

# Medieval Art and the Human Form

## Background Notes

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Plate 1 Henry II crowned by Christ, *Pericopes of Henry II*, Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, early 11<sup>th</sup> century



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# THE BODY IN MEDIEVAL ART

## HEAVENLY BODIES

### **CHRIST AND THE VIRGIN MARY**

Christ, and his mother, the Virgin Mary, were the most revered and frequently depicted figures during the Middle Ages and yet the Bible offered no specific details of their physical appearance. Craftsmen used visual aids to ensure they were clearly differentiated from others: from the late 4<sup>th</sup> century onwards Christ's physiognomy was based upon representations of Jupiter, the father of the pantheon of pagan gods; bearded, with long, dark hair parted centrally. Only Christ bore a halo emblazoned with a cross, and only he, and Mary, were depicted within an almond-shaped body halo, or *mandorla*, to demonstrate visually that both were untainted by Original Sin (Plate 1). Mary and her son were typically dressed in blue garments, since blue was often costly and the colour that defined Heaven in the language of medieval colour symbolism. Since Christ had ascended to Heaven and Mary was assumed there after death, bodily relics of the pair were lacking, but this did nothing to prevent phials, purporting to contain Christ's blood, and crystals, said to be crystallised drops of Mary's milk, together with contact relics, such as the Crown of Thorns, from being venerated. The Sacrament of the Eucharist, during which the miracle of Transubstantiation was believed to occur (whereby the bread and wine were transformed in to Christ's very flesh and blood), further focused the faithful's devotions upon the body of Christ.

### **THE SAINTS**

The Saints, holy men and women, some of whom had suffered grisly torture and martyrdom, for the sake of their Christian faith, inspired the living to holy behaviour, and interceded, on mankind's behalf with God. Identified in visual images by attributes associated with their lives or deaths, their physical remains were venerated with fervour by the faithful, who regarded relics as powerful channels of God's grace, capable of effecting spiritual and physical healing. Bodily relics, and items such as clothing that had come into contact with their bodies, were enclosed in precious goldsmiths' work reliquaries, sometimes designed in imitation of particular body parts, with the expectation that splendid packaging would enhance the spiritual power of the relic and prompt pilgrims to donate generously to the religious institutions fortunate enough to possess such treasures (Plate 2).



Plate 2 Reliquary of Sainte Foi, Conques (Aveyron), Sainte Foi, gold and precious stones, 10<sup>th</sup> century and later

## EARTHLY BODIES

### FROM THE PAST....

Early medieval patrons and craftsmen felt uneasy when commissioned to depict the human body. The Church, taught that man and woman were created perfect, in God's image, but that their disobedience, which led to the Fall, as narrated in Genesis, infected them with the stain of sin, and left them ashamed of their bodies which were prone to lust and idolatry. Naked bodies were thus rarely depicted; although fallible Old Testament figures, such as Adam, Eve and Bathsheba, provide notable exceptions to this rule, with cautionary intent.

Until the late 12<sup>th</sup> century artists depicted the human body in an abstract manner in order to avoid the temptation of idolatry, even if they could have produced more naturalistic figures, should they have wished. From c. 1200 onwards attitudes changed, as the result of a revolution in theological thought; Neo-Platonic philosophy, which had prompted a symbolic, non-realistic approach to the human form, was superseded by a Christian interpretation of Aristotelian ideas, which advocated the appropriate worth of appreciating the natural world, scrutinising it closely and depicting it accurately. Increasingly it became acceptable to replicate the human body in a natural way and to infuse figures with emotions, in the hope that audiences would engage

more closely with the holy figures and thus feel closer to God. The process of changing human forms is convincingly charted by comparing the abstract figures designed by the Master of the Leaping Figures, a mid-12<sup>th</sup> century painter who worked in Winchester (Plate 3), with the emotionally charged marble protagonists carved on pulpit reliefs by Giovanni Pisano, an early 14<sup>th</sup> century Tuscan sculptor (Plate 4), and the explicitly naturalistic, seductive nudes painted by Jean Bourdichon in late 15<sup>th</sup> century Books of Hours (lay prayer books), destined for royal French patrons (Plate 5). The margins of some late medieval devotional books reveal a frank willingness to depict nude human bodies employed in mischievous activities, laced with lascivious humour.

