

**Portraying Augustinian Theology:
The Influence of Saint Augustine on the Depiction of Male and Female Bodies in
Renaissance Art¹**

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The Christian West has a variety of meanings associated with nakedness in religious texts and visual images. When we look at Michelangelo's *David*, we see a nakedness that is different from the nakedness of Eve as depicted in Renaissance art. The dichotomy between male and female nakedness in the Christian West can be explained by analyzing the relationship between influential theological texts and the religious meanings of naked female and male bodies in Christian art. This paper explores the connection between the religious philosophy of the Christian theologian Augustine of Hippo and the depiction of male and female bodies in Renaissance art.

The following essay argues that Augustine's view on the Fall of Man, sexuality, and nudity directly influenced the way in which male Renaissance artists depicted Eve's naked body, as well as Christ's post-mortem body. Margaret Miles' reading of Saint Augustine in *Carnal Knowing* will be used to explore the influence of Augustine on two paintings by Hans Baldung Grien, which depict Eve's naked body.² Then, I will use Leo Steinberg's analysis of Christ's body in Renaissance art to draw a connection between Augustinian theology and the erection-resurrection motif in two works by artist Marten Van Heemskerck.

Augustine of Hippo was born in 354 and died in 430 CE in North Africa. It can be argued that Augustine's character was shaped by his parents. Augustine struggled between the conflicting impulses of his double inheritance. On the one hand, he was influenced by his non-Christian father, Patricius, who was a pagan magistrate. He was a violent and wrathful man of a passionate nature and profoundly sensual. Augustine was also influenced by his mother, Monica, who was a virtuous, Christian woman. Augustine was therefore struggling with opposing beliefs that came from his parents. His many-faceted personality would leave a mark on everything to which he turned his hand.³

Augustine's philosophy of religion had a tremendous influence on Western Christianity.⁴ His contributions to Christian theology literally revolutionized Christian belief.⁵ Medieval philosophy and theology show the unmistakable impact of Augustine. In fact, he had an effect on the essence of Christianity and of modern age.⁶ Augustine's philosophy infected the outlook of the Christian church on different subjects, whether it be the act of sex or the notion of lust.⁷ To understand the influence he had on Western tradition and thought, one must examine his two most important works: *The Confessions* and *The City of God*.

In *The Confessions*, Augustine reveals conflicts involving his own nature and the struggle to control his sexual impulses.⁸ The thirteen books of *The Confessions* are an autobiographical work in which Augustine relates his life up to the year 387. In this work, Augustine expresses his views on sexuality and lust. In fact, he is so concerned with his sexuality as a young man, that his

philosophical system is largely based in his own sexual experience as a male.⁹ In other words, his sexual experiences and his desire for women, which he admits were profane, shaped the way in which he addressed women and sexuality in his philosophy.

According to his *Confessions*, Augustine experienced lust when he was young. When he went to Carthage, he engaged in a hedonistic lifestyle and found himself in the middle of a “hissing cauldron of lust.”¹⁰ During this period, Augustine’s conflicting inheritance had an influence on him, because he prayed to God: “Give me chastity and continence, but not yet.”¹¹ Augustine, even though he enjoyed his engagement in sexual acts, knew that he must stop and, furthermore, asked God for help. His desire to avoid lust was perhaps rooted in the fact that he felt shame whenever he engaged in sexual acts.

Augustine was ashamed of his previous indulgence in lust. He writes that during his sixteenth year, “the madness of lust took rule over me, and I resigned myself to it.”¹² The way he refers to lust as “madness,” is an indicator of Augustine’s shame. Furthermore, when Augustine refers to his lustful sins, he calls them “abominable things.”¹³ The choice of the word *abominable* indicates that such acts caused moral revulsion in Augustine. He became ashamed of his sexual deeds when he converted to Christianity. Augustine, being a man given to extremes, went from being a hedonist to being the perfect Christian figure. In doing so, he rejected and condemned everything he had done before, including all the sexual relations in which he had engaged.¹⁴ In other words, when Augustine converted to Christianity, an enormous sense of guilt entered his life and, consequently, the entire edifice of Christian belief.¹⁵ He was therefore ashamed of having engaged in acts of lust, and such shame was a product of the connection he drew between lust and sin.

