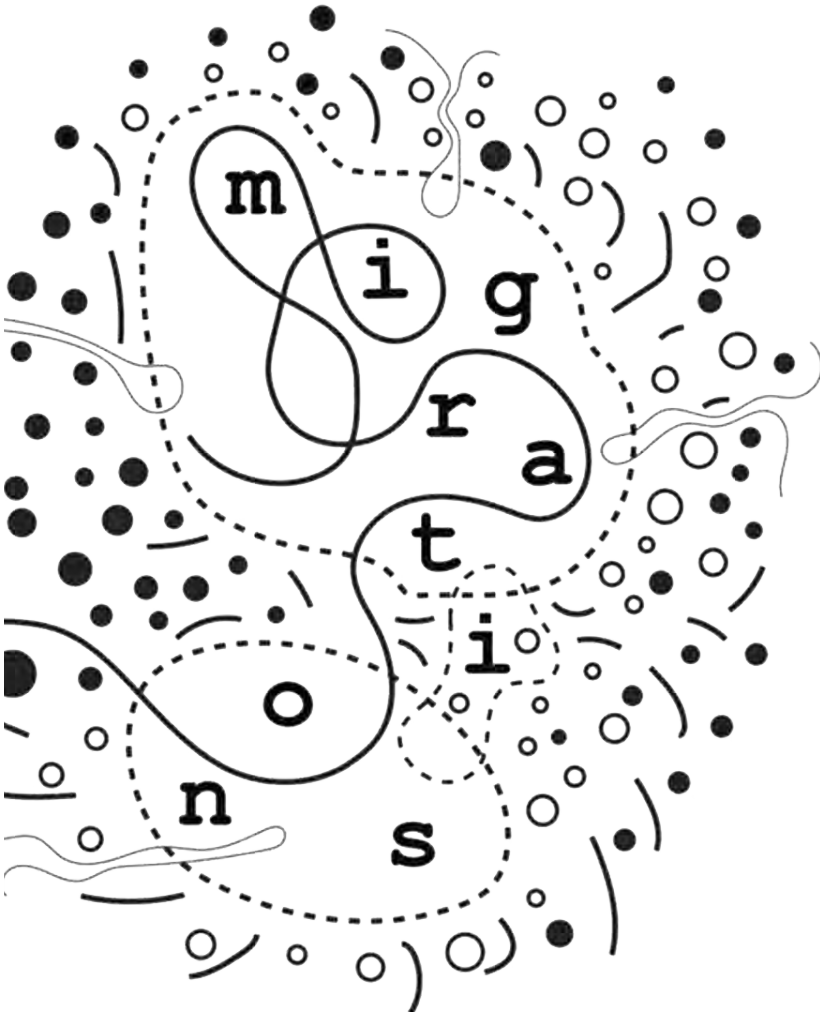


# Moving Bodies: The Transformative Power of Body Art

---

## Session 7



## Session 7

### **Moving bodies.**

# **The Transformative Power of Body “Art”**

---

**Margit Kern**

Universität Hamburg

**Marco Pasqualini**

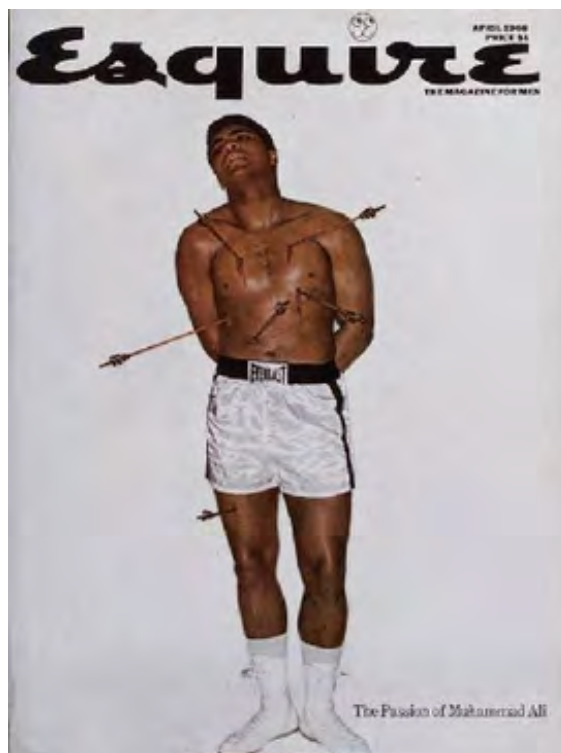
Universidade Federal de Uberlândia

In April 1968, a photograph of the US-American boxer Muhammad Ali was published as the cover of the US-American magazine for men “Esquire” [Fig. 1]. Muhammad Ali is set against a white background wearing white shorts, shoes, and stockings. The black title of the journal heading, the black belt of the boxing star as well as his hair mark a strong black-and-white contrast that frames and highlights Muhammad Ali’s muscular body. Disturbingly arrows stuck deep in the body and caused marks of blood. The blood stains the flawlessness of the body. The wounded man has tilted his head far backwards and appears in this way in a strong foreshortening.

It is immediately clear that the iconography of the Christian Saint Sebastian was the role model for the photo of the boxing star.<sup>1</sup> This *mise-en-scène* raises a lot of questions. Obviously, gender is a topic here: The body image of Saint Sebastian follows very much the dominant tradition of Sebastian as it was characteristic in the Italian Quattrocento [Fig. 2]. Research has pointed out that Sebastian received in the 15<sup>th</sup> century an emphatically youthful and delicate body which was interpreted as effeminization.<sup>2</sup> The motif of Sebastian with his effeminated appearance quoting 15<sup>th</sup> century Italian painted models is in the photography on the cover of Esquire set in tension with the hypermasculinity of the boxing star.

This raises further questions about the intersectional qualities of this ironic presentation.<sup>3</sup> How race, class and gender interact here is to be discussed. Muhammad Ali had at that time already made public his membership with the nation of Islam, an “ethno-religious movement” claiming moral supremacy of people of color compared to the white

population.<sup>4</sup> This movement of black supremacy was founded in 1930 and answered the racism of the 30s in the US. Muhammad Ali was at that specific moment under heavy criticism for refusing to take part in the war in Vietnam. The subtitle “passion of Muhammad Ali” refers especially to this aspect. He is wounded – not as a soldier in Vietnam but under fire by public offensive statements.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, Muhammad Ali was not only especially well-known for his boxing talents, he was also famous for advocating for a new self-confidence and pride of people of color. The posture thus oscillates between suffering and pride or self-awareness. Some authors have also pointed out that Muhammad Ali is staged here as a religious confessor who is willing to suffer for his beliefs. Just as Sebastian suffered for Christianity, Muhammad Ali defends his commitment to Islam: „a man who [...] suffered for his beliefs“.<sup>6</sup>



**Fig. 1** Muhammad Ali as Saint Sebastian, Cover of the magazine “Esquire”, April 1968, art director George Lois and photographer Carl Fisher



**Fig. 2** Antonello da Messina, Saint Sebastian, circa 1478, Oil on panel, 171 x 85,5 cm, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden

What interested me about this presentation concerning the general topic of the panel *Moving bodies*. *The transformative power of body “art”* is the question of how the reference to Saint Sebastian changed the body of Muhammad. On the one hand, we deal with a body because photography is not a painting, and photography has an indexical relationship to the existing body which is photographed. The body is not an image; it is the body. However, the body is subject to a continuous transformation between, on the one hand, a given form – what he has become, what he is, and what he looks like by nature – and on the other hand a forming process. The body has the potential to change the given form in becoming. The pose does not only show the body in itself, but implies always processes of taking shape and generating not the body as such but a formed body. In the display of the pose, the body is body and image at the same time. It is a culturally coded sign and nature at the same moment.

In the performance for the photographer Muhammad and Sebastian merge, and they are differentiated at the same time because Muhammad

does not only perform as Sebastian he also contradicts the model in quoting it.

This is especially true when we think about sainthood and skin color, sainthood and whiteness or people of color. Entries in dictionaries of saints point out the skin color of saints when the skin is of color, they are not mentioning the whiteness of saints.<sup>7</sup> This tells us something about the unconscious perception of concepts of holiness and sanctity in body images. The normative framework makes the white saint the rule and the black saint the extraordinary, the exception. By making this the norm, the color of the light skin becomes transparent, while the skin of the black saint is perceived as opaque. One can never look through it without perceiving it. This is a problem that critical whiteness studies address in a very precise way by pointing out that we should talk about whiteness in order to make the often unmarked character of whiteness more conscious.

To date, Critical Whiteness Studies,<sup>8</sup> a field in which important innovative research has taken place in recent years, so far had hardly any impact on the analyses of the Christian community of saints in art and church history. Although there were early fundamental studies on saints with dark skin color<sup>9</sup>, the demand of Critical Whiteness Studies not to make people with dark skin color the object of investigation, but to place the mostly unmarked, white viewer position at the center of analyses, was rather neglected in the study of religious iconography until recently. However, the relational quality of the categorizations should always be kept in mind to raise awareness, from a Critical Whiteness Studies perspective, of the hegemonic significance of the unmarked speaker position and the enforcement of a hierarchized relationship between norm and deviance through a "speaking-about" in a broader horizon.

The significance that the positions of Critical Whiteness Studies can have for Christian hagiography, in general, becomes immediately clear when standard works such as lexicons and encyclopedias are considered. For the unmarked 'white' speaker position is ubiquitous there. Exactly this applies to the consideration of the Christian hierarchies of saints up to the present: As lexicons or survey works<sup>10</sup> document, the light-skininess of saints remains unmentioned. Only dark-skininess is marked as a deviation. In this way, sainthood and brightness of the skin are unspokenly presupposed as a

normative connection in the lexicons simply by the structure of the lemmas. The unmarkedness of whiteness claims it being the norm whereas the saint as man or woman of color is seen as the exception, the deviation of a given norm, not taking into account e.g., a large number of existing Aethiopian saints, especially as we know from Brazil like king Kāleb/São Elesbão and Santa Ifigênia.<sup>11</sup> From the perspective of intersectionality research, however, it is striking that race and class are intertwined here in a specific way: Ethiopian saints, for example, are often attributed a noble or even royal origin in the saints' legends.

Taking into account the King of boxing Muhammad makes us conscious of this tension between the normative whiteness of the saint and the proud body image of Muhammad as a member of a black supremacy movement.

It is especially interesting to have a closer look at the theoretical image status of this image of the body. When the body is simultaneously understood as a medium and as mediated, in other words, as a subject and an object of representation, this oscillation remains unsolved in representations of the human being. Body images in art therefore have a different character of reality — “Realitätscharakter” or status — than other motifs. They are — as human counterparts — more often captured in their being-as-it-is and less in their being-formed. This oscillation between the medium and the unmediated, the medium and the immediate presence, becomes particularly explosive when a cultural hierarchization of body colors is at the centre, as it is here. Because in this context, naturalizations mean essentialization. Color starts to speak. This is the case with the interaction on the page between the white boxer shorts and shoes as well as the white background and the black heading, the black hair of the star. These sharp contrasts are part of the composition and have an effect. The discussion of whether the tension between culturally coded sign and the nature of the body can be easily solved with terms like “trans-corporeality”<sup>12</sup> as proposed by Stacy Alaimo has to be discussed, describing the nature-culture dichotomy rather as fluidity. However, the marking of skin color on the cover of Esquire seems to be a deliberate mark of difference that denies fluidity but highlights and immobilizes difference.

The medial status of the body and the question of which narratives are generated with body images referring to them as an object of design and creativity or as a given claiming authenticity for a static conceptualization of the body, is especially relevant when processes of mobility and migration are taken into account. The body is a place where narratives of singularity and collectivity are told and reinforced by creative acts. Body design produces a specific category of images because these “artifacts” are always more than an artifact. They oscillate between nature and culture, between the presence of the body itself and the simultaneous representation of preceding images of bodies that served as a model. The main thesis of the panel is that aesthetic practices in this area, which were seen as art forms beyond the traditional canon should play a more prominent role in art history. The consequence would also be that art historical terms associated with the body image are to be reformulated in non-Eurocentric art history. What is e.g. a portrait in the transcultural space of negotiation?



**Fig. 3.** Mummy on a palanquin, Guaman Poma de Ayala, *El primer nueva corónica i buen gobierno*, 1600–1615, pen and ink drawing Copenhagen, Det Kongelige Bibliotek, GKS 2232 4°, page 258

Here, for example, one could reflect on the image-theoretical status of the mummy,<sup>13</sup> which also oscillates in a remarkable way between presence, presence evocation, and representation. Similar to botanical or medical specimens,<sup>14</sup> mummies are not only bodies; in the mode of display, they also have pictorial qualities, as Hans Belting has already emphasized in his volume on “an anthropology of the images”<sup>15</sup>. The body image of the mummy is more than a corpse. The embalmed body has become the image of a living one. The mummy is activated as an image in the act of presentation.

It was precisely this ambiguity between death and life that the first Spaniards encountered in America, when they recognized with astonishment the way indigenous people in the Viceroyalty of Peru handled the mummified bodies of Inca rulers. Their families preserved the dead regents in the palaces, where they were regularly re clothed and provided with food and drink. At certain religious festivals and at moments of critical political actions, the embalmed bodies left their place inside the houses and — as the chronicler Guaman Poma de Ayala vividly describes in his chronicle entitled “El primer nueva corónica i buen gobierno”, written between 1600 and 1615 [Fig. 3] — were carried through the city on palanquins and publicly displayed in squares. At these moments, they were assisted by a family member who acted as the mummy's mouthpiece. In this way, as research has shown, noble families could exert their political influence even when they were not in power.

This “image” production in the Inca empire from prepared human bodies is also particularly remarkable because the mummy cult was also carried out with reference images, which had the function of “doubling” the fragile body images of the Inca rulers. These “image copies” were called “*guauques*,” which means “brothers”. Bernabé Cobo explains how they were used:

“[...] los cuales pusieron a cada uno con su *guáuque* en casa de por sí con el número de ministros y sirvientes competente, según su calidad, cuidando dellos siempre los señores y cabezas de las parcialidades, y dedicándose toda la familia al culto de los suyos. Sacábanlos de allí muy acompañados a todas sus

fiestas solemnes, y sí no lo eran tanto, sacaban en su lugar sus *guáuques*, y en la plaza los asentaban todos en ringlera conforme su antigüedad, y allí comían y bebían los criados que los guardaban [...]"

"Each body was placed along with its *guaunque* in a house of its own with an adequate number of attendants and servants, befitting the rank of the deceased. However, the lords and chiefs of their family units always looked after them, and the whole family devoted itself to paying tribute to their deceased. The bodies were brought out with a large retinue for all solemn festivals, and for less solemn occasions, in place of the bodies, their *guaunque*s were brought out. In the square they were seated in a row according to their seniority, and there the servants and guardians ate and drunk."<sup>16</sup>

William Harris Isbell has assumed that the "guaunque"s, which resembled effigies, were made primarily because the mummies were endangered and could be damaged if they were carried on ambassadorial journeys or war campaigns, for example in the warm, humid lowlands.<sup>17</sup>

That the body image, in the sense of Hans Belting's "Bildanthropologie" ("anthropology of images"),<sup>18</sup> also had a long tradition in Europe as a pictorial medium becomes clear not only in consideration of medieval veneration of relics, but also when one recognizes how European body images were activated in entangled transcultural histories that are marginalized and forgotten today. In my opinion, this is demonstrated by the treatment of the body of Charles V at the beginning of the 17th century in Spain.<sup>19</sup> Charles V was "discovered" to be miraculously mummified, i.e., intact, during the reburial of the body under Philip IV in the Escorial. This "miracle", which was also immediately attributed to divine intervention by the chroniclers from the Hieronymite order,<sup>20</sup> took place, in my opinion, not by chance in a time in which an increased preoccupation with the mummies of the Inca rulers can be observed in Spain, which ultimately led to the destruction and annihilation of the mummies in the Viceroyalty of Peru. Only by looking at these "body image histories" from an entangled histories perspective does it become possible to recognize that at the moment the mummy is erased as a memory image of South American rule, the

Habsburg ruler who commanded the conquest of the continent celebrates resurrection precisely in this body image,<sup>21</sup> thus acquiring time-transcending qualities. One memorial is erased, the other made permanent.



**Fig. 4** Martín Rico y Ortega, Sketch with the mummy of Charles V, drawing, 22 x 31,2 cm, 1871, New York, The Hispanic Society of America, © Courtesy of The Hispanic Society of America, New York

Art history has hardly dealt with the mummy of Emperor Charles V [Fig. 4], which was shown to scholars and state guests on their visit to the Escorial until the 19th-century<sup>22</sup> and of which early photographs also exist. It was seen only as a Spanish or European phenomenon of the worship of rulers. Thus, unlike the portraits of Charles V in the Prado, the mummy and the numerous photographs of the mummy have been excluded from the art historical analysis of image production. Here, in contrast, shall be proposed not only an expansion of the art historical subject area in the sense of a “Bildwissenschaft” (“visual studies”), but also to give the expansion of this subject area a decidedly transcultural twist. The mummies of Peru should not be included in the European tradition of portraiture, which would repeat the imperial act of the 17th century and, moreover, inadmissibly shorten the pictorial status of the mummies, but, conversely, the term “guauque” should be introduced for this form of body image in general, a term that has

survived in the Spanish sources for the mummy portraits, but which obviously did not originate in the Spanish vocabulary. Proceeding in this way would have the advantage of also decisively broadening the view of the European "image" tradition, and with this term the body images of relics and ruler mummies up to Jeremy Bentham's "auto-icons"<sup>23</sup> could be included differently in the historiography of art. My plea that book titles such as "The Tradition of Portraiture from Jan van Eyck to Frida Kahlo"<sup>24</sup> should in the future read "The Tradition of Guauques from Jan van Eyck to Frida Kahlo" is not to result in a neo-Indigenism in which Eurocentrism is replaced by another hegemonic discourse formation that makes a universalism claim for neo-Inca narratives. Rather, the goal is for us to feel challenged by this thought-provoking exercise to critically examine our own art historical master narratives and to question, or rather to recognize in their complexity, the purifications that follow a European narrative of progress and secularization and that are largely based on 16th- and 17th-century writings on art theory. For if we want to get serious about overcoming Eurocentrism, it is not sufficient to expand the subject area to shift the "edges," but it is indispensable, in the act of "decentering," to look at Europe from the "edges" and thus also to redefine the "heart" of the discipline. Then it would quickly become clear that the European epoch narrative of a vivification of painting based on the study of antiquity and the imitation of nature is also incomplete for Europe itself. For here, too, vivification does not only go back to mimesis, but the use of images knows the most diverse forms of pictorial "agency", which — for example, starting from the use of portraits of rulers from late antiquity<sup>25</sup> — would be much more compatible with the concept of the "guauque" than with that of the "portrait".

---

### Endnotes

1. In research, among the numerous depictions of Sebastian in the Quattrocento, a painting by Francesco Botticini is often cited as a model (Jonathan Eig, *Ali: A Life*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt [2017], 256).
2. Daniela Bohde. "Ein Heiliger der Sodomiten? Das erotische Bild des hl. Sebastian im Cinquecento." In *Männlichkeit im Blick. Visuelle Inszenierungen in der Kunst seit der Frühen Neuzeit*, 79–98. Eds. Mechthild Fend, and Marianne Koos. Cologne et al.: Böhlau, 2004; Alessandra D'Agostino. "Seduzioni dell'adolescenza. Angeli, santi ed efebi nell'arte rinascimentale toscana." In *Immagini del bambino e dell'adolescente nel Rinascimento. Percorsi evolutivi nell'arte toscana*, 93–109. Eds. Ivan Nicoletti, and Sara Ugolini. Florence:

- Nicompi, 2010; on the sexual allusions and the ambiguities of the body image see Bette Talvacchia. "The Double Life of St. Sebastian in Renaissance Art." In *The Body in Early Modern Italy*, 226–248. Eds. Julia L. Hairston, and Walter Stephens. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2010. Without reference to gender aspects: Paola Pacifici. *San Sebastiano. Nudità, sangue e peste nella pittura devozionale toscana (1350–1500)* (= Arte & saperi, 1), Livorno: Debate editore, 2017. On the transformation of the iconography of St. Sebastian in the viceroyalties of the Americas see Margit Kern. "St. Sebastian in Iberoamerica: Transcultural Negotiation on Body Images and Concepts of Sacrifice in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries". In *Sacrifice and Conversion in the Early Modern Atlantic World*, 273–297. Ed. Maria Berbara. I Tatti Research Series, 1. Florence: Villa i Tatti, The Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies, 2021.
3. Stuart Hall. „The Spectacle of the ‘Other‘. In *Representation. Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, 223–290. Ed. Stuart Hall. London: Sage 1997. Cf. also the introduction of Katrin Meyer. *Theorien der Intersektionalität zur Einführung*. Hamburg: Junius [2017].
  4. Harald Krämer. *Muhammad Ali*. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt-Taschenbuch-Verl., 2001; Peter Kemper. *Muhammad Ali*. Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2010; Eig. *Ali: A Life*.
  5. Alexxa Gotthardt. The Photograph That Made a Martyr out of Muhammad Ali. In *Artsy* Nov. 7, 2018 <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-photograph-made-martyr-muhammad-ali> (abgerufen am 16.1.2022).
  6. Eig. *Ali: A Life*, 258.
  7. E.g. Jochen Boberg. „Elesba(a)s (Elesboas, Kâlêb) von Äthiopien.“ In *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie*, vol. 6, col. 114. Ed. Engelbert Kirschbaum, 8 vols., Freiburg i. Br. 1968–1976: „E. m. schwarzer Hautfarbe zu Pferde“ („E. [= Elesbas] with black skin color on Horseback“ translation M.K.). Whereas the female saint from Wales Edwina on the same double page goes without a reference to skin color. Gabriela Kaster. „Edwina from Anglesey.“ In *ibidem*, vol. 6, col. 112.
  8. Leena Crasemann. *Unmarkierte Sichtbarkeit? Weiße Identitäten in der zeitgenössischen künstlerischen Fotografie*. Paderborn: Brill, Wilhelm Fink, [2021]; Anna Greve. *Farbe – Macht – Körper. Kritische Weißseinsforschung in der europäischen Kunstgeschichte*. Karlsruhe: KIT Scientific Publishing, 2013.
  9. Gude Suckale-Redlefsen. *Mauritius. Der heilige Mohr*. Houston: Menil Foundation, 1987; Erin Kathleen Rowe. *Black Saints in Early Modern Global Catholicism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. Grace Harpster. "The Color of Salvation. The Materiality of Blackness in Alonso de Sandoval's De instauranda Aethiopia salute". In *Envisioning Others. Race, Color, and the Visual in Iberia and Latin America*, 83–110. Ed. Pamela A. Patton. Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2016.
  10. See the example from the LCI in note 4. Sabine Poeschel. *Handbuch der Ikonographie. Sakrale und profane Themen der bildenden Kunst*. 4th Edition, Darmstadt: Wiss. Buchges., 2011; *Reclams Lexikon der Heiligen und biblischen Gestalten. Legende und Darstellung in der bildenden Kunst*. Ed. Hiltgart L. Keller. 14th Edition, Stuttgart: Reclam, 2019.
  11. Anderson José Machado de Oliveira. *Devoção negra. Santos pretos e catequese no Brasil colonial*. Rio de Janeiro: Quartet [et al.] 2008.
  12. Stacy Alaimo. „Trans-corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature.“ In *Material Feminisms*, 237–264. Eds. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman. Bloomington, Ind. [et al.]: Indiana University Press, 2008.
  13. Thomas B. F. Cummins. "Living Image." In *Lexikon of the Hispanic Baroque. Transatlantic Exchange and Transformation*, 206–211. Eds. Evonne Levy and Kenneth Mills. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013; Margit Kern. "Tote Körper – lebende Bilder. Das Körperbild der Mumie als Gegenstand transkultureller Aushandlungsprozesse im Vizekönigreich Peru." In *Heilige Bücher, Leiber, Orte. Festschrift für Bruno Reudenbach*, 171–183. Eds. Daniela Wagner and Hanna Wimmer. Berlin: Reimer, 2018; Margit Kern. "Globale Renaissance – multiple Antiken? Fragen von „Norm und Form“ in der Kunst der Frühen Neuzeit." In *Multiple Epochisierungen?*

*Literatur und Bildende Kunst 1500–1800*. 101–127. Eds. Klaus Hempfer and Valeska von Rosen. Berlin: J.B. Metzler, 2021.