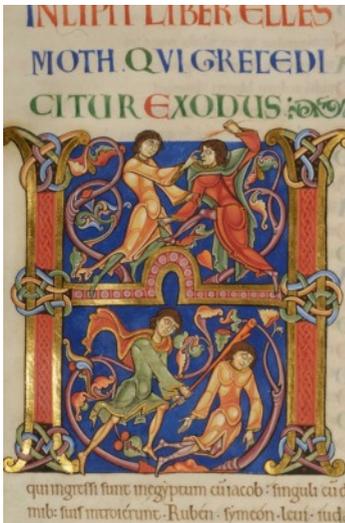


Plate 3 Exodus, *Winchester Bible*, Winchester (Hants), Cathedral Library, c. 1150-70



Plate 4 Annunciation and Nativity, pulpit, Pistoia (Tuscany), San Andrea, marble, Giovanni Pisano, c. 1302



Plate 5 Bathsheba bathing, *Hours of Louis XII*, J. Paul Getty Museum, California, 1498-9

**FROM THE PRESENT...**

Up until the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century, images of royal and noble individuals conveyed status by the choice of costume, while identity was declared through the employment of heraldry or use of rebuses, visual puns that played upon family names. Thereafter, the revived interest in the natural world led to a re-birth of portraiture, a skill that had disappeared along with the demise of the Western Roman Empire in the late 5<sup>th</sup> century. In France, the profile panel portrait of King Jean le Bon (John II, r. 1350-164), c. 1350, provides an early instance of this revived interest. English patrons and artists took a little longer to embrace this enthusiasm, but eventually, as was so often the case in the Middle Ages, they took their lead from the French. The *Wilton Diptych*, painted for King Richard II (r. 1377-99), c. 1396-7, together with his tomb effigy in Westminster Abbey, demonstrate beyond doubt that English royal patrons had become fascinated by portraiture (Plate 6); women and men of less lofty status had to wait until the Renaissance to have their portraits made.



Plate 6 The *Wilton Diptych*, panel, London, National Gallery, c. 1395-6

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY:**

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Kay, S. & Rubin, M (eds) *Framing Medieval Bodies* (Manchester University Press: 1996)

## **IMAGE LIST:**

New York, Cloisters Collection, leaf from a Missal, Crucifixion, Paris, c. 1270

Barnard Castle (Co. Durham), Bowes Museum, Sassetta, 15<sup>th</sup> century, tempera on panel, Miracle of the Host at Bolsena, 1263

Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek Clm 4456, *Pericopes of Henry II*, early 11<sup>th</sup> century, fol. 11, Henry crowned by Christ

New York, Metropolitan Museum, *Vièrge ouvrante*, c. 1300, wood, painted and gilded, Cologne

London, V&A, *St Nicholas Crosier*, elephant ivory, c. 1150, Northern France

London, V&A, *Becket Casket*, copper, gilt, *champlevé* enamel and rock crystal, c. 1180, Limoges

Oxford, University College MS 162, Bede, *Life of Cuthbert*, c. 1100, Durham Cathedral Priory

Conques (Aveyron), Sainte Foi, reliquary, gold and precious stones, 10<sup>th</sup> century and later

Bendorf-Sayn, Furst zu Sayn-Wittgenstein-Sayn, arm reliquary of St Elizabeth of Hungary, c. 1240, Germany

London, British Museum, *Boradaille Triptych*, elephant ivory, Constantinople, 10<sup>th</sup> century

Moscow, State Historical Museum, the *Khludov Psalter*, Constantinople, soon after 843, fol. 67, Psalm 68, Crucifixion and Iconoclasts

London, British Library, Cotton MS Nero C.iv, the *Winchester Psalter*, Winchester, c. 1150, the Flagellation

London, V&A, the *Veroli Casket*, elephant ivory and bone, Constantinople, 10<sup>th</sup> century

Chantilly, Musée Condé MS 65, *Très Riches Heures*, Limbourg brothers, Paris or Bourges, Zodiac Man, 1411-16

Rome, Catacomb of San Marcellinus, Daniel and the Lions, wall painting, late 3<sup>rd</sup> century

Escorial, Biblioteca de El Escorial &.II.5, Beatus of Liebana, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, c. 1000, fol. 18, Adam and Eve

J. Paul Getty Museum (California), *Hours of Louis XII*, 1498-9, Bathsheba bathing, Jean Bourdichon

Autun (Burgundy), St Lazare, west portal, Last Judgement, Gislebertus, c. 1130

Autun (Burgundy), Musée Rolin, Eve lintel from north portal, Gislebertus, c. 1130

