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# THE THEME OF THE CRUCIFIXION OF CHRIST IN VISUAL ARTS

Case  
Studies

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## Keywords

Christ,  
Crucifixion,  
The Virgin,  
St. John,  
Iconography

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## Abstract

*The Crucifixion of Christ is one of the major Biblical events in the context of the four Gospels, also marking one of the most frequently met themes in the iconography of Christian art. The focus of the paper is to underline the main aspects of the visual representation of this tense moment in the history of Christianity, referring to representative works of the artistic heritage inspired by the event of Christ's death on the cross. Thus, a number of famous works of art history are analyzed in relation to the described composition, the represented characters and their importance. They belong both to traditional artistic fields, such as painting, to modern ones, thus taking into account some of the most popular film representations on this topic.*

## 1. Introduction

When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. (Luke 23, 33)

To speak about a theme such as The Crucifixion of Christ is undoubtedly a sensible approach, both from the perspective of a man of science and that of a man of faith, or even from the perspective of the artist concerned with the mysteries of religious art. Dealing with the death of one of the most significant religious characters in history after so long, this subject still tackles many sensible subjects of the four Gospels and religious works, in general. However, in this study we will proceed to an interdisciplinary approach of this theme; our aim is to deal with the subject both from the perspective of the religious field, according to the Biblical accounts on the event, and the artistic field. For this purpose, this research will try to grasp some of the most significant elements of the way in which this theme was visualized in Christian iconography, by analyzing chronologically some of the many artistic works inspired by this important moment in the history of Christianity.

## 2. The Crucifixion of Christ, a biblical and historical event

It is known that crucifixion was one of the most common and widespread death sentences in the Ancient World, and accounts on such executions were encountered in other civilisations, as well; only crucifixion methods and the shape of crosses varied from an area to another. In the Roman Empire, the sentence of crucifixion was one of the most humiliating and painful execution methods which was only reserved to slaves and foreigners; the Romans were not subjected to such a low and painful sentence (Porter, 2007, p.124). In fact, this is one of the arguments for which J. R. Porter considers the moment of the Crucifixion of Christ to be a genuine historical one; his argument is based on the premise that the first Christians were not interested in inventing such a tragical and degrading ending for Christ, whatsoever, knowing that death in such a way would have been wrongly interpreted in the illicit context of the beginning of Christian times (Porter, 2007, p.124).

The crucifixion of Christ is placed in history during the reign of emperor Tiberius who ruled between 14-37 AD and Pontius Pilate's ruling (26-36 AD). The event of the Crucifixion of Christ is presented by the four Gospels, each of them bringing remarkable details to the happening of this landmark moment in the history of Christianity.

In Christianity, the Church writings and songs speak about the passions of Christ in the context of the so-called "Holy Week" or "Passion Week" that celebrates, in a religious manner, this extremely significant period of the year for Christians. This is the period in which the Christian Church recalls the

moments of sorrow and tragedy when Christ was sold by Judas to the priests and the elders for thirty pieces of silver; captured in the Garden of Gethsemane, he was hit, spit on, whipped and finally crucified.

The Gospels describe how He was delivered to the Jews to be killed, following the court ruling of Pontius Pilate; Jesus was delivered to the place of execution, also called Golgotha or "the place of the skull" (Mark, 15, 22), nowadays located inside the Church of Jerusalem that hosts the place of crucifixion and Christ's tomb. Once arrived at the place of calvary, after an exhausting path on which He was forced to carry His cross, Jesus Christ was handed to drink vinegar mingled with myrrh (wine mingled with gall, in Matthew); this was believed to kill pain, but He refused to drink, a gesture which may be interpreted as a full acceptance of His own passions and the holy mission He was entrusted. After He was undressed by the clothes further given to the soldiers present at the event, thus abiding by the word of the Scripture that reads "When they had crucified him, they divided up his clothes by casting lots" (Matthew 27, 35), Christ was crucified with two robbers, one on the right and the other one on the left, with an inscription on the plate above His head that blamed Him (Melnicic Puic, 2010, p.15) (INRI, "Jesus the Nazarene, King of the Jews" John 19, 19), being mocked by those that were passing by. According to biblical writings, all these events took place on Friday, until the ninth hour, when Jesus died, crying "Eli, Eli, lama sabahtani? Which means "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27, 47).