14. Johannes Grave. „Selbst-Darstellung. Das Präparat als Bild.“ In *Kritische Berichte* 37/4 (2009): 25–34; Hans-Jörg Rheinberger. „Präparate – ‚Bilder‘ ihrer selbst. Eine bildtheoretische Glosse.“ In *Bildwelten des Wissens. Kunsthistorisches Jahrbuch für Bildkritik*, Bd. 1, 2 (2003): 9–19. On the conceptualization of the "living image" as a media-dependent cultural construction cf. also Peter Geimer. „Das lebende Lichtbild – ‚Mumie der Veränderung‘“ In *UnTot. Existenzen zwischen Leben und Leblosigkeit*, 162–181. Ed. idem, Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2014.
15. Hans Belting. *An Anthropology of Images. Picture, Medium, Body*. Translated by Thomas Dunlap. Princeton, NJ [et al.]: Princeton Univ. Press, 2011.
16. Bernabé Cobo. *Obras* (Biblioteca de autores españoles 91/92), vol. 2, 164. 2 vols. (Madrid: Atlas, 1956), *Historia del nuevo mundo*, book 13, chap. 10, emphasis in original; engl. translation cited in Bernabé Cobo. *Inca Religion and Customs by Father Bernabé Cobo*, 40. Ed. and transl. by Roland Hamilton. Austin, Tex: University of Texas Press, 1990.
17. William Harris Isbell. *Mummies and Mortuary Monuments. A Postprocessual Prehistory of Central Andean Social Organization*, 38. Austin, Tex: University of Texas Press, 1997, 56.
18. Belting, *An Anthropology of Images*. See also *Den Körper im Blick. Grenzgänge zwischen Kunst, Kultur und Wissenschaft*. Eds. Beat Wyss and Markus Buschhaus Paderborn: Fink, 2008; *Bild und Körper im Mittelalter*. Eds. Kristin Marek, Raphaële Preisinger, Marius Rimmel and Katrin Kärcher. Munich: Fink, 2008.
19. Diane H. Bodart. *Pouvoirs du portrait sous les Habsbourg d'Espagne*, 94. Paris: CTHS [et al.], 2011; Rosemarie Mulcahy. *The Decoration of the Royal Basilica of El Escorial, 189–192*. Cambridge [et al.]: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1994.
20. „Solo la providencia de Dios puede de essa manera conservarlos“; „Only divine providence can preserve them [= the bodies] like this“ Francisco de los Santos. *Descripción breve del Monasterio de S. Lorenzo el Real del Escorial, única maravilla del mundo*, fol. 147v. Madrid: Imp. Real., 1657.
21. The fact that the report on the death of Philip IV noted that his physicians discovered a stone in his liver when embalming the body after the ruler's demise, (Steven N. Orso. *Art and Death at the Spanish Habsburg Court. The Royal Exequies for Philip IV*, 5. Columbia, Miss.: University of Missouri Press, 1989), in my opinion, speaks for the fact that the physicians were concerned with the king's internal organs in order to preserve the body. The embalming of rulers in the early modern period has not yet been fundamentally addressed in research, yet there are numerous references in the literature that suggest that this practice was widespread (Kristin Marek. *Die Körper des Königs. Effigies, Bildpolitik und Heiligkeit*, 12, 204 and 239. Munich: Fink, 2009) and did not only serve to temporarily preserve the bodies for transfer, as Weiss-Krejci assumes (Estella Weiss-Krejci. „Excarnation, Evisceration, and Exhumation in Medieval and Post-medieval Europe.“ In *Interacting with the Dead. Perspectives on Mortuary Archaeology for the New Millennium*, 155–172. Eds. Gordon F. M. Rakita (et al.). Gainesville (et al.): Univ. Pr. of Florida, 2005).
22. Bodart, *Pouvoirs du portrait sous les Habsbourg d'Espagne*, 95f.
23. Hans Belting. *Bild-Anthropologie. Entwürfe für eine Bildwissenschaft*, 37–106, on Bentham's „Auto-Icons“ see 106. Munich: Fink 2001.
24. Recent research on portraits has made interesting attempts to expand the subject area into non-European contexts, but this has not yet left any traces in the terminology. *Figurationen des Porträts* (Morphomata, Bd. 35), 11. Eds. Thierry Greub and Martin Roussel. Paderborn: Fink, 2018.
25. Hans Belting. *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image Before the Era of Art*, 190f. Chicago [et al.]: Univ. of Chicago Pr., 1994.

# Nature, Commodities and Bodies in Baroque Ballets across the Savoy State: Choreographies of Transmutation and Consumption

---

**Elisa Antonietta Daniele**  
University of Bologna

## **ABSTRACT**

This paper analyzes four ballets staged across the Savoy Duchy from 1645 to 1660 and lavishly documented by Giovanni Tommaso Borgonio. In these spectacles, the dancing bodies moved in two different environments – domestic mountains (the Alps) and foreign oceans (Atlantic and Indian oceans) – while they interacted choreographically with natural resources such as grain, milk, tobacco, and pearls. This paper explores the potential of these courtly performances and their bodily animation in staging transformative processes and dynamics of mobility. Moreover, taking a cue from Mark Franko's rumination on the baroque dancing body as a highly charged ideological medium, it also illustrates how the Savoy dancers performed two contrasting forces at play in the geopolitical agenda of the Duchy.

## **KEYWORDS**

Baroque; Ballets; Savoy; Commodities; Geopolitics.

Gently sloping hills in pale green with slate-blue and gold pen hatchings embrace the city of Turin, capital of the Savoy Duchy, in a large drawing currently held at the National Library of Turin<sup>4</sup>. In the background, the color fades from greenish-blue to almost white as the slopes flanking the valley become steeper and the Alps starts to rise. This view of Turin seen from the east, the hills rising behind the city, and an excerpt of the Alpine chain is actually an image within an image. As documented by the drawing, this landscape was in fact painted on the largest wall (or, more likely, a backdrop hung on that wall) of one of the halls in the Castle of Rivoli, near Turin, for an elaborate and unusual spectacle staged in 1645.



**Fig. 1.** Giovanni Tommaso Borgonio, *Il Dono del Re de l'Alpi*, n.d. [second half of the seventeenth century], fol. 8r. Pencil and gouache on paper. Ministero della Cultura, Biblioteca Nazionale Universitaria di Torino.

At the center of the hall, twenty-two guests seated around a long table are dining pleasantly under the gaze of Christine of Bourbon-France (1606-1663), seated in the pavilion to the left. The daughter of Marie de Medicis, Christine was the regent of the Savoy Duchy following the death of her husband Vittorio Amedeo in 1637 on behalf of her underage son Carlo Emanuele<sup>2</sup>. This spectacle, entitled *Il Dono del Re de l'Alpi* (*The Gift from the King of the Alps*), was put together by Christine's favourite, Filippo d'Agliè, to celebrate her birthday<sup>3</sup>. For this occasion, four room's walls of the Rivoli castle were decorated with a landscape of one of the Duchy's four major provinces: namely, in order, Savoy, Piedmont, Monferrato, and Nice<sup>4</sup>. In each room Christine and her courtiers were presented dishes showcasing the province's main products while a female personification of that region performed a song declaiming the landscape features and resource-wealth of the territory she represented<sup>5</sup>. What is more, at the very end of the dinner, some dancers appeared to perform choreography evoking the craft techniques involved in preparing the food that had been offered.

This event was part of a series of courtly performances, mainly *ballets à entrees*, staged at the Savoy court between 1640 and 1660<sup>6</sup>. They were acted out by the noblemen themselves in front of an audience of aristocrats and ambassadors – although the relationship between the audience and performative space could be rather fluid as we see in *Il Dono* itself – and they have been all documented by twelve albums created subsequent to the events by court calligrapher and cartographer Giovanni Tommaso Borgonio<sup>7</sup>. Composed of manuscript texts and drawings in pencil, ink, and gouache with silver or gold accents, these albums were designed to commemorate each ephemeral performance in all its constituent parts, including sets, dancers and costumes, choreographic indications, plot and lyrics (with the exception of the extant musical scores which are not included here)<sup>8</sup>. This extensive archive – it comprises almost one thousand pages – is the means through which I explore the four events selected as the focus of this investigation. In these events, the dancing bodies moved in two different environments: domestic mountains, specifically the Alps, and foreign oceans, the Atlantic and Indian, where they interacted choreographically with natural resources

such as grain, milk, tobacco, and pearls – to name the main critical examples examined here.

Christine's interest in this kind of performance was politically motivated. Through these events she legitimized her power as a female – and foreign – regent and pursued, I argue, the celebratory project of re-framing the Savoy Duchy as a resource-rich, culturally and commercially dynamic actor on the European and, eventually, global stage of powerful brokers. Let see how these four spectacles fit into this propagandistic framework. As we have seen, in *il Dono* the long wall opposite the entrance of each of the rooms featured a wide view of the province capital (Montmélian for Savoy, Turin for Piedmont, Alba for Monferrato, and Nice for the County of Nice) and, as noted above, the dishes served in each room emphasized the characteristic product of the province being showcased<sup>9</sup>. While the fertile Piedmont foothills and Monferrato area offered a profusion of cereals and wine, for instance, the mountainous Savoy provided game and dairy products. Nice, finally, was represented by fish and aromatic waters (it should be noted that Nice, together with Oneglia, was the Duchy's only outlet to the sea; however, the Duchy's territory was non-contiguous, with both of these cities cut off from the main Piedmontese area by the Alps and Republic of Genoa, respectively)<sup>10</sup>. The pavilion with Christine, the long table, and the diners in their chairs were all transported from one room to the next by a mechanism of sliding boards (described in the album as animated “by the occult power of winches”)<sup>11</sup>. The album pages do not depict or describe the specifics of this mechanical system; at the Savoy court, however, a similar mechanism of winches and moving planks had already been used in a 1627 dancing-banquet. The function of these albums, it bears noting, was not preparatory: rather than documenting technological aspects, they were tasked with preserving and amplifying the mysterious wonder of the past fiction<sup>12</sup>. At the end of the dinner, the guests were moved to a fifth room where the spectacle acquired a more conventional setting: a stage positioned before the audience hosted one male couple and female couple for each province using distinctive movements and gestures to convey the way natural or animal resources were converted into products to make the food offered to the guests. The

performers thus played the part of game hunters, milk curdlers, grain reapers and threshers, grape harvesters, fishers, and sellers of scented waters, in that order<sup>13</sup>. The two female milk curdlers from the Alpine Maurienne valley, for instance, entered the scene with a butter churn and proceeded to plunge the churning stick up and down to imitate the act of transforming cream into butter. “New shapes I imbue with motion”, each of them sung while beating the rhythm with a wooden spoon<sup>14</sup>.



**Fig. 2.** Giovanni Tommaso Borgonio, *Il Dono del Re de l'Alpi*, n.d. [second half of the seventeenth century], fol. 23r. Pencil and gouache on paper. Ministero della Cultura, Biblioteca Nazionale Universitaria di Torino.

Similarly, the grain threshers (called “faudalette”) came on stage with bundles of ripe wheat that they beat in order to convert “the straw into a crown, the wheat into food”<sup>15</sup>. The color palette of these two couples’ clothing, white and yellow respectively, connected them to the products they manufactured while their suggestive choreographic movements evinced

pride for the labour involved in managing livestock or game and harvesting agricultural commodities. Through this type of descriptive gestuality – an element that appears in almost every one of these spectacles – the choreography also advertised orderly and compliant wealth production relationships between the central power at court, its subjects across the state, and the natural resources of its territories<sup>16</sup>. Finally, the song performed by all sixteen of the characters intertwined in a dancing circle at the end reminded the diners that all the provinces united “bear with reverence the gentle yoke” of Christine’s rule<sup>17</sup>. Throughout the entire banquet the audience was thus immersed in a performance taking place within and outside their bodies, enveloping them while at the same time engaging their senses of sight, smell, taste, and sound. In so doing, Christine’s sovereignty as a regent was legitimized: as declared at the beginning, in putting together this event Christine’s still-underage son was offering his mother his own kingdom “to be tasted”<sup>18</sup>. This legitimization was all the more necessary given the civil war that had raged in the Duchy from 1638 to 1642 and had Christine’s regency contested by the pro-Spanish faction led by her two brothers-in-law – one of them present among the diners<sup>19</sup>. By ingesting the Duchy’s landscapes turned edible commodities, Christine therefore literally appropriated these lands through the act of eating.

With their extreme ruggedness, the Alps divided the Duchy’s territory in two parts. In these spectacles the synergy between the set design and bodily animation could be conducive to conveying a specific image of the Alps: not spatial closure, an immense protective barrier defending the Italian peninsula, but rather a traversable and exploitable terrain. An example of such representation can be found in the drawing documenting the ballet *La Primavera trionfante sull’Inverno* (*Spring Triumphant Over Winter*) staged in 1657 in Turin<sup>20</sup>. This performance, dedicated entirely to celebrating the transition between winter and spring in the mountainous parts of various climate zones, entailed highly complex scene changes and wondrous machines such as a ship mounted on wheels pretending to run aground in the ice and a snow fortress rising from the floor<sup>21</sup>. However, the element I

would like to briefly delve into is the scenography depicting the Mont Cenis pass.



**Fig. 3.** Giovanni Tommaso Borgonio, *La Primavera trionfante sull'Inverno*, n.d. [second half of the seventeenth century], fol. 68r. Pencil and gouache on paper. Ministero della Cultura, Biblioteca Nazionale Universitaria di Torino.

Located between the French Maurienne and the Italian Susa Valley, Mont Cenis had become increasingly crucial as part of a policy to make the Duchy a privileged bridge for major international traffic<sup>22</sup>. It was traversed on a daily basis by a vast stream of pilgrims, merchants, and diplomats descending or ascending along a rough path not accessible by coach. The scenography was formed by a simple two-dimensional backdrop flanked by two sculptural wings. A pair of actors took possession of the stage by sliding down from the top of these wings to the floor on sledges driven by another

pair of actors impersonating the sled-drivers locally known as “Marrons”<sup>23</sup>. In this case as well, the ballet offered an opportunity to celebrate the inhabitants and crafts of the area: these Marrons were in fact local professionals responsible for transporting travelers and their goods through the Mont Cenis pass, leading ascents and descents with the help of mules, chairs, or by pulling sturdy sleds built from tied-together branches (known as *ramazze*). Of the coeval writers documenting their activity, the abbot Giovanni Rucellai wrote in the diary recording his journey to Paris to extol in particular these men’s dexterity during the “precipitous” and “frightening” journey down Mont Cenis in winter – as the Marrons in the *Primavera* were meant to do<sup>24</sup>. In the ballet, however, this highly labor-intensive descent was converted into the gracefulness of a dance step: like in the case of the grain threshers, for example, the arduous manual labour characteristic of peasant life was transfigured into nimble, balletic gestuality and postures. Moreover, as previously outlined, for this scene a two-dimensional backdrop was combined with two wings jutting out onto the stage. In this multi-part yet cohesive scenography, the rocky protrusions, the space formed by the two rock wings, and the confluence of the trails come together to create a figurative pattern of triangular forms that carries the viewer’s gaze deeper, towards the winding valley in the background, rather than hampering it. While the spectatorial gaze was drawn toward the horizon, the dancers projected themselves toward the audience. The act so performed, their sliding down the wings, was thus instrumental to thematizing this landscape as a territory traversed on a daily basis by commuters traveling for commerce or migration; a space for social exchange between the peoples living on both sides of the Alps and who, at these latitudes, were part of the same state.

Although the Savoy Duchy was a mountainous state, not engaged in any colonial activity, the viewers of these spectacles were also pervasively immersed in fictive maritime environments, and the extensive imaginative presence of these bodies of waters was fraught with propagandistic and expressive implications that I will try to succinctly outline at the end of my argument<sup>25</sup>. To begin, I would like to briefly presenting the ballet *Il Tabacco*,

staged in Turin in 1650. Here the ocean was conceived as a connective tissue, the environment thanks to which, “through trade, [tobacco] is passed on to all the nations of the world”<sup>26</sup>. This spectacle thus took the viewers on a journey following tobacco’s migration across the Atlantic world, bringing on stage imaginary characters from the Americas to the Middle East engaged in the act of preparing and consuming this commodity. By examining Borgonio’s album together with botanical treatises, travel reports, and circum-Atlantic attitudes toward tobacco, in a previous study of mine I demonstrated how this event told the story of a transcultural commodity, a sacred social institution among American natives that became an economic institution, desacralized and alienable, on the other shores of the Atlantic<sup>27</sup>. In the unfolding of the spectacle, spectators would have been treated to a view of the many-sided history of this product in the variety of forms it assumed and associated choreographic gestures performed by the dancers. In the first part of the ballet, in fact, tobacco appeared in its land of origin as a plant, *nicotiana tabacum*, in the form of dried leaves pressed into balls to be burned in rituals for their ability to grant prophetic visions, and as coiled ropes, a particular way of spinning *nicotiana* leaves into thick lanyards in preparation for export to Europe<sup>28</sup>. As for the movements, the actors in this latter scene, for example, made their entrance onto the stage performing twirls while, at the same time, coiling the tobacco ropes into a ball. Another couple performed serpentine movements to mimic the swirl of smoke stemming from the pair of two-foot-long pipes they held in their hands<sup>29</sup>. In the second and last part, dancers demonstrated the cultural habits engendered by smoking in some Old World countries, such as Spain and Turkey. In this case, the movements conveyed the effects of smoking for personal pleasure on these exceptionally all-male bodies (probably mirroring the common belief that tobacco was a product not suitable for female consumption)<sup>30</sup>. The audience thus watched, for example, the Spaniards interspersing slower movements with lively dancing in order to express the physiological mood-change caused by tobacco consumption<sup>31</sup>. As in the previous dancing-banquet, therefore, in *Il Tabacco* the dancers used their bodily movements to imitate the gestures involved in preparing a specific product but also, in this case, to act out the

way it was consumed and its effects on national groups (especially in the second act). One of the aspects that makes this ballet so interesting is its timely setting and relevance. Starting in 1647 tobacco, began to appear at the center of a series of regulations issued in the Duchy regarding the taxation of its importation and the management of its domestic cultivation, manufacturing, and marketing<sup>22</sup>. This string of decisions guaranteed such a considerable new profit stream for the Savoy coffers that, at the end of the following century, tobacco marketing came to represent the third most important source of revenue in the state budget<sup>23</sup>. The spectacle thus celebrated the process of accommodating this new drug's production and consumption among the folds of Savoy domestic society while asserting the Duchy's standing in the expanding global community of consumption and associated policymaking processes. Moreover, singing and dancing in front of – in this case – a more simple stage backdrop featuring a stretch of ocean, the bodies together with the objects recounted the story of a natural resource which, appropriately processed by human beings, had spread to unpredictably conquer ever-more new bodies and societies. In telling this path-forming story, the ballet constructed a small symbolic realm in which the production and circulation of tobacco was presented as devoid of any reference to violence or forced labour, thus adhering in some way to the carnivalesque spirit of depicting reality turned upside-down<sup>24</sup>.

Oceanic bodies of water were also the setting for the last case study of this essay, *L'Unione per la peregrina Margherita reale e celeste* (*The Union for the Royal and Celestial Pilgrim Margaretha*) staged in 1660 for the marriage of Christine's daughter<sup>25</sup>. Like *Il Tabacco*, this spectacle was also dedicated entirely to celebrating a specific product, pearls. In contrast to the previous spectacle, however, in this case the sea was not simply a bidimensional painted background. As the generative space of pearls, the water in this performance took on material consistency to invade part of the scene and affect the dancers moves in such a way that their steps will "appear somehow liquid"<sup>26</sup>. In this narration natural history, biblical metaphors, and travel reports were mixed in an intriguing way to recount, first, how pearls originate in bivalve shells from a synergy involving moonlight, the dew, and salt water.

Secondly, this ballet records contemporary fascination with the geographic distribution of pearls in the world: deposits known from ancient times, as the Persian Gulf and coastal area around the Bay of Bengal, were mentioned together with relatively new sites such as the ones off the east coast of Venezuela. At the end of the spectacle, however, all the pearls “extracted” from these different seas (“estratte da diversi mari”) converged in the city of Turin<sup>37</sup>. Embedded throughout this critical source is also a marked curiosity about foreign labor regimes and the chain of value construction: namely, how pearls were fished using a variety of accoutrements, how they were cleaned to enhance their color and prepare them for sale to Europeans (using salt, mortars, and even more bizarre methods such as ingestion by pigeons), and how they were mounted in jewelry or thrown away to consume only the cooked flesh of the mollusks. Of these fishing tools, one of the drawings displays two characters holding an imaginative version of the stones and ropes, a practice also documented by Jan van der Straet in his series *Venationes Ferarum, Avium, Piscium*<sup>38</sup>.



**Fig. 4.** Giovanni Tommaso Borgonio, *L'Unione per la peregrina Margherita reale e celeste*, n.d. [second half of the seventeenth century], fol. 99r. Pencil and gouache on paper. Ministero della Cultura, Biblioteca Nazionale Universitaria di Torino.



**Fig. 5.** Giovanni Tommaso Borgonio, *L'Unione per la peregrina Margherita reale e celeste*, n.d. [second half of the seventeenth century], fol. 114r. Pencil and gouache on paper. Ministero della Cultura, Biblioteca Nazionale Universitaria di Torino.

This technique consisted of a rope with a stone tied to one end, the stones functioning to hold the divers deep under the water while other workers on the canoes used the ropes to lift the divers up once they had collected the oysters<sup>39</sup>. Once again, the bodily movements were designed to mimic all of these activities of fishing, cleaning, and eating, thus evoking in the spectators' minds the journeys and transformations pearls underwent from seabed to land markets, from a raw to a polished state, from hand to hand. Unlike all the other spectacles described above, however, *L'Unione* also touched on further issues, such as the brutal social and ecological repercussions of this resource extraction and circulation. For instance, two widows from the Gulf of Paria hinted at the extremely dangerous conditions

braved by pearl collectors by dancing out their grief for the deaths of their diver husbands. Conversely, two female merchants from Ormuz came on stage offering each other the pearls that comprise their merchandise, while making an act of greedily jingling bags full of gold earned thanks to their lucrative traffics. The fishermen from Borneo – the only figures in the entire corpus of Borgonio’s drawings to exhibit stereotypical Black facial features – appeared instead on stage declaring that they carried “death in their hands” on account of all the blood and destruction surrounding their acquisition<sup>40</sup>.

In her volume *American Baroque: Pearls and the Nature of Empire*, Molly Warsh emphasizes a critical point, noting that the environmental alchemy underlying pearls’ origin as well as their trade characterized by mobility, connection, and contending for wealth allowed the jewel to retain “a powerful association with mastery of the seas” in the European imagination, even when it was actually “eclipsed as a source of profit by other commodities and trades”<sup>41</sup>. Through the allure evoked by pearls, therefore, this spectacle expressed a chief concern of the Savoy state, namely the need to promote its engagement with a wealth reaped from maritime domination and colonial ventures, even though the Duchy’s maritime power was still quite limited at that time<sup>42</sup>.

The story that transpires from an exploration of these spectacles and their extant archive is composed of both the desire for global trade and the husbandry of local wealth and prestige. Through this investigation, I have been able to probe the way Savoy dancers performed two contrasting forces at play in the propagandistic agenda of the Duchy. On one hand, by staging the Alps’ natural resources and geographical elements, the Savoy court re-configured this difficult environment as a producer of desirable goods and pivotal connective tissue, despite its rough terrain. On the other hand, performing old and new foreign commodities such as tobacco and pearls, along with the associated maritime environments from which they were made to travel, extracted and exported, was a means of re-imagining Turin as lying at the confluence of sprawling commercial circuits and ventures. Analysis of these events, in which dancing bodies, natural history, and geopolitics were intertwined, sheds light on the transformative power of

courtly spectacles – how they transmuted nature into products, the consumption of goods into effects on bodies, and destructive forces into ideal landscapes. In this idea of theater as a conversion machine, bodily animation acted as the pivot around which stories unfolded, things were set in motion, and media were bound together.

### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- Arnaldi di Balme, Clelia, and Franca Varallo. eds., *Feste barocche* (Milan: Silvana, 2009).
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge: MIT, 1968).
- Ballaira, Elisabetta, et al., eds. *La barca sublime* (Milan: Silvana, 2012).
- Borgonio, Giovanni Tommaso. *L'Unione per la peregrina Margherita*, BNU Q V 53.  
\_\_\_\_\_, *La Primavera trionfante sull'Inverno*, BNU Q V 55.  
\_\_\_\_\_, *Il Tabacco*, BNU Q V 59.  
\_\_\_\_\_, *Il Dono del Re de l'Alpi*, BNU Q V 60.
- Botero, Giovanni. *Delle Relationi Universali* (B. Mammarelli: Ferrara 1592).
- Brooks, Jerome E., ed. *Tobacco: its history illustrated*, vol. 1 (New York: The Rosenbach Company 1937).
- Comoli, Vera et al., eds. *Le Alpi. Storia e prospettive di un territorio di frontiera* (Turin: Celid, 1997).
- Daniele, Elisa Antonietta. "Drawing Worlds: Bodies and Smoke in the Courtly Ballet Il Tabacco," in *Making Worlds*, eds. Bronwen Wilson and Angela Vanhaelen (Toronto: UTP, 2022): 85-109.
- Duboin, Felice A. "Della gabella del tabacco," in *Raccolta per ordine di materie delle leggi*, vol. 11 (Turin: Tipografia Baricco e Arnaldi, 1847-1868).
- Franko, Mark. *Dance as Text* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
- Gavelli, Niccolò. *Storia distinta e curiosa del tabacco* (Ferrara: F. Altieri, 1758).
- Gilman, Sander L., and Zhou Xun, eds. *Smoke: A Global History of Smoking* (London: Reaktion, 2004).
- Masoero, Mariarosa, et al., eds. *Politica e cultura nell'età di Carlo Emanuele I* (Florence: Olschki, 2007).
- McGowan, Margareth. "Les fêtes de cour en Savoie," *Revue de la Société d'Histoire du Théâtre* 22, 3 (1970): 181-241.
- Relatione della splendidissima festa (Turin: Cavalleri, 1628), Simeom Collection no. 2394.
- Rucellai, Giovanni Fr.co. *Un'ambasciata*, eds. John Temple Leader and Giuseppe Marcotti (Florence: Barbèra, 1884).