Winchester (Hants), Cathedral Library MS 1, the *Winchester Bible*, Exodus, c. 1150-70, Winchester

Liège (Belgium), St Barthélémy, the *Liège Font*, 1107-18, cast bronze, gilt (diam. 103 cm)

Klosterneuberg (Austria), Abbey, detail from the *Klosterneuberg Altarpiece* (formerly an *ambo* or pulpit), Nicholas of Verdun, 1181, copper gilt and *champlevé* enamel

Reims (Champagne), Cathedral, west portal, jamb figures of Mary and Elizabeth, c. 1130

Chartres, Cathedral, Western *Royal Portal*, jamb figures, c. 1150

Chartres, Cathedral, North transept Portal, jamb figures, c. 1220

Paris, Louvre, Virgin and Child statuette from Sainte Chapelle, Paris, elephant ivory, gilt and polychromy, c. 1260

Paris, Louvre, Virgin and Child, for Saint Denis, Paris, silver-gilt and *basse-taille* enamel, c. 1330, Paris

Pisa, Duomo Baptistry, pulpit, marble, Nicola Pisano, 1260

Pistoia (Tuscany), San Andrea, pulpit, marble, Giovanni Pisano, c. 1302

Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, MS 1-2005, the *Macclesfield Psalter*, East Anglia, c. 1330

Le Mans, Musée Tessé, tomb of Geoffrey, Duke of Anjou (d. 1151), copper, gilt and *champlevé* enamel, c. 1150

London, National Gallery, the *Wilton Diptych*, tempera on panel, Westminster, c. 1395-6

London, Westminster Abbey, tomb effigy of Richard II, c. 1394, copper gilt, Broker and Prest

Ewelme (Oxon.), St Mary, tomb of Alice de la Pole, Duchess of Suffolk, alabaster, London, c. 1475

## **PEOPLE, PLACES AND TERMS**

Alice de la Pole, Duchess of Suffolk, 1404-75

Aristotle, Ancient philosopher and author, 383-321 B.C.

Bolsena (Lazio, near Viterbo), where the miracle of the Miraculous Host occurred, 1263

Cuthbert, saint, Bishop of Lindisfarne, c. 634-687

Dampfold drapery – drapery convention that flourished in England, c. 1135-55

Galen, Ancient Greek author, 129-216

Geoffrey Plantagenet, Count of Anjou, 1113-1151, father of Henry II, King of England

Giovanni Pisano, Italian sculptor, c. 1250 - c. 1315, son of Nicola Pisano

Gislebertus, sculptor who worked at Cluny and Autun, fl. c. 1120-35

Henry of Blois, nephew of King Stephen, Bishop of Winchester, 1101-71

Hippocrates, Ancient Greek writer, 460—370 B.C.

Iconoclasm/Iconoclastic Controversy in the Byzantine Empire, 726-843

Jean le Bon, II, King of France, r. 1364-1380

Jean, duc de Berry, brother of King Charles V, patron and connoisseur, 1340-1416

Jean Bourdichon, French illuminator, 1457-1521

Jeanne d'Evreux, dowager Queen of France, 1310-71

Limbourg brothers (Hermann, Paul and Johan), manuscript painters, fl. 1385-1415

Louis IX, King of France, 1214-70

Louis XII, King of France, 1462-1515

Master of the Leaping Figures, fl. c. 1150, the earliest painter to work on the *Winchester Bible*

*Muldenstil*, soft drapery convention characterised by small trough-like folds, originated in the Meuse valley (Belgium) in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century

Nicholas of Verdun, Mosan metalworker, c. 1130 – c. 1205

Nicholas of Myra (Lycia, Turkey), and Bari (Puglia), Saint, 4<sup>th</sup> century

Nicola Pisano, Italian sculptor, c. 1220-84, father of Giovanni Pisano

Plato, Ancient Greek philosopher and author, 428/427 or 424/423 – 348/347 B.C.

Richard II, King of England, r. 1377-99

Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, d. 1170

Transi-tomb, double-decker tomb with cadaver at base and living effigy surmounting the tomb chest

Transubstantiation, the belief that the bread and wine at a Eucharist was transformed in to Christ's body and blood

*Vièrge ouvrante*, sculpture of the Virgin, often with the Child, that opens to reveal further figures within

*Virgo lactans*, the Virgin suckling the infant Christ

Zodiac Man, depiction of a man with each part of his body linked to a sign of the Zodiac

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