Augustine considered lust to be the cause of sin. When he addresses love and lust, Augustine writes that they swept him away over the precipice of his body’s desires, thereby pushing him into a state of sin.¹⁶ In other words, Augustine blames lust for the evil and unfaithful acts that he committed during his youth. Augustine’s *Confessions* provides the reader with some insights about his view on lust. Augustine’s perception of sexual activity was influenced by his family and his experiences as a male. However, in order to fully understand the connection between lust and sin, it is necessary to look at a later work of Augustine—*The City of God*.

The City of God, written in the fifth century CE, is Augustine’s major work on human sexuality and sin. *The City of God* profoundly shaped Western civilization and had a great impact on the philosophy of religion and on Christian doctrine.¹⁷ One of the most important parts of *The City of God* is Augustine’s account and interpretation of the story of Adam and Eve, where he provides an explanation of sexuality before and after the Fall of Man. Beginning with reproduction before the Fall, Augustine then embarks on his discussion of Original Sin, which he associates with lust. Thereafter, he philosophizes on the condition of men and women after the Fall and attempts to find an explanation of why Adam and Eve sinned.

Reproduction before the Fall did not require lust. Augustine insists that, before the Fall, the act of reproduction would have been passionless. He compares the act of begetting, before

the Fall, to a farmer's sowing of a seed, or even a handshake.¹⁸ In other words, the prelapsarian act of procreation was passive and was not driven by any sexual desire. Augustine did not deny the existence of sex in paradise, but he argued that such an act would not have been accompanied by lust.¹⁹ Procreation without lust was not only the norm in paradise before the Fall—it was idealized. For Augustine, the ideal husband would be a man of wisdom and faith who would prefer to procreate without lust and the sickness of desire. He would be able to possess his wife in such a way that the disease of desire was absent from the act of procreation.²⁰ However, one question arises; how would man be able to engage in sexual activity without lust?

Adam, before the Fall, was able to control his *Phallus* and thus was able to procreate without feeling lust.²¹ The prelapsarian organs responsible for procreation would commence their activity at the bidding of the will, instead of being moved by the agitation and excitement of lust. Therefore, if Adam was able to procreate without feeling lust—that is, being able to control his own erection—it meant that he was in total control of his body. In other words, Adam's *phallus*, like any other member of his body, would be a servant of his will, even in the act of procreation.²² Adam and Eve were not aware of the blessing they enjoyed when their members did not know how to rebel against their will.²³ After the Fall, when Adam and Eve realized that they had no control over their sexual organs, they felt ashamed of their naked bodies.

Before the Fall, nakedness was not shameful. In the biblical account, it is written that Adam and Eve were both naked, but they were not ashamed.²⁴ They were aware of their nakedness, but they were not ashamed of it because nakedness was not yet disgraceful or shameful. Prelapsarian nakedness was nothing to be ashamed of because, as Augustine had shown, lust did not yet arouse the sexual organs independently of the humans' decision. The human body did not yet testify the disobedience of Adam and Eve by a disobedience of its own.²⁵ Therefore, Adam and Eve became ashamed of their nakedness once they lost control over the arousal of their sexual organs. In other words, they were ashamed because their nakedness represented lust and was a proof of their disobedience.²⁶

Lust is a consequence of the Fall. It is important to note that in the Genesis story, the fallen sexuality, which is a sexuality based on lust and desire, is introduced in the human condition after the Fall.²⁷ The corruption of the body is the punishment for the first sin. It was not the corruptible, lustful flesh that made the soul sinful, but the sinful soul that made the flesh corruptible.²⁸ Therefore, it was implied that the human soul was corrupted before the Fall. The consequence of the first sin was that Adam and Eve were embarrassed by the insubordination of their sexual organs, which was evidence of their own disobedience.²⁹ However, lust, besides being a consequence of the Fall, was also a cause.

