

DIGITAL AGNES

Agnes Etherington Art Centre at Queen's University
agnes.queensu.ca

The Unnamed Genderfluid Figure: Transgender and Intersex Interpretations of Medieval Christian Art

SPEAKERS

Dr Jennifer Awes Freeman

KEYWORDS

Queering the Collection, Medieval Art, Genderfluid, Christian Art

TRANSCRIPT

Dr Jennifer Awes Freeman: My name is Jennifer Awes Freeman and I'm a professor of art and theology at United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities in Minnesota. I also teach courses in medieval art at the University of Minnesota.

This wooden sculpture, of unknown origin and date (but likely premodern and quite possibly medieval), presents a single bearded figure, nude from the waist up, and clothed below in a long garment that's embellished with stylized folds. It's reasonable to identify the figure as Jesus, though there are yet more questions about this object than answers. For example, premodern representations of Jesus clothe him in a toga or tunic (when teaching or performing miracles), a small loincloth (as in the crucifixion), or nude (at his baptism). Thus, the ankle-length garment here is unique. The figure's eyes seem to be closed, which might lead us to interpret this image as a lamentation/entombment image – that is, a depiction of the dead body of Jesus laid out for burial (in which case the shape framing his head could be read as a pillow).

The form and size of the sculpture—with its flat back, narrow width at 9.1cm and elongation at 34.5cm—suggests that it may have been a part of some kind of liturgical furnishing.

One of the most striking elements of this figure is the depiction of its arms, which conclude at the shoulders in rounded shapes that could be read as oddly-positioned fists, stylized pectoral muscles, or even breasts (indeed the protrusion on the figure's right side bears a circular indentation that may be a nipple). Maternal interpretations of Jesus date back to the first-century gospel of Matthew (chapter 23:37) in which Jesus compares himself to a mother hen, saying, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"

Likewise, early Christian theologians embraced maternal and androgynous imagery— particularly in devotion to the side wound of Jesus and its associations with the eucharist. For instance, in the second century, Clement of Alexandria praised the "milk of wisdom" expressed from the breast of God, writing:

"Nourished by the milk of heaven, to our tender palates given;

Milk of wisdom from the breast of that bride of grace expressed;
By a dewy spirit filled from fair Reason's breast distilled;
Let us sucklings join to raise with pure lips our hymns of praise as our grateful offering,
Clean and pure, to Christ our King."

These themes continued to resonate in medieval Christianity: a 13th c. moralized Bible depicts a personification of the church being born out of the side wound of Jesus on the cross (in an image that parallels Eve being created from the side of Adam on the same folio). The mystics and theologians of the later Middle Ages were devoted to a maternal and feminized Jesus; the 14th c. English mystic Julian of Norwich layers feminine imagery and titles with masculine pronouns to describe Jesus in her *Revelations of Divine Love*.

Another image in the Agnes Etherington Art Centre's collection, George Pencz's *Ecce Homo*, arguably depicts a maternal Jesus. In this 1538 painting, Jesus offers his right breast to the viewer by framing his nipple with his pointer and other fingers (instead of the usual framing of his side wound with such a gesture).

While we may not be able to make definitive conclusions about this wooden sculpture of a bearded figure, it offers us an exciting opportunity to reflect on the complex conceptions and representations of gender fluidity and its theological significance in the premodern world.