

Adam and Eve Iconography: The Fall of Man through the Ages

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Abstract---Art historians use the discipline of iconography to identify and describe symbols and themes in the subjects of visual arts. The iconographic inquiry is particularly useful for explaining the religious significance of Christian art. One of the first stories the Christian Bible conveys concerns, Adam and Eve. According to the biblical book of Genesis, Adam and Eve were the first man and woman that God created. Adam and Eve disobeyed God's directive not to eat the forbidden fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Christians believe Adam and Eve's disobedience brought sin and death into the world. This essay explores a select cross-section of portrayals of Adam and Eve during various eras of European art history. The goal is to use iconographic analysis to place the Adam and Eve theme within distinct contexts and by so doing better understand its complex functions.

Keywords---Adam and Eve, Albrecht Dürer, Biblical iconography, Byzantine art, Rembrandt van Rijn.

Introduction: the origin of Adam and Eve

Genesis is the first book of the Christian Bible. The book's English title, Genesis, derives from the ancient Greek term *geneseos*, a term used in the Septuagint (ca. 250-100 BCE). The Septuagint was the earliest Koine Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. The Greek term *geneseos* was a translation of the Hebrew Bible's *bereshith*, which translates roughly into English as "in [the] beginning." Bereshith was also the title of the ancient Hebrew book. *Geneseos*, and by extension Genesis, can mean birth, genealogy, origin, or beginning, depending on the context. The opening words of the King James Version of the Bible (1611) are "At the beginning [*geneseos*] God created the heaven and the earth" (Genesis 1:1, KJV).

The first chapter of Genesis tells the story of God's creation of heaven and earth, as well as the creation of the firmament (or sky) and stars, day and night, the sun and moon, the dry land and seas, and the plants and animals. According to Genesis, after God had created all of these things, he then said "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness ... So God created man in his image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created him them" (Genesis 1:26-27). The first man was named Adam. God placed Adam in a garden "in Eden." In the garden, God also placed "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." God then caused Adam to fall asleep and he took one of Adam's ribs, from which he made a woman. Adam and the woman (later named Eve) lived in a natural paradise in the Garden of Eden; they had only one restriction. God told them they should never eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The third chapter of Genesis discusses how the first man and woman disobeyed this restriction.

Now the serpent was more subtle than any beast of the field, which the Lord God had made. And he said unto the woman, 'Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?' And the woman said unto the serpent, 'We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden, but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die.' And the serpent said unto the woman, 'Ye shall not surely die: for God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.' And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat. And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons. ... And the Lord God said unto the serpent, because thou hast done this, thou art cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field. Upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life and I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel. Unto the woman he

said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee. And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life. Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee ... In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return. And Adam called his wife's name Eve; because she was the mother of all living. ... [The Lord God then drove out Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden] and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life.

One of the earliest surviving images of Adam and Eve was found in the baptistry room of a third-century CE Christian house church at Dura-Europos (figures 1, 2), a Roman frontier fortress in the Syrian desert (Dirven 2008). The small, somewhat crudely executed rendering of Adam and Eve sits amid some of the earliest Christian paintings, including a rendering of Christ as the Good Shepherd. Persecuted third-century Christians created similar images in the catacombs of Rome. The early Christian artists initially borrowed directly from Greco-Roman and Roman (pagan) naturalistic styles (figure 3). Later, Byzantine depictions of biblical figures became more abstract and symbolic.



