



The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion

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Originally published in 1983, Leo Steinberg's classic work has changed the viewing habits of a generation. After centuries of repression and censorship, the sexual component in thousands of revered icons of Christ is restored to visibility. Steinberg's evidence resides in the imagery of the overtly sexed Christ, in Infancy and again after death. Steinberg argues that the artists regarded the deliberate exposure of Christ's genitalia as an affirmation of kinship with the human condition. Christ's lifelong virginity, understood as potency under check, and the first offer of blood in the circumcision, both required acknowledgment of the genital organ. More than exercises in realism, these unabashed images underscore the crucial theological import of the Incarnation.

This revised and greatly expanded edition not only adduces new visual evidence, but deepens the theological argument and engages the controversy aroused by the book's first publication.

The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion Details

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Author : Leo Steinberg

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From Reader Review The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion for online ebook

Darcy says

Looks really interesting! analyses different religious paintings and points out the symbolism and hidden messages in each one. for example: it's very common for the child to be holding the mothers chin or breast, or she may be touching the child's groin, or even more common there is a man in the painting admiring the child's groin, totally interesting with tons of paintings as references.

Lance Kinzer says

I found the author's theory on the theological basis for the depiction of Christ in Renaissance art to be quite plausible. I read the 2nd Edition which devotes a great deal of time to addressing the books critics. While I can certainly understand Steinberg's desire to defend his theory against all comers, I think I might just as well have stopped where the 1st edition concluded. Written in an engaging fashion with wit and aplomb to spare this book should be of interest to anyone interested in the history of artistic depictions of Christ.

Tom says

I'd never heard of Steinberg before reading his obit in NYT yesterday, but this book sounded intriguing, especially coming on heels of another article I'd just read re Renaissance art and Christianity, in America, National Catholic Weekly (see 2nd link below).

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/15/art...>

<http://www.americamagazine.org/conten...>

David Dixon says

Someday I'll get to the addenda.

Richard says

Baby Jesus with a hard on? check.

The risen Christ with a hard on? check.

Weird tit play and penis gawking? check.

very amusing book.
We deserve more.

Dean Mathiowetz says

Yes, Jesus had a penis. And once upon a time it was a very big deal. This book contains not only Steinberg's original essay, but a series of commentaries on the shortcomings of its critics, and digressions on those digressions. And don't forget all the pictures of Jesus'....yah. Quite an education.

Próndr says

Once in a while I pick up a book that changes how I look at art. In this case Renaissance art, and one particular feature of it. I guess I am not alone in not having dwelled much on baby Jesus in between all the abundant richness that Renaissance painting has to offer. On the one hand, it took them a long time to be able to paint infants in a convincing manner, and on the other, the notion that a Son of God must have been extraordinarily precocious often made them translate said precociousness into disturbingly mature-looking baby Jesuses. Yet another reason for this type of depictions could be because the painters sometimes made references to the Virgin's mystic role as the Bride of her Son (after the Assumption obviously, but as prolepsis was common in Renaissance art, you often find this melange of representation.) So when in some paintings the Christ-child is looking at his mother in a less than childlike way it could be a representation of the Infant Spouse that you are being presented with. In more traditional theology the Church is the Bride of Christ, and this was my first introduction to this particular variant, but I am asking myself how this very Oedipal theme has escaped the clutches of art historians eager to enter the bestseller lists. (Though we should perhaps be grateful to have been spared a few Freudian extravaganzas.) The answer however is probably very simple. As Leo Steinberg shows in his book, art historians have avoided discussing the sexuality of Christ as it was commonly depicted in Renaissance painting, and it is as if some of them have learned to mentally add little sashes and veils, displaying an eagerness in perfect harmony with the spirit of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation.

Though, as Steinberg writes in *Excursus XXXI* (titled 'Bowdlerism'), "Museum culture has entered upon its deciduous season, a kind of autumnal shedding and falling of fig leaves throughout the civilized world, wherever livings are to be made by restorers," (p. 178) nevertheless, art historians often seem to suffer from a very modern kind of modesty, a compulsion to avert their eyes from exposed pudenda as if their careers depended on it - it is very curious indeed.