- Raviola, Blythe A., ed., *Lo spazio sabauda* (Milan: Angeli, 2007).
- Ripart, Laurent. "Nice et l'Etat Savoyard," in *Le Comté de Nice*, eds. Jean-Marc Giaume et al. (Nice: Serre, 2006), 13-24.
- Testa, Fausto. "L'allegoria dello Stato sabauda nel banchetto del Dono del Re de l'Alpi," in eds. Howard Burns and Mauro Mussolin, *Architettura e identità locali II* (Firenze: Olschki, 2013), 431-446.
- Uras, Federica. "La Sardegna nel period sabauda," (PhD diss., Università degli Studi di Cagliari, 2010).
- Varallo, Franca. "Il Laberinto de Groppi," in *Le dessin et les arts du spectacle*, ed. Cordélia Hattori (Paris: AEC, 2019) 109-24.
- Viale Ferrero, Mercedes. *Feste delle Madame Reali di Savoia* (Turin: Istituto Bancario San Paolo, 1965).
- Warsh, Molly. *American Baroque. Pearls and the Nature of Empire* (UNC Press: Chapel Hill, 2018).

---

## Endnotes

1. This research is part of the ANIMATE project, funded by the EU Horizon 2020 programme, Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement no. 101025547. The album (BNU Q V 6o, fol. 8r) measures 22.5x16 inches about.
2. Christine was regent until her son's majority in 1648 and unofficially retained power until her death in 1663. See, for instance, Martha D. Pollak, *Turin 1564-1680* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 108-150; Kristine Kolrud, "The Prolonged Minority of Charles Emmanuel II," in ed. Matthew Vester, *Sabaudian Studies* (Kirksville: Truman State University Press, 2013), 191-209.
3. Mercedes Viale Ferrero, "I balletti di corte sabaudi. Maurizio di Savoia e Filippo d'Agliè," *Antichità viva* 5, 4 (1966): 7-22; Margareth McGowan, "Les fêtes de cour en Savoie. L'oeuvre de Philippe d'Agliè," *Revue de la Société d'Histoire du Théâtre* 22, 3 (1970): 181-241.
4. Only one of these rooms survived in its original set-up; "History," Castello di Rivoli, accessed May 17, 2022, <https://www.castellodirivoli.org/en/la-residenza-reale/storia/>.
5. Fol. 2r-3r and 11r. For an analysis of these figures' clothing and heraldic references see Fausto Testa, "L'allegoria dello Stato sabauda nel banchetto del Dono del Re de l'Alpi," in eds. Howard Burns and Mauro Mussolin, *Architettura e identità locali II* (Firenze: Olschki, 2013), 431-446.
6. Margaret M. McGowan, *L'Art du Ballet de Cour en France, 1581-1643* (Paris: CNRS, 1963); Mercedes Viale Ferrero, *Feste delle Madame Reali di Savoia* (Turin: Istituto Bancario San Paolo, 1965); Clelia Arnaldi di Balme and Franca Varallo, eds., *Feste barocche* (Milan: Silvana, 2009).
7. See Franca Varallo, "Il Laberinto de Groppi," in *Le dessin et les arts du spectacle*, ed. Cordélia Hattori (Paris: AEC, 2019) 109-24;
8. BNU, Q M 85 A-D.
9. On Montmélian in lieu of Chambéry see Ferrero, *Feste*, 48.
10. Fols. 3r, 6r, 7r, 10r. Laurent Ripart, "Nice et l'Etat Savoyard," in *Le Comté de Nice. De la Savoie à l'Europe*, eds. Jean-Marc Giaume et al. (Nice: Serre, 2006), 13-24; Blythe Alice Raviola, "I governatori sabaudi di Nizza e Villafranca tra XVIIe-XVIIIe secolo," *Les frontières dans la ville* 73 (2006): 233-252; Paolo Palumbo, "Un dialogo difficile," in ed. Blythe Alice Raviola, *Lo spazio sabauda* (Milan: Angeli, 2007), 163-191, 163-164.

11. “Dalla occulta forza degli argani”; fol. 2r and 7r.
12. See *Relatione della splendidissima festa...per gli anni felici di S.A. Sereniss.* (Turin: Cavalleri, 1628), 26-28, Archivio Storico della Città di Torino, Simeom Collection no. 2394.
13. Only the male couple paired with the grape harvesters, impersonating two zither musicians, is not related to a natural resource.
14. “Novelle forme con il moto ispiro”; fol. 22r.
15. “In corona le paglie, in cibo il grano”; fol. 26r.
16. On this type of choreographic movement see Mark Franko, *Dance as Text: Ideologies of the Baroque Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 5 and *passim*.
17. “Il soave giogo dell'impero di M. R. [Madama Reale, namely Christine] con riverenza”; fol. 37r. Further symbolical implications are suggested in Fausto Testa, “L'identità territoriale del Ducato sabauda...nel 'Figurato Balletto' del Dono del Re de l'Alpi,” *Accademia Raffaello* 2, 1/2 (2012-2013): 39-77, 55-56 (see this contribution also for an in-depth analysis of the acts following the ballet of the provinces).
18. Fol. 2r.
19. Fol. iv (later annotation); Testa, “L'allegoria dello Stato sabauda,” 432.
20. BNU Q V 55.
21. Fols. 35r and 78r.
22. Vera Comoli et al., eds., *Le Alpi* (Turin: Celid, 1997), 23-83.
23. Fols. 67r and 69r.
24. Giovanni Fr.co Rucellai, *Un'ambasciata: diario dell'abate*, eds. John Temple Leader and Giuseppe Marcotti (Florence: Barbèra, 1884), 57-61. See also Franca Nemo, “I Marrons del Moncenisio,” Laboratorio Val di Susa, last accessed 7 November, 2021, <https://www.laboratoriovalsusa.it/blog/un-po-di-storia/i-marrons-del-moncenisio-una-storia-unga-oltre-dieci-secoli>.
25. See Franca Varallo, “Le feste sull'acqua,” in eds. Elisabetta Ballaira et al., *La barca sublime* (Milan: Silvana, 2012), 99-106, and Marco Emanuele, “Per un repertorio delle piscatorie,” in eds. Mariarosa Masoero et al., *Politica e cultura nell'età di Carlo Emanuele I* (Florence: Olschki, 2007), 529-552.
26. “Col traffico vien tramandata à tutte le Nationi del mondo”; BNU Q V 59, fol. 2r.
27. Elisa Antonietta Daniele, “Drawing Worlds: Bodies and Smoke in the Courtly Ballet *Il Tabacco*” in *Making Worlds: Global Invention in the Early Modern Period*, eds. Bronwen Wilson and Angela Vanhaelen (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2022): 85-109.
28. Niccolò Gavelli, *Storia distinta e curiosa del tabacco* (Ferrara: F. Altieri, 1758), 11-12, 65-67. This processing method is described, for example, by Orazio Busino (the Venetian ambassador in London) in a letter he wrote to the Contarini family on January 10, 1618, see Biblioteca Marciana, Ital. VII, 1122 (6541), 69r.; Luigi Monga, “La Londra secentesca nell'Anglipotrida di Orazio Busino,” *Annali d'Italianistica* 14 (1996): 553-574, 562.
29. Fol. 15r.
30. On women smoking in 16<sup>th</sup>-century treatises, see Jerome E. Brooks, ed., *Tobacco: its history illustrated*, vol. 1 (New York: The Rosenbach Company 1937), 282, 218, 324 and *passim*.
31. Fol. 23r. Regarding the beliefs around tobacco physiological effects see, for instance, the treatises collected in Brooks, *Tobacco*, 248, 334-335; Craig Rustici, “Tobacco, Union, and the Indianized English”, in Jonathan Gil Harris, ed., *Indography: Writing the Indian in Early Modern England* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2012), 117-131, 124; Sander L. Gilman and Zhou Xun, eds., *Smoke: A Global History of Smoking* (London: Reaktion, 2004), 41.
32. Felice Amato Duboin, “Della gabella del tabacco,” in *Raccolta per ordine di materie delle leggi*, vol. 11 (Turin: Baricco e Arnaldi, 1847-1868).
33. Federica Uras, “La Sardegna nel period sabauda,” (PhD diss., Università degli Studi di Cagliari, 2010), 76.

34. Regarding the use of carnivalesque procedures (reversal, distortion...) in 17<sup>th</sup> century burlesque courtly ballets, see Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge: MIT, 1968), 33-34, 101-103; Franko, *Ideologies*, 7.
35. BNU Q V 53.
36. Fol. 51r. On sea recreations on stage see Philip Steadman, *Renaissance Fun* (London: UCL, 2021), 96-99.
37. Fol. 2r.
38. The British Museum, "Plate 26," accessed March 24, 2022, [https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P\\_1957-0413-54](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1957-0413-54).
39. See the description by the Jesuit scholar Giovanni Botero, who served at the Savoy court of Christine's father-in-law, in his *Delle Relationi Universali...da lui corrette e ampliate. Prima Parte* (B. Mammarelli: Ferrara 1592), 242-243.
40. Fols. 92r, 121r, 103r.
41. Molly Warsh, *American Baroque. Pearls and the Nature of Empire* (UNC Press: Chapel Hill, 2018), 193.
42. For the Savoy later expansion see the map in Pierangelo Manuele, *Il Piemonte sul mare* (Cuneo: L'Arciere, 1997), 7; and Pierpaolo Merlin, "Una frontiera sul mare," in Raviola ed., *Lo spazio sabauda*, 289-306.

# **Criminal and Saintly Bodies. A History of Punishment and Dissection**

---

**Fabio Cafagna**  
University of Florence

## **ABSTRACT**

The development of anatomical knowledge depended largely on the availability of corpses to dissect. Restrictions of moral and religious nature prevented any bodies from undergoing such a treatment. For these reasons, one turns to the body of the criminal. A calculated economy of punishment was able to regenerate the body of the condemned. On the gallows, it was an object of contempt and a cause of horror, while stretched out in the middle of the anatomy theater, it became an iconic lesson in human destiny. Placed next to the body of the criminal, in a play of reflection and reversal, was that of the saint. Apparently antithetical, they sometimes shared the unhappy fate of the *sectio*. The saint, in fact, who, during his life, had often displayed the signs of divinity on his flesh, possessed for medicine, and even more so for the Church, an incomparable, precious and unique body.

## **KEYWORDS**

Artistic anatomy; Criminal; Saint; Dissection; Autopsy.

The whole history of Western anatomy is characterized by a stubborn insistence on the association between dissection and condemned criminals. To paraphrase Andrea Carlino, we might say that in Europe, right from the early-modern period, dissection only existed within the wider context of justice.<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Sawday also agrees that we would misunderstand the true meaning of anatomy, if we failed to bear in mind its close link to the punishment of the criminal.<sup>2</sup> After all, a calculated economy of punishment<sup>3</sup> was able to regenerate the body of the condemned: on the gallows, it was an object of contempt and a cause of horror, while stretched out in the middle of the anatomy theater it became “an iconic lesson in human destiny”.<sup>4</sup>

In these few pages, I will seek to place the dissected body of the condemned at the center of a system of references whose underlying themes are the esthetic question and the formation of the artist. For reasons of clarity, I have chosen to precede the analysis of some specific cases with an introductory section in which, in general and inevitably incomplete terms, I outline the theoretical frame that delimits the facts recounted. While the latter part looks at what happened in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the framework that precedes it has a wider focus, and sketches a model of interpretation which summarily may prove to be valid for a period of time stretching from the end of the Middle Ages to the “Murder Act” approved by the British Parliament in 1751.<sup>5</sup> Only eighty years later, in fact, the “Anatomy Act” gave British physicians the right to dissect bodies donated to science. By modifying the terms of anatomical practice, Parliament sought to halt the illegal market in corpses and began the process of revision and modernization of the activity.<sup>6</sup>

Two considerations come to mind before any other when we approach the subject of dissection in the early-modern period: one of moral nature, the other of esthetic character. A punishment similar to that suffered by the soul is inflicted on the body of the condemned. The infamy of dismemberment is accompanied by eternal torment, and the body ends up acting as an emblem, exhibiting materially that which could not be perceived except through an act of faith and imagination. However, not all the corpses of criminals could be dissected: they had to belong to foreigners, who had died far from their

fatherland and were thus unlikely to be claimed by their families. Within this limited number, only those that were quite young, in good condition, healthy, their muscles still taut and turgid, so as to allow the evidence of the demonstration, were taken into consideration by anatomists<sup>7</sup>. The choice of bodies to be dissected was therefore dependent on a dual inquiry, which from the scale of the punishment inflicted finally also considered the physical characteristics of the condemned.

Of all the forms of execution, anatomists preferred hanging. This, in fact, allowed them to operate on a body still intact, not disfigured by cuts, abrasions, burns or mutilations. The penalty had to suit not only the crime, but also the destination of the remains, the use that would be made of the corpse. In central Italy, hanging seems to have been reserved, at least from the sixteenth century, for criminals from the lowest social orders and for the most heinous crimes, while aristocrats and honorable people were granted a noble form of execution: beheading.<sup>8</sup>

What little information there exists allows us to grasp the complexity of a question for which the right balance between jurisprudence and medicine had to be found. The problem, in fact, risked appearing in all its absurdity: while on one hand the punishment inflicted had to be commensurate with the crime committed, on the other hand a relationship of inverse proportionality between the beauty of the corpse and the brutality of the sentence was becoming established. In other words, if the scale was tipped in favor of justice, the corpse risked being useless for medical purposes; while if it was tipped towards medicine, then jurisprudence was ultimately not applied correctly. The embarrassment of a discipline such as anatomy, which looked for beautiful, well-proportioned bodies in the most wretched sectors of society, among thieves, murderers and prostitutes, became increasingly evident.

In an article from 1994 entitled “The Criminal and the Saintly Body,” Katharine Park touched on many aspects of this paradox, defining first of all the difference between dissection and the practice of autopsy.<sup>9</sup> When we talk of the executed body of the criminal, in fact, and imagine it transported to the anatomy theater, washed, laid on the table ready for the scalpel of the

*sector*, we cannot but refer to it as the object of dissection. The practice of autopsy, although involving an analogous procedure, had different aims right from its birth: it was practiced when it was necessary, through post-mortem investigations, to determine the cause and manner of death. This happened mainly in noble families, in order to avoid the transmission of mortal diseases. Dissection, on the other hand, rather than concentrating on the physical state of a single individual, aimed to illustrate to students the general principles of anatomy and physiology. For this reason it established a canon and used it to procure the bodies that satisfied the purposes it had set itself. In a more recent article, Maria Pia Donato, too, discusses the problem and points out the inappropriate use of terms that would seem to be synonymous, but that in reality are not.

From the first medieval records, we can identify two main types of *sectio*, anatomical (or philosophical) and medical, that is what in modern terms we would define as dissection and autopsy. The former serves to demonstrate the structure of the body *abditarumque ejus partium*, is carried out in the setting of universities and is charged in the modern era with ritual aspects and moral implications; the latter is conducted for diagnostic purposes of a legal, medical (epidemics, unknown diseases) or pathologic nature, is generally limited to the three cavities - head, chest and abdomen - and is practiced in the presence of a small number of specialists.<sup>10</sup>

The distinction between the two types of *sectio*, although apparently far from our specific interests, actually has a theoretical value that cannot be underestimated: the body of the criminal, in fact, while frequently the object of anatomical *sectio*, is rarely subjected to medical *sectio*. Transformed into an ideal body, laid out on the anatomical table, opened and explored in each of its parts, it attained a form of redemption or of eternal damnation – according to how we wish to interpret it – which made it the protagonist of a magnificent public liturgy.<sup>11</sup> The rituality and the completeness of the dissection, which was not limited to the three customary cavities, but

involved the corpse in its entirety, were the exact opposite of the practice of autopsy, a private activity which, by ensuring that the body remained intact, did not compromise the funeral rites.

Placed next to the body of the criminal, in a play of reflection and reversal, was that of the saint. Apparently antithetical, they sometimes shared the unhappy fate of the *sectio*. The saint, in fact, who during his life had often displayed the signs of divinity on his flesh, possessed for medicine, and even more so for the Church, an incomparable, precious and unique body. This peculiarity allowed its autoptic examination and dismemberment. Opposed to that of the saint, analyzed to record its typical features, the body of the criminal lost its individuality and became a replaceable image that took on meaning only if read in succession with many other similar bodies. The esthetic canon of anatomical iconography formed around the dissected bodies of individuals, many of them criminals, who lost their own specific quality. This conduct, the same as that which accompanied the establishment of a classical canon in painting and sculpture,<sup>12</sup> generated a separation: on one hand the dissected corpse of the criminal, anatomical (or philosophical) *sectio*, the representation of the ideal body and the study of normal anatomy; on the other the remains of the saint, medical *sectio*, the textual and visual recording of a specific body and the study of practical medicine understood as pathological anatomy. These series of opposites, although they should be outlined, must not be interpreted in a rigid manner. As Donato suggests, “in view of the current state of research, it is necessary to proceed by means of hypotheses and clues, aligning scattered elements,” which will acquire meaning “only [through] careful reading of the sources”.<sup>13</sup>

Let us therefore ask ourselves a precise question, and let us try above all to formulate an answer by looking at a well-defined group of examples. The question is the following: what is the relationship between the study of the dissected body of the criminal and the teaching of artistic anatomy? The small group of examples, on the other hand, will serve to provide a visual frame within which to arrange the terms of our reflection.

If we consider the period between 1750 and 1840, roughly that between the “Murder Act” and the “Anatomical Act,” the best known iconographic

reference on the theme of art and the dissection of the criminal is undoubtedly the last engraving in the *Four Stages of Cruelty* series by William Hogarth, published in 1751, the same year as the approval of the British law on the dissection for public utility of the corpses of the most heinous criminals.<sup>14</sup> The fourth print in the series, entitled *The Reward of Cruelty*, shows the tragic epilog of the anti-hero Thomas Nero (fig. 1).



**Fig. 1.** William Hogarth, *The Four Stages of Cruelty*, 1751. Plate 4: *The Reward of Cruelty*.

The engraving belongs to the substantial body of works that describe the fate of the criminal from the scaffold to the anatomy theater, and for this reason assumes a marginal value here, serving as an *incipit*.<sup>15</sup> A value that is not negligible, however, as by taking it as a starting point we can identify the features of another specific category of anatomical images, characterized by a

pervading sense of affliction and torment. As scholars have shown, this series includes famous illustrations executed before Hogarth's engraving: from Govert Bidloo's flayed backs to William Cheselden's praying skeleton. The former, executed by the painter Gérard de Lairesse for the Dutch physician's *Anatomia humani corporis* (Amsterdam: Johann Someren et al., 1685), show the flaying of a woman's body.<sup>16</sup> Of the four plates that make up the small cycle, all devoted to the depiction of the dorsal muscles, number 30 shows most clearly the signs of the punishment (fig. 2).

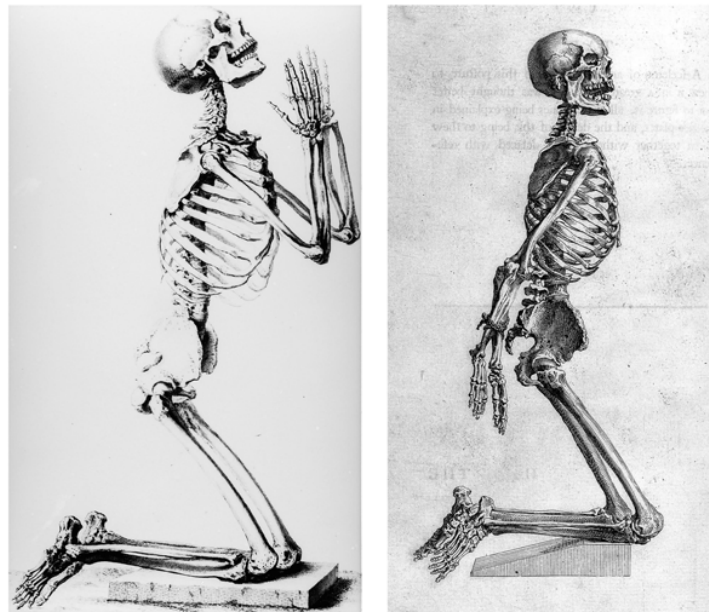


**Fig. 2.** Gérard de Lairesse, Plate 30, from Govert Bidloo, *Anatomia humani corporis*, 1685.

The noose that supports the head and the rope that binds the woman's wrists recall a scene of hanging and encapsulate in a single image the moment of execution, that following of the dissection and the conclusive moment of the public display of the flayed body. For this reason, the

illustration seems to confront the delicate theme of the redemption of the body of the criminal.

The second illustration referred to above is the praying skeleton depicted in plate 34 of the *Osteographia* (London: William Bowyer for the author, 1733) of William Cheselden. The work of Gerard Vandergucht, the drawing shows a praying skeleton, kneeling on a low slab of stone, his hands about to meet at chin level and his head turned upwards. The image does not at first seem to relate closely to those of constriction and torment considered above, until we consider that seven years later, in the revised edition of another work by Cheselden, *The Anatomy of the Human Body* (London: William Bowyer for the author, 1740), Vandergucht himself adapted the figure, which remains largely unchanged but is now shown with his arms behind his back (fig. 3).<sup>12</sup>



**Fig. 3.** Left: Gerard Vandergucht, Plate 34, from William Cheselden, *Osteographia*, 1733. Right: Gerard Vandergucht, Plate 10, from William Cheselden, *The Anatomy of the Human Body*, 1740.

It seems unnecessary to point out that the pose is completed by the addition of a ligature that binds the wrists together. Vandergucht's praying skeleton was thus that of a poor supplicant criminal. In this case, too, repentance, prayer, torment and dissection defined the stages of a path, imposed on the criminal by the system of justice, which concluded with the redemption of a body that would otherwise be unusable and damned forever.

There is no doubt that if we paused to reconsider these illustrations more carefully, we would be able to identify others of a similar kind, and thus substantially increase the nucleus of our collection. However, what is more pressing at the moment is to show how this theme of constriction, punishment and agony, together with that of the redemption of the criminal, was also present in the following century. Before, however, it is worth making a brief digression in order to point out that the ligatures, ropes and nooses that appear in the works of Lairesse and Vandergucht are the same instruments of coercion of the body that we find in use not only on the scaffold and in the anatomy theater, but also in the art academies and in artists' studios. While in the first case they prevent escape and in the second allow the correct exhibition of the bodies, in the third case such instruments alleviate the fatigue caused by maintaining the same pose for long periods of time. The ropes and cords I refer to are those that allow the model, posing in front of an audience of promising pupils or a master who wishes to study a subject from life, to place his body in the attitude chosen and to maintain the position for as long as possible. It is clear that in special circumstances, when the pose is particularly dramatic, these instruments assume considerable importance. This is the case (one of many) of the *Male Nude, with Arms Up-Stretched* (1828-30), an oil painting by the English artist William Etty (fig. 4).



**Fig. 4.** William Etty, *Male Nude, with Arms Up-Stretched*, 1828-30. Oil on cardboard, 59.7 x 47 cm. York Art Gallery.

The man's position, which recalls that of Prometheus bound to the rock, conveys a disturbing sensation in which suffering and erotism combine. The raised arms, the head hanging backwards, the cold tones of the flesh and the bent legs recount the suffering of a prisoner and the privations to which his body is subjected. The harshness of the lighting, the white drape on which the pale body rests and the lingering of the artist's brush on certain anatomical details (the sternocleidomastoid muscle, the hair under the arm and the sole of the left foot) suggest the opposite a type of sensuality whose roots seem to lie in the painting of Caravaggio.<sup>18</sup>

However, what makes Etty's painting interesting is not only the ambiguity of its content and the sensation of corrupt sensuality it arouses in the observer, but also the uncertain quality that characterizes, more generally, the role of the life model and his relationship with the ideal of beauty. The body painted by the English artist, poised precariously between myth and reality, moves, according to who interprets it, between two poles: one constituted by the heroic image of Prometheus who faces his punishment courageously, the other embodied in the ignoble features of the criminal who pays for his sins and bears the mark of his crime on his skin. This duality acquires value if it is elevated to the status of the symbol of a widespread contradiction, the very contradiction we saw in action a little earlier when the anatomist looked for the features of an ideal beauty in the dissected body of the criminal. In the same way, members of the art academies must have had serious worries about the question of the decency of the model's pose; by "decency" I mean its appropriateness with respect to the characteristics and the story of the figure that the model was meant to interpret, albeit temporarily and anonymously. It was, in fact, often members of the lower social classes who were more available, and whose bodies, above all, were better suited. And while for the Herculean muscularity of the male body the academies often turned to soldiers, pugilists, jugglers and trapeze artists, it was, on the other hand, impossible to avoid engaging prostitutes to pose as their female counterparts.<sup>19</sup> All this led to a rather disturbing disjunction, which nobody, however, could rectify; examples of virtue and value were shaped from a mold that was frequently anything but virtuous and valorous.