Adam sinned because of his love for Eve. Augustine, discussing the nature of Original Sin, asked how Adam, a spiritual man, could have fallen for the words of the serpent. To provide an answer, he turned his attention to Eve. According to Augustine, Adam did not want to make Eve unhappy. Augustine suggested that Adam sinned not because he had any fault, but because of his love towards Eve. Such an excessive love was the primary motivation for Adam's sin. He

would not have been able to believe the words of the serpent. Therefore, Eve was employed by the serpent to bring evil into the world.³⁰

Eve's bodily weakness explained why she was used to tempt Adam. Eve was portrayed as intellectually inferior to Adam, her male counterpart.³¹ Augustine understood that Eve, as opposed to Adam, had a limited understanding and, perhaps, that she lived according to the spirit of the flesh, and not the spirit of the mind.³² Eve's inferiority was explained by her different body. It was Eve's different body that pulled her away from eternal concerns such as God, salvation, and righteousness, and led her into temporal cares—in this case, lust. Such bodily weakness made Eve an easy victim for the serpent. Such an account, held by later interpreters of Augustine, explained why Eve sinned before Adam.³³ Augustine's account of the Genesis story was quite influential in Western societies, especially in art.

Art, especially paintings, played an important role in propagating Augustine's message. Before the printing press, Augustine's interpretation of the story of Adam and Eve circulated widely in sermons, devotional texts, and, most importantly, paintings.³⁴ No society in the Christian West underestimated the power and influence of religious images. They were central in "training religious sensibilities, educating values, and formulating and expressing common interests."³⁵ Religious female figures, like Eve, represented Augustine's view of the story of Genesis—the fall of humans into sin and sexual lust.

The German artist Hans Baldung Grien (c.1484 - 1545) managed to draw the connection between Eve's nakedness and the Fall of Man.³⁶ In his work, he developed a heightened awareness of the theology of the Fall, which is similar to Augustine's account of Genesis. Both theologies make a connection between Eve's body, lust, and sin.³⁷ An analysis of two of Baldung's works where Adam and Eve are the main subject will facilitate an understanding of the relationship between the Augustinian view of nakedness and the depiction of the female body in Renaissance art.

Baldung draws an explicit connection between lust and sin in *The Fall* [fig. 1]. Eve's body is fully naked, facing the viewer, whereas Adam's body is partially hidden behind Eve's. Adam presents Eve's left breast to the viewer. In this case, the breast symbolizes Eve's seductive power over Adam.³⁸ Also, Adam's offering of Eve's breast parallels Eve's offering of the fruit.³⁹ Therefore, the connection between sin and lust in this work is the analogy between Eve's breast and the forbidden fruit. Furthermore, Adam, under the influence of Eve, is simultaneously grasping an apple from the tree. Baldung draws a link between Eve's nakedness and its influence on Adam's actions. Therefore, the connection between Eve's breast and the fruit, and between Eve's nakedness and Adam's sin, reiterates the Augustinian version of the Fall—Eve, through her naked body, is responsible for Adam's sin.

Baldung's *Eve, the Serpent, and Death* depicts the connection between Eve's nakedness and Adam's sin. Like in *The Fall*, 1511, Eve's naked body is exposed and presented to the viewer. Although it seems like Adam is not present in the painting, he has not been left out.

Adam has become the corpse standing behind the tree, which, in this case, represents death.⁴⁰ In this painting, like in *The Fall*, 1511, Adam is grabbing a fruit from the tree, while holding on to Eve. Adam's grasp on Eve and the apple symbolizes the connection between his sin and her naked body. Furthermore, the eye of the viewer is drawn to the centre of the painting, where the knot formed by Eve, Adam, and the serpent, represents the story of the Fall. First, Eve interacts with the serpent or, in other words, engages in sin. Afterwards, Adam, by engaging with Eve and accepting the fruit, engages in sin too. Finally, as a punishment, the serpent bites Adam.⁴¹ Eve's naked body initiates the sequence, just as it initiated the events that led to the Fall of Man, by which Adam became a walking corpse.⁴² In Baldung's depictions, like in Augustinian philosophy, lust is not only a consequence of the Fall. On the contrary, it is one of the causes of the Fall of Man. Depictions of Augustinian theology, however, also included representations of the male body.

