The androgyny of Christ

H. Valdes-Socin¹ · M. Vuidar²

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The androgyne (from the Greek andros, “man”, and gune, “woman”) is a creature that is half male and female. The Bible states: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him. Male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27). According to the Genesis, the first man created was androgynous, so Adam gave birth to Eve.

The Museum of Notre-Dame à la Rose, in Belgium, has among its collections an astonishing and unique work of its kind. The painting, from the end of the sixteenth century, represents “the Lamentation around the remains of Christ”. The work, probably commissioned by Augustinian nuns, was restored during the twenty-first century. Unexpectedly, restoration discovered an androgynous Christ, occulted under a layer of paint on the upper torso [1]. Indeed, we observe (Fig. 1) some additional female characteristics of Christ, such as breasts, and feminine curves. Jesus finger, delicately placed on his nipple, further reinforces the symbolism of divine spiritual breastfeeding.

Modern endocrinology firmly established during the twentieth century that a single man can produce both androgens (“the male principle”) but also, to a lesser extent, oestrogens (“the female principle”) [2]. However, this painting should be rather being understood as a changing metaphor for the times in which it was painted. By giving Christ both male and female characteristics, the artist shifts the traditional image of the crucified Saviour into a universal symbol of all suffering humanity.

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflicts of interest The author states that there is no conflict of interest.

✉ H. Valdes-Socin
hg.valdessocin@chuliege.be

¹ Endocrinology Service, Centre Hospitalier Universitaire, Liège, Belgium

² Museum of Notre-Dame à la Rose Hospital, Lessines, Belgium

Fig. 1 Oil on wood (103 cm×73.5 cm). “The Lamentation around the remains of Christ”. Anonymous painter, probably painted at the end of XVI century. Museum of Notre-Dame à la Rose Hospital, Lessines, Belgium. (reproduced with the permission of the Museum Authorities)

Ethical approval This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any author of the study.

Informed consent For this type of study, formal consent is not required.

Reference

1. Rolf Quaghebeur (1999). [Idiosyncratic Christ representations. An exploratory study of the maternity theme in mystical visual language from the second half of the middle Age]. Thesis of history of Art, supervised by Prof. Dr. Bert Cardon. Leuven
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