However, if this kind of disjunction of meaning was created when a wrestler, a soldier or a jouster assumed the pose of a mythical hero, what happened if the same men, or even worse recognized delinquents (perhaps even condemned or executed), impersonated saints or enacted the sacred suffering of Jesus? In this case, the contradictions (theoretical, ethical, esthetic and theological) emerged in all their force: the interchangeable body of the delinquent replaced the uniqueness of the body of the saint, and the ignominy of the former risked obscuring the divinity of the latter.

In early nineteenth-century London, however, the idea of crucifying the corpse of a criminal to test its reaction to the force of gravity was evidently not considered to be absurd.

Sometime in the year 1800, three of the greatest men of their time, namely, Mr. West, President of the Royal Academy, Mr. Banks, and Mr. Cosway, [...] having agreed amongst themselves that the representation of the crucifixion did not appear natural, though it had been painted by the greatest artist of his age, wished to put this to a test. They, therefore, requested me to nail a subject on a cross, saying, that the tale told of Micheal Angelo and others was not true of their having stabbed a man tied to a cross, and then making a drawing of the effect.<sup>20</sup>

The only first-hand account of this incredible event was provided by the surgeon Joseph Constantine Carpue. The trio of undaunted experimenters who involved him in the undertaking was composed of the painters Benjamin West and Richard Cosway and the sculptor Thomas Banks. The body of the criminal, executed, flayed and then crucified, belonged to James Legg, a Chelsea pensioner hanged publicly on 2 November 1801 for the murder of William Lamb. The corpse, taken from the Newgate gallows, was flayed carefully, after which a first cast was made. It was then nailed to a cross and a further cast was made, proving that a body devoid of life but still not hardened by rigor mortis would fall naturally into the terrible pose of the crucifixion. The one surviving plaster cast of the pair made by Banks is now a celebrated image, representative of a particular way of viewing science in the

service of art. It established a direct link between two apparently unconnected spaces: the “modern” art academy and the “premodern” gallows (fig. 5).



**Fig. 5.** Thomas Banks, *Anatomical Crucifixion (James Legg)*, 1801. Plaster cast, 231.5 x 141 x 34 cm. Royal Academy of Fine Arts, London.

The English intellectuals of the time were enraptured: the brilliance of three artists and the skills of an anatomist finally made it possible to put to one side the extraordinary stories regarding Michelangelo and to capture precisely the appearance of the muscles in the passage from life to death. The representations of Matthias Grünewald, Raphael, Alessandro Allori and Peter Paul Rubens were no longer the benchmark. Painters and sculptors who wanted to tackle the theme would now have to bow to scientific evidence and reconsider the real physiology of a man executed on the cross.

Despite this, the experiment was not unique; it was, rather, the last episode in a tradition that had become established precisely within the new-founded Royal Academy, promoted by the celebrated Scottish anatomist William Hunter. Elected as Professor of Artistic Anatomy in 1768, Hunter had perfected a technique for making casts from life which, unique in its kind, he had used to produce the illustrations for his greatest work, *Anatomia uteri humani gravidi* (Birmingham: John Baskerville, 1774). Employing this technique, even before he joined the Royal Academy, he had made plaster casts of a number of flayed bodies. Of the three recorded after his appointment in 1768, only two are still housed in the Academy's collections. Both cast from the bodies of recently executed criminals, one reproduces the pose of Jean-Antoine Houdon's *Écorché au bras levé*, the other that of the *Dying Gaul* in the Capitoline Museums. In reference to the crime committed by the man whose body served as the model, the latter assumed the name *Smugglerius*, by which it is still known.<sup>21</sup> While not perhaps customary, the experiment conducted by Banks, Cosway and West was thus part of a well-defined current of anatomical studies, whose main addressees were artists themselves and whose success was guaranteed by the British justice system. The experiment gave new value to the established tradition of the study of the anatomized body in art academies. Going beyond the limits of mimetic representation, it fixed in images that which by definition is perishable. It rectified not only the works of great artists, but also the scientific illustrations that had preceded it. It combined anatomical truth and the language of art. Or, perhaps we should say, it thought it could do all this.

While before the trio of English artists Berengario da Carpi and Jacques Gamelin had already tried to demonstrate what happens below the skin when a body is crucified,<sup>22</sup> now Banks and his companions produced an image that, although closer to reality, continued to suffer the pains of fiction (Legg's true death by hanging versus death staged on the cross) and the even sharper pains of philosophical incoherence (the singularity of Legg's death versus the universality of crucifixion; the punishment of the criminal versus divine sacrifice). There was no remedy for these contradictions. However, for the last aspect at least a way out seems to have existed, assuming the features of the "penitent thief," Saint Dismas, the redeemed criminal crucified to Christ's right. Seen in this light, Banks's *Anatomical Crucifixion* becomes an image of redemption, as it places the sinner at the service of the very society harmed by his actions.<sup>23</sup> It is Gamer, once again, who offers these reflections on the crucified body of the poor Legg:

If the *Anatomical Crucifixion* is undoubtedly an image of a sinner, it may also be an image of a redeemed sinner, one whose penitence and redemption were effected precisely by and through his execution. In this context [...], Banks's cast emerge as a wholly, if unexpectedly, positive image: the result of a morally licit and technologically progressive experiment, a model and a source for the making of religious art, and a testament even to the spectacular and redemptory power of the British penal system.<sup>24</sup>

The case of James Legg responds to the question we asked at the beginning, demonstrating not only the relationship that can exist between the body of the criminal and the study of artistic anatomy, but also the number and the complexity of the questions it involves.

#### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Bignamini, Ilaria, and Postle, Martin, eds. *The Artist's Model: Its Role in British Art from Lely to Etty*, catalog of the exhibition. Nottingham: University Art Gallery, 1991.

- Carlino, Andrea. *Books of the Body: Anatomical Ritual and Renaissance Learning*. Chicago-London: Chicago University Press, 1999.
- Cazort, Mimi, Kornell, Monique, and Roberts, Kenneth B., eds. *The Ingenious Machine of Nature: Four Centuries of Art and Anatomy*, catalog of the exhibition. Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1996.
- Donato, Maria Pia. "Anatomia, autopsia, *sectio*: problemi di fonti e di metodo (secoli XVI-XVII)." In *Anatome. Sezione, scomposizione, raffigurazione del corpo nell'Età Moderna*, edited by Giuseppe Olmi and Claudia Pancino, 137-60. Bologna: Bononia University Press, 2012.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Pantheon, 1977.
- Gamer, Meredith. "Criminal and Martyr: The Case of James Legg's *Anatomical Crucifixion*." In *Sensational Religion: Sensory Cultures in Material Practice*, edited by Sally M. Promey, 495-513. New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 2014.
- Kemp, Martin, and Wallace, Marina, eds. *Spectacular Bodies: The Art and Science of the Human Body from Leonardo to Now*, catalog of the exhibition. London: Hayward Gallery, 2000.
- Mandressi, Rafael. *Le regard de l'anatomiste. Dissections et invention du corps en Occident*. Paris: Seuil, 2003.
- Park, Katharine. "The Criminal and the Sainly Body: Autopsy and Dissection." *Renaissance Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (1994): 1-33
- Roberts, Kenneth B., and Tomlinson, J.D.W. *The Fabric of the Body: European Traditions of Anatomical Illustration*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992.
- Sawday, Jonathan. *The Body Emblazoned: Dissection and the Human Body in Renaissance Culture*. London-New York: Routledge, 1995.

---

## Endnotes

1. This article is a re-elaborated version of my previous essay "Condannati alla dissezione: criminali, anatomia, belle arti," in *Les enfants de Caïn. La représentation du criminel en France et en Italie, de la Renaissance au début du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, ed. Amélie Bernazzani (Turnhout: Brepols, 2016), 239-64.
2. Jonathan Sawday, *The Body Emblazoned: Dissection and the Human Body in Renaissance Culture* (London-New York: Routledge, 1995), 54-84.
3. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pantheon, 1977), 38. An interesting critical re-reading of Foucault's theories has been proposed by Florike Egmond, "Execution, Dissection, Pain and Infamy – A Morphological Investigation," in *Bodily Extremities: Preoccupations with the Human Body in Early Modern European Culture*, eds. Florike Egmond and Robert Zwijnenberg (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 93-128. For a rich visual transposition of Foucault's text, see Lionello Puppi, *Lo splendore dei supplizi: liturgia delle esecuzioni capitali e iconografia del martirio nell'arte europea dal XII al XIX secolo* (Milan: Berenice, 1990).

4. Sawday, *Body Emblazoned*, 72.
5. On the “Murder Act” (1751, sometimes 1752) see Sawday, *Body Emblazoned*, 54.
6. On the illegal market in corpses and on tomb robbers, known as *resurrectionists* or *sack 'em up men*, see once again Roberts, Tomlinson, *Fabric of the Body*, 478-83.
7. Carlino, *Books of the Body*, 93-98.
8. Carlino, *Books of the Body*, 94.
9. Katharine Park, “The Criminal and the Sainly Body: Autopsy and Dissection in Renaissance Italy,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (1994): 1-33; republished in *The Renaissance: Italy and Abroad*, ed. John Jeffries Martin (London-New York: Routledge, 2003), 224-52.
10. Maria Pia Donato, “Anatomia, autopsia, *sectio*: problemi di fonti e di metodo (secoli XVI-XVII),” in *Anatome. Sezione, scomposizione, raffigurazione del corpo nell'Età Moderna*, eds. Giuseppe Olmi and Claudia Pancino (Bologna: Bononia University Press, 2012), 140, my translation. On this subject see also Rafael Mandressi, *Le regard de l'anatomiste. Dissections et invention du corps en Occident* (Paris: Seuil, 2003), 167-216.
11. Andrea Carlino, “L'anatomia a teatro tra didattica, celebrazione e edificazione,” in *L'anatomia tra arte e medicina. Lo studio del corpo nel tardo Rinascimento*, eds. Andrea Carlino et al. (Cinisello Balsamo: Silvana Editoriale, 2010), 17-18.
12. On the constitution of canons in the visual arts, see two important essays by Ernst H. Gombrich, “Art history and the social sciences” and “Canons and values in the visual arts – a correspondence with Quentin Bell,” in *Ideals & Idols. Essays on Values in History and Art* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1979).
13. Donato, “Anatomia, autopsia, *sectio*,” 154, my translation.
14. On the history of public executions in England, see Douglas Hay, *Albion's Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Allen Lane, 1975). On the relationship between dissection and visual arts, again in England, see Fiona Haslam, *From Hogarth to Rowlandson: Medicine and Art in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1996).
15. Analyzing the image, critics have pointed to the close links between the figure of the anatomist-surgeon and that of the judge. See Kenneth B. Roberts, “The Context of Anatomical Illustration,” in *The Ingenious Machine of Nature: Four Centuries of Art and Anatomy*, eds. Mimi Cazort, Monique Kornell and Kenneth B. Roberts, catalog of the exhibition (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1996), 84, note 52.
16. Unusually, and well in advance of what happened later, female bodies are flayed and dissected to study organ systems other than the reproductive system (Mimi Cazort, entry 71, in *The Ingenious Machine*, 186).
17. On the engraving see the brief comment in Roberts, “The Context,” 84-5.
18. Martin Postle, entry 14, *The Artist's Model: Its Role in British Art from Lely to Etty*, eds. Ilaria Bignamini and Martin Postle, catalog of the exhibition (Nottingham: University Art Gallery, 1991), 46-7.
19. Martin Postle, “The artist's model from Reynolds to Etty,” in *Artist's Model*, 19.
20. The quotation – “Obituary: Joseph Constantine Carpue, FRS,” *Lancet* 47, no. 1171 (February 1846): 167 – is cited in Meredith Gamer, “Criminal and Martyr: The Case of James Legg's Anatomical Crucifixion,” in *Sensational Religion: Sensory Cultures in Material Practice*, ed. Sally M. Promey (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 2014), chap. 30, note 1, Kindle. See also: Julius Bryant, “Thomas Banks's Anatomical Crucifixion: A Tale of Death and Dissection,” *Apollo* 133, no. 352 (June 1991): 409-11. On the legendary episode from the life of Michelangelo, see Giorgio Vasari, *La vita di Michelangelo nelle redazioni del 1550 e del 1568*, ed. Paola Barocchi (Milan-Naples: Riccardo Ricciardi Editore, 1962), vol. II, 120-32, note 109.
21. Martin Kemp and Marina Wallace, eds., *Spectacular Bodies: The Art and Science of the Human Body from Leonardo to Now*, catalog of the exhibition (London: Hayward Gallery, 2000), 85-90.

22. Jacopo Berengario da Carpi, *Commentaria cum amplissimis additionibus super Anatomia Mundini* (Bologna: Girolamo Benedetti Editore, 1521), f. 519 verso; Jacques Gamelin, *Nouveau recueil d'ostéologie et de myologie* (Toulouse: J.F. Desclassan, 1779), vol. II, plate 1.
23. Mitchell B. Merback, *The Thief, the Cross and the Wheel: Pain and Spectacle of Punishment in Medieval and Renaissance Europe* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999), 69-100.
24. Gamer, "Criminal and Martyr," Kindle.

# From a Modern Woman to a National Painter: Flowing Identities of Bodies Constructed in Pan Yuliang's Paintings

---

**Hanyun Jiang**

Academy of Arts & Design, Tsinghua University

## **ABSTRACT**

Pan Yuliang, as a representative modern female artist in China, is always perceived to be limited to the gaze of women and the revival of Chinese painting, therefore, the studies of Pan Yuliang are thus often confined to private romantic histories or national historical narratives. This paper wants to focus on Pan Yuliang's transmedia artistic creations and reflect on her life beliefs and artistic ontology, so as to view the marks of the times on individual women from a microscopic perspective. The most popular genre of Pan Yuliang's works are self-portraits and female nudes, from which this paper explores Pan Yuliang's use of female bodies as a mediator of self-realization, which not only completed the domestication of the new women by the Chinese elites, but also finally escaped the patriarchal gaze of her family and motherland by using ink as an art medium and realized the self-subjectivity. The paper ultimately lands on Pan Yuliang's combination of nudity and line drawings, achieving a de-masking of the self through a circuitous translingual path of Chinese art history.

## **KEYWORDS**

Pan Yuliang; Self-Portraits; Nudity; Calligraphic Lines; Motherhood.

### **Introduction**

In the 20th century, when China was staging the New Cultural Movement, “new women” and “fine arts” were both imported concepts reshaping the nature of culture.<sup>1</sup> This reflected a dialectical cultural competition that for female artists, the recording one’s name in art history is, rather than sufficient evidence of one’s feminine agency, merely exacerbates the cultural and political dominance of male intellectuals.

When Linda Nocklin famously asked, in 1971, why there are no great women artists? As early as 1936, in *History of Modern Chinese Art* published by Liang You Company included Pan Yuliang among the representatives of modern Chinese painters, along with Xu Beihong, Lin Fengmian, Liu Haisu and Chen Baoyi and other reformers of the Fine Arts Revolution. During the same period, Michael Sullivan who had been deeply involved with the Chinese art world introduced Pan Yuliang as an outstanding example of one of the few contemporary Chinese painters who have been able to fuse Chinese and European art technically and aesthetically.<sup>2</sup>

In this sense, her entry into Chinese art history symbolizes a new historical point, but this is not necessarily in sync with her personal art history. Therefore, in terms of her artistic career, one needs to look at her reproduction of female bodies, especially with her self-gazing.

### **The Physical Education of Self-Portraits**

Before Pan Yuliang became a well-known female painter, her personal history is seriously lacking in historical evidence and personal statements are scarce. Still, one thing is clear that Pan Yuliang's artistic career was launched and supported by male leaders as patrons in the New Culture Movement, especially her husband, Pan Zanhua. Just as Yuliang changed to her husband's surname only after she married him, and her social identity as a female painter was also given, so in this sense, we can find traces of performance and typicality in her self-portraits.

Many dramatic legends about her original name and her life, before she met her husband, have never been confirmed. From today's perspective, these allegorical legends become the hidden threads in her paintings. There is

a saying that her original name was Chen Xiuqing, yet after the death of her father at the age of one, she changed to her mother's family name and was renamed as Zhang Yuliang and followed her uncle to Anhui later sold to a brothel after the death of her mother at the age of fourteen, where she met her husband, Pan Zanhua.<sup>3</sup> This story of the redemption of a lost girl is a much-needed historical allegory and the structure of feeling for the same period of Chinese history, namely, a new generation of Chinese intellectuals who evoke the cultural subjectivity of their motherland through a translingual intellectual practice.

The neighbor of the newlyweds called Hong Ye happened to be a faculty member of the Shanghai Academy of Fine Arts. As a result, her husband, Pan Zanhua, and her painting teacher, Hong Ye registered as Pan Yuliang's two guarantors who recommended her to Shanghai Academy of Fine Arts. More than that, the witness of their marriage Chen Duxiu who was one of the founders of the New Culture Movement, and also a friend of Pan Zanhua, personally recommended Pan Yuliang to Liu Haisu, the vice president of Shanghai Academy of Fine Arts at the time. It is not surprising at all that in 1920, Pan Yuliang, along with a total of twelve girls were enrolled to the first professional art school, Shanghai Art Academy, which was the first time for boys and girls studying in the same classroom in the history of Chinese art education. <sup>4</sup>The beginning of her artistic career thus can be considered the result of the joint planning and anchoring of this group of male elites in the art world.

Pan Yuliang seemed to use her name as a rip to tear up the safety net of social connections and career path that male art patrons have built for her. She registered at Shanghai Art Academy under the name Pan Shixiu and it was said that Pan Zanhua gave her the name when she came of age. She signed this name on one painting only, *Ready to start off from Tonglu* (presumed 1937). Interestingly, the only two times she used the name Shixiu were before she suffered the controversy of lowly birth and female nude paintings that led her to leave China twice and study in France instead. In one of her iconic self-portraits, *Self-Portrait in Red*, she signed her name Yuliang on a letter in her hand, making it an important symbol in the picture. This

letter with her name on it marks the picture as a modern intellectual woman who could read and write, and not only that, but her makeup, hair, and clothing are all symbols of the fashionable Chinese of the time.



**Fig. 1.** Self-Portrait in Red, Oil Painting, 90cm x 64cm, Date not Clear, Anhui Museum

Pan Yuliang's self-portraits depict herself as a stylish, modern new woman, which were inseparably linked to her art education in Shanghai, a space for romanticizing the modern Chinese visual experience. Pan Yuliang was born in Yangzhou, which was once one of centers of Chinese literati arts and has ceded its cultural and economic status to Shanghai since the 20th century. The newlyweds moved to Shanghai in 1913, where Pan Yuliang began her training as a professional painter. In her self-portraits, repetitive patterns can be seen, as she portrays herself as a modern woman with slick bob hair and bangs, finely lined eyebrows, a straight Greek nose, and a cherry-sized lip

of traditional aesthetics. Pan Yuliang portrays a typical modern Chinese woman in a hybrid mask that translates the image of a female face and body into modernized and Westernized pictorial types. This performative mask also helped her to break through the class classification and gender division in Chinese social reality,

Georg Simmel saw prostitutes as the pioneers of a new fashion, because they were naturally placed by society to be eliminated, so they in turn reaped an aesthetic of destroying impulse.<sup>5</sup> So far, we have no way of confirming whether Pan Yuliang was a prostitute, worked in a brothel, or was completely unrelated. What we can confirm is that she was among the socially excluded and marginalized due to her unimpressive appearance, low birth and drawing her naked body in the mirror at school. Thus, she found refuge in the typical image of the urban woman, with fashion providing her universal imitateness and personalized adornment.

In the painting, her eyes are steely, looking straight ahead without evasion. Her body is not thin and weak, showing the health of regular exercise and, more importantly, she wears a new style Qipao. All of them are associated with popular ornaments of a new urban woman, in contrast to the softness and slenderness of the traditional picture of a lady. The Qipao emphasized the body's contours with close-cutting pieces while traditional Chinese clothing tend to be loss, using the entire width of a piece of fabric. This new style of health and beauty offered new ways of viewing women, helping to shape the male gaze into an illusion of the object body, the ideal figure in exotic clothing, Hollywood star style in a Western atmosphere.<sup>6</sup> Women's faces and body curves are considered as a kind of landform and are taken up as urban spectacle to show the urban space.

In her self-portrait, she plays as a new middle-class urban woman through typical fashion, fulfilling the inner male desire to a westernized self. This shows that the Qipao is actually a performative dress that manifests the way physicality exists and makes the new woman visible. However, this is not merely an artificial transformation of imperialist colonization but also implicitly hooks the face of the female body to the aspirations of Chinese modernity. The iconic bobbed hair she wore in every self-portrait was once

thought to imply an unmarried state and a probable student status. At the same time, cutting hair also symbolizes the desire to become a man<sup>7</sup>. Pan Yuliang consciously plays her non-role in her paintings to broaden the boundaries of her social role in real life, and in Baudelaire's words, giving Pan Yuliang a modern beauty and heroism.

Here we see not only the dialectical nature of fashion as unifying social groups and dividing social classes but also Pan Yuliang as the kind of female role model needed by the new cultural movement, both regulated by the expectations of China's new generation of intellectual elites and at the same time exploring the self-growth and ideal appearance of women. In fact, this overlay of ambivalence is also a weave of multiple historical times that can be seen in the costumes of Pan Yuliang's self-portrait. As Walter Benjamin said, "The eternal is in any case far more the ruffle on a dress than some idea."<sup>8</sup> His use of the folds of clothing as mediating channels to bridge the organic world and inorganic time between bodily pictures has the power of a revolutionary historical movement. The patterns on Pan Yuliang's Qipao are isomorphic to her changing between various surname names and the folding back of her art education in Shanghai and Paris, a folding of the flesh, of memory and of historical time. In doing so, she realized that if she pursued subjectivity in the ruffle, she had to take off the curse of the "newness" of women projected on her by her male patrons.

### **From the Biological Mother to the Mother of the Earth**

The Qipao was at first considered a modern look. Still, it was soon used as an identity symbol of traditional national dress in the merging of modernism and Darwinian evolutionary theory. After the outbreak of the Second World War, it became a silent protest by Chinese women, and thus a symbol of patriotism.<sup>9</sup> The contradictory and ambiguous nature of the Qipao lies not only in the simultaneity of the brief history of clothes, but also in the radical aesthetics of the body and the conservative cultural politics.

The Qipao emphasizes the curves of the female body, which is the opposite of the traditional Chinese connotation of subtlety and elegance as

beauty. Nevertheless, the origin of the Qipao is traced in Eileen Chang's "A Chronicle of Changing Clothes" (Geng Yi Ji) as actually imitating male dress. In fact, the Qipao is not just out of a desire to imitate men, but a fusion of Chinese men's robes, Manchu women's robes, and Western one-piece dresses, thus hybridity of historical time. Here, the Qipao is what Judith Butler calls the gender yoke that is neither an agency nor a locus, but an identity woven in time. And this typicality can only be de-gendered in Roland Barthes' view when stripped down to the nude.

Nude painting is imported, scientific, and even humiliating to the history of Chinese art. Nicholas Mirzoeff introduced Jacques Derrida's concept of the blind to interpret that the premise of the history of European art is the physiological structure of the visual faculty, i.e., that art history is actually the insight and understanding of female objects constituted by male artists.<sup>10</sup> The origin of painting itself metaphorized the body, and thus classical art gained scientific status as evidence of the superiority of the white race. The logic behind Chinese art education's motivation to introduce nude sketching into the classroom for the sake of scientific realistic technique is an acknowledgment of the backwardness of the intellectual system, that is, the autonomous placement of Chinese art at the end of a Hegelian linear art historical narrative.

Pan Yuliang also has many paintings on this topic, such as *Two Sitting Female Bodies* (1938) and *Black and White Female Bodies* (1939), revealing the hidden side of artistic production by placing mixed-race people together in the pictorial space, the individuals checking and balancing each other, and there is no clear division between primary and secondary. Her reflection on the body as a culturally constructed medium also has a rather personal perspective, that of foot fetishism in the sense of artistic symbols.

The foot is a morally regulated sexual organ in traditional Chinese aesthetics, and the abolition of the custom of foot-binding was one of the important ideas and contributions of the New Culture Movement. From a cross-cultural perspective, foot-binding personifies the barbaric image of Chinese culture: "Foot-binding was construed as the ultimate sign of China's uniqueness and Otherness and has continued to fuel the Euro-American's

imagination of a mysterious, exotic, and barbaric Orient.”<sup>11</sup> Yet within Chinese history, foot-binding ladies implied a superior bourgeoisie class. Pan Yuliang is at a historical point where the old and the new aesthetic concepts meet, and her dual identity as a female artist and a national painter is interrogated, which becomes a wedge for her to break the hypocrisy and illusion of the male elite.

