

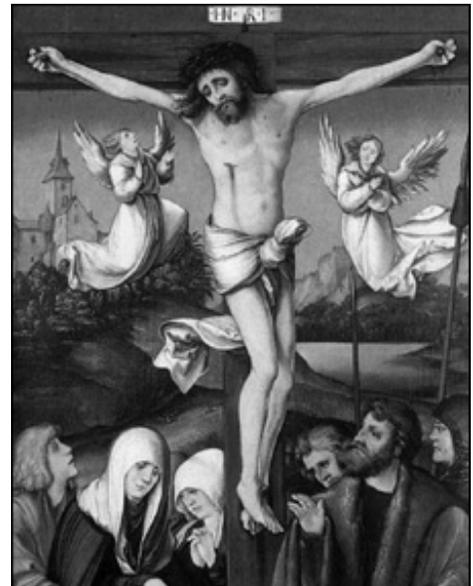
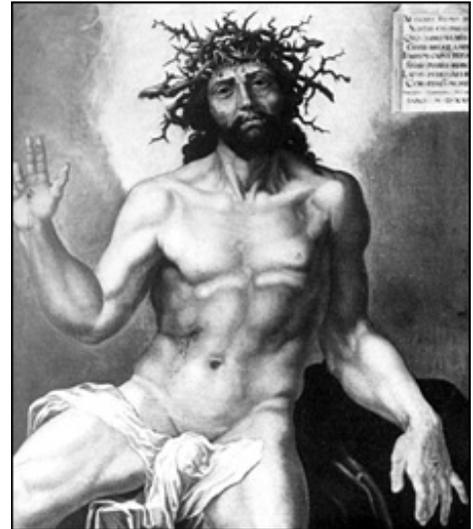
## Features | Our Jesus, ourselves

### NEWS & FEATURES

Mel Gibson did a fine job of capturing modernity's hatred of human flesh. Imagine what our world would be like if Jesus were depicted in a state of arousal during the Passion.

BY MICHAEL BRONSKI

JESUS CHRIST! Unlike Mel Gibson's bloody exercise in body demolition in *The Passion of the Christ*, these paintings from the 16th century - Maerten van Heemskerck's *Man of Sorrows*, from 1550, above, and Hans Schäufelein's *Crucifixion*, from 1515, were a celebration of Jesus' humanness.





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AMID THE REAMS of copy devoted to Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, little to nothing has been said about what's really at the heart of the controversy over the film: who has the right, and the moral authority, to portray Jesus? Over the centuries, Jesus has been presented by different cultures in radically different ways. Images of him have spanned race, body type, hair color, visage, affect, and — thanks to Edwina Sandys's crucified, bare-breasted Jesus, created in 1975 to commemorate the United Nations' Decade of the Woman — gender. In the United States alone, as Stephen Prothero notes in his excellent new study *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), Jesus has been "black and white, male and female, straight and gay, a socialist and a capitalist, a pacifist and a warrior, a Ku Klux Klansman and a civil rights agitator." And then, of course, there is Gibson's portrayal of Jesus, neatly summarized by Andrew Sullivan as "largely a piece of soul-deadening pornographic sadism."

The one constant through the ages — as blasphemous as it may sound to some — is that Jesus is always sexy. Could you even imagine a paunchy, balding Jesus with bad teeth? Jesus has, as novelist Elinor Glyn proclaimed of silent-movie star Clara Bow, "It." Whether it be Albrecht Dürer's intense, manly Jesus in the 1512 engraving *Christ Before Pilate*, or the mass-produced images — commonplace since the 19th century — of Jesus as the smiling, gentle Good Shepherd, the man has sex appeal. It has always been true of Hollywood's portrayal of Jesus — think of comely Jeffrey Hunter in 1961's *King of Kings* looking like a cross between teen heartthrob Tab Hunter and a slightly stoned angel from a fresco by Fra Angelico. In ABC's scripture-of-the-week television movie *Judas* this past Monday, Jonathan Scarfe's portrayal of Jesus is so cute and flirty with his come-on smile and hugs for everyone that it's almost embarrassing. And it's certainly true of James Caviezel, the star of Gibson's film, who, even while being tortured, is over-the-top gorgeous.

That there have been such myriad representations of Jesus doesn't mean he was a religious chameleon. Rather, Jesus is *tabula rasa*, a blank slate upon which cultures build the images of him it most wants or needs. Expressing a sentiment often ascribed to Jesus, Paul declares in 1 Corinthians 9:22: "I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some."

SO WHAT DOES it mean that Gibson's portrayal of an utterly victimized, brutalized Jesus has so much appeal today? The decision to dwell (single-mindedly, some critics would argue) on the Passion of Jesus is certainly valid aesthetically. There are precedents for such portrayals throughout Western art, although it could also be argued that contemplating a physically realistic 13th-century crucifix of the wounded Christ is quite different from watching 90 minutes of unrelieved physical torture in a dark movie theater. Nevertheless, Gibson's violent portrayal of Jesus' suffering has struck a chord. To date, moviegoers have dropped \$212 million in just two weeks to see Gibson's Jesus. It certainly says much about the times that — despite the broad panoply of accumulated Jesus iconography at our disposal — Gibson's savage imagery is so popular.

Many critics have pointed out that the violence in *The Passion* is really no different from that permeating many of Gibson's other films, such as *Lethal Weapon* and *Braveheart*. But to see *The Passion* simply as a toga-and-loincloth version of *Braveheart* misses the point. The audiences flocking to *The Passion* are interested in the theology of the film, which lies just below its surface. Beneath the familiar story of the death of Jesus, Gibson's deeply felt conviction is that the human body — in this case, Jesus' — is meant to be destroyed, because it isn't important. The body is *intrinsically* inconsequential.