This book has convinced me that I am in fact seeing what I had often thought I was seeing, e.g. the many paintings where one of the Saints or Magi, or a Donor gazes intently at the Christ-child's crotch. They are not being at all ill-mannered in so doing however; they are beholding the Mystery of the Incarnation. For the benefit of the uninitiated, this will shortly be elucidated; at least I will provide some quotes from Steinberg's very well-written book that allow you some glimpses into the mystery.

Steinberg expresses his indebtedness to John W. O'Malley early on:

"I have learned much from John O'Malley's recent book *Praise and Blame in Renaissance Rome* – a masterly study that deals for the first time with the sermons delivered at the papal court between the years 1450 and 1521. O'Malley quotes this admonition to preachers from a late 15th-century author (Brandolini): "Whereas in earlier times men had to search for the truth and dispute about it, in the Christian era men are to enjoy it." The preacher is not to waste

words persuading believers to belief. His office is to stir men to gratitude and delight. The sermons, accordingly, dwell on the boon conferred by the Incarnation; to which the Christian's proper response is admiration and praise.” (p. 9)

The gist of the theology of Incarnation that was preached from the pulpits found a wider outreach in what Steinberg calls the two “steady best sellers of the late Middle Ages and Renaissance.” These were *Meditations on the Life of Christ* by Pseudo-Bonaventure and the late 13th century *Golden Legend*. “For nearly three hundred years, the *Legenda aurea* served as the standard compilation of the lives of the saints, and as a source book for every Renaissance painting with a hagiological theme.” (p. 57)

So, the painters that dwelled on the sexuality of Christ weren't eccentric in their choice, Incarnation theology was indeed *de rigueur*. While this may seem odd to us moderns, we can compare it to some of the oddities of our own age, as when in the US (with its Puritan offshoot of the Reformation) an exposed nipple during Super Bowl is a scandal, and this absurdity is now even spreading through that huge success of American entrepreneurship, Facebook, from where this very American dogma is being expounded, and where a picture showing a nipple is an Abomination, and I suspect a picture of baby Jesus' pecker would lead to Excommunication and Eternal Damnation in the lowest circle of Hell. - By Jove, I much prefer the Renaissance to the sanctimoniousness of contemporary mores. Incarnation theology is at least intelligible, something you can hardly state about this contemporary upsurge of nipple-phobia.

Ok, enough digressing, though I appear to have found yet another good reason for my affinity for the Renaissance through it. Where was I? Yes, the phallus:

“The ithyphallus as emblem of immortality haunts later Mediterranean mysteries honoring Bacchus. The prevalence of such symbolism accounts perhaps for the readiness with which Christian theology associated the penis in its circumcision with resurrection. (...) In Western literature, the *locus classicus* for our metaphoric equation is Boccaccio's *Decameron*, the tenth tale of the third day, where the sexual arousal of the anchorite Rustico is announced, with blasphemous irony, as "la resurrezion della carne." The context of the novella makes Boccaccio's wording - the resurrection of the flesh following its mortification - an apt and effective pun. But this same "pun," now deeply serious, lurks in the greatest 16th-century representation of the *Raising of Lazarus* - Sebastiano del Piombo's colossal painting in London, composed with the assistance of Michelangelo...” (p. 89)

I don't find Sebastiano's painting particularly convincing as an illustration, but there are quite a few others that prove his point, like the many versions of the *Man of Sorrow* by Maarten van Heemskerck and the one by Ludwig Krug. And of course there's Michelangelo's unique marble sculpture of the *Risen Christ*, installed in the church of Santa Maria sopra Minerva in Rome. Later the church reconsidered the matter and ended up disfiguring the magnificent sculpture by adding an absurd bronze loincloth.

