

Response to article of Matthew J. Milliner

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Twice I heard Leo Steinberg lecture, once on the sexuality of Christ. Each time, he spoke with great authority and passion as if addressing an august assembly or as if debating an all-powerful foe. When someone afterwards raised a small point of disagreement, Prof. Steinberg responded speaking as if to his questioner and to that unseen foe, who had to be slain. There is no doubt that in Dr. Milliner's paper he would have found a number of dragons to put to rest. I am not a dragon-slayer. Instead I offer praise for the important issues that the essay raises about Byzantine attitudes toward the physicality of Christ, nudity, and the role of religious images more generally. These matters are of greater significance than Steinberg's flawed thesis that is now thankfully fading into the past. Thus I offer this response prompted by reading Dr. Milliner's paper two days before Christmas, the feast of the incarnation.

Once for a conference in England, I was asked to write about nudity and eroticism in Byzantine art but declined because of the press of other duties. Yet the topics remain intriguing. Then there was practically nothing written on them. Now there is more, and Dr. Milliner has cited that literature, but perhaps it is useful to draw a larger context. Visually there is a fundamental difference between ancient and medieval Greek art in the depiction of the human body, as everyone who has taken or taught a survey of the history of art would agree. Statues (and presumably once paintings) of nude or semi-nude males and females were numerous in antiquity, but rare in the Middle Ages. Moreover, people saw each other with little or no clothing more often in antiquity than in the Middle Ages. By the high Middle Ages in Byzantium, there were no longer athletic contests in the nude and few circus games either. The public baths had

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long been closed, and bathing itself became a private affair that was practiced less often, certainly if one were a monk. Since many of the people walking the streets of Constantinople were clergy or monks clad in long garments, the public display of the body was reduced. Moreover, public spaces themselves had been eroded, as the ancient city of broad streets and fora gave way to something more like the urbanism of the Middle Eastern city and its suq. Others have discussed this, including Peter Brown in his chapter on John Chrysostom in *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (1988) and Giles Constable and Alexander Kazhdan in *People and Power in Byzantium* (1982).

Visually this change can be seen in a comparison of images of the baptism of Christ at the fifth-century mosaic Arian Baptistery at Ravenna (illustrated by Steinberg and Milliner) with the twelfth-century mosaic of the same subject at the Byzantine church of Daphni (which can be viewed by [clicking here](#)). Christ's genitals are displayed in the former but not the latter, but these are not equivalent monuments. Both need to be seen larger contexts. The Baptistery was adjacent to the Arian cathedral of Ravenna and thus belongs to the public culture of a late antique city; the church of Daphni was the center of a then rural monastery in which bathing was seldom practiced and surely with great modesty. The image at the summit of the dome of the Baptistery serves as a model for the baptisand below, so that to understand the nudity of Christ, one must interrogate local baptismal rituals as to the degree to which participants disrobed for the rite, as Annabel Wharton has done.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, the image at Daphni lacks these associations with its beholders, because it is part of a series of the life of Christ.

This comparison of a fifth- and twelfth-century mosaic leads to my second point, the status of the holy image. More than iconography and bathing practices changed in the interval. For religious art, the watershed event was Iconoclasm and its decisive theological formations

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about the nature of religious images in Byzantium, for it separated the image practices of late antique and early Christianity from those of the ninth and succeeding centuries. The West never went through the same doctrinal crisis over visualization of the holy, and art historians and those that work with western art often underestimate the issues involved. This does not include Dr. Milliner, whose dissertation and prior publications dealt with icons and who concludes the present article with icons of the Virgin. However, in responding to Steinberg's argument, he restates Steinberg's misassumptions about Byzantine art and may thus give the impression that there is something worth saving in Steinberg's notions of the medieval art. For Steinberg, Byzantine art is iconography, that is, imagery to be read or interpreted, as if it were a text or a sermon, much as Steinberg interprets the Renaissance images he reproduces of Jesus with exposed genitals. For such a student of iconography, the assumption is that the artist, like the preacher is free to compose images on Biblical or patristic themes and create new religious art and theologically valid statements. After Iconoclasm, such is not the case for the Byzantine painter. The text that expresses the changed visual regime is the Acts of the Seventh Ecumenical Council (787), a source that I am sure Dr. Milliner teaches as often as I:

“the making of icons is not the invention of painters, but [expresses] the approved legislation of the Catholic [i.e. universal] Church....The conception and the tradition are therefore theirs and not of the painter; for the painter's domain is limited to his art [i.e., the making or manufacture of the object], whereas the disposition manifestly pertains to the Holy Fathers...”<sup>2</sup>

Byzantine icons copy other icons, which copy other icons, which.... The chain leads back to the prototype, the holy person him or herself. The validity of that process is believed with greater conviction and certitude in that culture than any reproductive process in ours. Thus

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it is not necessary for an image of Christ to bear his penis to demonstrate his humanity. An image of icon is itself a demonstration of the Lord's human nature, equivalent to the transformation of the Eucharistic bread during the liturgy; this analogy was made during Iconoclasm. From a Byzantine point of view, Steinberg's Renaissance and its emphasis on the realistic human traits of Christ constitutes a loss of both Christ's humanity and divinity, because the images are no longer icon-like. In its place, Renaissance painting presents a beguiling, handsome, even beautiful representation of an ordinary man. The icon became art, to paraphrase the thesis of the important book by Hans Belting, *Bild und Kult: Eine Geschichte des Bildes vor dem Zeitalter der Kunst* (1990; translated as *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, 1994). For Giorgio Vasari and his late, late pupil Leo Steinberg, this transformation was a cause for celebration. In different places outside museums and often outside academia, people still pay close attention to images before and beyond the "era of art" and derive considerable benefit from them. There is theology and the word and light of God in these images. In Steinberg's day, icons were ignored by most art historians, anthropologists, and historians of religion, but no longer. Dr. Milliner's article will hopefully attract yet other audiences to this fascinating subject.

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<sup>1</sup> “Ritual and Reconstructed Meaning: The Neonian Baptistery in Ravenna,” *Art Bulletin* 69 (1987): 362-3.

<sup>2</sup> Cyril Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire 312-1453: Sources and Documents* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1972), 172.