Pan Yuliang always intentionally places women's feet prominently in the most conspicuous foreground part of the picture, in surprisingly large proportions, making it difficult for the audience to ignore them. Alternatively, the viewer is guided down to the foot by having the painting subject touch the foot with her hand, with the sight downward. It is hard not to think of it as an inferiority complex. The ghostly symbol of social class is her large feet, not that her feet were unusually large. Still, she came from a time when the practice of foot-binding had not yet been abolished at the legal level. Thus, women born in the upper classes of society usually had three-inch lotus-like feet, implying economic affluence without labor and moral chastity without leaving the boudoir. For example, Su Xuelin, her classmate and a good friend who stayed in France with her, recalled in her autobiography that her grandmother began to urge her mother to wrap her feet when she was four years old, which eventually led to her becoming “formally disabled” and “unable to hold her head up for life!”<sup>12</sup>

Pan Yuliang's self-struggle is reflected in the monstrous portrayal and deliberate enlargement of her feet. Still, her self-reconciliation is also reflected in the careful application of brightly pink nail polish to her toes: she begins to admire her big feet and invites the attention of the audience. The exaggerated feet, heavy bodies and deformed movements of the women in the paintings constitute a reaction to the traditional pictures of ladies. The artist thus opens up a female perspective of self-examination.



**Fig. 2.** *Two Sitting Female Bodies*, Color Ink, 91cm x 68.5cm, 1959, Anhui Museum

In addition to the deformed big feet, Pan Yuliang paid extra attention to the representation of voluptuous female figures in nude paintings, especially the interaction of children with breasts. It is important to know that Pan Yuliang and Pan Zanhua never had any children.

In her painting, *My Family* (1933), Pan Yuliang invited her husband's child with his first wife to join the picture to establish a family of three. However, while Pan Zanhua and his son are looking at the family in the mirror together, Pan Yuliang is turning his head to look directly at us outside the picture. The indifference in her eyes already implied her withdrawal from the coherent family structure. This indifference to a fulfilled family life becomes more and more pronounced in her subsequent paintings, which are directly manifested in the self-sufficiency of motherhood and the absence of the father.



**Fig. 3.** *Maternal Love*, Color Ink, 80cm \* 107cm, 1958, Anhui Museum

In the painting *Maternal Love*, the baby is shown sleeping peacefully under the watchful eyes of two women, implying independent parenting by the mother.

On the one hand, we can see this as her desire for children and motherhood, but more importantly, her awareness of self-sufficiency in family life, that is to say, no longer needing the male to play the role of savior. In her later portraits of women, the subject of nursing children can often be seen. And it is interesting to note that none of the spaces where women nurse their children take place indoors, but are exposed to nature surrounded by mountains, rivers, and trees. The situation of breastfeeding in nature constructs a disorder and confrontation between public and private space, which confirms the indistinguishability of patriotic feelings and personal love in China at that time.

The Chinese female body was nationalized at the time. In the context of the fall of the nation and the destruction of the race in modern China, male intellectuals blamed the catastrophe of the motherland on women's mistakes. Thus, breastfeeding became an important guarantee of a strong nation and a strong race, and the female body was repeatedly publicized and nationalized.<sup>13</sup> Since women are transformed into a construct of collective identity in a patriarchal civilization, Pan Yuliang goes in the opposite direction and tries to reproduce the image of self in female nude paintings until it becomes an ever-generating dynamism. This returns to the Chinese mythological tradition of Nüwa's creation of humans, in which Nüwa created and constructed human society by making a man out of the earth in imitation of herself.

### **The Transmedia Practice of Lines**

In the painting *Pleasure on the Beach*, nine nude women are in the midst of nature. However, judging from their facial features, the picture has only the painter herself. It can be considered that Pan Yuliang arranged nine poses of herself to appear in one space at the same time in this painting, creating a stage of simultaneity of individual images. The tenth figure is a macaque monkey hanging from the top of a tree, climbing in a manner that echoes the

nude woman at the center of the image, suggesting the two creation narratives of biological evolution and Nüwa's creation of man. The composition of this painting resembles Sandro Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* and thus could be considered as a footnote to a translingual art historical dialogue.



**Fig. 4.** *Pleasure on the Beach*, Color Ink, 94cm \* 177cm, 1959, Anhui Museum

Not only does the composition of this painting attempt to trace the paradigm of the European Renaissance, but the group of nude women playing by the water also reminds us of Paul Cézanne's *Women Bathing*. Cézanne united the three-dimensional space of Perspectivism with the two-dimensional flatness of easel painting by applying horizontal and vertical brushstrokes. According to the linear development logic of European art history, such speckled brushstrokes were difficult to understand, so Roger Fry borrowed a Chinese aesthetic concept "Calligraphic Lines" to interpret Cézanne and Matisse's brushstrokes:

In the portrait, the lines are forced into a scheme of extreme simplicity. Merely to distinguish these methods (not to define them) we may call them respectively calligraphic and structural. The word calligraphic is perhaps unfortunate here and needs

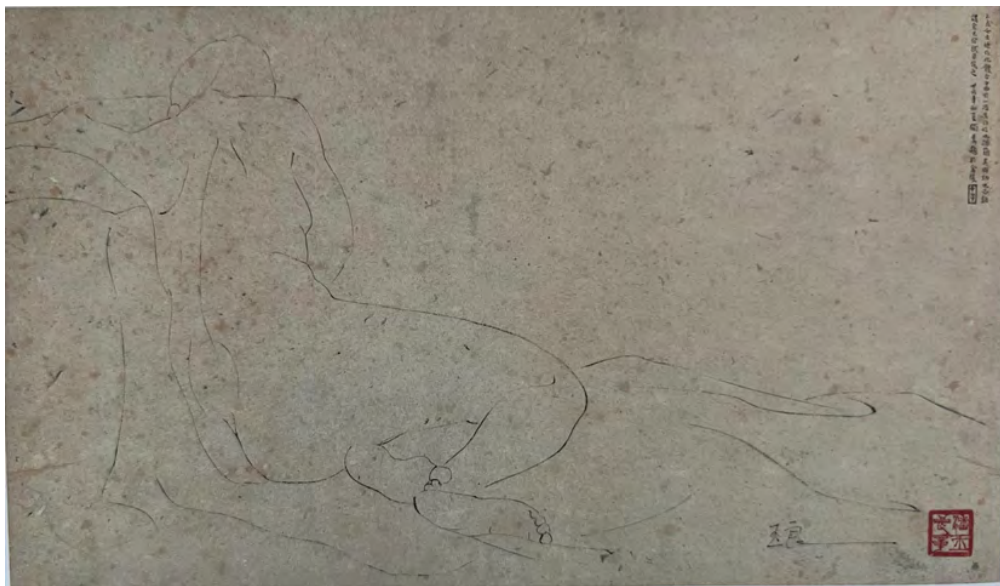
some explanation. For although perhaps the most striking thing about this drawing is its astonishing beauty of line, nothing could be further removed than this from the bravura of the highly skilled artist who from long habit has become able to state the commonplaces of form with a desolating assurance and certainty. Here, though all is rapid in actual execution, the line has an almost exaggerated delicacy and sensibility. To an eye accustomed only to academic drawing it might even seem helpless and incompetent.<sup>14</sup>

In Fry's view, "Calligraphic Lines" stay on the paper, while structural lines enter into three dimensions. As a result, the calligraphic line is undoubtedly a subversive new aesthetic concept. It marked the abandonment of Western painting's realistic portrayal and direct reference to nature, and the shift to the multiple subjects and musical qualities of egolessness. This interpretation is actually a kind of collaborative writing on the classical Chinese aesthetics of "vividness and rhythm", but he adds a layer of modernist semantics to it. As the calligraphic line is a record of a pose, the body becomes a linear movement toward the depths of matter.

In fact, before Pan Yuliang turned to the ink medium and completed *Pleasure on the Beach*, the intention of several of her oil paintings was more clearly to imitate European painting's portrayal of the body, especially the harmony of the nude group in the picture. For example, her *Spring (Rong)* (1930) recreated the character interactions in Matisse's *La Dance II*, while *Ode to Spring* (1930) again copied the basic composition of Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*. Thus we know that Pan Yuliang's nudes bypass the development of European art from the Renaissance to Modernism. In this journey of pictorial types, Pan Yuliang's portraits of bodies challenge Confucian culture's definition of beauty, which excludes physical beauty.<sup>15</sup>

This helps us understand Pan Yuliang's more emancipated female figure when she shifted from the medium of oil painting to ink painting. Here, emancipation means that Pan Yuliang prefers to express the vivid lines of ink and brush rather than the materiality of the figurative nude. In fact, long before Pan Yuliang's second trip to France, Chen Duxiu had already recognized her artistic transformation from her line drawings of figures.

Chen Duxiu wrote in the painting *A Sitting Female Body* inscription: “This recent painting of the human body by Yuliang is a fusion of Chinese and Western painting methods. This painting is pursued to the extreme simplicity, the achievement is bound to be huge.” Chen Duxiu's prophecy was one-sided; he only saw the maturity of Pan Yuliang's technique but did not draw enough attention to her inner growth.



**Fig. 5.** *A Sitting Female Body*, Line Drawing, 24.5cm \* 32cm, 1937, Anhui Museum

Even though the traditional Chinese female figures in Court Ladies Painting (Shi Nü Tu) had a long history of applying line drawing technique, the body is usually sheltered under the dress, so the metaphor of the lines turns the beauty to an ornament to emphasize the complex process of manufacturing the silky texture. Jonathan Hay called this seductive surface to attract the viewer's gaze wandering, walking around it, even touching it. In his view, the beauty figure is both a dynamic subject as well as an image of an object, and can also be seen as a metaphor for an ornament as a source of pleasure.<sup>16</sup> The danger of this viewing pleasure lies in the fact that the body only has value under the gaze, that the lines in the painting are given weight only when they become ruffles of dress in the picture, and that in this

relationship, the lines themselves have no materiality.

Roger Fry has already clarified the connotation of “Calligraphic Lines” as the gist of which is to transcend a structural control through rapidness, thus achieving a spiritual escape, and the line drawing could be regarded as poetic and lyrical. Based on the Modernist Paintings, Hubert Damisch points towards another history of painting that paintings no longer consider that the splendor of clothes is only about the roughness of the fabric itself, but begin to express ideas in another, non-commodity language.<sup>17</sup> For Damisch, the way to achieve this artistic practice is to bring clouds into the interior, cutting through the steel frame of the train station, and breaking up the visual order of the perspective method.

Pan Yuliang consciously tried the ink play of lines in her paintings. Not only does she place the female nude in the natural landscape of the sea and the forest, but in her later ink and wash. She also suspends the human body in the movement of the lines. Such void space to some extent is typical of literati portraits, as unsatisfied with social reality, male painters detach themselves from their environment with a gesture of rejection.<sup>18</sup> But the difference is that Pan Yuliang's line movement abolishes the presence of spatiality completely in the carnival of lines, thus she is not seeking a utopian escape, but facing the presence of corporeality.

In the painting *Nudes and Masks (1956)*, there are two naked women in the picture, one with her back to the viewer, and another woman with obvious facial features of Pan Yuliang holding a mask with another mask placed beside her feet. Moreover, there seemed to be many masks remaining in the red box between the two. The naked woman holding the mask reveals an asymmetry between the face and the body. As Giorgio Agamben argues, social morality requires people to leave their faces bare, but dictates that their bodies need to be covered.<sup>19</sup> Pan Yuliang seeks to completely strip away the value of display by replicating his own face and then externalizing his face into a mask as an object, thus trying to explore what remains of the beautiful nudity.

### Conclusion

This paper attempts to articulate that categorizing female artists' entry into art history as an individual achievement oversimplifies the issue, since art history has always been closely linked to the intellectual production of cultural politics and is therefore an action of state governance in the Gramscian sense. This does not mean a complete loss of female artists' agency and this paper takes Pan Yuliang as a case study, exploring her transmedia and translingual intellectual practice. Pan Yuliang's artistic journey has benefited from the male elite and thus suffers from the projection of family and motherland on the ideal woman. Through persistent self-observation and self-portrayal throughout her artistic career, Pan Yuliang continues to break the feeling of shame as an object of the gaze and a human being. Whether it is the exploration of painting techniques or the search for subjectivity, Pan Yuliang is always thinking about the issue of imitation and authenticity. Through a global vision of art history, molding the face, body and coexistence relationship of women, she finally materializes her belief of being into the representation of female nudity, and towards the objecthood of lines.

---

### Endnotes

1. Liu, Lydia He. *Translingual practice: Literature, national culture, and translated modernity--China, 1900-1937*. California: Stanford University Press, 1995.
2. Sullivan, Michael. *Art and artists of twentieth-century China*. California: University of California Press, 1996.
3. Yi, Ge. *The Biography of Pan Yuliang(1899-1977)*. Chengdu: Chengdu Times Press, 2003.
4. Yue, Daimei. *A Chronology of Pan Yuliang's Art*. Hefei: Anhui Fine Arts Publishing House, 2013.
5. Simmel, Georg. "Fashion." *American Journal of Sociology*, no.6(1957):541-558.
6. Lee, Ou-fan. *Shanghai modern: The flowering of a new urban culture in China, 1930-1945*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999, pp.240-255.
7. Antonia, Finnane. *Changing clothes in China: Fashion, history, nation*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008, pp.197-198.
8. Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999, p.69.
9. Chan, Heather. "From Costume to Fashion: Visions of Chinese Modernity in Vogue Magazine, 1892-1943." *Ars Orientalis*, vol.47(2017):225.
10. Nicholas, Mirzoeff. *Bodyscape: Art, modernity and the ideal figure*. London: Routledge, 2018, pp.20-26.

11. Ko, Dorothy. "Bondage in Time: Footbinding and Fashion Theory." *Fashion Theory*, no.1(1997):4.
12. Su, Xuelin. *A Lifetime of Drifting Years, Xuelin's Memoirs*. Taipei: Sanmin Press,1991, p.7.
13. Mann, Susan. "Why Women Were Not a Problem in Nineteenth-Century Chinese Thought." In *Windows on the Chinese World: Reflections by Five Historians*, edited by. Clara Wing-chung Ho. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009.
14. Fry, Roger. "Line as a means of expression in modern art." *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*, no.33.vol.189 (1918): 201-208.
15. Teo, Phyllis. *Rewriting modernism: three women artists in twentieth-century China: Pan Yuliang, Nie Ou and Yin Xiuzhen*. Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2016,p.60.
16. Hay, Jonathan. *Sensuous surfaces: the decorative object in early modern China*. Reaktion Books, 2010.
17. Damisch, Hubert. *A theory of cloud: toward a history of painting*. California: Stanford University Press, 2002.
18. Vinograd, Richard. *Boundaries of the Self: Chinese Portraits, 1600-1900*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
19. Agamben, Giorgio. "Nudities." trans.David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella. California: Stanford University Press,2010, pp.91-103.

# When Species Migrate. Becoming-Animal in Contemporary Art

---

**Jessica Ullrich**

University of Fine Arts Münster

## **ABSTRACT**

Being human is not a definite state of being but a performative act that is always in the process of becoming. It has fuzzy boundaries towards the animal as well as the inorganic. While the figure of the cyborg, the hybrid between man and machine, has long been at the center of considerations on the potential of posthumanism, I focus on human-animal border crossings. I discuss performative artworks in which artists attempt to imitate animals, empathize with animals, merge with animals, and even 'become animal' by means of imitation, prostheses, surgery, or blood transfusion. The transgressions, entanglements, and becomings redefine species boundaries and open up post-anthropocentric sensory, physical, and affective aspects of worlding.

## **KEYWORDS**

Becoming-Animal; Posthumanism; Animal Studies; Species Transgression.

### **Introduction**

The alleged fundamental discontinuity between humans and other animals turns out to be an anthropocentric fallacy.<sup>1</sup> The question of where an animal body ends and a human body begins cannot be answered with certainty. All bodies are the site of histories of cross-contamination and symbiotic relations. If, for example, humans were genetically analyzed together with their microbiome, the totality of microorganisms that live in and on them, only about ten percent 'human' would be left. Xenotransplantation or the gene transfer of human cells into laboratory animals for the purpose of researching diseases, further challenge the idea of a clear human-animal divide. Also, evolutionary theory, ethology, and animal studies question criteria that have long been considered purely human characteristics and expose the dogma of human exceptionalism as no longer tenable. Former hallmarks of anthropological difference such as language, consciousness, self-awareness, empathy, and culture have been observed in many other animals as well.

In what follows, I want to focus on human-animal boundary transgressions and on artists who are trying to overcome ontological, morphological, ethological, and affective limitations of the human by migrating into animality.<sup>2</sup>

My approach is informed by the scholarship of Cary Wolfe<sup>3</sup>, Rosi Braidotti<sup>4</sup>, and Donna Haraway<sup>5</sup> who oppose the anthropocentric orientation of humanism, which produces the normative human through the human-animal dichotomy. An ontology of the human derived from the human-animal distinction discriminates against or subjugates everyone not human. This dominant stance can be challenged not only by rejecting anthropocentrism, but also by subverting it through hybridization.

### **Pop cultural body modifications**

A radical and rather literal form of becoming animal that points to the mutable qualities of the human flesh is embodied by people who permanently alter their own bodies to become animal-like, for example by the completely tattooed and in part surgically enhanced Cat Man or Tom

Leppard. Their striving to become animal is often a romanticized escapism and can be considered as a kind of neo-primitivism. Cat Man, for example, explained his transformation to be a self-realization.<sup>6</sup> Since he felt like a cat, his tattoos, sharpened teeth, and silicone implants only made visible on the outside what he already was on the inside. He claimed to have telepathic access to cats and saw his Native American roots as essential to this close relationship. Thus, going through the process of externalizing inner truths was part of his personal 'rite of passage', as was the experience of pain and the public display of his self-evolution. It seems like Cat Man wanted to become more authentic through body modification. But seeking to ferret out the identity of an animal by physical assimilation means equating being an animal with being an animal body which is a rather reductionist view of animality. Another animal person, Tom Leppard, wants his body modification to be understood as resistance against the Western capitalist lifestyle.<sup>7</sup> But of course his own lifestyle as a 'human leopard' is also part of a consumer culture. He partakes of its goods and services, such as those offered by tattoo artists, to make his skin look like the fur of a leopard.

What nevertheless interests me about these subcultural animal people is that they are perceived as attacking the prevailing order and a danger to civilized society. A defamatory discourse that calls such people "freaks" is based on a human-animal boundary that is believed to be immutable. While forms of body modification through dieting, bodybuilding, hair styling, makeup, earrings, or piercings are accepted forms of self-expression, protest or personal experimentation, more extreme body modifications are not sanctioned by society. Public opinion is rather hostile towards these individuals, they are regarded as pitiful psychopaths or attention-seeking exhibitionists profiteering from the spectacle. In social media comments, these animal people are often called "perverts" or "sickos" and compared to other "deviants" such as homosexuals and transgender people.<sup>8</sup> Apparently, anything that transgresses traditional dichotomies of gender or species traumatizes dominant orders. Any attack on one of the most vehemently defended boundaries - the one between humans and other animals - the primordial boundary that makes humans human - is considered provocative.

### **Ritualistic animal imitation**

Becoming animal can also find highly diverse, mostly performative and often very witty and multilayered manifestations in the visual arts. Alluding to Judith Butler's notion of "undoing gender" one could almost speak of a new trend of "undoing species".<sup>9</sup>

Marcus Coates, for instance, imitates and embodies various species in Westernized shamanistic performances, mimics animal voices, and dresses up as an animal. In *Journey to the Lower World* (2004), he wears deerskin with head and antlers attached to a bicycle helmet imitating the sounds of British wildlife. He undertakes his ritualistic performance on behalf of a marginalized community, the residents of a tower block in Liverpool that will soon be demolished. By communicating with animals, Coates retrieves messages for the residents, offering them guidance during uncertain times. Coates costumes seem unfinished and amateurish and his whole demeanor is often reminiscent of a child imitating an animal with the simplest of means. And just like such a child, Coates wants to be taken seriously. As Mircea Eliade has shown regarding shamanism, the important thing is not the dressing up in animal skins, it is what one feels when masqueraded as an animal.<sup>10</sup> The magical transformation is a 'going out of the self' in an ecstatic experience that transcends the limitations of the body or of humanity itself. Through trance-like states Coates tries to mimetically empathize with animals and to judge human behavior from a point of view outside the human realm. As absurd as many of his performances may seem, the artist insists that an actual crossover is taking place during the performance. Coates thereby contradicts philosopher Thomas Nagel, who famously argued that humans can never know what it is like to be a bat.<sup>11</sup> Coates is sure that humans are able to share emotions and affects with other animals: "I mean, you can feel different degrees of empathy, but it's in the attempt that you realize so much, even if you fail".<sup>12</sup>

And sometimes such an attempt is realized by imitating the locomotion of an animal. In one of his early projects, *Stoat*, Coates designed stilt-like prostheses because he wanted to move around like an ermine.



**Fig. 1.** Marcus Coates, *Stoat*, 1999, video still, <https://vimeo.com/76657054>

Before creating the stilts, he studied the exact footfall of a weasel by taking paw prints and measuring their step length. In the *Stoat* performance, recorded on video, he then struggled to adopt the posture of the small predator for his own body. The goal was to establish an ‘intuitive relationship’ with the animal. “Stoat”, says Coates, “was an attempt to become an ermine through a process I couldn't control. I found that the only way to move was to move sideways. This produced a hopping rhythm not unlike the weasel's gait. [...] In an unconscious process I became an animal ... I immerse myself completely in this animal. [...] It is a detachment from the idea of being a separate entity; I pass into a state in which I do not know who I am and in which I have doubts, in which I regard my identity as partial”.<sup>43</sup> The immersion is apparently not total, but remains stuck in a vague in-between state, which seems to make up the aesthetic tension of the work and which coincides with the becoming-animal figure of thought developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*.<sup>44</sup> Here becoming-animal refers to the experience or the necessity of stepping out of binary hierarchies. By

detritorializing oneself in the process of becoming animal, a person may enter into alliances with the non-human and partake of their intensities. Becoming-animal can thus offer a possible way out of repressive social and psychological orders.

Coates also puts his artistic strategy of becoming-animal to use in the service of species conservation. On the Galapagos Islands, ludicrously costumed as an endangered blue-footed booby, he diagnosed the state of human society. From the bird's perspective, he narrates not only the customs and traditions of humans – which, from an extra-human point of view, are nonsensical – but also the exploitation and pollution of their habitat by humans. With the botched character of his costume, he is making a fool of himself, sabotaging any superior authority that a white male genius-artist might traditionally have been assigned. Behind the mask of the simpleton, Coates addresses important questions about the detrimental and complicated relationship of humans and animals in the Anthropocene.

### **Surgical Metamorphosis**

Becoming animal may have therapeutic effects. At least, this seems to be the case in a work by Rodrigo Braga. Background for his work *Compensation Fantasy* (2004) is an experience from his youth when he was suffering from social phobia and panic attacks. One day on the way to school, he encountered a very sick dog, knelt down, looked the animal in the eye and burst into tears in the middle of the street.<sup>15</sup> This story recalls Friedrich Nietzsche's legendary collapse when confronting a maltreated cab horse, an incident at the turn of the year 1888/1889 that marked the beginning of Nietzsche's mental breakdown. For Theodor Adorno this episode exemplified “the inability to further endure a creature's abuse” which, as he says, leads “to an irrational action, which precisely in its irrationality criticizes the state of affairs in which ill treatment of horses is a commonplace”.<sup>16</sup> In Braga's case, the encounter with the dog brought him to seek more help from his family and to start psychological therapy. In hindsight, he realized that he had cried because he had recognized himself in the pitiful dog and that this encounter

was the start for his psychological recovery. He then decided to artistically embody his identification with the dog in a radical act of metamorphosis.



**Fig. 2.** Rodrigo Braga,  
*Compensation Fantasy*, 2004

He made a lifelike silicone cast of his own face, obtained the body of a dead Rottweiler who had been euthanized in a shelter because he had not been adopted, and hired a veterinarian to dissect the dog and sew his ears and muzzle onto the cast. He made photos of the procedure as well as photos of his own head in the same angle and photoshopped them in a way that the idea of the fusion of a living human face and a dead dog's face became uncannily real. With this real and imagined as well as digitally rendered collision Braga processed his earlier troubled self. In addition, the work could also be read as a gesture of solidarity with the sick dog from his youth or the dead dog whose body parts he used and whose life had been considered

disposable. Furthermore, in the age of transgenic animals, such an image also raises the question of how to treat a human-dog-hybrid if it really existed. Does such a creature have a 'face' that, as Emmanuel Levinas says, demands an ethical response from us – or is it a monster to which we are not morally obligated?<sup>17</sup> When human beings are decentered in such a way, it is no longer possible to tell who counts as a moral object and who counts as a moral subject. And the problematic ideological construction of 'the animal' as an oppositional term to define 'the human' is destroyed by the hybridization.