To sum up, this is the outline of the main stages that mark the event of the Crucifixion of Christ, that we aim to debate further from the perspective of symbolical meanings and the spiritual significances that can be grasped with respect to the sign of the cross.

## 3. Considerations on the spiritual significances of the cross and the crucifixion of Christ

Along time, several variants of the cross were encountered; Ivan Evseev referred to more than 400 (Evseev, 1999, p.119), some holding heraldic significances, others purely decorating or strictly religious ones. Although it was also encountered in other ancient cultures before the rise of Christianity from the primitive to those of the Ancient world, the present significance of the cross mainly owes to its association with religious faith, where its senses and symbols received particular shades of interpretation due to the event of the Crucifixion of Christ. Because of this feature, it became a main symbol of religious faith (Evseev, 1999, p.118), as opposed to its different sense for a non-believer (Korsia, 2011, p. 59).

As the studies of the field show, the cross is one of the ancient symbols of mankind as it became known ever since ancient times in the Egyptian, Chinese or Cretan culture and it was enriched with various significances from case to case. According to the peculiarities of each cultural area in part, among the various known significances, the sign of the cross refers, in a significant manner, to the mingling between heaven and earth, space and time, thus foreseeing a certain function of synthesis (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1994, p. 398). Spiritually speaking, this aspect is underlined by the faith that the vertical sign of the cross is the main axis that sends to the superior world of divinity, the supratemporal or transcendent world, whereas the horizontal part brings together the common points of this world, the reunion of this axes allowing for a symbolical representation of neutrality's opposites or the Center (Guénon, 2008, p. 82), an expression of multiple significances and reasonings in different cultures of the world.

In the Christian tradition, the cross became enriched with particular meanings in relation to the person of Jesus Christ which it symbolizes by the celebration of His passions. This explains the particular cult that the cross knew within Christian faith where it is celebrated on holy days devoted to it (The Rise of the Holy Cross – in Orthodox faith), by means of special prayers, and is considered a weapon that defeats evil. According to the Christian interpretation, the cross becomes a sign of divine love, stronger than sin and human evil, and a concrete symbol of Deification (Costin, 1997, p.58). Its importance thus justifies its takeover within religious architecture and Christian iconography, an aspect we also have in view within the present analysis.

Following the significances of the death of Christ on the cross, we can distinguish between several aspects that we find relevant from the entire historical outline of Christian faith. Understood as a major centre of interest for the whole Scripture, the Crucifixion of Christ, His death and resurrection, mark some of the most complex biblical accounts as, in the Christian acception, the theme of the Cross became a true emblem of the spiritual mission that every man should have.

The importance of this theme consists in many aspects that influence the space of faith and religious feelings. In Christianity, Christ's death on the cross is mainly considered to be a sign of His love for humankind. The endurance of this feeling is proven by the pain, sorrow and patience He proved, as nothing succeeded in preventing Him from the achievement of God's will ("Father, if you are willing, please take this cup of suffering away from me. Yet I want your will to be done, not mine." – Luke 22, 42). The episode of the prayer in Gethsemane Garden highlights this idea by showing that, even in the context of the most

intense feelings which are natural to human beings, namely love and the ability to endure sorrow that are stronger than sin, treason and men's evil (He prayed more fervently, and he was in such agony of spirit that his sweat fell to the ground like great drops of blood. – Luke 22, 44).

The significance of the biblical event discussed in this study may be emphasized by the acknowledgement of the cosmic dimension of the suffering of Christ and the co-participating nature on the sake of humankind. (At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook and the rocks split; The tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. – Matthew, 27 51-52).