During the Renaissance, a few artists started representing the post-mortem body of Jesus with a phallic erection. However, such representation was not sacrilegious. On the contrary, what these Renaissance painters depicted was implicit in standard Augustinian theology.⁴³ The erection motif was associated with Christ's resurrection. One of the main controversies associated with this subject is whether it is possible to reconcile the erection motif with Augustine's account of male sexuality in *The City of God*. For Augustine, the erection is a symbol of the fallen human nature, which contrasts with the argument for the erection motif. However, the theological justification for associating the phallic erection with Jesus' resurrection is found in Augustine's *The City of God*.

The erection motif is present in paintings about Jesus' resurrection. The Dutch painter Maerten Van Heemskerck (1498-1574) created two works that depicted Jesus' phallic erection. Both are named *Man of Sorrows*. The first one was painted in 1532 and the second one in 1550 [fig. 2]. In both paintings, the loincloth "appears to reveal more effectively than conceal a huge erection."⁴⁴ These two paintings combine the iconic theme of the man of sorrows with resurrectional symbolism. In fact, the erection motif is so integral to the resurrection that Heemskerck must have thought it essential to the urgency of the message—the undoing of death.⁴⁵ Although the erection motif is present in the paintings, the question 'how does the erection motif relate to Augustinian theology?' has not been answered yet.

It is important to remember Augustine's view on the disobedience of the *phallus* to understand the connection with Heemskerck's *Man of Sorrows*. Before the Fall, the *Phallus* was not stimulated by sin, but actuated by volition. Furthermore, not even lust could move the penis without man's consent.⁴⁶ In other words, man, in this case Adam, was in control of his *phallus*. For Augustine, the penis became ungovernable after the Fall. Augustine points out that the penis now moves unbidden, and sometimes, when bidden, refuses to obey.⁴⁷ However, Augustinian theology applies, in this case, to Adam. The connection with Christ's post-mortem erection is more subtle.

Christ's erection represents the absence of sin. In Christianity, the resurrected Christ "assumed a body like the flesh of sin, but without the sin."⁴⁸ In other words, the body of the resurrected Jesus is like that of Adam before the Fall. Since the mark of sin in man is the involuntariness of the erection, Heemskerck attributed the resurrected Christ with an alternative: a voluntary erection.⁴⁹ Therefore, Heemskerck, by attributing the resurrected Christ a voluntary erection, shows that the postmortem Christ is free from sin. In other words, Christ possesses a prelapsarian body, like that of Adam, the first man. However, how can the viewer distinguish between a voluntary and involuntary erection?

When the resurrected Christ is depicted with an erection, it cannot be other than willed. The resurrected Christ is in control of his spirit and soul. For Christ, no will of the body wars against the will of the mind. In other words, bodily needs such as lust have no effect on the resurrected Christ.⁵⁰ Therefore, anything that Christ's body does or incurs is entirely intended. That is to say, whenever Christ's postmortem body is shown as having a phallic erection, such movement should be understood as volitional.⁵¹ Once the volition of the erection is understood, it follows that the erection motif is influenced by Augustine's ideas.

The erection motif in Heemskerck's *Man of Sorrows* is connected to Augustinian philosophy. Augustine's view on involuntary erection is relevant to Heemskerck's vision, but by inversion. What had been altered by Original Sin is returned to its normal state. For example, the penis, which became disobedient through Original Sin, is returned to volition. Furthermore, the absence of involuntary erection represents the lack of lust. Through Christ's erection, humanity goes back to a state of innocence and purity. The erection motif is the painter's way of explaining how Paradise may be regained through the body of Christ.