### **Prosthetic Humanimality**

Confrontation and interaction with nonhuman animals not only challenge us ethically and affectively, but also shape human thought, aesthetics, technology, and language. Roberto Marchesini has convincingly argued that the developments of aviation can be traced back to imaginings of a human-bird hybrid. Humans observed birds in flight, and the idea of 'I am a human, I want to fly like a bird' represented a highly productive shift in perspective that would have been impossible without living birds.<sup>18</sup> According to Marchesini, every invention, every technology is born from such a change of perspective, that is then technologically translated. This is also the approach taken by Thomas Thwaites: He conceived his project *A Holiday from Being Human (Goat Man)* when he encountered a happy and carefree dog – a state of mind that seemed very desirable to him: "... I was fed up with my life anyway and I needed a break. I was jobless, had a lot of personal problems, and found everyday life so stressful. [...] One day, walking a friend's dog I was struck by how the dog just seemed really happy about life, without any worries, and I thought to myself that it would be really great to be like that for a day".<sup>19</sup> Thwaites demonstrates a pessimistic view of humanity - to be human is to worry - and wants to escape the general misery. In search of the supposedly simpler life of an animal, he took a timeout from his human existence trying to live not as a dog but as a goat. In practice, however, this turned out to be so cumbersome that the realization of the project rather seems like a satire of the attempt of modern man to find a simpler life. The project documentation which is part of the artwork reveals how Thwaites'

approach is becoming more and more complicated and technological, thus more and more human as he works through it. After visiting a shaman who advised him on the best choice of animal, he used sophisticated tools and technologies for his transmogrification into a goat. He prepared for his project by studying goat ethology, physiology, anatomy, and engineering, and consulted with goat experts from around the world. Thwaites learned all about goat locomotor systems and digestive organs, participated in dissections of goat bodies, visited a goat sanctuary to get to know living goats, and studied mythological lore about goats. Finally, he built an elaborate and patently uncomfortable exoskeleton and, with the help of doctors and chemists, constructed a prosthetic goat stomach capable of digesting grass.



**Fig. 3.** Thomas Thwaites, *A Holiday from Being Human (Goat Man)*, 2015, Photo: Tim Bowditch

In several instances, his experiment put him in serious danger, as when he took potentially toxic substances extracted from bacteria in an attempt to digest grass. He learned from an ethologist that goats lack a human notion of time and are stuck in the present. To achieve a similar mind, he persuaded a neuroscientist to subject him to transcranial magnetic stimulation. In this procedure, a diagnostic technique that originated from neuroscience research, a coil was applied to the skull briefly generating a strong magnetic field to trigger activity potentials for inhibiting areas of the brain. This quite radical intervention in Thwaites' journey to becoming a goat was intended to manipulate his brain waves in the hope of freeing his mind of any thoughts of the past or future. Eventually, he spent some time with a herd of goats in the Swiss Alps. According to the goatherd, the herd accepted him and apparently even one of the goats became attached to the artist. Just like Marcus Coates, Thwaites is neither embarrassed nor afraid of looking foolish. In the end, his physical inadequacies, his unwieldy equipment, and the unpredictable and inhospitable habitat constrained his project. Still, it may be that – through early failure and unexpected successes, such as the goat apparently seeking his friendship – Thwaites gained a direct physical understanding of the fragility and embeddedness of all animals, human and non-human, in a shared environment. Most certainly the work points to alternative ways of knowing and understanding the world.

### **Blood relations**

In their theatrical performance *May the Horse Live in me* (2011), the artist group Art Orienté Objet (Marion Laval-Jeantet and Benoît Mangin) staged an even more transgressive becoming-animal attempt. With the aim of turning her own body into a receptacle for an animal, Marion Laval-Jeantet underwent a blood transfusion with horse blood in front of an audience. Her first idea was to use panda blood because she wanted to become a container for the genetic material of an endangered animal at the brink of extinction. Panda blood was hard to find, though, and the artist group turned to readily available horse blood. Beforehand, Laval-Jeantet was immunosensitized for several months with equine immunoglobulins – the proteins that distinguish

between self and other and fight off invaders such as bacteria and viruses – to make her blood compatible with that of the horse. Fusing animal and human blood in this manner manipulates the part of human biology that makes cells, organs and bodies recognize and maintain themselves as individual entities.

Before the blood-transfusion, the artist visited the horse for weeks to get to know him as an individual and to gain his trust. For her performance, Laval-Jeantet also became externally horse-like by strapping prosthetic hooves to her legs to be at eye level with the horse. In fact, in some shots, it is impossible to tell their bodies apart. Visually, they form a centaur. Perceptive empathy and physical assimilation, however, were not enough for *Art Orienté Objet*. Instead, they wanted to create an actual embodied reality beyond species limitations by removing the physical boundary lines between humans and horses at the level of blood. Laval-Jeantet incorporated the horse's alterity on a molecular level and metabolized it. In the days following the transfusion, she allegedly experienced a peculiar jumpiness, restlessness and anxiousness but also felt strong: "I had the impression of being extra-human. I was not in my ordinary body. I was hyper powerful, hypersensitive, hyper nervous, skittish, with the emotionality of an herbivore. I couldn't sleep. I had the feeling, a bit, that I was possibly a horse".<sup>20</sup>

*Art Orienté Objet* explain these experiences by the fact that the immunoglobulins selected for transplantation targeted specific organs or muscles and triggered biochemical chain reactions. They interpret the asserted psychological experience as a physiological reaction that was provoked by the radical transgression and through which Laval-Jeantet established, at least temporarily, a horse-like relationship with her environment: "I feel powerful yet .. I am startled by small noises, afraid of everything, but it's a fear without awareness, somewhat instinctive and non-existential. [...] My understanding of time is different from that of the others around me. I need to walk constantly".<sup>21</sup> Of course, such explanations are part of the work and an additional level of staging. The scientific verifiability is beside the point here, truth or scientific factuality are not necessary criteria in the context of art. The statements might derive from some form of self-hypnosis or they might consciously ridicule attempts in

medicine to boost human physical or sexual performance or to rejuvenate people with the help of animal blood or other animal body parts. Animal bodies or bodily fluids (including horse urine) are also used in hormone therapy, xenotransplantation, or organ cloning to maintain or improve human health. Art Orienté Objet's approach has to be distinguished from this form of objectification and instrumentalization of animals. By employing the same techno-scientific methods and staging associated with such procedures, the performance rather becomes an affirmative critique of such appropriating practices. *May the Horse Live in me* is creating a powerful image of speculative possibilities of symbiosis and sociality with non-human actors in an artwork. After all Laval-Jeantet claims that "Art exists in order to extend the limits of consciousness and consequently to understand the Other."<sup>22</sup>

Elizabeth Grosz calls art political when it develops the possibilities of new sensations that are different from those we already know.<sup>23</sup> And in this sense, 'becoming horse' might be a transformative event that points to future possibilities to form solidarities with other animals.

### **Interspecies Mothering**

Donna Haraway, having stated in the 1980s that she would rather be a cyborg than a goddess and referring to OncoMouse as her sister in the 1990s, recently asked to "make kin, not babies".<sup>24</sup> The fantasy of making bodily kin with an animal is also found in Maja Smrekar's *ARTEMIS*. Departing from her desire to be fertilized by dog sperm so she can give birth to a hybrid puppy, for the project she had one of her own oocytes removed and, after it had been denucleated in the laboratory, made it available as a host for one of her dog Ada's body cells. The work addresses the instrumentalization of women's bodies and represents Smrekar's attempt to decolonize her own reproductive freedom. She has chosen to share her life not with a human family, but with her dogs. In the same spirit, she conceived her long-term project *(M)other*, which centered on her mothering of her little dog Ada including breastfeeding her.



**Fig. 4.** Maja Smrekar and Manuel Vason, K-9\_topology: Hybrid Family, Berlin, 2016

Smrekar treated her body with a special diet, psychological and physiological training, and with a breast pump applied every four hours, to get it to the point where she could function as her puppy's wet nurse. A side effect of the release of prolactin, which stimulates the flow of milk, is that increased amounts of oxytocin are released, a hormone associated with empathy and maternal love.

Physical forms of mothering animals are not socially accepted and are often pathologized as misguided, deviant love. Yet this phenomenon is not at all uncommon: In particular, puppies and piglets were and are breastfed at different times in different areas and for different reasons: to save motherless young, but also to stimulate milk flow, to avoid mastitis or to prevent pregnancy. In modern industrial societies, because of the sexualizing of the female breast, transspecies breastfeeding is viewed as akin to bestiality. Moreover, it represents an assault on the animal-human boundary. Smrekar questions the idealized notion of breastfeeding as an expression of a 'natural'

mother-child relationship, something that is not usually portrayed as exhausting labor. While fatherhood is constructed as something active, as a social and cultural institution, motherhood is often viewed as a purely automatic and biological process. Smrekar counters this with a motherhood that is self-chosen and active and creates a powerful image for the co-evolution and kinship of dogs and humans.

### **Becoming-human**

The discussed artists radically manipulate their bodies in performative, imaginative art projects to point to the material entanglements of humans and other animals. But Maja Smrekar will never be Ada's biological mother. And Marcus Coates, Cat Man, Rodrigo Braga, Thomas Thwaites, or Marion Laval-Jeantet will not really become blue boobies, cats, dogs, goats, or horses, but will always remain people pretending to become blue boobies, dogs, goats, or horses. And precisely this could be considered an expression of human autonomy and human exceptionalism. The idea "I would like to be another animal" is genuinely human, no other animal would think this way. Seen from this angle, the projects not so much undermine, but rather redefine or consolidate the boundary between humans and other animals.

Animal studies scholarship has long criticized the reduction of animals to mere symbols or metaphors for something else because this denies their individuality and agency. Although the animals in the discussed artworks are not simply display objects, decorative props, or decipherable symbols, they are still somehow vehicles of meaning. Even though the involved animals are clearly influencing and guiding the artists and his or her thought processes and creative actions, the animals' agency and the animals' subjectivity play a subordinate role in the projects.

Having said this, it is important to point out that these artworks avoid universal narratives and entrenched meaning concerning the notion of 'the animal'. They work against essentialist thinking, species hierarchies, and suppression of alterity. The artists not only recognize the creative potential of the idea of the animal, but they also recognize the animality of the human and their evolutionary and speculative ties to other animals. They present

homo sapiens as a malleable species and contribute to an understanding of its connectedness and kinship with other animals. And this creates opportunities for solidarity with other animals and for rethinking both the non-human and the human. Cary Wolfe has pointed out that posthumanism is not about outdoing, rejecting, or superfluing humanity, but about rethinking it, along with its meaning, its means of communication, interactions, and affects, and about recreating it in relation to other living beings.<sup>25</sup> The prostheses that the artists design for themselves function as aesthetic crutches for new experiences that go beyond the purely physical and question the boundaries between species. The transgressions acted out in the flesh introduce post-anthropocentric sensual, bodily, and affective aspects of knowing the world. Through aesthetically becoming animal, a momentary empathy with the other becomes tangible. Speculative experiments of fluctuating potentialities and of new forms of humanness illustrate that being human is also a performative act, one that is always evolving.

---

#### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- Braidotti, Rosi. *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
- Butler, Judith. *Undoing Gender* (London: Routledge, 2004).
- Coates, Marcus, Anthony Spira, and Rosalind Horn, ed., Marcus Coates. *MK Gallery* (Cologne: Walther König, 2016), 271–280.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *Mille Plateaux* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1980).
- Graham, Chris. “No kidding. Why Thomas Thwaites lived as a goat in Switzerland” *The Telegraph* (28.5.2016)  
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/05/28/no-kidding-why-thomas-thwaites-lived-as-a-goat-in-switzerland/>.
- Eliade, Mircea. *Le chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l’extase* (Paris : Payot, Paris 1951).
- Grosz, Elizabeth. *Becoming Undone. Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics and Art* (Durham: Duke University Press 2011).
- Haraway, Donna. *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2008).

- Haraway, Donna. *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).
- Hilton, Leon J., "The Horse in my Flesh. Transspecies Performance and Affective Athletism", *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 4, Vol. 19 (2013), 487–514.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totalité et Infini. Essai sur l'extériorité* (Paris : Le Livre de Poche 1991).
- Marquesini, Roberto. *Epifania animale. L'oltreuomo come rivelazione* (Milan: Mimesis 2014).
- Marti, Silas. "In Focus: Rodrigo Braga," *Frieze* 152, (1.1.2013), <https://frieze.com/article/focus-rodrigo-braga>.
- Nagel, Thomas. "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?," *The Philosophical Review* 83, 4 (1994), 435–450.
- Potts, Annie. "The Mark of the Beast. Inscribing 'Animality' through Extreme Body Modification", In *Knowing Animals* edited by Laurence Simmons, and Philip Armstrong, 131-154. Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2007.
- Probyn-Rapsey, Fiona. "Furries and the Limits of Species Identity Disorder: A Response to Gerbasi et al.," *Society and Animals* Vol. 19 3 (2011), 294-301.
- Sommer, Marc Nicholas. *Das Konzept einer negativen Dialektik. Hegel und Adorno*, (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016).
- Thomas, Cyril. "Art Orienté Objet. J'ai ressenti dans mon corps la nature très vive du cheval", *Poptronics*, <http://www.poptronics.fr/Art-Orienté-Objet-J'ai-ressenti>.
- Thwaites, Thomas. *GoatMan. How I took a Holiday from Being Human* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2016).
- Ullrich, Jessica. "Undoing Species. Transspezies-Performances im 21. Jahrhundert. Design und Mimesis. Nachahmung in Natur und Kultur," edited by Friedrich Weltzien, and Antonia Ulrich. Berlin: Reimer 2019.
- Wolfe, Cary. "What is Posthumanism," *Journal for Critical Animal Studies* 1/2, Vol. IX (2011): 208–214.

---

### Endnotes

1. A different version of this paper was published in German language: Jessica Ullrich, "Undoing Species. Transspezies-Performances im 21. Jahrhundert. Design und Mimesis. Nachahmung in Natur und Kultur," ed. Friedrich Weltzien, and Antonia Ulrich. Berlin: Reimer 2019.
2. I use the term 'migrating' metaphorical for changing into or blending into an animal via mental or physical movement, the motion of affects, or by means of imitation or body manipulation.
3. Cary Wolfe, "What is Posthumanism", *Journal for Critical Animal Studies* 1/2, Vol. IX (2011): 208–214.
4. Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
5. Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2008).

6. Annie Potts, "The Mark of the Beast. Inscribing 'Animality' through Extreme Body Modification," in *Knowing Animals* ed. Laurence Simmons, and Philip Armstrong, 146. Leiden / Boston: Brill, 2007.
7. Potts, "The Mark of the Beast", 141.
8. Fiona Probyn-Rapsey, "Furries and the Limits of Species Identity Disorder: A Response to Gerbasi et al.," *Society and Animals* Vol. 19 3 (2011), 294-301.
9. Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (London: Routledge, 2004).
10. Mircea Eliade, *Le chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l'extase* (Paris : Payot, Paris 1951).
11. Thomas Nagel, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?," *The Philosophical Review* 83 4 (1994), 435-450.
12. Marcus Coates in conversation with Valerie Smith: Marcus Coates, Anthony Spira, and Rosalind Horn, Coates. MK Gallery (Cologne: Walther König 2016), 280.
13. Coates, Spira, and Horn, Marcus Coates. MK Gallery, 276.
14. Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari: *Mille Plateaux* (Paris: Editions de Minuit 1980).
15. Silas Marti, "In Focus: Rodrigo Braga," *Frieze* 152, (1.1.2013), <https://frieze.com/article/focus-rodrigo-braga>.
16. Marc Nicholas Sommer *Das Konzept einer negativen Dialektik. Hegel und Adorno* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 220.
17. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et Infini. Essai sur l'extériorité* (Paris : Le Livre de Poche 1991).
18. Roberto Marquesini, *Epifania animale. L'oltreuomo come rivelazione* (Milan: Mimesis 2014).
19. Thwaites In Chris Graham, "No kidding. Why Thomas Thwaites lived as a goat in Switzerland," *The Telegraph* (28.05.2016), <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/05/28/no-kidding-why-thomas-thwaites-lived-as-a-goat-in-switzerland/>.
20. Leon J. Hilton, "The Horse in my Flesh. Transspecies Performance and Affective Athletism," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 4, Vol. 19 (2013), 487-514.
21. 501
22. Cyril Thomas, "Art Orienté Objet. J'ai ressenti dans mon corps la nature très vive du cheval," *Poptronics*, <http://www.poptronics.fr/Art-Orienté-Objet-J-ai-ressenti>.
23. Elizabeth Grosz, *Becoming Undone. Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics and Art* (Durham: Duke University Press 2011).
24. Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).
25. Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?*, XXV.

# **St. Francis' *Stigmatized Body*: Processes of Transcultural Negotiations in New Spanish Art of the 16th Century**

---

**Julia Kloss-Weber**  
University of Hamburg

## **ABSTRACT**

When the Franciscan order started its missionary activity in New Spain in the early 16th century they had at their disposal a body image that turned out to be especially attractive in their new mission area: St. Francis with its stigmatized body. In the New Spanish convents of the Franciscans the concepts of artistic decorations practiced show a significant emphasis on the depiction of St. Francis' stigmatization, his wounded body as well as his five wounds visualized separately. These motifs were here generally rendered in a remarkable way with a striking plasticity and an astonishing emphasis on his injured and actually marked body. This phenomenon seems to be explainable by the fact that body images had already played an important role in prehispanic local image cultures and served hereby also as manifestations of the divine. Therefore, St. Francis' body as an 'image of god'—or at least of an encounter with the divine—was apparently especially suitable for processes of transcultural translation between local traditions and the imported Christian faith. This article discusses body images as a condensed form of iconic transcultural translations, as by thorough consideration every act of image reception can be understood as a sort of 'incorporation', as a transformation of an external picture into an internal image.

## **KEYWORDS**

St. Francis, Stigmata, New Spain-Mission, Body Images, Entanglement.

During the 16<sup>th</sup> century, missionizing activities were carried out in New Spain (contemporary Mexico) by three European mendicant orders: by 1524, twelve Franciscans had landed in Veracruz; the Dominicans arrived in 1528, with the Augustinian Hermits following in 1533. The Franciscans were not just the first to reach the former Mexica Empire. After the initial and disastrous destruction of local cult objects and the indigenous cultural heritage, they were also the first to grasp the necessity of invoking pre-Hispanic traditions in some form: only this, they realized, would allow them to render comprehensible the Christian belief system they sought to disseminate. Observable to a striking degree, in fact, in the visual cultures produced in the Christian convents is a marked preference for iconographies that are characterized by what Margit Kern has called “strategic double-coding,” meaning a preference for motifs that permit to be perceived from both indigenous and Christian perspectives.<sup>4</sup> Such motifs should facilitate a fusion of horizons, albeit self-evidently—at least from the standpoint of the monks—against the background of Christian hegemony. Recent research has however produced a consensus according to which the processes of translation initiated thereby were not aimed unidirectionally toward Christian dogma. Inevitably, both poles of such a translation became entangled in processes of transcultural negotiation, which generated new and characteristically colonial-era semantics.

The Franciscans in particular soon recognized that they had at their disposal a body image that seemed to be especially appealing and culturally ‘compatible’ in the context of their new mission: that of St. Francis with his stigmatized body. In the New Spanish convents of the Franciscans depictions of St. Francis and his stigmata display a remarkable emphasis on the bodily act of stigmatization as well as on his five wounds, which were also visualized separately. To a remarkable degree, these motifs were here generally rendered with striking plasticity and with an astonishing emphasis on the saint’s injured and actually marked body.

In the year 1224, according to legend, St. Francis received the five stigmata of the Savior from an apparition of the crucified Christ in the form of a six-winged seraph; the event is said to have taken place on the mountain

of La Verna in Tuscany, situated just a few kilometers north of Arezzo.<sup>2</sup> In the European context as well, the Franciscans emphasized the similarity to Christ on the part of their charismatic founder, interpreting it as confirmation of his special chosenness. In New Spain depictions of St. Francis and his wounds were with greater frequency rendered in the medium of sculpture, so that the visualization of the body experienced an emphatic potentiation; in the 'corporeal medium' of sculpture, the 'body image' engendered by the stigmata was endowed with a marked object character.

This is true as well for a relief depicting the stigmatization that adorns a small chapel in the Franciscan convent of *Nuestra Señora de la Asunción* in Tlaxcala (Fig. 1). Tlaxcala was among the order's first settlements in New Spain, and the chapel is found in the spacious *atrio* of the complex, which was heavily frequented by the indigenous population.<sup>3</sup>

Turning our attention now to the virtually square relief from Tlaxcala, we see the figure of St. Francis set in a mountainous landscape along the lower right-hand edge of the image; through the rotation of his head, he is linked to the theophany of the seraphic Christ visible in the upper left corner. The figure of the saint has been artfully integrated into the surrounding landscape. This aspect is important to the pictorial narrative: Otherwise, it is only the rotation of the head that creates a connection with the point of emission of the mystical stigmata, while the rest of the figure is oriented nearly frontally toward the beholder. Conspicuous in particular are the oversized hands, held out toward the viewer rather than toward the Savior who reveals himself to the saint. Even today, despite weathering damage, the stigmata chiseled into the palms of St. Francis's hands remain visible. In a captivating way, this significant motivic accent corresponds to the image's stylistic traits. The forms—their execution even reminds of woodcut technique—are set off sharply from the plane background that lies parallel to the picture surface. The figure of the saint is displayed mainly either frontally or in a clearly delineated profile view. The incisive scoring of the motifs into the material promotes a corporeal mode of vision: when the eye scans the deeply-incised forms, a viewing of the relief becomes a haptic experience. Emerging as well as a result is a correlation between pictorial content and the

relief's formal traits: because the stony surfaces of St. Francis's hands are integrated in the uppermost plane of the relief, an analogy emerges between the divine markings on the saint's hands and the forms of the relief, which seem to have been punched out. In this constellation, finally, the formal rigor of the work, with its slight tendency toward abstraction, gives rise to the emphatic corporality of both the figure of Francis and the relief itself. Much more could be said about the resemanticizations to which the motif has been subjected through its confrontation with local traditions;<sup>4</sup> but this would lead too far here. Instead, an important observation Raúl Flores Guerrero made, shall be mentioned: According to him, the vault of the interior of the small chapel containing the St.-Francis-relief is decorated with flower motifs that allude to pre-Columbian religious rituals involving scarification.<sup>5</sup>



**Fig. 1.** Local sculptor, *The Stigmatization of St. Francis*. Relief in stone, 16<sup>th</sup> century. *Capilla posa*, former Franciscan convent Nuestra Señora de la Asunción, Tlaxcala (Tlaxcala)

Depicted on the closed side of the chapel, moreover, is the emblem of the Franciscans in New Spain, consisting of the five stigmata of St. Francis, displayed now in isolation (fig. 2). Close examination reveals that the five wounds,<sup>6</sup> depicted here in red, take the form of encrustations: a red-dyed mortar has been pressed into depressions that were worked into the surface. In conjunction with the scene taking place on Monte Alverna, visualized in the relief displayed on the front of the chapel, it seems remarkably telling that here, the wounds were not simply painted on or applied sculpturally, but instead penetrate the surface of the chapel wall. In this way the wounding of the ‘body’ by the stigmata is also performed medially (which is to say: it is reproduced sculpturally), and so to speak became embodied in the chapel architecture.



**Fig. 2.** *Franciscan coat of arms. Relief with red incrustations, 16<sup>th</sup> century. Capilla posa, former Franciscan convent Nuestra Señora de la Asunción, Tlaxcala (Tlaxcala)*

While the motif of the five wounds had already been adopted in Europe as a symbol of the Franciscans, it became almost ubiquitous in the convents of the order in New Spain. As Christian Duverger has convincingly shown, it also allowed a reading from the perspective of pre-Hispanic pictography, thereby generating a semantics that—while not identical to the European iconography—nonetheless seemed comparable with it in certain respects. In visualizing the wounds, local sculptors in most instances used the

disk shape of the so-called *chalchihuite*, or jade pearl, which symbolized precious fluids, sacrificial blood in particular, while the rendering of fluent, dripping blood reflected pre-Columbian modes of depicting flowing liquids.<sup>7</sup> In this context, it is worth emphasizing that precisely through this symbolic-glyphic charging of the wounds, formulated in such a pointedly physical fashion, and the drastic rendering of the flowing blood, the New Spanish variant of the motif emphasizes physical vulnerability to an extreme degree. This further heightens the image's focus on the wounds, hence counteracting a tendency toward abstraction on the part of the motif through the fragmentation of the wounds.

At the same time the reduction to the central elements of similarity between Christ and the stigmatized Francis harbors a certain explosiveness, so to speak, for given the glyphic, reductive mode of depiction, it ultimately remains an open question exactly whose wounds are being visualized.