It's no surprise that such a message resonates with so many people. We live in a culture that is deeply conflicted about the human body and sexuality. It is obsessed with beauty, sex, and body image, while simultaneously proclaiming that these concerns are irrelevant to our spiritual lives. Commercialized sexuality is at the heart of popular culture, and yet there is a nearly overwhelming prohibition on speaking frankly and honestly about sexuality. Why is it that every major television

network will air smarmy, smirky advertisements for Viagra, but consistently refuse to sell airtime for condom ads? The hysterical reaction over Janet Jackson's "costume reveal" (which pushed the Super Bowl entertainment envelope about a millimeter of an inch) was so great that people actually made a federal case out of it. The same media culture that promotes Britney Spears among preteens bemoans the effect she may have on them. No wonder Gibson's conviction — that if the spiritual life is to triumph, the body must be destroyed — is so popular. Whatever one thinks of Gibson's art, politics, or religious beliefs, you have to give him this: he has tapped into a powerful theme in popular consciousness. His Jesus is obviously the one many in our culture want and need.

THERE IS, HOWEVER, a long-lost body of work that casts the image of Jesus in a much different light — one that's far more relevant for our time. Speaking to us more eloquently than Gibson's blood, nails, and cat-o'-nine tails are the paintings by 16th-century Dutch and German artists that show the crucified or suffering Jesus with an erection. The most noted and sexually explicit of these are Maerten van Heemskerck's series *Man of Sorrows* (16th-century shorthand for the image of the suffering Jesus) from 1525 to 1550; Marcus Gheeraerts's *Christ As Victor over Life and Death* from 1560, and Ludwig Krug's woodcut *Man of Sorrows* from 1520. Each of these features an aroused Jesus in the throes of his Passion. In their time, these paintings were fully accepted as religious art and understood to be theologically appropriate. By the 19th century, however, they had become artistic and religious embarrassments. It was only in 1983, with the publication of Leo Steinberg's superb *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion* (University of Chicago Press), that they resurfaced.

Looking at these paintings and woodcuts today, it is impossible not to be shocked. There is little doubt that the images are erotic. Although Jesus' genitals are always covered with a cloth, there is no question that his penis is erect and that the artist intends to portray a sexual image. In other paintings and statues of the day, Jesus' genitals are indicated by extravagantly folded cloth coverings; in still others, his hands or fingers are pointing to, even manipulating, his genitals.

These paintings of the suffering Jesus capture the multiple meanings of the word "passion." As startling as these images may be to our modern sensibilities — more shocking, certainly, than anything found in Gibson's *Passion* — they made complete sense at the time of their creation. As opposed to Gibson's bloody exercise in body demolition, these works of art celebrated Jesus' humanness. In theological terms, this is called the mystery of the Incarnation. How better to demonstrate Jesus' manhood than by ostentatiously displaying his, well, manhood. But these paintings also spoke to a larger matter — one too often overlooked today, so enmeshed are we in commercialized sexuality and cultural prudery. These paintings tell us that sexuality is sacred and holy. By rendering Jesus as a man who was born without shame (*i.e.*, original sin) and who publicly exhibited sexual arousal, the artists were celebrating all human sexuality. Now, here's the message: there is nothing shameful about sex — look, even Jesus can be aroused.

That 16th-century artists use the imagery of sexual excitement to depict Jesus' humanity, while the dominant 20th-century image of Jesus is one of pain and suffering, shows how far we have come from understanding what it means to be human. While it could never be argued that 16th-century Europe was a paragon of sexual liberation — sodomites were burned at the stake, and women were sexual chattel — these paintings reveal ideas about sexuality that are more advanced, in some ways, than the ones we embrace now. Too often today, sex and the body are ultimately viewed as shameful and in need of regulation. We see this in nearly all aspects of an increasingly repressive culture — in more censorship (see "Indecent Proposal," in this section), in attacks on sex education in schools, in lack of funding for HIV/AIDS-prevention programs. But nowhere is this modern repressiveness better seen than in the battle against same-sex marriage. No one believes that denying same-sex couples the right to marry is going to stop them from having sex, or living together in happy relationships. What same-sex-marriage opponents do believe is that this is the last symbolic stand they can take against the social acceptance of homosexuality — one of the last bastions of regulated sexuality.

THINK OF HOW different our lives would be if these 16th-century images were accepted as part of our contemporary religious and secular life. Imagine if they were hanging in churches and cathedrals and reproduced in prayer books as simply one more aspect of a devout Christian's spiritual life. Would we have the same sort of culture of sexual shame? Would children — having been brought up with images of a sexualized Jesus in a religious context — believe that sex was a "dirty" impediment to spiritual life? Would we have the same negative attitudes toward nudity and sexual desire that we

have now? And when young Christian women and men ask themselves, "What would Jesus do?", would their answers differ from those of today?

While every culture gets the images of Jesus it needs and wants, it's probably also true that every culture gets the images of Jesus it deserves. As aspects of our religious and political culture grow increasingly more conservative, it is no surprise that Mel Gibson's traditional image of a body-hating Jesus will find eager audiences. That is why it is so vital to remember that Gibson — and other religious conservatives — do not have a monopoly on how to define, portray, or interpret Jesus. One of the clear messages of the van Heemskerck and Gheeraerts paintings is that there are a multitude of Christian religious experiences, beliefs, and imaginations, and that some are more true to the full measure of human experience.

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