Each of these elements bears various meanings, as, due to Christ's death, the darkness lying over the earth could be interpreted as an opposite expression of the well known phrase: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." – (John, 8, 12). These are only a few considerations concerning the spiritual significances of this biblical event, its importance and relevance mainly consisting in the possibility of Redemption that Christ gave to human nature through His sacrifice.

#### **4. The theme of the Crucifixion of Christ in visual arts**

The theme of the Crucifixion of Christ is one of the most approached subjects in Christian art, which is often encountered within the creations of visual art from the major artistic periods of the last two decades.

Rosa Giorgi shows that the first representations have been barely accepted among Christians; they preferred to avoid the typical rendering of the crucifixion of Christ, in general, and the cross, in particular. They aimed at envisaging it as an object of salvation and redemption, and not one of a death sentence (Giorgi, 2005, p.34). In the same place, the aforementioned author shows that since 313, it became more widespread as the Christian faith became official thanks to the Emperor Constantine the Great who allowed the free expression of the faith in Jesus Christ. Other sources indicate the fact that the image of Christ crucified would have only occurred in the 5th century (Gardin & Pascual, 2005, p.72), an idea supported by François Boespflug who gives as reference the year 420 (Boespflug, 2008, p. 98), showing that until the middle of the 11th century, Christ would have been portrayed as alive, triumphant, eyes wide open, an image which would further replace the "classical" one in which He was rendered as dead. As the cited study shows, the motivation of this evolution consists in a change of perception on this theme which would go for the search and representation of certain mystical emotions, meant to render the

soul and mind of the believer (the admirer) more sensible (Gardin & Pascual, 2005, p.72). Therefore, as François Boespflug wrote, since the 12th century iconography would develop and put a stress on the representations related to the Passions of Christ which, from his point of view, would mark the starting point of the pathetic, in Christian art whose pioneer was the West (Boespflug, 2008, p. 141).

The diversity of models, as well as the differences of representation known in the Eastern and Western world with respect to the presentation of this theme, both in iconography and profane painting, gives precious insights on the evolution of the way in which this subject was approached, as well as the religious sensibility owing to the awareness of the importance of this landmark event in the history of Christianity. In what follows, we will try to seize and synthesize a series of general tendencies.

The different compositional types of the theme of Crucifixion vary from a period to another, showing Christ on the cross (who is never absent), the two robbers crucified with him and the other characters on the scene, who are sometimes absent. The Renaissance is a proof of this wide diversity of examples, the iconographic representations of the theme consisting in a different number of characters, compositional formulae and work techniques. Thus, Virgin Mary and Saint John the Evangelist are usually represented sitting near one side of the cross and the other, soldiers, Saint Longinus, sometimes even angels and various characters. ("Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene." - John, 19, 25)

We should focus on the model of representation given by Byzantine iconography, from which all the other visual expressions of this theme drew on. The Byzantine icon mainly stresses the faces of Christ, Saint Mary and Saint John, seeking a visual synthesis of the accounts in the Gospels on this moment, illustrating the tormenting episode in which Jesus entrusts his mother to his beloved apostle. ("When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, "Dear woman, here is your son" John 19, 26-27)

In the icon, Christ is rendered as dead, lying on the cross with his arms pinned down, his head on the right shoulder and eyes closed. Along time, there have been several iconographic formulae, especially in the Western world, in which Jesus was presented as alive, dressed in a colubium, sometimes without showing the violence infringed on him, the intention of these representations being that of suggesting His victory on death and sin. However, other representations grasped the moment when He was pierced with a spear and the blood and water that sprang were collected in a chalice by an angel.

The iconographic tradition renders a small cave hosting Adam's skull which is thought to be buried on Golgotha; the illustration of this detail is an intended one as Christ is considered to be „the new Adam” or the redeemer of the world. Besides the above mentioned characters, the superior part of the icon also hosts the sun and the moon which are often presented as anthropomorphic characters and the background of the icon suggests the image of a citadel – Jerusalem.

