



The Image of Saint Sebastian in Art

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The history of art may be regarded differently – according to historical periods, art styles and trends as well as the creative work of individual artists. It may also be constructed according to particular images regarding the way one and the same image has been depicted by various artists in different epochs.

Iconographies of a most popular male image of the medieval and Renaissance art, Saint Sebastian, are especially interesting from this point of view.

Sebastian was a Christian saint and a great martyr. Very little is known about his life that, despite the fact that it has no historical basis, produces a truthful impression owing to the lack of any miracles in it that are abundantly present in lives of other early Christian saints. The early medieval period gave rise to a legend that he was born in the Roman town Narbonna. Having received education in Milan, he set out in the search of fortune to Rome. Due to his courage and honesty, Sebastian attracted the attention of the Roman emperor Diocletian and won his disposition. Sebastian was appointed the honourable position of the head of the first cohort of the Imperial Guard. Yet Sebastian was a secret advocate of Christianity and it was revealed when he openly supported his friends Mark and Marcellian who were sentenced to death because of their faith. Being a Roman legionary, the captain of bowmen, who had accepted Christian faith, Sebastian started converting others to his religion. For this reason, Emperor Diocletian sentenced him to death. On January 20, 354, Sebastian was tied to a tree and his own bowmen shot arrows at him until he was considered to be dead. The executioners left him lying on the ground. However, his wounds, though deep, were not mortal. According to the legend, he was healed by the widow of Castulus whose name was St. Irene. She took him to her place that was near the emperor's palace and nursed him until he recovered. Afterwards Irene advised him to run away, but he did not follow her advice and intentionally crossed the emperor's way courageously appealing for the alleviation of the fate of Christians stating that they were the most devoted of all emperor's subjects.

The emperor considered Sebastian to be dead and was scared as if being faced by an apparition. "You will have no peace," Sebastian cried, "until you stop shed-

ding innocent blood.” The emperor sentenced him to death again: he was cruelly beaten to death and his body was thrown into a water-shoot. His dead body was dragged out from there by St. Lucia who buried him by Via Apia.

In the year of 367 Pope St. Damasus erected Basilica of San Sebastiano upon his grave.

Around the year of 680, when the provinces of Pavia and Rome were exhausted by the terrible epidemic of plague, one of the town-dwellers had a vision that a chapel must be built in honour of Saint Sebastian. After building the chapel, the plague epidemic ceased and Saint Sebastian became known as the protector from plague. His veneration started in the fourth century.

The image of the Roman warrior and steady Christian that was declared a saint by the church became one of the most famous ones in Italian art as well as later, up to the present day.

What was the reason for such a great interest in the fate of Sebastian? According to one version of the research literature, Sebastian gained popularity owing to the regular epidemics of plague in Europe. At that time, this saint was venerated as the protector from the terrible disease.

Another version holds that the painters became fond of this story because of quite a different reason: it provided an opportunity to depict a nude figure without fearing that the church might consider it indecent. Renaissance artists deified the antique ideals of nudity, but were forced for a long time to respect religious limitations.

It is quite possible that Sebastian’s age was changed for the same reason. According to the legend, he was a mature man at the time of his execution. Hence, the first depictions of Saint Sebastian since Byzantine frescos of the 6–11th centuries represented him as a mature, sinewy, bearded man, fully clothed, with a martyr’s wreath in his hand (a captain of bowmen could not be a young man). Since the 13th century, St. Sebastian was gradually undressed and made younger. The Italian artists of the 15th century depicted him as a gentle, feminine young man taking after Apollo.

The iconography of this saint is rather varied. He occurs in the canonical scene of Our Lady’s exaltation (e.g. “Madonna with St. Sebastian” by Correggio, “Enthroned Madonna with Saints” by Rubens); sometimes Sebastian is depicted as supporting Mark and Marcellian in their faith when they are taken to the place of execution. He was often depicted together with St. Irene who saved his life.

However, the most widespread was the story of shooting the martyr. He is usually depicted as a naked young man tied to a tree or a column and pierced with arrows. Arrows as an element of martyrdom are the symbol of Saint Sebastian in painting. His figure usually stands against the background of a scene of Rome as viewed from Palatine Hill – the supposed place of his martyrdom.