We have now moved on to representations of the Crucifixion, Lamentation, Entombment and Resurrection, where there is a plethora of paintings and drawings that stress the crotch, either through a phallic knot or the fluttering of a loincloth (Crucifixion) or where the dead Christ conspicuously grasps his crotch with one hand (Lamentation, Entombment). Steinberg sees this gesture as a reference to the Circumcision. Here I'll quote from O'Malley's excellent Postscript:

“When the hand of the dead Christ simply covers the genitals (...) the simplest explanation is perhaps to take this gesture as a sign that there was, indeed, something there to cover - and,

hence, to take the gesture as a sign of the genuine humanity of the one who died and as a symbol of modesty by the one who had been so immodestly stripped. Or the gesture very well may be meant, as Steinberg proposes, to point to the first wound and first shedding of blood for our redemption.” (p. 202)

But there are other reasons for the same emphasis in the resurrected Christ; back to the theme introduced by the reference to Boccaccio:

“Constant throughout is the conceit of the phallus as a manifestation of power. (...) In an ancient text well known to 16th-century authors, the *Oneirocritica*, or *Interpretation of Dreams*, of Artemidorus, "the penis . . . is a symbol of strength and physical vigor, because it is itself the cause of these qualities. That is why some people call the penis 'one's manhood' [*andreia*]." (...) Nothing here seems specifically Christian. Yet it is precisely in the Renaissance that this ancient topos surfaces in the most Catholic context - within a sermon on the Circumcision delivered by Battista Casali in 1508, again *inter missarum solemnia*, before Pope Julius II... the preacher invokes the male member as the "greatest testimony of fortitude" (*amplissimum fortitudinis testimonium*). In common with his audience of prelates and theologians, Casali takes it for granted that the phallus is reasonably equated with power. But the supreme power is the power which prevails over mortality. And it is in this sense again that the phallus of Christ resurrected is spoken of in yet another sermon, delivered by Cardulus before Pope Alexander VI some ten years before Casali's. Discussing the theological question whether or not the circumcised prepuce of Christ was reassumed in the risen body, Cardulus cites opinions both for and against, and reports that those in favor of reassumption regard the restored member as a *signum victoriae*-- i.e., the phallus as sign! Returning now to Heemskerck's outrageous conception of the Man of Sorrows with the *testimonium fortitudinis* in plain evidence, we restate our question: is the erection-resurrection equation in paintings of c. 1530 admissible within the Christian ethos? And now a positive answer no longer seems scurrilous: in the similitude of Christ's body, Heemskerck (like Ludwig Krug and the others) may have attempted a metaphor of the mortified-vivified flesh” (pp. 90-91)

In the 'Madonna and Child' paintings however, when the Christ child places a hand on his crotch; where a flimsy veil emphasises the crotch rather than cover it; or where the Virgin “accidentally” lifts his garment to expose his genitals, it is more likely his humanness that is being stressed. And I particularly appreciated O'Malley's comment regarding this:

“I would even venture to develop further a suggestion Steinberg makes about the draperies that often seem to be deliberately removed from the infant's genitals in many of the scenes we have seen. I suggest that here we might have a deliberate play on the idea of "revelation." *Velum* is a veil, while *revelare* means to unveil, just as epiphany means to show and to make manifest. This God, in other words, is unveiled, *revealed*, in these scenes as truly and fully man.” (p. 202)

As I started writing this when I was nearing the end of the book, I have to backtrack a little here – to the subject of the Circumcision:

“What the Christian art of the Renaissance took from pagan antiquity was the license to plumb its own mythic depths. To the penis of the Christ Child, the images we are discussing assign a

crucial, positive role in the redemption, not only as the proof of Christ's humanation, but as the earnest of his self-sacrifice. The member exposed--or touched (...) stands for God's life as man and for his man's death, perhaps even for his Resurrection. And this plural function points inevitably to the theology of Christ's Circumcision, which supplies all we need in the way of supporting texts." (p. 49)

"A (...) constant in Patristic writings is the Circumcision of Christ conceived as continuous with his work of redemption. Since the debt incurred by the sin of Adam cannot be met by Adam's insolvent progeny - and since Christ's blood pays the ransom - his Circumcision becomes, as it were, a first installment, a down payment on behalf of mankind. It is because Christ was circumcised that the Christian no longer needs circumcision." (p. 50)

