions took on increasing levels of disfigurement and inspired varying degrees of discomfort in the viewer.¹¹ Lucas Cranach’s scene of Calvary is a prime example of the way in which the crucified thieves are made to undergo the maximum amount of pain during a method of execution already at the forefront of Roman cruelty (Figure 2).¹²

Cranach’s representation of the crucifixion follows the iconic compositional format of this scene, with Christ’s cross positioned in the center of the image, flanked by the crosses of the two thieves.

The key component of the painting worth noting is that while Christ’s body, serene and yielding, follows an elegant geometrical and symmetrical layout, the thieves writhe, contorted and disfigured by their suffering, on their crosses. In their torment their physicality serves as a foil to Christ’s tranquility and apparent lack of suffering. This distinction, outstanding in most variations of this scene, raises the question of whether the extent to which a tormented individual suffers from his or her torment depends on his or her level of guilt. At this point in most depictions of the Crucifixion, Christ has resigned himself to God’s will, thereby actualizing the ideals of humility and virtue by the Christian model. His divinity and status as fully human, to the extent that he gives himself over to God, contribute to a lessening of his suffering;



Figure 3
Vincenzo Foppa, *Martyrdom of St. Sebastian*, late 15th century.
Alinari / Art Resource, NY.

not only was he not guilty of the crime of which he was accused, but he also used his suffering as a tool for salvation and redemption. This, however, is decidedly not the case of the thieves, who remain bound to the earth and their physical torments by their humanity compounded with the burden of their guilt and desert of their punishments. Their corporeal disfigurement serves as a foil to the tormented, yet fundamentally uncompromised, body of Christ. The early modern notion that a lack of confession or surrender in torture (in theory) demonstrated the innocence of the victim strengthens the reason for the contrast between Christ and the thieves: the nature of death, suffered in innocence as opposed to guilt, and the extent to which physical torment wracked one's form was seen as dependent on the goodness of the individual.

Depictions of the suffering bodies of the morally depraved allow for reactions of revulsion and a lack of sympathy for the torture/execution victim as well as a sense of justice and fulfilled duty at destroying society's monstrosities. However, it was not only those who may have deserved it who were depicted as suffering: saints and martyrs, those who were most in touch with what was holy and in keeping with Christian values, also were portrayed as un-

dergoing some of the most brutal torments in artwork of the Renaissance. For these, though, suffering and pain took on the function of imitating Christ's torments, thereby leading to a salvific religious awareness. For some religious fanatics, pain carried such desirable connotations to Christ's life that it became self-imposed. Zealous asceticism had been a fixture among seriously committed believers almost since Christianity's beginnings as an organized religion. It was not uncommon for the devout of antiquity and the Middle Ages to remove themselves from social contexts and undergo self-imposed discomfort in an attempt to mirror Christ's suffering. Athanasius's *Life of Antony* details the extremes to which the eponymous saint went to achieve a purer relationship with God.¹³

Martyrdom, continuing in its inherited tradition from antiquity, was heavily present in the Renaissance conception of religious devotion and virtue. As Spivey points out: "Christianity thrived because it mined for virtue in striations of distress."¹⁴ The martyrs, in their submissive attitudes and "clean" disfigurements, echo the form of pain often presented in depictions of Christ. Despite their intense physical suffering, the tranquility and fulfillment of the inner soul is conveyed through their physicality. While the images would still be received with pity, they served more to inspire admiration and perhaps even a desire for emulation among the pious communities of the early modern period. Operating under the same principle of Christ-emulation as asceticism did, the suffering of martyrs may have elicited envious emotions from those who would wish to demonstrate the same level of fealty to their faith.

