

**The Crucified Woman: a Paradox of
Prurience and Piety**

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****** Introduction******



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What do you see in this picture? A statement about the sacrificial position that women and their sexuality occupy in our society? Or, an image of most vile violence being perpetrated upon a female victim, who is shown in her terrified, wrenchingly vulnerable and powerless state, just moments before a suggested and impending rape? Or, do you just see an extremely pornographic image, straightforward in its depiction of a female participating in sadomasochism, bondage and sexual games of submission and dominance?

¹ *Tara* by Leigh Heppell. ca. 2006. http://www.exotic.co.uk/erotica/tara/tara_complete.html.

Perhaps, you see all of these things. But, do you also see a woman in *imitatio Christi*, a pure and saintly woman whose name has been immortalized in hagiographic tales, which recount how she faithfully chose to follow her Savior in his torments upon the cross? I would hazard a guess that religious purity and saintliness were not the first things to come to mind upon observing that image. Should they be?

Images of crucified women are necessarily potent; they combine two of the most intensely evocative motifs of Western culture, the image of the Crucified Christ and the image of the alluring Female Body. The result of their combination yields an extraordinarily freighted image. A picture of a crucified woman calls forth in the viewer's imagination messages of a seemingly impossible, completely contradictory variety. For example, a female saint's naked and sensually suggestive body can be utilized to express a moralizing message of sexual prohibition; on the one hand, her body is enticingly and erotically displayed to the spectator, who, on the other hand, is all the while reminded that the saint is chastely suffering in terrible agony for the cause of their shared Savior.

The complicated and confusing morass of emotions that is likely to take hold of a viewer of such images properly begs interpretation by the student of comparative religion. As the iconic tradition of Christianity unfolds, one might ask what role the erotic plays in representations of the Passion² of Christ, in the passions of those women that have been displayed as objects of piety upon the cross, and in the passions of those minds and hearts that have contemplatively viewed these images of crucified women for close to 1000 years. For, there most definitely has existed, and continues to exist, a tradition of depicting women crucified upon the cross. And, as

² The very word 'passion' provides a parallel and aptly convoluted representation of our discussion when one considers its curious family of meanings, from the religious and painful, to the loving and erotic. Notice the interesting progression in *the Oxford English Dictionary's* list of definitions for 'passion': referring to the pain and "sufferings of Jesus," as well as "the Crucifixion itself," "the sufferings of a martyr," "an overpowering feeling or emotion," "strong affection, love," "amorous impulses or desires," and finally, "sexual desire or impulses."

piously powerful as they might be, these bare-breasted Crucified Women are not without prurient potential. Indeed, the very existence of such images might seem strange, if not outright blasphemous, in light of the Catholic Church's historically considerable desire to keep women in their clothes and out of positions of power. How is it possible, then, that the Crucified Woman has been a Church-condoned figure within Western Christian iconographic tradition? How, we must wonder, did the Revered Crucified merge with the Naked Female into a single image? What forms and meanings has this merging taken through time, and how do we account for any transformations of imagery and meaning that we might detect? What, ultimately, does the image of the Crucified Woman mean in the history of Catholic religious devotion and erotic fantasy?

Certainly, I was astounded the first time that I encountered an image of a crucified female saint. In 1995 I had just finished touring the St. Vitus Cathedral in Prague, and I had gone to the gift shop to pick up a few postcards of some of my favorite paintings and sculptures from the Cathedral. There, amongst the postcard images of glorious stained glass and gilded cherubs, was a reproduction of Gabriel von Max's 'A Christian Martyr on the Cross.'³

It is a lovely painting: a sweetly beautiful and poised woman, ensconced in a flowing dress, is crucified, her cross standing in a scene of lonely,



³ *Christian Martyr on the Cross (St Julia)*. Gabriel Cornelius von Max. Germany. 1865. Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg, Russia.

rosy-lit countryside; an attractive and youthful male sits at her feet, and he is seen just in the act of reverently placing a wreath of flowers at the base of her cross. It is a sentimental and romanticized scene. But, the image was shocking to my eyes, which were utterly unaccustomed to seeing any body but Jesus Christ's upon the cross. The painting had not been in the Cathedral – I had never seen such a thing in my life and was dumbstruck that the Cathedral's gift shop would choose to sell such a bizarre and seemingly blasphemous image. My curiosity was tapped, and I bought every copy of the postcard that the shop had. When I returned home to Seattle and began to look into von Max and this strange painting, I was quite surprised to find that he had made a second copy of the painting, and that it was in the possession of the Frye Art Museum, just a few miles from my house. Thus began this curious project, and ten years later I am still struck by the power that images of crucified females convey.