Figure 1.
Baptistry of Dura-Europos.
Public Domain



Figure 2.
Detail of figure 1.
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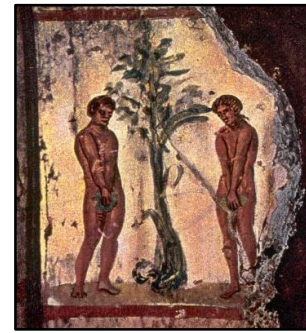


Figure 3.
Catacombs of Marcellinus
and Peter, Rome

Byzantine illustration and decorative art

Byzantium was the eastern half of the Roman Empire, which survived for centuries after the fall of Rome (figure 4). Constantinople (modern Istanbul) was the capital of Byzantium. In 330 CE, the emperor Constantine (ca. 272-337) moved the seat of the Roman Empire from Rome to Constantinople, at the crossroads of Europe and Asia. After the fifth century fall of Rome, Constantinople was recognized as *Nova Roma Constantinopolitana*, or the "New Rome of Constantinople." Figure 4 shows the geographical and political extent of Byzantium in the year 1025. Constantinople is in the center, on the northern coast of Propontis (the Sea of Marmara), the inland sea connecting the Aegean Sea and the Euxine (or Black) Sea. Although Byzantine art of each region was predominantly Christian art, the artistic splendor of the capital contrasted with the simpler styles of the provinces. Whereas Constantinople transmitted the grand Classical heritage to medieval Europe, the provinces produced humbler Christian imagery.



Figure 4. The Byzantine Empire in 1025.
Wikimedia Commons. 2.5.

Mosaic is a method for creating images and designs by arranging and setting small stones, tiles, and glass fragments. Mosaic - which reflected the stylization of third and fourth-century painting in Rome - became the leading pictorial art form in Byzantium. The mosaic fragment shown in figure 5 was originally located on the floor of a Byzantine church in northern Syria. The fragment shows Adam and Eve exchanging the forbidden fruit and partially covering themselves with leaves. Tree branches on the upper right suggest the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The Greek inscription at the top of the fragment quotes the book of Genesis: “And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked, and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons” (Genesis 3:7). Few of the original visitors to the Syrian church containing the mosaic would have been able to read, but the mosaic still conveyed the essence of the biblical story. Gregory I (ca. 540-604), the Roman Catholic Pope from 590 to 604, encouraged church authorities to use artistic imagery as visual “books for the illiterate” (see [Diebold, 2001](#)).



Figure 5. Fragment of floor mosaic of Adam and Eve, Early Byzantium, Northern Syria, ca. 500 CE.
The Cleveland Museum of Art CC0

Byzantine artists and artisans adapted vessels that were popular with the earlier Greeks and Romans for use in Christian liturgy. For example, Byzantines modified the *pyxis* - a small cylindrical, wooden box used by the Greeks and Romans to hold medicines - into ivory containers for holding Eucharistic bread. They carved the containers with ornate scenes of Christ’s Passion. Similarly, Roman *sarcophagi*, or funerary caskets, were adapted as box-like, ivory receptacles for safekeeping valuables, such as illuminated manuscripts of the Bible or other religious texts ([Cutler 1984-1985](#); [Hendrix, 2016](#)). Such Byzantine receptacles were often covered in relief carvings of Old Testament scenes, such as the fall of man, which served as moral examples for their owners (figures 2a, 2b).



Figure 2a. Ivory box with scenes of Adam and Eve, Constantinople, ca. 1050.
The Cleveland Museum of Art CC0.



Figure 2b. Detail of Figure 2a.

Only the wealthiest citizens or churches of Byzantium could afford luxury items such as the ivory box shown in figures 2a and 2b. The sides are decorated with a cycle of ten bas-relief plaques depicting scenes from the first four chapters of the book of Genesis, including the creation of Adam and Eve, their expulsion from the garden, and Cain killing Abel. Master artisans created the box in the capital city of Constantinople, which at the time was Europe's foremost commercial and trade center. The majority of Constantinople's highly sought-after ivory came from east African sources via Egypt (Cutler, 1985). Although most Byzantine art focuses on creatively expressing Christian theology, the mature Byzantine style was a stylization of Classical (non-Christian) Greco-Roman forms. In figure 2b, for example, the carver shows Adam and Eve's unclothed bodies, but with no hint of the sensuality that characterized pre-Christian Roman and Greek depictions of human anatomy. The display of nudity in Byzantine artworks "elicited a powerful set of oppositional responses" from the original viewers. "In some contexts, it engendered a sense of shame for the fallen state of humanity, further tinged by negative associations with pagan idolatry" (Ryder 2008).