Still, the most prevalent suffering figure in the minds of early modern Europeans would have been the sacrificed Christ. Subjected to torture and the most cruel, and self-admittedly barbaric, form of execution employed by the Roman Empire,¹⁵ Christ in many ways was the quintessential body-in-pain of late antiquity and the Renaissance. Representations of his suffering body as an idealized form proliferated, and given the pervasiveness of this concept/image, it is no wonder that those who found themselves in situations of agony turned to this symbol for a sense of empathy. Specifically, depictions of Christ in a very realistic portrayal of agony serve to more fully emphasize his humanity and place him on a relatable level with the viewer. The champion of this rapidly growing religion, Christ, as a human demonstration of fortitude and piety in the face of extreme pain, became glorified in his suffering: "whereas the Classical Greek hero demonstrated his status by a tally of swerving feats and prodigal slaughter graced, it may be, with scars, and showing some insouciance towards staying unharmed the Christian martyr gained veneration from spiritual indestructibility. Such heroism was as feasibly demonstrated by a woman as by a man; and nobility of birth was no qualifying condition."¹⁶ The ability to suffer and withstand pain while retaining

spiritual integrity was a unifying theme across the Christian faith and made depictions of Christ, even the most gruesome ones, desirable as means of connecting to the miracle of Christ's death and resurrection.

This understanding of suffering to be a positive occurrence, when undertaken with the purity of the soul as a ballast, pervaded the early modern consciousness to such an extent that representations of suffering bodies altered to reflect it. There are often key visual distinctions in depictions of individuals that suffered innocently or for a religious purpose from those whose fates were justified by guilt. Bodies, even in their disfigurement, were depicted with delicacy and a suggestion of purity. Artists often emphasized the beauty of martyred forms, as if to imply that though they were subjected to such cruel fates, their status as exemplary human beings was undiminished and that they were, in fact, resplendent in their holy role. Those for whom pain serves some higher purpose often have their faces inclined toward the heavens and, though their bodies undergo mutilation and even mild contortion, their form is often drawn in a languid pose that mirrors the easy stances of antiquity (Figure 3).¹⁷ This is not the case for those being punished for their own wrongs, however. In cases of torture, the body of the criminal is almost always contorted grotesquely in a manner that reflects inward on itself rather than outward, barring the necessities of pose demanded by certain torture devices. Their gaze is frequently directed downward toward the things of the earth, if at all—shut or partially closed eyes are prevalent in images of punishment more so than in depictions of unwarranted pain (Figure 4).¹⁸

Nevertheless, the role of torture as cleansing the victim of his or her crimes persisted despite the trends of artistic delineation, and was brought into practice physically in instances of execution:

... in Italy between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries, brotherhoods were set up to offer a kind of solace [to those about to be executed]; and the instruments of consolation were small painted images. A fair number of these *tavolucce*, or *tavolette*, as they were alternatively called, survive, and their use is attested by a considerable amount of supplementary visual evidence. Each *tavoletta* was painted on both sides. On one side was a scene from the Passion of Christ; on the other side, a martyrdom that was more or less relevant to the punishment to be meted out to the prisoner.¹⁹

Proffering such images to criminals in their last moments attests to the belief in the ability of images to direct focus toward the divine, and thereby becomes a healing tool and a means of imbuing the execution with religious purpose.

As observers and documenters of the world around them, artists necessarily had to draw upon the resources at hand for models from which to craft accurate representations of the human form.



Figure 4
Jean Milles de Souvigny, *The estrapade, or question extraordinary*, 16th century.
Picture Collection, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations.

For traditional portraits and scenes, this need could easily be satisfied by a live model who would hold the requisite pose for the artist to observe, interpret, and document. However, the situation became more challenging when the subject being portrayed was of the human form mangled and/or deceased. More difficult to come by than an uncorrupted human body, mutilated body parts demanded of the artist a strong comprehension of anatomy and the ability to improvise and invent the look of a convincingly tormented human form. The ubiquitous image in popular conceptions is that of Raphael carrying the severed limbs of corpses through the streets from the charnel house to his studio and, though often exaggerated for all the titillating shock value that accompanies hyperbole, was probably not completely inaccurate. To depict realistic corpses, artists had to study corpses, or at least

parts of them, in the interests of pictorial accuracy. Presumably, they would have used the same bodies available to their contemporary anatomists, that is, “the marginal members of their own societies—the criminal, the poor, the insane, suicides, orphans, even, simply, ‘strangers.’”²