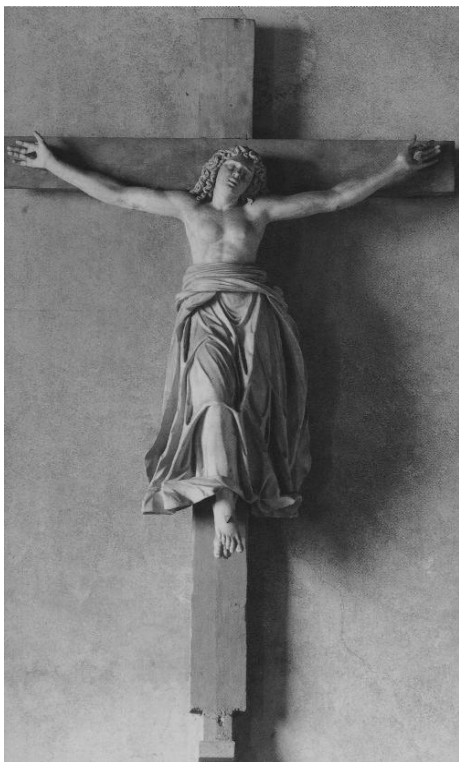
And, I am not alone in my reaction, apparently. For there exist hundreds of depictions of crucified women, from early Medieval woodcuts to *fin de siècle* paintings to current computer generated images. Depictions of crucified women are found in churches⁴, prayer cards⁵, internet pornography sites⁶, and museums.⁷ There are so many images, throughout so much history, and yet, I have been surprised to discover that there is so little scholarship on the subject. Few people, at least in the United States, seem to be aware that there is a tradition, a recurring motif of the Crucified Woman, within both piety and pornography. And interestingly enough, among images of crucified women the line between piety and pornography can be, and I would assert always has been, a suspiciously faint and slippery demarcation. And therein lies the interest of this paper.

For, I contend that there has always been latent erotic content within the images of crucified women, and that this eroticism is partly responsible for their power and the perseverance of the motif. The erotic aspect of female crucifixion is one of the many meanings

of crucifixion, meanings that have been interlayered so as to form a multifaceted and curiously compelling model of Christian piety. However, the formation of the Crucified Woman as a signifier of both piety and prurience cannot be understood separately from historical attitudes regarding crucifixion. Thus, this essay will investigate how attitudes regarding crucifixion evolved in response to the growing sway of Christianity, and how crucifixion imagery, both that depicting Christ and that depicting women, evolved along with these changing attitudes. I will trace this evolution through two eras, identifying the light in which crucifixion was beheld and using that light to examine and interpret images of the Crucified Christ and images of the Crucified Woman. The first era is that of ca. 420-1000 CE, when Christianity gains political and social power in Western Europe and the Levant, Christian symbolism and imagery developed structure, and when the first crucifixion images of an alive and stoic Christ emerge and then gradually evolve into the dead and pained Christ of the early Middle Ages. The second era is that of the High Medieval and Renaissance period of 1100-ca.1630 CE, a time of inflamed and eroticized devotional piety that absolutely adored the tortured and bloody body of Christ upon the cross, when almost all art was religious art, and during which the pictorial tradition of the Christian Crucified Woman appears to have arisen and to have established its own suite of many meanings. I will conclude this essay with a succinct survey how the Medieval motif of the Crucified Woman has been treated in more recent history - how the tradition's many meanings were preserved and passed down with consistency, as well as how the motif took on new meanings. This latter survey will touch on two distinct blossomings of Crucified Woman imagery: the modern and *fin de siècle* era of 1800-1930, and the contemporary era of 1960 to the current day.

Along this path the crucified bodies of women will visibly change with the times. So, too, will their symbolically conveyed meanings – but only to a degree. For, I think that within

Western Christian culture, this combination of the cross and the female body creates a locus of meaning so deep that some facets of this meaning have defied the aging process. For, although beauty, and so too seduction, shame, pornography and morality, are in the eye of the beholder, the Crucified Woman is so iconographically powerful as to have *continuously exuded both a sacred piety and an eroticized prurience* throughout these thousand years. It is this paradox of concurrent and yet contradictory meanings that *truly characterizes* the motific tradition of the Crucified Woman.



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Die hl. Julia, Statgen.

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⁴ *Saint Julia Crucified*. Attributed to the school of Carra, 16th c. Chiesa di Santa Giulia, Brescia, Italy.

⁵ Prayer card depicting Saint Julia. Artist unknown. Courtesy of Dr. Mabuse.



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⁶ Image taken from <http://www.crucified-women.com>. Yes, there is actually a porn site dedicated to images of crucified women.

⁷ *Julia Crucified*. Hieronymus Bosch. ca. 1500. Palazzo Ducale, Venice, Italy.