Biblical concordances and *books of hours*

Biblia Pauperum is a Latin term meaning "Bible of the Poor." *Biblia Pauperum* were hand-colored woodblock-printed books that served as theological guides for clergy and laymen. Tradition and some documentary evidence credit Ansgar (ca. 801-865), the first archbishop of Hamburg and patron saint of Scandinavia, with creating the first *Biblia Pauperum* (Corbett 1907). They reached their height of popularity during the late medieval period. The picture books consisted of 40-50 pages juxtaposing New Testament scenes from the life of Christ with corresponding Old Testament prophetic stories and types (figure 3a). The corners of each page contained explanatory texts relating to the stories' concordance or relationship. Historians have proposed several explanations for the designation Bible of the Poor (Corbett, 1907). *Biblia Pauperum* were among Europe's first mechanically printed books and they gained wide circulation, in part, because they were much cheaper than hand-written manuscripts. Furthermore, members of *mendicant* Roman Catholic religious orders - such as the Dominicans, Franciscans, and Carmelites - who lived lives of poverty traveling and evangelizing, often used the instructional books, especially when teaching in poorer communities. A final explanation for the designation is that illustrative picture books were Bibles for the illiterate and uneducated classes, much like the Syrian mosaic discussed previously. Christian clergymen also used the visual narratives of stained glass windows to teach doctrine to the illiterate (figure 4). The late-Gothic cloister of the Benedictine Hirshau Abbey in Germany's northern Black Forest once housed thirty-nine stained-glass windows that portrayed the woodcuts of the *Biblia Pauperum*, though they were lost during the War of Palatine Succession in 1692 (see Kohl, 2007).

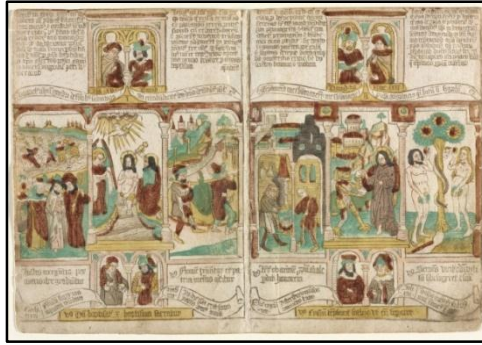


Figure 3a. Page from a Biblia Pauperum (Bible of the Poor), Germany or The Netherlands, ca. 1450. The Cleveland Museum of Art CC0.



Figure 3b and Figure 3c. Details of Figure 3a.

The Biblia Pauperum's lessons relied upon visual juxtapositions and *typology*, or analysis based on the belief that Old Testament events prefigured New Testament events. In figure 3b, the drowning of Pharaoh's soldiers in the Red Sea as they pursued the Israelites escaping Egyptian enslavement (Exodus 14:23-28) is juxtaposed with Christ's baptism, or immersion in water (Matthew 3; Mark 1; Luke 3). Since at least the second century CE, theologians connected the two stories. In his treatise *De Baptismo*, the important North African theologian, Tertullian (ca. 160-220 CE) wrote, "Indeed, when the people, set unconditionally free, escaped the violence of the Egyptian king by crossing over through water, it was water that extinguished the king himself, with his entire forces. What figure more manifestly fulfilled in the sacrament of baptism? The nations are set free from the world using water, to wit: and the devil, their old tyrant, they leave quite behind, overwhelmed in the water" (Tertullian: chpt. 9). In figure 3c, Adam and Eve's temptation in the Garden of Eden is juxtaposed with Christ's temptation in the Judean wilderness (Matthew 4; Mark 1; Luke 4). Medieval theologians wrote about three obstacles separating human beings from salvation: Satan's temptations, worldly concerns, and fleshly desires (see [Taşdelen, 2019](#)). Many posited that the source of *concupiscence*, or human beings' inclination toward sin, was the fall of Adam and Eve and that the proneness to evil remains an element of human nature. Like Adam and Eve, who faced Satan's temptation free of concupiscence, Christ faced Satan's temptations free of an inclination toward sin. Unlike Adam and Eve, however, Christ withstood Satan's efforts and, thus, provided "a perfect model of resistance to [the] spiritual enemy and a permanent source of victorious help" ([Gigot, 1912](#)). Adam and Eve's sin led to death, but, according to the New Testament book of James, a person who follows Christ's example and successfully endures Satan's temptation "shall receive the crown of life" (James 1:12).