The popularity of Saint Sebastian reached its peak in the 15th century. Almost simultaneously with Antonello da Messina, his image entered the paintings by Andrea Mantegna, Antonio Pollaiuolo, Sandro Botticelli; later it was taken up by

Titian, El Greco, Paolo Veronese, Jusepe Ribera, Anthony Van Dyke and many others. Occasionally Saint Sebastian became a real obsession, e.g. Perugino managed to produce eight paintings with Saint Sebastian as the central image.

The painters produced diverse interpretations of Saint Sebastian's story and used different means of composition. Further we will consider and compare the works by Antonello da Messina and Titian.

Both painters focus on the same story and the central event of Saint Sebastian's life, i.e. his execution. The composition by both painters reveals common features – the format of the pictures is vertical and the saint has been depicted in the foreground in full height. However, there are many more dissimilar features in both painters' works.

Firstly, the image of the saint has different characteristic traits. Sebastian by Antonello da Messina is a somewhat melancholic young man whose spirit has already broken the earthly bonds of this world. If the arrows were not visible, it could seem that the young man is just sad about something, his head slightly bent and his dreamy look directed to the sky, not paying attention to passers-by and the earthly life. Antonello da Messina has depicted the victory of life over death. Though Sebastian's body has been pierced with five arrows, he stands unshaken as a column. His image embodies the humanist ideal regarding the human as the centre of the Universe and the necessity of overcoming the fear of death. Looking at Sebastian makes one recall Pico della Mirandola's words, "We have placed you amidst the world, so that your look could get into all that is around you. We made you neither a heavenly nor earthly creature, neither mortal nor immortal, so that you would be a free sculptor of yourself and could take up any form of yourself that you selected. You may fall to the animal level but you may also rise to the stage of the divine existence" (Л а з а р е в 1972, 153). This exalted state of human spirit is reproduced in Sebastian's image by Messina. In Messina's interpretation, Sebastian is first of all a human and therefore he reflects on "the things transcendental and heavenly" (Ibid.). Sebastian seems not to feel any pain caused by his wounds. He is bearing his suffering with the serenity of a stoic wise man. There is no shade of anguish on his face. His figure is not doubled with pain, as the Gothic artists used to depict it.

Titian's Sebastian, on the contrary, is more courageous and sinewy. His spirit and body are united and the martyr is suffering like an ordinary mortal whose body is not only a shell for the soul. His figure is lighted by uneven, fluctuating light and his agonized face is turned towards the sky. We can see that the human is in unbearable pain and his living human body is made very real. The image is so expressive that the tragic state of the human is perceived even without the depiction of arrows.

The background of both paintings also differs. Antonello da Messina depicts ordinary buildings with smooth walls devoid of any decorations. Just a few oriental carpets hanging from the balustrade stand out in bright red and blue patches. Serene flatness of walls in warm colour of ivory prevails. These walls seem to be saturated with the even scattered light in tender silver shade. Light and air fill the whole

space smoothing the distinct contours and gaining more and more of lightness and transparency as the viewer's look moves deeper into the painting. This space is perceived as an almost happy one as it matches the image of Sebastian which expresses not so much the suffering of a martyr as the triumph of life over death. Antonello da Messina has constructed the space of his painting with admirable skilfulness. Its structure is so well-balanced and light that the viewer is overwhelmed by a wish to go deeper into it. Then the viewer's gaze slides over the coloured plates of the square moving from the fragment of the column in the foreground to the lying guard depicted from a brave angle, then to two warriors standing on the right, then to the figure of a woman with a child who seems to be melting in the streams of light, then to the figures of two old men behind the right arch, and finally, to the figures of passers-by visible in the distance. The space of the painting continues into the depth where several buildings with an adjacent garden are sketched surrounded by a bluish haze of the mountain. Antonello da Messina has created a joyful and light space marked by a strict balance of depiction.

In Titian's painting, the surrounding space brings out the tragic character of what is going on. Flames are rising from the burning fire throwing shadows on the naked body of the saint. Smoke is curling round his feet and slowly rising upwards. The dark clouded sky merges with the earth. Ominous shades are falling on the deserted location that is surrounded by the glow of the fire. It seems that the death of the hero brings about the moment of the tragic destruction of the world.

The painting of Antonello da Messina shows the sublime and harmony. According to him, spirit and matter exist separately. The material world in the picture is equalled to the world of objects. Physically Sebastian is a part of this world of objects, while spiritually he has already separated from it. The martyr's gaze is directed to another, ideal world where the limits of the real world exist no more. The beautiful nude figure reminds of Greek statues, owing to its great nobility and quiet strength. It reigns over the space depicted by the painter and everything that surrounds it recedes into the background, thus emphasizing the anthropocentric aspect that was held so dear by Italian humanists in their philosophical constructions.