From the many examples provided by the history of these representations both in the fields of painting, sculpture, cutlery, and other, we will select only a few and follow their evolution in the field from pre-Renaissance Western creations to contemporary times.

Thus, from the rise of the 15th century, we noticed the intensity of the feelings expressed by means of a disturbing setting of the theme discussed by Duccio di Buoninsegna, with his Crucifixion painted around 1310. The impressive composition shows the three crosses in the superior part of the image, Christ rendered as dead with his head bending on the right. Six angels guard His cross, the expressiveness of the portraits and their sorrow triggering a strong tension in the space of the beholder. The inferior part of the image presents many characters, on the right of the image the artist showing the group of women that mourned Christ; in their middle, the image of Holy Mary can be distinguished due to the sober and sad colouring. On the left side of the image, the painting is covered with the figures of the other characters that participate in the Crucifixion, soldiers, pharisees, great priests led by Saint Longinus who points to Christ with his right hand, recalling the renowned biblical verse "The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, "Surely this was a righteous man." (Luke 23, 47). As far as the composition of the work is concerned, it can be noticed that the artist was particularly concerned with its achievement, a proof of this fact being the way in which the cross of Christ is positioned; thus, the cross becomes the central axis of the image and the essential factor of balance of the entire representation. We can also notice the extremely refined colouring that the artist used, the shades of violet and green which made the work a particularly refined one.

For the approximately same period, we recall the special Crucifixions accomplished by Cimabue (c. 1270), Giotto - la Cappella Scrovegni from Padua (c. 1300)-, Pietro Lorenzetti (1340) and other masters of this era that became known by means of the mastery of their work, innovation and refinement. However, Michel Quenot stated that they were the ones who initiated the desacralisation of sacred Western art and its laicization (Quenot, 1993, p. 52).

During the Renaissance, one of the most emancipated periods of artistic creation, new visual formulae can be distinguished in the representation of the theme of Crucifixion; a great number of artists were inspired from it in the achievement of their works: Masaccio (*Crucifixion*, c.1426), Fra Angelico (*Crucified Christ*, 1433-1434), Paolo Uccello (*Christ on cross*, 1438), Rogier van der Weyden, (*The Crucifixion*, c. 1445; *Christ on the Cross with Mary and St. John*, c. 1460), Antonello da Messina (*Crucifixion*, 1475), Michelangelo Buonaroti (*Crucifixion*, 1492), Albrecht Dürer (*Christ at the Cross*, 1494-1497), Albrecht Altdorfer (*Calvary*, 1526), just to name a few.

One of the most ravishing works on this theme carried out in the Renaissance period is that of Matthias Grünewald (*The Crucifixion* - c. 1515), the central panel of the Isenheim *altarpiece*. The work succeeds in imprinting in the eyes of the beholder the tense moment recorded by the Gospels, finely describing the climax of the Passions of Christ. Similar to other works devoted to this theme, Jesus is depicted as dead, the artist expressing the extraordinary torment He was inflicted on. His figure is strongly marked by the signs of wounds, the dead body, the pale colour stressing the sinister sensation shown by the overall image. Next to them, the lower bending of the transversal wood of the cross under the load of the represented forms constitutes the emblem of another way of understanding this moment. Unlike the Byzantine icon, in which the idea of suffering is suggested as subtly as possible, herein the artist chooses the most rudimentary variant of expression – an explicit, even grotesque one – of the idea of pain and death (Stoleriu, 2010, pp.221-222).