The late-Gothic depictions of Adam and Eve are shown in the Biblia Pauperum may appear unsophisticated to the eyes of art connoisseurs. The medieval artisans who contributed to Biblia Pauperum were more concerned with illustrating theological concepts than creating "art for art's sake" (see [Sutherland, 2014](#) and [Ryken, 2006](#)). Throughout European art history, however, fine artists exploited the aesthetic possibilities of the Adam and Eve narrative. Before and during the Gothic era, theologians conflated Classical and Christian conceptions of beauty (see [Eco 2002](#); [Crossley 2013](#)). The earliest Greek versions of the Hebrew Bible use the term *kalos* (καλὰ), which can mean very good or beautiful depending on the context, to translate the final statement of Genesis chapter 1: "God

saw all that he had made, and it was very good (καλὰ). And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day” (Genesis 1:31). Medieval theologians and artists thought God’s creation (including the first man and woman) was beautiful, and they represented Adam and Eve accordingly. Figure 4, for example, shows a small, circular stained glass window representing Adam and Eve. It is part of the famed Good Samaritan Window of the Chartres Cathedral in France, of ca. 1200.



Figure 4. Stained glass window, 1210, Chartres Cathedral. Public Domain.

Some of the finest art of the late medieval and early Renaissance eras was created to illustrate books of hours. Books of hours were devotional texts. They contained a set of eight prayers, called the Hours of the Virgin, which Christian laypeople said at eight canonical times throughout the day. The prayer texts and accompanying artwork fostered reflection and devotion. Members of the nobility were the first to own books of hours, but during the late Middle Ages, as literacy increased and Christians gravitated more toward personal piety, members of other social classes began to buy their books of hours. During the Middle Ages, various European cities emerged as major centers of book production and *illumination* (or book illustration), such as Bruges and Ghent, in the Burgundian Netherlands, and Paris and Rouen, in France.



Figure 5a. Book of Hours. Rouen, ca. 1500. The Cleveland Museum of Art CC0.



Figure 5b. Detail of figure 5a.

Rouen is on the River Seine, approximately 150 kilometers northwest of Paris. Historical accounts indicate the Welsh missionary Mellonius Probus (ca. 229-314) introduced Christianity to Rouen during the fourth century CE. In the Middle Ages, Rouen passed between the English Crown and France until the fifteenth century, when Rouen became an important French cultural center for over two centuries. Religious life circulated Rouen’s Gothic Cathedral (Notre-Dame de l’Assomption de Rouen), the Church of Saint-Maclou (1436-1521), and the Church of Saint-Ouen (ca. 1318-1450). An anonymous, though distinctive, illuminator working at Rouen specialized in

portraying Old Testament iconography for books of hours. The artist's characteristic touch, shown in an image of Adam and Eve in the garden (figure 5a), is identified by his/her combination of contrasting orange-reds and deep blues-greens, and abundant application of gold wash (figure 5b). The artist invariably used fine parallel lines and crosshatching in gold to indicate shading and drew figures with large oval faces (Leaf from a Book of Hours 2020). The miniature image (18 x 13 cm) shown in figure 5a reveals an early Renaissance fashion in Rouen, and in Paris, for Italianate decorative forms, including winged putti, swags, garlands, and scallop shells. A vendor would have sold the book of hours containing figure 5a to a prosperous bourgeoisie in Rouen's *cours des libraires*, or bookseller's street, next to the Gothic Cathedral.