Titian's painting reveals a limitless space, and the human is closely related to this world. Titian provides a different interpretation of the human as well. The martyr's body in Titian's perception is not just the physical body of a particular form; first of all it is a warm, trembling body of an agonized man. The painter does not analyze the structure of human body; neither does he stress its contours. Instead, wide, energetic strokes of brush are emphasized along with the contrast of the light and dark spaces thus creating a menacing atmosphere of the surrounding elements. The basic function of expressing the artistic idea in this case is performed by colour. The painterly structure of the picture is marked by the subtle beauty and versatility of its colour range. Titian has attained an amazing painterly effect. "St. Sebastian", according to one of the investigators of Titian's art, is "the richest symphony of colours, though dominated by pre-eminently dark tones" (С в я т о й).

In comparison to the serene and balanced depiction of Antonello da Messina, Titian's painting reminds of a vortex as an iridescent flow of colours.

Images of St. Sebastian are strikingly diverse. Andrea Mantegna has depicted him not as a gentle youth but as a courageous young man standing like a statue on the stone base. Another painting by Mantegna shows Sebastian's face distorted by agony. "St. Sebastian" by Sandro Botticelli is handsome and calmly thoughtful.

Despite the common origin of this image, Sebastian has been depicted very differently by diverse painters: he is made stern by Mantegna, ecstatic by Ribera, feminine by Guido Reni, expressive by El Greco. After several centuries, Salvador Dali depicted him as a hermaphrodite in his painting "Hermaphroditic St. Sebastian". This kind of interpretation has gained a special popularity nowadays. This is related to the fact that, after eradication of plague, the saint was for a long time considered a patron of soldiers and policemen but nowadays another function has been attributed to him – that of the patron of gays of Catholic faith, though the church does not officially approve of it.

Saint Sebastian is the only one in the history of Christianity who has been depicted naked. The scarce loin cloth hardly covers the male dignity of the hero. According to the expert on sexology, Igor Kon, who has dedicated a number of research works to this image, Saint Sebastian is a favourite image for gays: "There is even an opinion that this saint has been homosexual. St. Sebastian has attracted the attention of sexual minority groups and there has been evidence to this" (И з Д р е з д е н с к о й).

An impressive description of St. Sebastian occurs in Yukio Mishima's writing; another one has been produced by the personal chaplain of Queen Victoria, Charles Kingsley who never admitted his homosexual preferences: "These masculine extremities, so big and delicate, standing out against the background of the ghostly light, helplessness of the tied hands, the arrow palpitating in the pierced side, the tossed forehead, eyes with their deep-hidden exaltation of faith holding victory upon agony and shame <...> The tension of my look made my eyes almost pop out from their orbits" (Ibid.).

Saint Sebastian's arms that are tied behind his back and raised up uncovering his armpits make his body open for gaze and vulnerable. His figure is often feminized and relaxed, while the composition of the painting, e.g. by Luca Signorelli, has been constructed so that the viewer is looking at it as if from beneath.

Igor Kon also notes that "some artists often make the composition so that the viewer should regard the painting from beneath. Therefore the first thing that hits one's eye is the martyr's genitals. But they are always covered by cloth. This became an object of homoerotic imagination. Someone imagines himself as St. Sebastian, while someone else – as his torturers" (Ibid.).

The image of an arrow is also polysemous. On the one hand, arrows bring death (e.g. Apollo's arrows killed Niobe's children). On the other hand, an arrow is a phallic symbol (a sharp object penetrating the victim's body). And, finally, this is the sign of love. The expression "arrows of love" was rather widespread in the poetry and art of Renaissance.

The number of arrows is significant as well. If the number of arrows is great, as is the case in Giovanni del Biondo's work, the body does not seem so naked and tempting. Still in the majority of cases Renaissance artists depicted three or five, but Perugino – even one or two arrows. The interest of gays was aroused by the works of all artists. Yet Guido Reni's image of Saint Sebastian became the most favourite one; Yukio Mishima and Charles Kingsley also declare their love to this image. Also German homosexuals admitted their love to this Sebastian in the early 20th century. For some of them this image helped becoming aware of their sexual orientation.