Back to the *Legenda aurea*:

"The structure of the work follows the liturgical year, and the entry for January 1 informs us that Christ allowed himself to be circumcised "to show that he had assumed true human flesh; so as to destroy the error of them who would say that he had taken on a phantasmal and not a true body. To confute their error, he wished to be circumcised and emit blood, for [in the phrasing of William Caxton's translation of 1483] a body phantastic shall shed no blood." Thus once again, in this most popular Renaissance reading, the genuineness of the Incarnation is put to proof in the sexual member. More than that: the wounding of it initiates the salvation of humankind, for the archbishop [Voragine] says further: "On this day he began to shed his blood for us . . . and this was the beginning of our redemption." Then, after citing three subsequent effusions of the precious blood (at the Agony in the Garden, the Flagellation, and the Nailing to the Cross), Voragine comes to the fifth and last shedding-"when his side was opened [with a lance] and this was the sacrament of our redemption, for then out of his side issued blood and water" - the blood and water which, in Augustine's wording, "we know to be the sacraments from which the Church is built up." In Voragine's formulation, the first and last wounds received are not yet placed in immediate apposition, but they appear as the terminal points of an ordained cycle. Linking beginning and end, the knife's cut to the gash of the lance, we trace a passage on the body of Christ from man to God; the sexual member broaching the mortal Passion, the breast yielding the gift of grace. Put into words, the anatomical consequence of Voragine's formula comes as a shock - that Christ's redemptive Passion, which culminates on the cross in the blood of the sacred heart, begins in the blood of the penis. We are educated to shrink from such thinking. But it is Christian thinking - implicit in doctrine, explicit wherever in Renaissance art Christian teaching is brought face to face with its own metaphoricity." (pp. 57-8)

These quotes should suffice to underscore the fact that Steinberg isn't simply looking at paintings here; he argues convincingly and with impeccable erudition. Nevertheless, there are as many as 246 illustrations, all referenced in the text, and while there are a few of them that I didn't find entirely convincing, the overwhelming majority of them are just that - many more are mentioned in the text, but I didn't bother to look them up; those that are found in the book are more than sufficient to illustrate the argument. The Excursuses in the back of the book fill about as many pages as the text itself, and most of them are just as interesting as the rest of the book, and they are often very entertaining as well.

Steinberg writes towards the end of his essay: "I have risked hypothetical interpretations chiefly to show that, whether one looks with the eye of faith or with a mythographer's cool, the full content of the icons discussed bears looking at without shying." (p. 108) They do, and I am grateful to him for his unflinching look at an intriguing, yet sorely neglected aspect of Renaissance art.

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Jeff says

There must be a reason why artists for 500+ years have depicted Christ (especially the infant version) naked. This book outlines the reasons. Art history is rarely as polemical and controversial as this book, which makes it all the more engaging.

Saskia says

A+

Neev says

This is one of the best and most engaging art history books I've ever read. The writing is humorous and very accessible, even if you don't have an extensive background knowledge of Renaissance art or the culture of the time period. The basic premise of the text is reassessing some of the more puzzling depictions of Christ by examining them in their proper socio-cultural context, which reveals the symbolism and concepts that would have been more obvious to contemporary viewers of these pieces. Steinberg lays out his ideas very clearly and offers a wealth of examples and images to back up his thesis.

Kathryn Kopple says

Leo Steinberg, always eloquent, offers an account of Humanism as celebrated in Renaissance art of such scope and interest that it makes this book one of the great intellectual adventures and achievements of our times.

Marielle says

I adore books that expose me to new ways of thinking. This was one of them. Fantastically researched. And re-researched!

Ms says

Don't let the blunt wording of the book title offend you. This book is a respectful, scholarly inquiry into a topic most polite people are encouraged to ignore, but with all the provided pictorial evidence, makes it difficult to do so.

Definitely a book I will re-read after I study more Medieval and Renaissance paintings.