The German Renaissance

Europe's Renaissance artists were very creative in imagining the flora and fauna of the Garden of Eden. The biblical narrative identifies the location of the Garden of Eden by describing its geographical features.

And a river went out of Eden to water the garden; and from thence it was parted, and became into four heads. The name of the first is Pishon: that is it which compasseth the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold; ... And the name of the second river is Gihon: the same is it that compasseth the whole land of Ethiopia. And the name of the third river is Hiddekel [for the Tigris]: that is it which goeth toward the east of Assyria. And the fourth river is Euphrates (Genesis 2:10-14).

Historians have not reached a consensus on the identities of the Pishon and Gihon. Some early researchers, such as Antoine Agustin Calmet (1672-1757) and Ernst Friedrich Karl Rosenmüller (1768–1835), speculated that Pishon and Gihon may have been distant source rivers for Eden, perhaps the Rioni River of western Georgia, the Araxas River, which reaches northern Iran, or Amu Darya, which flows southward into upper Afghanistan (Duncan 1929). The Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, on the other hand, demarcated a well-known historical place: Mesopotamia. Mesopotamia, a Greek name meaning “between the rivers,” was an ancient region located mainly in modern Iraq. It was home to several important early civilizations, including the Sumerians, Akkadians, Babylonians, and Assyrians. Although climates change over time, ancient Mesopotamia was generally similar to today: semi-arid, defined by a vast desert to the north and marshes, lagoons, and mudflats to the south, where the rivers empty into the modern Persian Gulf. A wide variety of wildlife roamed the riverbanks and deserts or flew overhead: lions, leopards, boar, gazelle, vultures, and eagles. In their depictions of Adam and Eve, however, European artists rarely depicted the landscape, plants, and animals of the Garden of Eden as they may have appeared.



Figure 6. Albrecht Dürer, Adam and Eve, 1504.
Public Domain.

Albrecht Dürer's (1471-1528) engraving places Adam and Eve in a dense, distinctively German forest (figure 6). Resituating the figures in a colder European climate accentuates their nudity; they seem even more exposed and vulnerable. This is not a Mesopotamian river valley, but, rather, the deep, dark forest of German fairy tales, the forest

inhabited by the big, bad wolf in the fable entitled *Rotkäppchen*, or Little Red Riding Hood. Although Little Red Riding Hood is closely associated with the nineteenth-century Brothers Grimm, the origins of the fable go back at least to the tenth century and perhaps back even further to a similar but more sinister legend told by the ancient Greek storyteller, Pausanias (ca. 110-180) (Anderson, 2000; see also Pretzler, 2007). Dürer, and other German Renaissance artists, would have been as familiar with folktales of evil temptations lurking in mysterious woods as they were with the biblical story of the Garden of Eden. Albrecht Dürer brought together both traditions in his engraving.

Dürer worked during the age of the Renaissance, a French word that means rebirth. The Renaissance was a period when European artists and intellectuals were captivated by a renewed interest in Classical culture and values, the culture and values of the ancient Romans and Greeks. Dürer based his depictions of Adam and Eve on ancient prototypes. Adam's pose is very similar to that of the Apollo Belvedere, a second-century CE Roman copy of a lost Greek statue that showed the important Greek Olympian pagan deity. After its rediscovery in the late fifteenth century, the Apollo Belvedere was placed on public display in the Papal Vatican Palace. Eve's proportions mimic sculptures of Venus, the Roman goddess of love and beauty. In 1494, Dürer traveled to Italy and, in Venice, he studied with the renowned painter, sculptor, and art theoretician, Antonio Pollaiuolo (ca. 1420-1498). From Pollaiuolo, Dürer learned to idealize the human form using geometric formulas and mathematical systems of proportion, derived from the ancient paradigms of Roman theoretician Vitruvius (ca. 80 BCE - 15 CE). Dürer also studied firsthand the dynamic poses of Italian and Classical sculptures of pre-Christian deities (Kuspit 1972). He used non-Christian concepts of divinity for his Christian depictions of the divine. Adam and Eve are seen "moments before tasting the forbidden fruit, they are still uncorrupted by sin and death, existing in a state of faultless beauty" (Adam & Eve, 2020).

Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472-1553) was a German painter and printmaker. In 1500, Cranach settled in Vienna and began working with the humanist scholars at the University of Vienna, or *Universität Wien*. The University of Vienna was founded in 1365 by the Habsburg Duke of Austria, Rudolph IV (1339-1365), and is the oldest university in the German-speaking world. The religious paintings Cranach produced in Vienna caught the attention of Frederick III (the Wise 1463-1525), Elector of Saxony. Frederick ruled Saxony, a state of the Holy Roman Empire, from the capital of Wittenberg (modern eastern Germany). Although Frederick was a Roman Catholic, history remembers him for the protection he provided his subject Martin Luther (1483-1546) from the Holy Roman Emperor and the Roman Catholic Pope. Luther helped set off the Protestant Reformation on October 31, 1517, when he nailed ninety-five theses challenging Roman Catholic doctrine and practices to the door of All Saints' Church in Wittenberg. Lucas Cranach the Elder supported the Reformation cause, but was, nonetheless, the primary court painter to the Catholic Electors of Saxony for over four decades (see Noble, 2009).

Lucas Cranach painted portraits of Luther and other Reformation leaders and created innovative woodcut designs for the first German edition of the New Testament. Interestingly, however, Cranach's most famous and popular subjects were not his biblical illustrations, but rather his idealized portrayals of female beauty. Like Albrecht Dürer, Cranach consulted Italian Renaissance and ancient Greco-Roman prototypes, but Cranach's figural types featured an idiosyncratic, whimsical spirit, as seen in figures 7 and 8. Eve's thin, graceful form, undulating contour, and coquettish expression conformed to the Elector of Saxony's courtly ideals of beauty (Eve, 2020). Cranach exploited the biblical account of the fall of man ("And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons," Genesis 3:7), to appeal to both devoutly religious and secular audiences (Campbell 2007).



Figure 7. Lucas Cranach. Adam, 1537.
Public Domain.



Figure 8. Lucas Cranach. Eve, 1537.
Public Domain.

In Cranach's depiction of Eve, the serpent - entwined in the branches of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the upper left - has tempted Eve to pluck the forbidden fruit and to consider its desirability. The animal kingdom provides one additional witness to Eve's drama, an elk lying on the ground behind her, looking up distraughtly, distressed by her impending poor decision. Ancient Greek and Roman physicians and philosophers thought that the balance of four *humors* (or chemical processes) regulated the human body: black bile, phlegm, blood, and yellow bile. The ancient Greek physician Hippocrates (ca. 460-370 BCE) taught that an excess or deficiency in the ratio of the four humors led to illness (Lloyd 1984). During the Renaissance, artists and philosophers symbolized the four humors with four animals: an elk represented black bile (gloom); a bull represented the phlegmatic humor (calm); a rabbit represented the bloody or sanguine humor (sensuality), and a cat represented the choleric or yellow humor (cruelty or pride). Dürer's print (figure 6) included each of the humor symbols. Significantly, Lucas Cranach's depiction of Eve contemplating the forbidden fruit included only the elk, symbolic of melancholia (a feeling of deep sadness or depression).