Augustine's understanding of the Genesis story and his views on sexuality, lust, and women shaped the way in which male and female bodies were portrayed in Renaissance art. An understanding of Augustine's religious philosophy, including his view on sin, sexuality, and women, is critical to an understanding of the religious meaning of female nakedness in Renaissance art and Christ's erection-salvation motif. Augustine's familial background and his experiences as a young man shaped his view on women and lust. On his account of the Genesis story, according to Miles, Augustine blamed lust and women for the Fall of Man into sin. Also, he argues that after the Fall, man had no control over his *phallus* and thus, involuntary erections were a sign of Original Sin. Augustine's ideas influenced the depiction of Eve's naked body, as exemplified in Hans Baldung Grien's works. Women's naked body was depicted as the gateway by which sin entered this world. Lastly, Augustine's theology influenced the depiction of Christ's postmortem phallic erection as representing an absence of sin and a return to a prelapsarian condition. Although Augustine died in 430 CE, his view on gender, lust, and sin, influenced the way in which the Christian West perceived the human body from the Middle Ages through the Renaissance, effectively demonstrating once more the importance which Augustine held as a figure in Christian theology and Western civilization.

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Figures

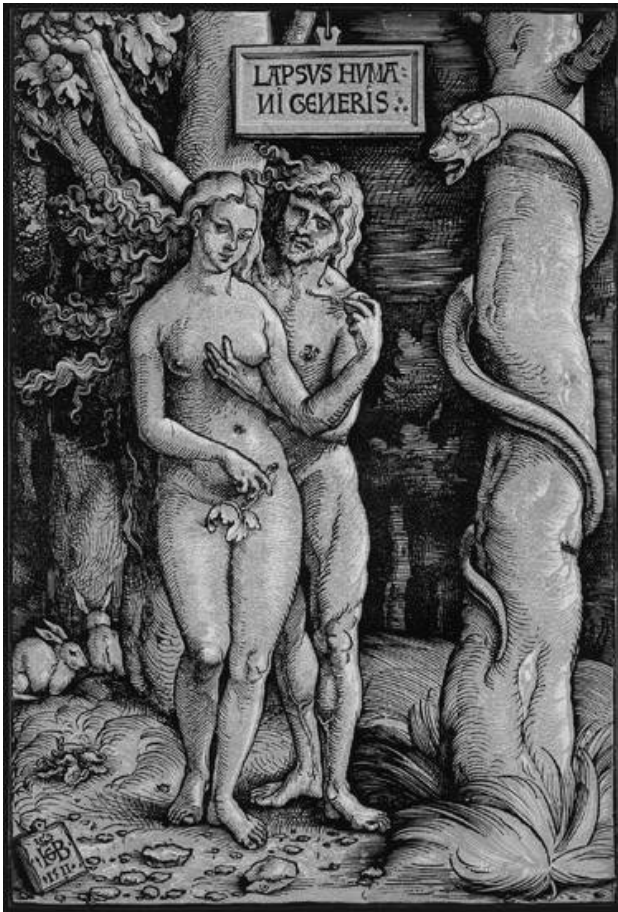


Figure 1: Hans Baldung Grien, *The Fall*, 1511. Woodcut. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (Source www.artmuseumjournal.com/hans_baldung_grien.aspx)



Figure 2: Marten Van Heemskerck, *Man of Sorrows* (Source: Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 388.

Endnotes

- ¹ This paper was originally written for the Liberal Arts Integrating Activity and Seminar at John Abbott College. Thank you, Peter Solonysznyj, Irini Tsakiri, Maria Mamfredis, and Carly Daniel-Hughes for your feedback on earlier versions of this paper.
- ² In other words, I will base my analysis of Augustine's theology on Miles's reading of his texts. It is possible that different readings of Augustine will provide a different understanding of his views on human sexuality. However, it is possible that Miles's interpretation of Augustinian theology in her book is based on how later Christians interpreted Augustine's work.
- ³ Julian Marias, *History of Philosophy*, (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1967), 113.
- ⁴ Kristen E. Kwan, Linda S. Schearing, and Valerie H. Ziegler, *Eve and Adam: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Readings on Genesis and Gender*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 147.
- ⁵ Donald L. Boisvert, *Sanctity and Male Desire: A Gay Reading of Saints*, (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2004), 81.
- ⁶ Marias, *Op. Cit.*, 113.
- ⁷ Boisvert, *Op. Cit.*, 82.
- ⁸ Elaine Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent*, (New York: Random House, 1988), 99.
- ⁹ Christopher T. Graham, "Desire and Delight: A New Reading of Augustine's Confessions by Margaret R. Miles" in *Journal of Religion and Health* 32, no. 3 (1993): 227.