Thus, walking through history in the spirit of this idea, a certain distance from the principles of Byzantine art can be noticed and a similarity with the expressivity of a realist painting, supported by the expressive possibilities drawing on the discovery of a lineary perspective. In this sense, in the evolution of representations of this theme in religious art, a gradual waiver can be sensed, a waiver of those elements of artistic language that loaded the image with the symbolical trait of the idea of divine transcendence; in their place, specific elements of a more explicit visual language is preferred, rendered more human by the artistic expressions of a pure Byzantine art or of Gothic art, for instance. Understanding this phenomenon in the wide sense, along with the other changes and events that occurred in this period, it is obvious that Renaissance culture and society witnessed a significant tendency of laicization (Grünberg, 1967, p. 5).

This explains the stressing of this tendency in the visual representations of the Crucifixion during the periods that followed the Renaissance; for the artists that took this path, the coming centuries are

a proof of new ways of visual expression meant to invite to meditation and bring compassion to the beholders. In the artistic context described, many works of art belong to a common typology which brings them together, showing Christ crucified and alone, without the rest of the characters. In order to detail this typology, we recall some of the artists of the 17th century such as El Greco, Anthony van Dyck, Francisco de Zurbaran, Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn and Bartolome Esteban Murillo. The Spanish artist Diego Velasquez holds a separate place with his *Christ on the Cross* (1632) which mingles pictorial realism and mystical attitudes, hiding the image of Christ in the shadow, but revealing the supranatural light coming from His redeeming sacrifice through the entire image (Boespflug, 2008, p. 324).

Further on, during the 18th and 19th centuries, following the new directions dictated by the cultural and spiritual emancipation of society, the artistic world walked the path of a particular laic rationalism, releasing itself from the Church norms and dogmas. As far as artistic works are concerned, this phenomenon contributed to the artists' inspiration from less religious themes in favour of laic ones. Despite all these, the theme of the Crucifixion of Christ continued to hold a particular place in the line of religious artistic creation. This is the period of artists such as Giovanni Battista Tiepolo (*Crucifixion*, 1745-1750), Francisco Goya (*Crucified Christ*, 1780), Jacques-Louis David (*Christ on the Cross*, 1782), Eugene Delacroix (*Christ on the Cross*, 1853), Edgar Degas (*The Crucifixion* -after Mantegna- 1861) or Paul Gauguin (*Yellow Christ*, 1889).

Even from its beginnings, the 20th century brought into discussion the already known dissociation established between laic and religious art, highlighting in a clearer manner, the different routes experienced by the two types of art consecrated as such several centuries before. The second half of the 20th century gave life to sacred art when the attempts of audacious artists tried to bring together the religious and artistic fields. As a result, as F. Boespflug shows, Crucifixion was one of the great obsessions of the 20th century, despite its breaking from the artistic and religious context of Christian tradition (Boespflug, 2008, p. 411).

In this period, we remark a series of famous works such as Edvard Munch's *Golgotha* (1900), in which the characters of composition are represented with their face pointing to the viewer, and not Christ, as the entire Christian iconography of the Crucifixion used to, Oskar Kokoschka's *Crucifixion - Golgotha* (1912) which gives the feeling of a deliberated dramatism, typically expressionist, Emil Nolde's *Crucifixion* (1912), a spectacular creation through the intensity created by the contrast of primary colours, Max Ernst's *Crucifixion* (1913) that is characterized by the intense visual tension

determined by the chromatic shades used, Marc Chagall's *White Crucifixion* (1938), remarkable by the non-conventionalism of the theme representation, or Salvador Dalí and his *Crucifixion - Corpus Hypercubicus* (1953-1954), an innovative creation due to the surrealist vision of the dramatic event described in the Gospels.

The 20th century with its great number of technical-scientific innovations, experienced a genuine development of the possibilities of artistic expression and this contributed to the rise of artistic fields such as photography, film, performance and installation. In the space of religious creations, the theme of the Crucifixion of Christ was approached from various perspectives and knew a wide portfolio of artistic attitudes that varied from faith, respect and piety, to irony and despise.