The ancient Egyptians developed perhaps the first theory of the four senses of humor. The Greeks and Romans adopted the Egyptian ideas, and physicians utilized *humoralist systems* throughout Europe during the medieval period and even during the Renaissance Age of Discovery, including at the court of the Elector of Saxony. It is, therefore, not surprising that Cranach (and Dürer) referenced the senses of humor's symbols in their Christian imagery. Only with the pioneering research of the Flemish anatomist Andreas Vesalius (1514-1564) and the English physician William Harvey (1578-1657) was the validity of the theory of humor seriously called into question.

A Mannerist print

The four humoralist symbols, and many more members of the animal kingdom (see Cohen, 2014), can be found in Jean Mignon's (active ca. 1535-1555) Renaissance print entitled the Temptation of Eve (figure 9). Mignon's etching is a quintessential example of the art of The School of Fontainebleau. The School of Fontainebleau is a term historians use to describe artworks created for the French monarchy, particularly under Francis I (1494-1547), or *François I^{er}*, at the Château de Fontainebleau. The French king commissioned the architect Gilles Le Breton (died 1553) to design and construct the Renaissance-style mansion within the scenic and historic forest of Fontainebleau, approximately fifty kilometers southeast of Paris. A small army of French, Flemish, and Italian artists and artisans, including Mignon, decorated the sprawling château and its grounds.



Figure 9. Jean Mignon, Temptation of Eve, ca. 1535.
Cleveland Museum of Art CC0.

Francis, I was a practicing Roman Catholic, and he emulated the Catholic princes of Renaissance Italy by using court patronage to glorify himself and to bring prestige to his royal residence. Francis I and the Château de Fontainebleau played a pivotal early role in the Counter-Reformation, or Catholic Reformation, a period of Roman Catholic resurgence initiated in the wake of the Protestant Reformation. In 1540, Francis I issued a royal edict from the Château de Fontainebleau. The Edict proclaimed Protestantism a heresy and Protestant religious practice "high

treason against God and mankind” (Shepardson 2007). The edict codified persecution of the Huguenots or French Protestants.

During the wider European Counter-Reformation, which began with the Council of Trent (1545-1563), many Roman Catholic theological and cultural leaders denounced art that included unnecessary nudity, promoted Classical paganism, or lacked an appropriate religious message for the masses. This included much of *Mannerism*, Italian and Italian-inspired art created between the High Renaissance and the Baroque period, between approximately 1520-1600. Theorists decried Mannerism as too elegant, too refined, artificial, and decadent. In fact, during the sixteenth century, conservative Catholic clergymen led a campaign against artistic nudity in churches and chapels. Biagio da Cesena (1463-1544), the Papal Master of Ceremonies to four Roman Catholic Popes, was particularly outraged by Michelangelo Buonarroti’s (1475-1564) nude figures in the Sistine Chapel, which Cesena thought were better suited for the public bathes or taverns than the site of Papal worship and ceremony. Cesena and Pope Paul IV (1476-1559) directed Michelangelo’s pupil Daniele da Volterra (1509-1566) to paint drapery over many of Michelangelo’s nude characters in Michelangelo’s final Sistine Chapel fresco, the Mannerist masterpiece, *The Last Judgment*, of 1536-1541. In *The Last Judgment*, Michelangelo included an aged Adam and Eve, and Volterra later covered their bodies in drapery (figure 10).

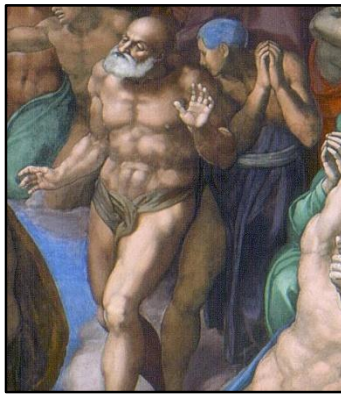


Figure 10. Michelangelo Buonarroti. Detail of *The Last Judgment*, ca. 1540.
Public Domain.



Figure 11. Detail of figure 9.



Figure 12. Michelangelo. *The Fall of Man*, 1508-12.
Public Domain.