**Fig. 3.** Local sculptor, *Franciscan emblem*. Stone, 16<sup>th</sup> century. Installed above the entrance portal to the atrio, former Franciscan convent San Andrés, Calpan (Puebla)

Such a highlighting of the similarity between archetype and image (meaning Christ and St. Francis), one that comes close to suggesting actual identity, is performed as well by the sheer visual ubiquity of a motif adopted by a second Franciscan emblem in New Spain, namely that of the crossed arms of first Christ, and secondly Francis, which display the pierced palms of their hands (fig. 3). In the New Spanish context, the extremities of Christ and St. Francis, depicted as fragments, can be associated with highly similar pictorial formulae from the local visual cultures: A detail from the *Codex Laud* shows an arm—its protruding bone suggesting it was torn off—that has been interpreted by Escalante Gonzalbo as a sacrificial offering.<sup>8</sup> Many place glyphs, some still in use today, display arm segments as elements of the image composition, for example, the place glyphs for Zacualpan de Amilpas (Morelos) and Acolman (Estado de México).<sup>9</sup>



**Fig 4.** Local sculptor, *Franciscan emblem*. Relief on a massive stone block, 16th century. Mexico-City, Museo de sitio de Tlatelolco

A massive block of stone unearthed during archaeological excavations on the premises of the former, in the year 1536 consecrated *Colegio de la Santa Cruz de Santiago* in Tlatelolco (fig. 4) also displays the Franciscan motif of the crossed arms, framed by a Franciscan cord, with the wounds of the passion respectively the stigmata visible on the palms of the hands as deep gouges. Even in depictions of St. Francis whose positioning conceals the wounds from the viewer's eyes, as with the sculpted Francis-figure seen on the facade of the *capilla abierta* in Tlahuelilpan (Hidalgo) enlarged photographic details reveal that these are nonetheless present as sculptural hollows in the stone surfaces of the saint's palms; and it seems conceivable that originally, encrustations—perhaps pieces of jade—were set into these depressions.

Standing out in particular among the numerous depictions of the stigmatization found in the Franciscan convents is the one of the second *capilla posa* in the *atrio* of the monastery of Calpan (Puebla) (fig. 5).<sup>10</sup> The sculptural highlight of the chapel is a fully rounded, kneeling figure of St. Francis set at the corner of the recessed base of the cupola. The saint is oriented toward the cross that crowns the cupola; his hands, held before his upper body, suggest a depiction of the scene of La Verna. Interestingly, the acroteria-style extensions visible on the exit-side of the chapel contain elements in the form of cactus flowers; and the cacti thorns were used in the local context for the ritual perforation of the skin.<sup>11</sup> This fully three-dimensional visualization of the stigmatization-scene, that was relatively uncommon in the European context, evokes a striking physical presence; the saint's figure is not framed, there is no delimited image-space as in a painting, but instead—and despite its elevated positioning—it occupies the same spatial environment as the beholder, namely the *atrio* of the cloister complex.

But exactly how is this emphasis on the marked, wounded, violated corporeality in the depictions of St. Francis and his wounds—observable in so many examples—; how is this to be interpreted in the context of 16<sup>th</sup>-century New Spain?



**Fig. 5.** Local sculptor, *Stone-figure of Saint Francis*, 16th century. Second *capilla posa, atrio*, former Franciscan convent San Andrés, Calpan (Puebla)

There can be little doubt—as documented by a number of texts—that the Franciscan monks were familiar with the exceptional importance of body marking in Ibero-American cultures. Within the territory of the mission in New Spain, temporary body painting, tattoos, skin incisions, and scarifications played a central role in religious ritual, as did the ornamentation of the body through ear or nose rings or the so-called *bezotes*, what is a chin ornament.<sup>12</sup> In connection with the hypothesis, presented above, that the stigmata of a number of Francis-figures—but also of Christ-figures—originally contained incrustations, I would like to recall the pre-Hispanic tradition of slicing open and scarifying certain parts of the body to create small pockets of skin into which bits of jade, obsidian, or other precious stones were inserted.<sup>13</sup> For the most part, such techniques for adorning the body were reserved for members of the political and religious

elites. Just how deeply rooted such practices were in the local belief systems is suggested by the circumstance that certain divinities were depicted with specific colors and specific patterns, which the priests used in maintaining the respective cult. Found in the *Codex Florentinus*, composed under the aegis of Bernardino de Sahagún, as well as in the earlier *Primeros Memoriales* (an earlier version of this famous manuscript), are a number of models for face painting that consistently correspond to specific pre-Hispanic gods.<sup>14</sup> The mystical connection with a divinity through the display of its specific signs or symbols on the human body, is familiar as well from the practice of tattooing and body painting with so-called *sellos* and *pintaderas*, round and flat stamps used for the purpose of printing onto the body.<sup>15</sup> Against this background, it becomes understandable that the figure of St. Francis encountered quite fertile ground in New Spain.

The main thesis of this article, then, is that in New Spain, the iconography of the stigmatized St. Francis was perceived and understood as a body image so powerfully because there, it was embedded in a local image culture in which various body image-practices were still current. This observation points to an aspect that has been marginalized in European art history: body image techniques such as tattooing were used intensively by Christians as well, and had been important markers of Christian identity from early Christian times until at least the Middle Ages—and still are to some extent today, when we think of the tattoo studios of Coptic Christians in Jerusalem or in Egypt.<sup>16</sup> In European art history up to the present day, however, the body image of St. Francis has been interpreted and contextualized in a discursive tradition that has tended towards sublimation and transcendence, thereby leaving the body in its physical agency behind. The study of non-European art histories can hence also yield new insights into traditional fields of European art history. It can bring to light suppressed motifs of European image cultures, thereby engaging with so-called entangled histories of art.

Established recently in the disciplines of history and cultural studies was a methodological approach known as *entangled histories*, whose basic intention is to deconstruct the grand European, Western master narrative,

which assumes that—following Sebastian Conrad and Shalini Randeria, “Europe and its ‘Other’” developed “independently of one another before the products of European progress were exported,” which means that “Europe is said [...] to have radically changed the world, without having been affected itself.”<sup>17</sup> In opposition to this, there is a growing awareness among scholars that all “regions of the world—including Europe—were not merely the points of departure for such outcomes, but instead themselves result” from such processes of entanglement.<sup>18</sup>

An art history that has been enriched by the perspectives of cultural studies, and which brings together the often till today institutionally segregated European and non-European histories of art in a contextualized way, regarding them as the products of transcultural exchange, also makes possible a reevaluation of the putatively all-too-familiar phenomena of European art history. For such an approach encourages us to consider aspects that have been excluded from the canon of traditional European art history.

Such a shift of perspective is relevant not just on the level of the historical objects, but also on the level of the discourses that shape our discipline. Accordingly, a confrontation with the histories of non-European art has the potential to refocus our attention again on repressed aspects of European art history. In this instance, it means asking whether these sculptural depictions of St. Francis with their emphases on the wounded body found in New Spain might somehow alter our view of the ‘European’ Francis; whether a confrontation with the New Spanish depictions of the 16<sup>th</sup> century might induce us to perceive the ‘European’ Francis from unfamiliar angles.

But why exactly is such a revision of our image of the figure of St. Francis in the context of European art history necessary in the first place?

Within the history of European-Western discourse, the fact that body images belonged to the earliest forms of artistic expression has led to classify them as archaic. Which is precisely why they have been regarded—and may still be regarded today—as emblematic of societies that used for a long time to be classified as ‘primitive’. Moreover body images were regarded within modern societies—as formulated so radically by Adolf Loos in his famous

essay *Ornament and Crime*—even as typical of criminality,<sup>19</sup> in short: body images have been attributed to the ethnically and socially ‘Other.’<sup>20</sup>

But this means ignoring the fact that since antiquity, bodily marks have served as a crucial factor in the construction of identity within Christian societies: in the framework of a relationship with God that was characterized by humility, Christian believers declared themselves to be ‘slaves of the Lord.’ And during the era of the persecution of the early Christians, they were in fact stigmatized as religious renegades by means of bodily insignia. For this reason, they developed and practiced a tradition of self-marking, taking up the negative connotations of such practices that prevailed in the Greco-Roman context and revaluing them in positive terms,<sup>21</sup> bringing to life the concept of the stigmatized individual as a charismatic figure.<sup>22</sup> Crusaders and seafarers in particular displayed tattoos as signs of their inextinguishable affiliation with the Christian community, while in the Holy Land, pilgrims had symbols signifying their belief engraved on their bodies or under their skin. Jerusalem and Bethlehem, but also Loreto in Italy, were regarded as strongholds of pilgrim tattooing, with a motivic focus on depictions of the Cross, the Arma Christi, and the insignia of the Virgin.<sup>23</sup>

Till today, art-historical researchers have largely failed to integrate this in reality long-standing Christian tradition of purposefully deployed bodily markings into its investigations of the body imagery of the figure of St. Francis.

Hans Belting and Urban Küsters, who have in the German speaking context been preoccupied with representations of the stigmatized Francis,<sup>24</sup> elaborated their interpretations by extending figures of thought that had been developed earlier by medieval hagiographers. In doing so, they occupy a discursive context for which an understanding of the stigmata as a miracle engendered by inner religious powers is crucial. Required already in the context of the political instrumentalization by the order and the ecclesiastical canonization of the body image of St. Francis were processes of disembodiment and spiritualization. And since art-historical interpretations followed the paradoxical hagiographic traditions of understanding the stigmata, they have focused primarily on the oscillation between the facets of

the real-bodily and the metaphorical-miraculous image, rather than situating it in the context of the cultural history of Christian body markings. Furthermore, art-historical research has referred mainly to images, or more precisely to *paintings* of the stigmatized Francis, meaning: to images of a body image (in particular from Giotto's hand), and not to the stigmatized Francis as an image.

But as such a real body image, he was perceived with greater intensity when—as in the New Spain of the 16<sup>th</sup> century—fully three-dimensional, sculpted figures of St. Francis were positioned side-by-side with actual, real, living, human bodies carrying body markings. For such a side by side makes it clear that in the European context as well, the stigmatized Francis has to be understood in connection with widely disseminated practices of deliberate body marking, which are traceable all the way back to early Christianity, and which played an important role in popular piety—and this in spite of all of the discursive traditions concerning the mystification and allegorization of the stigmata to the level of a divine and supernatural miracle.

In closing, I would like to touch on an aspect that seems particularly relevant in the context of body “art”:<sup>25</sup> my preoccupation with the role of the stigmatized Francis formed part of my second book on transcultural processes of translation in the New Spanish missions of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>26</sup> Central for me was the question of whether and the degree to which images or picture acts (in German: ‘Bildakte’) were predestined to undermine or fracture thinking in dichotomous cultural structures. In this context, in fact, body images—as I would like to argue—represent a precedent. This is related to the fact that bodies per se figure as a liminal place, as they constitute an interface not just between nature and culture, but also between presence and representation, corporeality and symbolism, inner and outer, subject and object, self and other, own and foreign. Body images disrupt binary orders because they are never simply given as such, but instead possess an intensely performative character, so that through the act of embodiment, the above-named parameters continually shift in relation to one another—and become displaced. And from this perspective, I wondered whether body images such as that of St. Francis could not be understood almost as a

symbolic concentration of the operations through which picture acts per se can be linked to processes of transcultural translation.

With an eye toward the stigmatization of St. Francis, Hans Belting argued that “for his part, Francis was a beholder, but one who became an image of that which he beheld.”<sup>27</sup> Taking up this argument, I would like to conclude by shifting to another dimension of the body image of St. Francis—but in a certain sense every body image includes these aspects of outer and inner image, in so far as, like also in the case of the *sellos* mentioned below, the outer image becomes in a process of incorporation, of embodiment an image of one’s own body or: of one’s own.

From my perspective, Belting here describes a quite fundamental mechanism of pictorial experience *in genere*, one that—according to my thesis—acquires special virulence in the context of intensified processes of transcultural negotiation. It would be possible to sharpen Belting’s formulation by saying that in every act of reception, strictly speaking, image viewing and ‘image-becoming’ are superimposed: every act of reception is realized as an “embodiment”<sup>28</sup> of an initially external image into the universe of my internal images. And the repertoire of my internal images that is enriched in this way will flow into all of my future experiences with images, tending to condition each of them, to a certain degree. Stated differently: for the observed image, the body of the beholding subject represents a second medial agency, and the viewing of every image is realized in the form of a complex interweaving of outer and inner factors. In this way, every picture act fluidizes dualistic structures, suspends them temporarily, and exposes them to a process of creative refiguration. The beholding subject and the perceived object are inscribed onto one another reciprocally, so that in the process of pictorial perception, experiences of self and of alterity proceed hand-in-hand, and the demarcation lines separating these poles lose their clear contours, albeit without being fully dissolved. The stigmatized Francis is in this sense a pictorial formula that also reflects upon the far-reaching consequences and implications of acts of reception, of picture acts, and which can hence be termed a dispositive of appropriation, or more precisely: a dispositive of the transformative dimensions of picture acts.

The erratic nature of images<sup>29</sup> is by no means exhausted in their capacity to travel between cultures. The images migrate, so to speak, into our bodies and through them, leading a will-of-the-wisp existence in the interspace of our bodies, within which they themselves are unavoidably transformed. In this sense as well, it becomes possible in the field of visual studies to encircle “moving bodies” and the “transformative power of body ‘art’” analytically.<sup>30</sup>

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Belting, Hans. “Franziskus. Der Körper als Bild.“ In *Bild und Körper im Mittelalter*, edited by Kristin Marek, Raphaële Preisinger and Marius Rimmele, 21–36. Munich: Fink, 2006.
- Caplan, Jane. “Introduction.” In *Written on the Body. The Tattoo in European and American History*, edited by Jane Caplan, xvi–xix. London: Reaktion Books, 2000.
- Conrad, Sebastian, and Shalini Randeria, “Einleitung: Geteilte Geschichten – Europa in einer postkolonialen Welt.“ In *Jenseits des Eurozentrismus. Postkoloniale Perspektiven in den Geschichts- und Kulturwissenschaften*, edited by Sebastian Conrad, Shalini Randeria, and Regina Römhild, 32–70. Frankfurt on the Main and New York: Campus, 2013 [2002].
- Durán, Diego. *Historia de las Indias de Nueva España y Islas de la Tierra Firme*, introduction by José Rubén Romero Galván and Rosa Camelo. Madrid: Banco Santander, 1990–1991 [1867].
- Duverger, Christian. *Agua y fuego. Arte sacro indígena de México en el siglo XVI*. Mexico-City: Landucci Editores, 2003.
- Escalante Gonzalbo, Pablo. “Manos y pies en Mesoamérica. Segmentos y contextos.” *Manos y pies* (= *Archeología Mexicana* 12, no. 71 (2005)): 20–27.
- Flores Guerrero, Raúl. *Las capillas posas de Calpan y Huejotzingo*. Puebla: Secretaría de Cultura, Gobierno del Estado de Puebla, 2002.
- Flores Guerrero, Raúl. *Las capillas posas de Calpan y Huejotzingo*. Puebla: Secretaría de Cultura, Gobierno del Estado de Puebla, 2002.
- Flores Guerrero, Raúl. *Las capillas posas de México*. Mexico-City: Ediciones Mexicanas, 1951.
- Gell, Alfred. *Wrapping in Images. Tattooing in Polynesia*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993.
- Glissant, Édouard. *Philosophie de la relation: poésie en étendue*. Paris: Gallimard, 2009.

Gutiérrez Arriola, Cecilia. "El convento de Nuestra Señora de la Asunción de Tlaxcala en el siglo XVI. Notas sobre un dibujo de Diego Muñoz Camargo." *Anales del Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas* 19, no. 71 (1997): 5–39.

Kern, Margit. *Transkulturelle Imaginationen des Opfers in der Frühen Neuzeit. Übersetzungsprozesse zwischen Mexiko und Europa*. Berlin and Munich: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2013.

Kloss-Weber, Julia. *Bilder der Alterität – Alterität der Bilder. Zum transkulturellen Potenzial von Bildern in Übersetzungsprozessen zwischen Neuspanien und Europa im 16. Jahrhundert*. Manuscript, habilitation thesis, history of art, University of Hamburg 2021. In preparation for publication in the publishing house De Gruyter.

Küsters, Urban. "Ebenbild und Spur. Der gezeichnete Körper des Hl. Franziskus." In *Schrift und Bild und Körper*, edited by Ulrike Landfester, 43–66. Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2002.

Lipp, Wolfgang. *Stigma und Charisma. Über soziales Grenzverhalten*. Berlin: Reimer, 1985.

Loos, Adolf. "Ornament und Verbrechen [1908]." In *Gesammelte Schriften*, edited by Adolf Opel, 363–373. Vienna: Lesethek, 2010.

McAndrew, John. *The Open-Air Churches of Sixteenth-Century Mexico*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965.

Mena, Adelaide. "Heiliges Tattoo! Eine 700 Jahre alte christliche Tradition blüht in Jerusalem." CNA German, broadcast July 10, 2017, accessed May 14, 2019. <https://de.catholicnewsagency.com/story/heiliges-tattoo-eine-700-jahre-alte-christliche-tradition-bluht-in-jerusalem-2085>.

Oettermann, Stephan. *Zeichen auf der Haut. Die Geschichte der Tätowierung in Europa*. Frankfurt on the Main: Syndikat, 1979.

Prem, Hanns J. *Die Azteken. Geschichte, Kultur, Religion*. Munich: Beck, 2003.

Sauser, Ekkart. "Wunden Christi." In *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie*, vol. 4, 1972: columns 540–542.

Vela, Enrique. *Decoración corporal prehispánica. Catálogo visual (= Arqueología mexicana, special issue 37)*. Mexico-City: Raíces, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2010.

Wesjohann, Achim. *Mendikantische Gründungserzählungen im 13. und 14. Jahrhundert. Mythen als Element institutioneller Eigengeschichtsschreibung der mittelalterlichen Franziskaner, Dominikaner und Augustiner-Eremiten*. Berlin: LIT Verlag Dr. W. Hopf, 2012.

---

## Endnotes

1. See Margit Kern, *Transkulturelle Imaginationen des Opfers in der Frühen Neuzeit. Übersetzungsprozesse zwischen Mexiko und Europa* (Berlin and Munich: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2013), especially 100–115.

2. A good overview of the various versions of the legend is provided by Achim Wesjohann, *Mendikantische Gründungserzählungen im 13. und 14. Jahrhundert. Mythen als Element institutioneller Eigengeschichtsschreibung der mittelalterlichen Franziskaner, Dominikaner und Augustiner-Eremiten* (Berlin: LIT Verlag Dr. W. Hopf, 2012), 234–249.
3. John McAndrew, *The Open-Air Churches of Sixteenth-Century Mexico* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), 333. See also: Cecilia Gutiérrez Arriola, “El convento de Nuestra Señora de la Asunción de Tlaxcala en el siglo XVI. Notas sobre un dibujo de Diego Muñoz Camargo,” *Anales del Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas* 19, no. 71 (1997): 16.
4. This topic is discussed in detail in the author’s habilitation thesis *Bilder der Alterität – Alterität der Bilder. Zum transkulturellen Potenzial von Bildern in Übersetzungsprozessen zwischen Neuspanien und Europa im 16. Jahrhundert* (manuscript, University of Hamburg 2021, in preparation for publication in the publishing house De Gruyter).
5. Raúl Flores Guerrero, *Las capillas posas de México* (Mexico-City: Ediciones Mexicanas, 1951), 51.
6. See for the motif of the five wounds Ekkart Sauser, “Wunden Christi,” *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie*, vol. 4, 1972: columns 540–542.
7. See Christian Duverger, *Arte sacro indígena de México en el siglo XVI* (Mexico-City: Landucci Editores, 2003), 132–134.
8. See Pablo Escalante Gonzalbo, “Manos y pies en Mesoamérica. Segmentos y contextos,” *Manos y pies* (= *Archeología Mexicana* 12, no. 71 (2005)): 25, e.g. the figure on page 25, below right, with the caption „Brazo cortado como ofrenda“.
9. Other examples of such arm fragments can be found, for example, in the *Codex Durán* as part of the place glyph of Tlaxcala, see Diego Durán, *Historia de las Indias de Nueva España y Islas de la Tierra Firme*, introduction by José Rubén Romero Galván and Rosa Camelo (Madrid: Banco Santander, 1990–1991 [1867]), vol. 1, 316.
10. See for the *capillas posas* of the convent *San Andrés* in Calpan (Puebla): Flores Guerrero, *capillas posas*, 37–43, for the second *capilla posa* 39–41; Raúl Flores Guerrero, *Las capillas posas de Calpan y Huejotzingo* (Puebla: Secretaría de Cultura, Gobierno del Estado de Puebla, 2002), 9–19.
11. See Hanns J. Prem, *Die Azteken. Geschichte, Kultur, Religion* (Munich: Beck, 2003), 33 & 57.
12. See for the various local traditions of body images: Enrique Vela, *Decoración corporal prehispánica. Catálogo visual* (= *Arqueología mexicana*, special issue 37) (Mexico-City: Raíces, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2010).
13. See for this procedure called *escarificación* Vela, *Decoración corporal*, 62.
14. See in Vela, *Decoración corporal*, the passage with the subtitle *Pintura facial*, 34–43; a very revealing compilation of illustrations showing these patterns of face painting associated with certain deities, taken from the *Primeros Memoriales* and the *Florentine Codex*, can be found in this publication on page 37.
15. See on the tradition of tattooing Vela, *Decoración corporal*, 56–59, and for the so-called *sellos*: 46–55.
16. The fact that this tradition is still cultivated today by Coptic Christians in Egypt or Jerusalem, for example, is also documented by recent reports: Adelaide Mena, “*Heiliges Tattoo! Eine 700 Jahre alte christliche Tradition blüht in Jerusalem*,” CNA German, broadcast July 10, 2017, accessed May 14, 2019, <https://de.catholicnewsagency.com/story/heiliges-tattoo-eine-700-jahre-alte-christliche-tradition-bluht-in-jerusalem-2085>.
17. Sebastian Conrad and Shalini Randeria, „Einleitung: Geteilte Geschichten – Europa in einer postkolonialen Welt,“ in *Jenseits des Eurozentrismus. Postkoloniale Perspektiven in den Geschichts- und Kulturwissenschaften*, ed. Sebastian Conrad, Shalini Randeria, and Regina Röhmlid (Frankfurt on the Main and New York: Campus, 2013 [2002]), 35, 47.
18. Conrad and Randeria, *Einleitung*, 2013 [2002], 18.

19. Adolf Loos, "Ornament und Verbrechen [1908]," in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Adolf Opel (Vienna: Lesethek, 2010), 364.
20. Alfred Gell analyzed tattoos as characteristics for the "class Other" as well as for the "ethnic Other"; see: Alfred Gell, *Wrapping in Images. Tattooing in Polynesia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 8, 10.
21. See for the Christian tradition of body markings: Jane Caplan, "Introduction," in *Written on the Body. The Tattoo in European and American History*, ed. Jane Caplan (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), xvi–xix; Stephan Oettermann, *Zeichen auf der Haut. Die Geschichte der Tätowierung in Europa* (Frankfurt on the Main: Syndikat, 1979), especially chapter I.2 "Unter Christenmenschen," 12–20.
22. For the relationship of stigma and charisma see: Wolfgang Lipp, *Stigma und Charisma. Über soziales Grenzverhalten* (Berlin: Reimer, 1985).
23. See Caplan, *Introduction*, xvii. In this introduction on page xviii can be found an illustration of the motifs from the place of pilgrimage in Loreto, Italy; Oettermann (Oettermann, *Geschichte der Tätowierung*, 1979) shows on page 16, fig. 2, an illustration of the Jerusalem tattoos of the Prussian Otto von Gröben from 1694.
24. Hans Belting, "Franziskus. Der Körper als Bild," in *Bild und Körper im Mittelalter*, ed. Kristin Marek, Raphaële Preisinger, and Marius Rimmele (Munich: Fink, 2006), 21–36; Urban Küsters, "Ebenbild und Spur. Der gezeichnete Körper des Hl. Franziskus," in *Schrift und Bild und Körper*, ed. Ulrike Landfester (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2002), 43–66. My intention is not questioning the importance of these studies, both are absolutely worth reading and very compelling. However, the body image of St. Francis in the present article is analyzed from a quite different perspective.
25. This formulation refers to the title of panel 7 of the CIHA SÃO PAULO 2022–*Moving bodies. The transformative power of body "art"*, led by Margit Kern and Marco Pasqualini—in the context of which the paper on which this article is based was given.
26. See the indication in footnote 4.
27. Belting, *Franziskus*, 24.
28. Belting, *Franziskus*, 30.
29. The adjective 'erratic' is borrowed from Édouard Glissant's *Philosophie de la relation* and the cultural philosophy of what he called "errance" contained therein. See Édouard Glissant, *Philosophie de la relation: poésie en étendue* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009), e.g. 61–63.
30. The phrases in quotation marks are taken from the abstract of panel 7 of the CIHA SÃO PAULO 2022 - Motion Migrations written by Margit Kern.

# Neither Female, nor Male. Image, Performance and Crossdressing in Early 20th-Century Argentina

---

**María Isabel Baldasarre**  
University of San Martín

## **ABSTRACT**

During the nineteenth century and a great part of the twentieth, fashion was a clear marker of gender, as well as a device for disciplining the body. Being dressed according to biological sex, occupation and social class was imperative for the rising bourgeoisie, who saw extreme danger in transgressing any of these norms.

This paper analyses some of these occasions and the conflicts raised by public opinion when crossdressers and “serious” actresses filled the central theaters thanks to their drag shows. Likewise, liminal characters on the edge of the law made crossdressing a way of life, allowing them to travel, hide and intervene from the margins.

Moreover, it focuses on the images of these crossdressers, paying particular attention to the styles and poses used to shape their appearance. My main hypothesis sustains that the identity of these “other” genders was effective precisely because it understood and mimicked “correct” female or male identities that, in turn, were based on a masquerade. Even at the beginning of the twentieth century, the public persona of “proper” men and women rested on stereotypical and theatrical forms, in which preestablished poses obliterated the personality, psychology and particular ways of each human being.