Chris Burden's *Trans-Fixed* achieved in 1974 can also be included in this new era of attitudes. Here, he crucified himself on the back of a car, thus giving a complete facelift to the role model given by traditional iconography for this theme. To the same context belong the works of Francis Bacon (*Crucifixion*, 1933 and *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*, c. 1944), Antonio Saura (*Crucifixion*, 1959), Germaine Richier (*Christ of Assy*, 1959), Leon Ferrari (*Civilization Occidental y Cristiana*, 1965), Arthur Boyd (*Crucifixion Shoalhaven*, 1979-1980), Andrés Serrano (*Piss Christ*, 1987), Robert Mapplethorpe (*Christ*, 1988); these artists provided new formulae for this theme, visual expressions, connotations and messages specific to the era they come from.

The visual representations of the theme of Crucifixion are not only limited to the fields mentioned above, but they also enter the world of film, creating masterpieces such as Franco Zeffirelli's *Jesus of Nazaret* in 1977 and Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* in 2004, the latter being one of the bloodiest films of the genre.

Beyond the concern that has now already become a tradition of visual representation of the theme of the Crucifixion of Christ, the last decades revealed an increasing interest of the artists in taking over the cross in their own works, to be used by it as a pure decorative motive or as structure, be it as a Christian or universal symbol, each time revealing and investigating new interpretations for the theme. However, this interest became a generalized one in the 20th century, involving artists such as Kazimir Malevich (*Black Cross*, 1915), Piet Mondrian (*Compositie in Lijn*, 1916-1917), Alexei Jawlensky (*Meditation*, 1935), Joseph Beuys (*Kreuz*, 1952), Andy Warhol (*Crosses*, 1981), Martin Kippenberger (*Zuerst die Füße*, 1990), Jannis Kounellis (*Untitled*, 2009), Jean Fabre (*Living Gravetomb*, 2011) and many others.

## 5. Conclusions

Analyzing all these creations, starting from the first examples of Christian iconography that expressed the symbolic and metaphysical value of the Cross (Guénon, 2012, p.33) and the Crucifixion of Christ, to the unconventional works of contemporary art, the obvious question to be addressed is the following: how can we interpret this long evolution of the representations of the Crucifixion of Christ, having in view the difficult path undertaken and the large number of visual examples that have become known to us, in this sense? Or: which of the models is closer to the truth of the Gospels and the spirit of Christian tradition? Without any hesitation, we could state that, in our opinion, the Byzantine icon – understood as “a window through which the unseen world looks onto ours” (Howes, 2007, p. 6) – is the one that succeeds in giving the most pertinent answer to these problems after so many centuries, remaining a visual and spiritual model to follow in any of the branches of artistic creation.

In this respect, Jérôme Cottin wrote that there was a triple breach in the relations between the theme of the Cross and that of the Crucifixion, on the one hand and the art of the 20th century, on the other hand (Cottin, 2011, p. 42). Thus, he speaks about a detachment of the symbol of the cross from its Christian significance, and many artists not depending on any religious authority approached this theme, as well as a separation of the cross from the image of the crucified one (namely Christ). Although inseparable in the beginning, in many of the artistic works of the period, the image of the cross and that of Christ, as the author cited above states, became two distinct figures (Cottin, 2011, p. 42), with autonomous meanings. Last, the third breach referred to has in view the detachment from tradition with respect to the visual representations of this symbol, the technical possibilities of the end of the 20th century giving new methods of representation of the cross, both in vision and concept.

Following the evolution of this theme in time, we would like to point out an increasingly significant predilection for materiality, flesh and explicit expression of the violence of the moment of Crucifixion, as many of the contemporary creations, especially films, stressed these aspects.

As far as we are concerned, we find in the theme of the Crucifixion of Christ one of the most important religious themes taken over from the space of visual arts; its plastic evolution also respected the general evolution of art along the two Christian millennia to a great extent, its endurance in time emphasizing the Christian idea that the cross turned into a life symbol from a death symbol through the death and resurrection of Christ.

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