It is a point of curiosity that representations of the human form that were a patchwork of an artist’s studies of severed body parts could be received well and even lauded as beautiful by an early modern audience. Despite the Renaissance emphasis on observation of the natural world and accurately conveying exactly what the artist was depicting, the acceptance of bodies that had been pieced together from various elements, which, taken in their actual context, would have been abhorrent, suggests a willingness on the part of Renaissance audiences to look past the purely physical to something more transcendental. While there existed (and still does exist) a certain delight in the mere appearance of the body, the visible presence of an intact soul behind the façade of the human form is what imbues images with appeal for the Renaissance audience. The artist’s ability to convey humanity and a spiritual presence behind the corporeal surface suggests that not only was adherence to naturalistic depiction not necessarily the only focus of an artist, but that it may not even have been the primary one.

In the context of torture and the deliberate infliction of suffering at the hands of the state, artists would have had an intimate perspective on the incident of the body in pain. Commissioned to create images of suffering and torment, the artist would draw upon not only his training as a skilled craftsman who could transpose what he saw to the canvas, but also upon the philosophies of the day that dictated differing views of what humanity meant in the context of agony and death. Where these commentaries on dualism, transcendence, and experience contrasted was where the artist assumed the role of interpreter and necessarily expressed his own viewpoint in the images he created. Charged with observing and imitating life as well as communicating to their contemporary audiences, artists clearly did not work in a vacuum. They were subject to the traditions and prejudices of their time, perhaps more so than any other member of Renaissance society. As such, it is no wonder that preconceived notions of morality played into their interpretations of instances of suffering. In torture, especially, were their biases in place, as the subtle variances in techniques of showing a criminal in pain versus a holy individual being scourged demonstrate. Innocence and guilt, like the character traits that certain artists saw as permanently evident in the physiognomy of an individual, inevitably colored their visual accounts of the events. By grappling with their studies and masterpieces, not only with their personal beliefs but also with the philosophies informing artistic endeavors of the day, artists acted as the Renaissance’s interpreters and translators of competing concepts about the body, pain, and torture.

Notes

- ¹ Maria Ruvoldt, *The Italian Renaissance Imagery of Inspiration: Metaphors of Sex, Sleep, and Dreams*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
- ² Moshe Barasch, “Character and Physiognomy: Bocchi on Donatello’s St. George a Renaissance Text on Expression in Art,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* Vol. 36.3 (1975).
- ³ Nigel Spivey, *Enduring Creation: Art, Pain, and Fortitude*, (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 2001).
- ⁴ Michelangelo Buonarroti, *The Dying Slave*, ca. 1513–1515. Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, NY.
- ⁵ Paul McLean, *The Art of the Network: Strategic Interaction and Patronage in Renaissance Florence*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 59–65.
- ⁶ David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 248.
- ⁷ *Statuta communis Parmae digesta anno MCCLV*, A. Ronchini ed., *Monumenta historica ad provincias Parmensem et Placentinam pertinentia*, I (Parma, 1855), 441, in Freedberg, *The Power of Images*.
- ⁸ Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, 248.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 250.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.* (emphasis added).
- ¹¹ Mitchell Merback, *The Thief, the Cross, and the Wheel*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998).
- ¹² Lucas Cranach the Elder, *Crucifixion; Calvary*, 1502. The Metropolitan Museum of Art / Art Resource, NY.
- ¹³ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Vita S. Antoni [Life of St. Antony]*, 356–362, in Internet Medieval Sourcebook, ed. Paul Halsall, last modified November 1998, <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/vita-antony.asp>.
- ¹⁴ Spivey, *Enduring Creation*, 40.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 44.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.
- ¹⁷ Vincenzo Foppa, *Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian*, late fifteenth century. Alinari / Art Resource, NY.
- ¹⁸ Jean Milles de Souvigny, *The estrapade from Praxis criminis persequendi*, (Paris) 1541. In Lisa Silverman, *Tortured Subjects: Pain, Truth, and the Body in Early Modern France*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001). Image: Picture Collection, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations.
- ¹⁹ Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, 5–6.
- ²⁰ Jonathan Sawday, *The Body Emblazoned: Dissection and the Human Body in Renaissance Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1995), 3.