## **KEYWORDS**

Crossdressing; Argentina; Buenos Aires; Gender; Identities.

### Introduction

During the nineteenth century and a great part of the twentieth century, fashion was a clear marker of gender as well as a device to discipline the body. Being dressed according to biological sex, occupation and social class was imperative for the rising bourgeoisie who saw an extreme danger in transgressing any of these norms.

These habits spread throughout the western world and became hegemonic in Argentinian cities. Thanks to wealth concentration and European-style civility, Argentine urban dwellers adopted the then-dominant patterns when it came to shaping and assessing appearance.



**Fig. 1.** Mario Zavattaro, “Those who have a lot of fun. Cheap costumes”, *Caras y Caretas*, February 12, 1910.

Dib. de Zavattaro.

Disfraces económicos

Building and maintaining sex differences through clothing was key in a period in which sex, experienced as a natural quality of human beings, served to ensure social order reproduction and to discipline those defying gender norms.<sup>1</sup> Studying fashion in a context of rigid and unequal separation between men and women and a strict “heterosexual imperative” set by cultural norms and internalized by individuals<sup>2</sup> is also examining the spaces for resistance and trickery.

Clothing gender norms were defied not only by performing artists, but also by people from the so-called “underworld”, an even, on specific occasions such as carnival, by “decent” men and women, using crossdressing as an artistic, political or even utilitarian element.

Men and women who did not comply with clothing parameters according to gender sometimes gained ephemeral, sometimes long-lasting fame. However, it is important to differentiate crossdressing as a stage performance from that which became a permanent way of life.

Understanding the different contexts of crossdressing is critical to capture its implications and significance. Using clothes that did not correspond to the “natural” gender of the wearer, which tricked the canon, gave place for performances where agency was materialized not only on a theatre stage but also outside the norms of bourgeois morality. The disruption of gender common sense (men dresses like men, women dresses like women) enabled to escape the codes of decorum and move between margins different from those set by heteronormative sexuality. Travesties and crossdressers acted not only in show business but also in environments considered marginal or criminal. They were labeled as freaks, prototypes of what might happen to people if dressing norms were defied.

The same society who felt strongly drawn to crossdressing in music and theatre performances cruelly persecuted crossdressers outside the stage in the belief that “public gender presentation” gives an account of “private sexual practices”.<sup>3</sup> The spectacular interest for crossdressers could rapidly shift to pathologizing condemnation, as, in the legal and medical narrative, this behavior was labeled perverse.

However, the uneasiness about the perversion or deviation of crossdressers on stage was scarcely reflected in the reviews. On the contrary, what abounded was the fascination exerted by the majesty of the performance to fool even the most trained eye. It was the costumes, the makeup, and the poses that tricked the audience and “made brass pass for gold”, as it was commonly said back then.

Never has been clothing a mere set of items covering the body, and even less so in the nineteenth century. Garments conveyed well-rooted meanings and values oriented to maintaining the status quo in relation to the spheres and roles assigned to men and women. This binary construction which pretended to be hegemonic did not succeed, nevertheless, in burying the great fascination exerted by those who were capable of playing with gender lines and pushing the limits to the extreme.

The opera and theater divas—such as the French actress Sarah Bernhardt (1844-1923), who made three tours in Argentina between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth—used to play *in travesti* roles, that is, assuming a male appearance and attire. For example, in 1905, at the Opera theater, Bernhardt recreated *L'Aiglon*, a verse drama by Edmond Rostand, in which she played the role of the son of Napoleon I wearing men's clothes on stage, as she had done in *Hamlet*. Her awesome versatility allowed her, being then sixty-one years old, to adapt well to the frock coat, the jabot and the boots required by the adolescent character. She claimed to prefer male roles, as they provide greater intellectual challenges. In regards to her adaptability, the reviews emphasized that her art was “polyphonic” and that her genius had no sex.<sup>4</sup>

Women crossdressing in academic drama was a phenomenon that became popular in the nineteenth century. In general, women played youthful, passionate or weak male characters, that is, those attributed with a certain ambiguity in relation to their sexual or emotional maturity.<sup>5</sup> They also gave proof of the dramatic and physical capacity of the performer, capable of overcoming the limitations of body and gender, thereby reaffirming their great professional competence. Yet, we should not disregard the erotic charge induced by wearing the attire of the “other” for these transvestite actresses.

Crossdressing allowed the spectrum of sexual identities to broaden, and body parts such as legs and buttocks, usually hidden or disguised by female costumes, to be exhibited.<sup>6</sup>



**Fig. 2.** Paul Boyer, *L'Aiglon*. Sarah Bernhardt, Paris, 1900, postcard.

As Christie Davies argues, theater—understood as the home of costumes and a space where no protagonist has a single essence but a disparate number of masks, attires and makeups—was a tolerant refuge for stigmatized people and for persons with dubious identities,<sup>7</sup> the perfect place to fulfill the clothing fantasies, whether in plays where performers donned the clothes of the “opposite” sex to act certain roles or in shows in which crossdressing was the one and only attraction.

Buenos Aires, like many other capital cities in the world, participated in the turn-of-the-century fascination for those characters who could be male and female at the same time. Crossdressing shows proliferated in theaters such as the Casino, the Scala, the San Martín and the Politeama, many times with the antecedent of having been successfully received by foreign audiences. Many articles in the press recounted the achievements of the crossdressers who were filling the theaters in Europe and the United States.

The enchantment induced by these actors and actresses who were capable of transforming into another character in just seconds thanks to a change in the tone of voice, the pose and, of course, the attire was a recurring phenomenon in the Argentinean theatre scene.

Italian Leopoldo Fregoli (1867-1934) was the most renowned transvestite performer to cross the world and arrive to the country, although not the only one. Fregoli was considered the creator of the genre, his name was a synonym for crossdressing and it was used as an adjective (Fregolian) or equivalent to describe this type of entertainment.

Between 1895 and the 1920s, Fregoli performed extensive tours across Argentina. His shows, with suggestive names such as *Chameleonic*, *Fregoloid* or *Whirlwind* seemed never to tire the audience. His overwhelming success at the box office led a critic to write with sarcasm that thanks to transformism Fregoli had “transform” himself into a millionaire.<sup>8</sup> However, as part of the extended homosexual apprehension in the period, the same sources made it clear that he was not “a ladylike type, that neither in his public nor in his intimate performance could he suggest suspicions of equivocal sex to the malicious gossip”.<sup>9</sup>

His favorite public was, apparently, the female audience. The hilarity was probably due to women feeling identified with the complex artifice on which their own gender affirmation rested. In his shows he constantly mutated from one character to another of the opposite gender, evoking the most diverse social types and geographies: A Chinese monk, a clown, a thief, the Spanish singer “La bella Freghero”, or “Lola Fuller”, the serpentine dancer. Quick costume changes were key to his performances, as well as the voice

modulations, generally displayed in musical acts that conclusively ratified the repertoire of the transformation.

Something similar would happen to his successor, the also Italian Fatima Miris (1882-1954) who visited the country in five extensive *tournées* between 1905 and the 1930s. On the first occasion, she received a “very flattering welcome” being introduced as a little “Fregolina” who emulated the prototype of crossdressing by presenting a program that included an imitation of Loïe Fuller's serpentine dance and parodies of different military types.<sup>10</sup>

Like her predecessor, Fatima Miris stood out for her amazingly quick costume changes, but above all for her vocal skills that extended from the register of a baritone to that of a soprano, as well as for her gifts of ventriloquist that allowed her to interpret dialogues between several characters simultaneously.

Fatima, who had had her hair cut like a man, defined herself as a “male born female”.<sup>11</sup> However, the reviews on crossdressing performances did not reflect such anxieties. On the contrary, the artists were described neither as effeminate men nor as manly women, and beyond their performing costumes which crossed gender boundaries, they were unquestionably heterosexual.

In the multiple studio photographs, Fatima, the crossdressing diva, posed with her eminently womanly face and mischievous smile, smoking enigmatically or with a cigarette at the corner of her mouth, combining her feminine features with the tailcoat, the waistcoat and the bow or tie around her neck, thus establishing the style parameters of the drag kings that would populate the movies over the twentieth century.



**Fig. 3.** Alberto Rabbi, *Fatima Miris*, Bologna, 1912, photography, Juan Aletta de Sylvas donation, Museo Histórico Provincial de Rosario “Dr. Julio Marc.”

Imitation gestures are elusive. Their ultimate meaning escapes us, warns Roger N. Lancaster in his attempt to approach contemporary transvestite practices from an ethnographic perspective.<sup>12</sup> That is to say, what was complex, exciting, and attractive about these transformations was that they did not achieve a uniform effect. They did not homologate the features of women and men, but rather combined them in unique ways that were specific to each individual who performed them.

The identity construction of this gender “other” (than man and woman) was effective precisely because it knew and imitated the “correct” feminine or masculine identities. These imitations or substitutes revealed that their “authentic” versions, that is, those in which genitality and gender coincided, were also, following Judith Butler, products of intentional and performative acts.<sup>13</sup> Even at the beginning of the twentieth century, seeing oneself as a man or a woman rested in stereotypical ways of dressing and behaving. The pre-patterned poses blocked the personality, the psychology, and the particular ways of each individual. The verisimilitude achieved by crossdressing performers called into question the naturalness of the process of gender affirmation.

In general, men embodying female characters accentuated a fixed and superficial image of femininity in which they emphasized, as recurring features, the narrow waist, the prominent bust, the recline of the head as a sign of modesty, and the soft and expressive positioning of the hands. It was not the modern woman who had begun to simplify her hairstyle and show straighter silhouettes, the woman imitated by crossdressers. On the contrary, the parameter was set by the pulpy matrons, with prominent necklines and voluminous hairdos; it was a kind of hyperbolized emulation of their object of inspiration. It is interesting to note how this typology, which would continue to model the practice of drag queens into the twentieth century, was already defined in these initial years.

I think that the main attraction of these shows lay in the possibility of combining feminine and masculine attributes in the same body, without one gender ending up subsuming the other. For example, in the photographs of Fregoli from 1895, the attire and body posture connoted as feminine

coexisted with a face with rough features, unmistakably masculine. Although he resorted to masks and wigs, the performer was known for not wearing makeup and showing himself in bare face. His transvestism did not seek an absolute feminine identity, but rather, he played with the disruptive effect of the opposites coexisting in the same body.



**Fig. 4.** Antoni Esplugas, *Whole body portrait of Leopoldo Fregoli characterized as a lady of high society*, Barcelona, ca. 1895, Generalitat de Catalunya. Arxiu Nacional de Catalunya, ANC-1-402-N-7132

It might not be surprising that for a society that wanted to keep clothing differences between the genders so categorically, crossdressing became a way of having fun, but also a catalyst for surviving these rigid norms through humor and entertainment. However, the consequences of transgression had a much more dangerous and disruptive potential if it was practiced outside that fictional space contained between the stage and the seats of a theater.

Dressing up as the opposite sex could have functioned as trickery, a stratagem, a disguise in order to obtain a better job, become someone else, perform a misdeed, or just go unnoticed. Or perhaps it was the other way around. The need and desire to identify with the clothes of the “opposite sex” led crossdressers to seek other ways of life, to pursue more or less decorous occupations not considered appropriate to their biological sex, and to find survival paths. Like every social practice, transvestism bears “multiple nuances” and complex intentions among which class status is not a minor component.<sup>14</sup> What happened to those women and men, generally from popular sectors, who wore in their public life clothes that were not expected for their sex? At what point did these acts of dressing and making up cease to be acceptable pantomimes to become “morbid” pantomimes?

Liminal individuals made transvestism a way of life to hide in or intervene from the margins, self-proclaiming themselves actresses or singers of variety theatre and thus adopting the performance-art characteristic implicit in crossdressing. In general, they were immigrants who acted at the edge of legality and the entertainment market. They became the subject of abundant literature, especially from the medical and legal fields but also, they were spectacularized by mass-circulation newspapers and magazines which, through criticism, also turned them visible.<sup>15</sup>

The pathologizing readings associated inadequacies of dressing habits with illness and crime. Categorizing these behaviors as perversion made up for the crisis of the “matrix of intelligibility”, in terms of Butler, that establishes an inevitable coherence between sex, desire, sexual practice and gender,<sup>16</sup> being clothing one of the most ostensible vehicles of the latter. Therefore, items such as a corset, a skirt, a blouse, a pair of pants could

convey shifting meanings, could mutate from a synecdoche for femininity or masculinity into perversion depending on who was wearing them. Over the span of time examined here, as well as for most of the twentieth century, there was not much space for nuances. It was not possible to “visualize a body outside of a heterocentric sexual representation system.”<sup>17</sup> In short, the garments came to ratify or pervert the identity given by the sexual organs under them.

Precisely, Doctor Francisco de Veyga, a federal police investigator and legal medicine teacher at the University of Buenos Aires, associated criminal types with their clothing strategies. Thus, crossdressing, vice and illegal behavior became equivalent. In a context of strong positivism, scientific publications such as the *Archives of Criminology, Legal Medicine and Psychiatry* made use of photography as a control device for the pathologized subject.

It is interesting to analyze the photos of the “sexual inverts” that appeared in the specialized publications as well as in the mass press in confrontation with theatre crossdressing and to examine carefully the clothing strategies revealed in these images. In the cases of Manón, Aída and Luis D. (alias La Bella Otero), they were portrayed in studio photographs far distant from the typical front and side view pictures of mug shots. Instead, these transvestites, who, according to the press, dressed as women in every possible occasion, surrounded by furniture and vegetation, emulated the poses and decorum also performed by bourgeois girls. Unlike the theatre transvestites, who parodied gestures and emphasized female sensuality based on features such as necklines, bare arms and visible calves, these crossdressers seek to homologate with the natural modesty and the usual postures of society ladies by having their portrait taken at the best photographic studios.

They were demure girls, who did not show too much of their bodies and sought to reaffirm their appearance as “honest women.” The hands were hidden or covered with gloves as a sign of modesty, the boas gave glamor and modernity to the outfits, and the face was mediated with the veil, a key device

for social distancing which provided an aura of mystery to the ladies of the period.



**Fig. 5.** “Sexual invert imitating the honest woman [Aída]”, *Archivos de criminología, medicina legal y psiquiatría*, January, 1902: 369.

For example, Aída posed with a dress that covered her up to the neck, shaping a feminine silhouette that, like that of any fellow lady, relied on the pressure exerted by the corset and the volume of the petticoats. The gloves, the ostensive dress tail, a subtle floral decoration in her updo hair and a lace mantilla resting on one of the chairs in the studio, reinforced the idea of a young bride, homologating the usual wedding portrait.<sup>48</sup> Other figures, such as Aurora, a 30-year-old “Paraguayan man,” “a hairdresser as a spare job,” accused of robbery and injuries, were assimilated into sensualized matrons. Aurora’s construction of gender was a complex, and “even the most basic underclothes [...] chemise, stockings, drawers, were female. Corset and petticoat, corset-cover and garters were worn as well as every other piece that made up the garment of the sex pretended to embody”.<sup>49</sup> No matter how surprising this verification was for the criminologist; we know that “real”

femininity also rested on the effectiveness of all these shaping devices, so it is not strange that the alleged impostors used them too for the same purposes.

In addition to their convincing appearance, the chronicles also emphasized the distinctive womanly traits that were manifested in these girls: the adoption of female manners and voice, the autosuggestion, the use of melodious and romantic names, and their joyful devotion to “feminine” activities such as music, flowers, sewing, and poetry.

On the other hand, the practices of women who wore outfits of men were justified by jobs that implied physical strength and virile qualities. Such had been the case of Berta Veiss, who “always wearing a male suit” had managed to work as a “coachman, a stable hand, a valet”, to the “complete satisfaction of her employers”.<sup>24</sup> Or the situation of young María López who, arriving from Spain and with the aim of dedicating herself to agriculture, “thought that by wearing a male attire, it would be easier for her to get a job and achieve a better pay.”<sup>24</sup>

It is difficult to corroborate whether María had opted for men’s clothing to find a better position or, on the contrary, had decided to carry out agricultural tasks as appropriate to her desire to cross-dress. We know that she was arrested by a police officer and taken to the police station to give a statement, to be later released because there was no reason for her arrest. Although at the beginning of the twentieth century the practice of transvestism was not legally penalized, it could be used in a discretionary way for the detention and even for the deportation of foreign men and women, before and after the formal sanction of the law in 1902.

Several women suffered arrest and imprisonment for wearing the “wrong” attire; such as a three-piece suit, a pair of boots and a scarf around the neck, basing their choice on the possibility of moving more freely in public space or in the job market. Such was the case of the Russian Lucía Sagoruicó who was arrested when she was trying to take a train to Junín. In her defense, she claimed that she resorted to wearing pants to get out of misery: Lucía was a good-looking young woman and dressing like a peon with shirt, pants and hat, which she had bought for five pesos, worked as armor to preserve her from male harassment. “Dressed as a man, she could be free”

stated an article of the time. In this regard, the same article said that in the second decade of the century, there were more than a thousand women in Buenos Aires who wore a “male suit” daily, as well as three thousand men who engaged in a robbery using female attire.<sup>22</sup>

The press approved the rectification of behavior for these “women in pants” or “women dressed as men”, while it could not help but show fascination for the transforming power of clothing. The photos portrayed them in their masculine poses and outfits but also in the female attires imposed against their will but necessary to be admitted in jail. In other words, the “right” outfit made of skirt and apron was imposed as an act of coercion and state violence.

In some cases, the simulation was total and absolute. For example, Dafne Vaccari, transvestite under the name Arturo de Aragón, had moved to Buenos Aires from her native Italy as a sailor, in line with the history of immigration and social advancement, moving through various jobs. From being a farmworker and a bricklayer, Arturo became a debt collector for the Moltedi Company, where he stood out for his capacity and honesty. His prosperity was accompanied with an improvement in his way of dressing. Apparently, crossdressing was less risky than dressing the clothes of self-perceived identity undecorously: “the work attire was replaced by that of a young man who likes to dress well; the former peon has now turned into an elegant man who enjoys the comforts of better economic status”. The story culminated in the narration of how Arturo, fallen from grace, had to accept a position in the police force to end his days wearing the suit “that corresponds to her sex.”<sup>23</sup> It is interesting to note how even in those who were not engaged in criminal activity, the crime was conveyed by resisting biological identity and by “usurping” through clothing an identity that was not their own.

The cases analyzed here prove the central power that gender parameters of clothing had in the culture of the beginning of the twentieth century, patterns that remain in force even today. Dresses and skirts, in most of the Western world, continue to be outfits that represent the feminine, surviving longer than the association between pants and masculinity. Furthermore, the protocols and uniforms of certain formal or institutional

events continue to recommend women to wear a skirt. In critical times such as the current ones, of revision and deconstruction of gender identities and assumptions, we still assume as logical that each one dresses according to their biological sex. However, the history of the first years of the century shows us that the categories of gender were not as stable as advertising, education and bourgeois morality tried to represent them.

Even in contexts of strong determination and will of control, some individuals managed to trick gender parameters by performing on the stage of a theatre or walking on the city streets. And for the case of those who did not dare to do so, the actresses, actors and crossdressers stood as attractive reservoirs of freedom.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Baldasarre, María Isabel. *Bien vestidos. Una historia visual de la moda en Buenos Aires (1870-1914)*. Buenos Aires: Ampersand, 2021.
- Butler, Judith. *El género en disputa. El feminismo y la subversión de la identidad*, translated by María Antonia Muñoz. Madrid: Paidós, 2017.
- Butler, Judith. *Cuerpos que importan. Sobre los límites materiales y discursivos del "sexo"*, translated by Alcira Bixio. Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2018.
- Davies, Christie. "Stigma, uncertain identity and skill in disguise." In *Masquerade and Identities. Essays on Gender, Sexuality and Marginality*, edited by Efrat Tseëlon, 38-53. London/New York: Taylor & Francis, 2001.
- Khoury, Camille. "Le travesti dans le théâtre du xixe siècle: une distribution à contre-genre?" *Agôn. Revue des arts de la scène*, n° 7 (July 2015): 1-10.  
<https://doi.org/10.4000/agon.3448>
- Lancaster, Roger N. "La actuación de Guto. Notas sobre el travestismo en la vida cotidiana." In *Sexo y sexualidades en América Latina*, compiled by Daniel Balderston and Donna J. Guy, 153-188. Buenos Aires: Paidós, 1998.
- Leveratto, Jean-Marc. "Le sexe en scène: l'emploi de travesti féminin dans le théâtre français du XIXe siècle." In *Le spectaculaire dans les arts de la scène*, directed by Isabelle Moindrot and Olivier Goetz, 271-79. Paris, Presses du CNRS, 2006.
- Marazzi, Livio. *Fatima Miris. Vent'anni di trasformismo per le vie del mondo*. Mirandola: Al Barnardon, 2017.
- Nye, Robert A. *Masculinity and Male Codes of Honor in Modern France*. Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993.
- Preciado, Paul B. *Manifiesto contrasexual*. Madrid: Ópera Prima, 2002.

Sosa Cordero, Osvaldo. *Historia de las variedades en Buenos Aires (1900-1925)*. Buenos Aires: Corregidor, 1978.

Ullman, Sharon R., “‘The Twentieth Century Way’: Female Impersonation and Sexual Practice in Turn-of-the-Century America”, *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5 (4), (1995): 573-600.

Vicens, María. “¿El sexo vende? Erotismo, moralidad y público femenino en La Mujer (Argentina, 1899-1902).” *Nomadías* 25, (2018): 9-32.

---

### Endnotes

1. Robert A. Nye, *Masculinity and Male Codes of Honor in Modern France* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 6.
2. Judith Butler, *El género en disputa. El feminismo y la subversión de la identidad*, trans. María Antonia Muñoz (Madrid: Paidós, 2017), 16; *Cuerpos que importan. Sobre los límites materiales y discursivos del “sexo”*, trans. Alcira Bixio (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2018), 19.
3. Sharon R. Ullman, “‘The Twentieth Century Way’: Female Impersonation and Sexual Practice in Turn-of-the- Century America”, *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5 (4), (1995): 574.
4. Roberto I. Ortiz, “Sarah Bernhardt”, *P.B.T.*, September 9, 1905, 68.
5. Camille Houry, “Le travesti dans le théâtre du xixe siècle: une distribution à contre-genre?” *Agôn. Revue des arts de la scène*, n° 7 (July 2015): 4-5.
6. Jean-Marc Leveratto, “Le sexe en scène: l’emploi de travesti féminin dans le théâtre français du XIXe siècle,” in *Le spectaculaire dans les arts de la scène*, dir. Isabelle Moindrot and Olivier Goetz (Paris, Presses du CNRS, 2006) 274.
7. Christie Davies, “Stigma, uncertain identity and skill in disguise” in *Masquerade and Identities. Essays on Gender, Sexuality and Marginality*, ed. Efrat Tseëlon (London/New York: Taylor & Francis, 2001), 44.
8. José María Cao, “Caricaturas contemporáneas por Cao”, *Caras y Caretas*, July 26, 1902.
9. Osvaldo Sosa Cordero, *Historia de las variedades en Buenos Aires (1900-1925)* (Buenos Aires: Corregidor, 1978), 119.
10. “Arte y teatro. Fátima Miris”, *La Prensa*, September 9, 11, 1905.
11. Livio Marazzi, *Fatima Miris. Vent’anni di trasformismo per le vie del mondo* (Mirandola: Al Barnardon, 2017), 56, 74.
12. Roger N. Lancaster, “La actuación de Guto. Notas sobre el travestismo en la vida cotidiana,” in *Sexo y sexualidades en América Latina*, comp. Daniel Balderston and Donna J. Guy (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 1998), 157.
13. Butler, *El género en disputa*, 28, 83-84.
14. Lancaster, “La actuación de Guto”, 162.
15. María Vicens, “¿El sexo vende? Erotismo, moralidad y público femenino en La Mujer (Argentina, 1899-1902)”, *Nomadías* 25, (2018): 19.

16. Butler, *El género en disputa*, 72-73; *Cuerpos que importan*, 19.
17. Paul B. Preciado, *Manifiesto contrasexual* (Madrid, Ópera Prima, 2002): 110.
18. Francisco de Veyga, "Invertido sexual imitando la mujer honesta", *Archivos de criminología, medicina legal y psiquiatría*, 1, n°1, January, 1902: 369.
19. Francisco de Veyga, "La inversión sexual adquirida", *Archivos de psiquiatría y criminología aplicadas a las ciencias afines*, 2, n°1, January, 1903, 195-196.
20. "Picotones", *El Mosquito*, January 28, 1878.
21. "La mujer vestida del hombre", *P.B.T.*, March 23, 1907, 81.
22. Juan José Soiza Reilly, "Mujeres con pantalones", *Fray Mocho*, March 14, 1913.
23. Aquiles Escalante, "Dafne Vaccari. La mujer-hombre", *Caras y Caretas*, July 21, 1906.

Note: *This paper develops some ideas extensively addressed in my recently published book: Bien vestidos. Una historia visual de la moda en Buenos Aires (1870-1914) (Buenos Aires, Ampersand, 2021).*