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- ¹⁰ Augustine, *The Confessions of a Sinner*, 3:1. R. S. Pine-Coffin, trans., (London: Penguin Books, 2004).
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 8:7.
- ¹² Augustine, "The Confessions," 2:4 in *Great Books of the Western World, Volume 18*, edited by Robert Maynard Hutchins, 1-128. (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica Inc., 1952).
- ¹³ Augustine, *The Confessions of a Sinner*, 2:1.
- ¹⁴ Boisvert, *Op. Cit.*, 91.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 83.
- ¹⁶ Augustine, *The Confessions of a Sinner*, 2:2.
- ¹⁷ Marias, *Op. Cit.*, 115.
- ¹⁸ Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 320.
- ¹⁹ Margaret R. Miles, *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and its Religious Meaning in the Christian West*, (New York: Random House, 1991), 94.
- ²⁰ Augustine, *The City of God*, XIV:16, (Toronto: Penguin Books Canada Ltd., 1984).
- ²¹ Since female sexual arousal is not visibly apparent, his model is clearly male sexual arousal. See Miles, *Op. Cit.*, 116.
- ²² Augustine, *City of God*, XIV:16.
- ²³ Augustine, *The City of God*, XIV:17.
- ²⁴ Genesis 3:25 in Michael D. Coogan, ed., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).
- ²⁵ Augustine, *The City of God*, XIV:17.
- ²⁶ It is commonly believed that Adam and Eve became ashamed of their nakedness when they ate of the fruit because "the eyes of both were opened, and they knew they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves." (Genesis 3:7). However, Augustine argues that Adam and Eve were not created blind, since Adam saw the animals to which he gave names (Genesis 2:20), while Eve saw that the tree was good for food and pleasant to the eyes to look at. (Genesis 3:6). Therefore, their eyes were opened, not to enable them to see what they already could see, but to enable them to distinguish the good which they had lost (control of their sexual organs) and the evil in which they had fallen (lust and involuntary erections). See Augustine, *The City of God*, XIV:17.
- ²⁷ This is an interpretation of the Genesis story. See Miles, *Op. Cit.*, 135.
- ²⁸ Augustine, *The City of God*, XIV:3.
- ²⁹ In Genesis 2:16-17, God said to Adam and Eve "you may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die." The Original Sin was not having engaged in lustful procreation. In fact, the first sin is disobedience to God. Hence the insubordination of the *phallus* as punishment: that which caused the Fall of Man will be their punishment.
- ³⁰ Miles, *Op. Cit.*, 97.
- ³¹ Wioleta Polinska, "Dangerous Bodies: Women's Nakedness and Theology" in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 16, no. 1 (2000): 48.
- ³² Miles, *Op. Cit.*, 97.
- ³³ Polinska, *Op. Cit.*, 48.
- ³⁴ Miles, *Op. Cit.*, 117.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 119.
- ³⁶ Polinska, *Op. Cit.*, 50.
- ³⁷ Miles, *Op. Cit.*, 127.
- ³⁸ Polinska, *Op. Cit.*, 50.
- ³⁹ Miles, *Op. Cit.*, 129.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, 133.
- ⁴³ Steinberg, *Op. Cit.*, 298.
- ⁴⁴ Steinberg, *Op. Cit.*, 310.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 316.
- ⁴⁶ Augustine, *The City of God*, XIV:24 cited in Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ*, 320.
- ⁴⁷ Augustine, *The City of God*, XIV:16 cited in Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ*, 318.
- ⁴⁸ Steinberg, *Op. Cit.*, 323.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁰ In order to dissociate the volitional phallic erection from any hint of sexual lust, the erection motif is assigned to Christ in his babyhood or in his postmortem body. See Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ*, 324.
- ⁵¹ Steinberg, *Op. Cit.*, 323-324.