

Response to Matthew Milliner, “The Sexuality of Christ in Byzantine Art and in Hypermodern Oblivion”

Here is a fantasy of mine (forgive my solipsism): Vasari was never born. How very different would art history’s periodization look if we didn’t have the *middle* ages, if the temporal incongruities evaporated, if we saw relations and not hierarchies. Byzantinists feel Vasari’s calumnies, even if they don’t engage in their refutation directly, but the discrete unit of art-historical teaching and research that is Byzantine is so because we have professionalized his divisions. And we very often feel very defensive about these long-established divisions in the discipline.

Matt takes on this posture in the full and right spirit of restitution—of correcting Steinberg’s misrepresentation of medieval orthodoxy and its art, and his overstating the originality and uniqueness of Renaissance Italian art. As Matt describes with real verve, he is not the first to take on the master, but it must be said that he is the first Byzantinist to perform this service, and so well and ably, on behalf of this historically miscast field. How would Matt’s argument play if he and Steinberg hadn’t had Vasari’s debt to re-pay? Why do we let Vasari pick our fights still? In any case, Matt admirably and lucidly demonstrates that Byzantines also thought of the sexual receptivity of bodies and, not less from historical traces we have, of God’s own too.

But Matt misses a great opportunity here, because Steinberg made his case on the shoulders of what he claimed was the unique achievements of the Italian Renaissance. That culture extraordinarily made a case for the special treatment of Chalcedonian theology in *art* first, foremost and only. That claim was special when it was made, since art history was (and in historical art history, still is) in the thrall of textual, namely theological, ratification of art’s meanings and workings. Much work has been done in the meanwhile to show that visual argumentation was a very nimble and persuasive means in the Middle Ages, too.

Matt’s missed opportunity, in my opinion, is to fight the battle not on Steinberg’s ground, which privileges the unique visual and material expression of those Italian artists, but on the field of textual priority.¹ In other words, Matt’s evidence for the real interest in Christ’s nudity—even if just a relative nudity, which I can imagine Steinberg finding a little weak—among Byzantines is drawn out through some very good exposition of theological thinking and expostulating on that divine nakedness (which also includes Adam and Eve).

Visual and material expression is therefore underplayed, and close and eloquent readings of images, an exciting and revelatory part of Steinberg’s book, are the lost chances to take on the master at his own game. How is St. Menas really pregnant? That example is fantastically provocative, but can the particular expression be excavated to see the ways his peculiar gravid condition works? The strengths in this argument are the lovely range of sources evoking strongly physical reactions to bodies, sex and all the metaphysical

¹ Henry Maguire is the most cited art historian here, and I take that reliance to be telling; however, *Other Bodies* was co-written by Eunice Dauterman Maguire, who deserves equal credit for that fine book.

implications. But we're dealing with a theological explanation, as if the moment of art-making that matters is the one arrived at in the head of the writer before art is made. Steinberg would only have admitted the force of an art-historical argument, I believe, if the last word belonged to things, in all their emergent, contingent, irregular, manipulative work.

To take an example where the art-making is all on the outside, as it were, showing forth: the Hermitage has a statuette of Dionysos, found in the nineteenth century, cast in the Roman period and revised in the eighth or ninth century (one might search for Byzantine Iconoclasm's great empty gesture here). The statuette is a provocative little nude, with a hipshot pose that accentuates the youthful god's lithe form, and so the revision—the addition of Psalm 29: 3 (RSV: “The voice of the Lord is upon the waters; the God of glory thunders, the Lord, upon many waters.”)—provides even further attraction in the way the inscription follows the curve of his hips and belts his nude form. Here is a re-made religious object, possibly for chrism or holy water, performing a provocative act of full disclosure. I'm not really sure how texts explain this piece, but I'm also not sure we need them to (pace upholders of the necessity of 787's Fathers).

Now, I know too well how difficult it is to demonstrate erotic content of Byzantine art, especially in examples that do not self-declare to the degree that Dionysos does. For example, I tried to argue for Byzantine erotics in a show I curated at the Menil Collection in 2013, but without my explanation—and despite some gorgeously sensual objects in the same room, like two de Kooning paintings—the erotic content didn't play very well. This recovery of erotic feeling and searching is Matt's great achievement here. I myself had to describe an icon of St. Onuphrios to visitors in terms very like Donatello's David in the Bargello to make my point: the beard of the saint curls around his thigh and calf just like Goliath's plume does David's; the shrub covering the saint's midsection sits on his hips as provocatively as a speedo. How did sex in art get activated, sublimated, accomplished in that culture? How did it serve devotion, assimilation and union with God's own body? How do we write these questions through without resisting Vasari's weight and Steinberg's brilliant myopia? Maybe no one on top, and horizontal relations instead.

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