Renaissance artists represented the naked and tied up masculine body not so much as the one in agony but as passive and enjoying his helplessness. This made it possible for them to objectify their own sadomasochistic feelings and desires and those of the viewers, simultaneously undermining the traditional phallic stereotype of man as subject and the master of the situation.

Up to the end of the 16th century, the depiction of the handsome masculine nudity was an end-in-itself for many artists. However, depictions of a naked masculine body that were acceptable in the art of Renaissance epoch became an object of attacks in the period of Counter-Reformation. Trident Council passed a formal ban on depicting a naked body in religious painting. The image of Saint Sebastian was especially vulnerable in this respect.

However, the image of Saint Sebastian has retained its popularity in fine arts up to the present. Besides, Saint Sebastian's image is more and more associated with homosexuality. In gay art of the 20th century this image has been made even more naked and openly sexual. The modern art demonstrates everything – total front nudity, savage tortures, and passionate embraces. Yet none of these pictures arouses so deep and also erotic feelings as does the innocent St. Sebastian with his upward directed gaze by Guido Reni.

At the beginning of the 20th century, in Germany there was a survey carried out among homosexuals and it turned out that their favourite image was that of Saint Sebastian's. Father Zbignev commented on the issue of the attitude of the church to this fact: "Artists have a right to embody in their work their own vision – this is art, isn't it? Everyone will see in this work what he or she would. Someone will see there a masterpiece of the world culture, while others will notice something totally different <...>"

This is really true that the image of Saint Sebastian has been endowed with a totally diverse meaning. He has been treated as the protector of people from plague, as a person who has miraculously escaped death, as a Christian hero and martyr, as an embodiment of spiritual beauty, as a general tempter, as well as a personification of homosexual love. According to Igor Kon, "A moralist would say that everyone understands according to his or her putridity, while a scholar of art – according to his or her artistic culture" (К о н).

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Šv. Sebastijono paveikslas mene

S a n t r a u k a

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: *šv. Sebastijonas, kariūnas, kankinys, strėlė, ikonografija, kompozicija, aktas, homoseksualas.*

Straipsnyje aptariamas šv. Sebastijono vaizdavimo meno kūrinuose fenomenas ir įvairi su jo atvaizdu susijusi ikonografija. Šv. Sebastijonas buvo romėnų legionierius, lankininkų kapitonas, skelbęs krikščionybę, kelis kartus nuteistas myriop, vėliau paskelbtas šventuoju ir garbinamas. Jis tapo viena dažniausiai vaizduojamų figūrų pasaulio, ypač italų, dailėje. Tačiau jo paveikslui dažnai būdavo suteikiamas skirtingas turinys. Šv. Sebastijonas buvo vaizduojamas kaip gynėjas nuo maro, kaip žmogus, per stebuklą išvengęs mirties, kaip krikščioniškasis herojus ir kankinys, taip pat kaip dvasinio grožio įsikūnijimas. Nė vienas iš šventųjų nebuvo pavaizduotas mene toks nuogas, todėl XX a. mene jis tapo gundytoju ir homoseksualios meilės raiška. Dėl šios priežasties homoseksualai pasirinko jį savo patronu.

Pati šv. Sebastijono istorija ir kompozicija buvo traktuojama labai įvairiai. Straipsnyje lyginama šv. Sebastijono interpretacija Tiziano, Antonello da Messinos ir Guido Reni paveiksluose.

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S u m m a r y

Keywords: *Saint Sebastian, warrior, martyr, arrows, iconography, composition, nude, gays.*

The article discusses the phenomenon of Saint Sebastian's image in art and its versatile iconography. Saint Sebastian was a Roman legionary, captain of bowmen who proclaimed

Christianity and was repeatedly sentenced to death, later sanctified and worshipped. He became one of the most favourite images of the world and especially Italian art. This image has been endowed with a rather diverse content. Saint Sebastian has been represented as a protector from plague, a person who miraculously escaped death, as a Christian hero and martyr as well as an embodiment of spiritual beauty. None of the saints has been represented in art so naked, hence in the 20th century art he has become a tempter and personification of homosexual love. For this reason gays have selected him as their patron.

The story and compositional treatment of Saint Sebastian has been as diverse. The article provides comparison of Saint Sebastian's interpretation in paintings by Titian, Antonello da Messina, and Guido Reni.

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