Around 1530-1532, two Italian artists, Rosso Fiorentino (1495-1540), of Florence, and Francesco Primaticcio (1504-1570), of Mantua, brought the Mannerist style to the Château de Fontainebleau. Jean Mignon’s *Temptation of Eve* (figure 9) includes many of the hallmarks of Fiorentino and Primaticcio’s Mannerist styles, including overly crowded compositions, anatomical distortions, and contorted poses. Before coming to Fontainebleau, Rosso Fiorentino lived in Rome, where he studied and copied the Sistine Chapel frescos of Michelangelo, including *The Fall of Man*, of 1508-1512 (figure 12). In all likelihood, when Fiorentino arrived at Fontainebleau he showed Mignon, a mysterious yet prolific French printmaker, his copies of Michelangelo’s biblical scenes from the Sistine ceiling and walls. Mignon modeled his figure of Eve, as well as the serpent twisting upward around the tree trunk, after those in

Michelangelo's Fall of Man (figures 11, 12). Unlike the Italian master, however, Mignon deftly manipulated Adam and Eve's twisting poses to conceal, rather than reveal, the details of their nude forms.

Rembrandt's personal connection

The Dutch painter and printmaker, Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669) is among European art history's most-renowned visual interpreters of biblical texts. Although he did not leave behind written statements concerning his specific religious beliefs, Rembrandt's hundreds of surviving biblical paintings and prints indicate he was a "close student of the Bible and imbued with an intense religious feeling. ... He was attracted by the [Bible's] genuinely human element ... by the universality of human experience, by the similarity of human passions and emotions through the ages" (Reider, 1929; see also Mercer, 2005).

Early in his career, Rembrandt served a pivotal apprenticeship with Pieter Lastman (1583-1633). As a young man, Lastman studied in Italy, where he fell under the spell of Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571-1610), perhaps the most original and influential Italian painter of the seventeenth century. Lastman taught to Rembrandt Caravaggio's manner of depicting religious characters with dramatic gestures and expressions and brilliant, emotional lighting. Rembrandt's mature style combined intimacy and tragedy, exemplified by his two best-known early religious paintings, *The Stoning of Stephen*, of 1625, and *The Blinding of Samson*, of 1636.



Figure 13. Rembrandt. *Adam and Eva*, 1638.
Cleveland Museum of Art CC0.

When Rembrandt created his 1638 etching entitled *Adam and Eva* (figure 13), he had moved from his native Leiden to Amsterdam, where he became one of the cities' leading portrait painters and religious artists. Rembrandt's professional success was matched by personal happiness. In 1634, Rembrandt married Saskia van Uylenburch (1612-1642). Before her sudden early death, Saskia was Rembrandt's prized muse and his favorite model. Saskia posed for Rembrandt's portrayal of Eve and the artist used his self-portrait for his portrayal of Adam. Rembrandt created several contemporaneous prints in preparation for his etching of *Adam and Eva*, for example, figure 15. The everyday faces and plump bodies of Rembrandt's Adam and Eve differ from the noble faces and idealized bodies of Dürer. Dürer based his figures on ancient Classical sculptures and anatomical formulas; Rembrandt based his figures on life. Rembrandt's self-referential portraits of Adam and Eve are devoid of aggrandizement; the artist expressed the biblical characters' psyches and their dilemma with the utmost sincerity. Eve stands in the very center of the composition holding the fruit before her mouth. Like the serpent hanging menacingly above her head, the viewer ponders her temptation and her momentous decision.



Figure 14. Detail of figure 13.



Figure 15. Rembrandt and Saskia, 1636.
Cleveland Museum of Art CC0.

The 1638 etching was the only time Rembrandt portrayed the devil successfully tempting Adam and Eve into disobeying God. However, Rembrandt also portrayed the devil's unsuccessful effort attempting Jesus Christ into disobeying God's commandments, as described in Matthew 4, Mark 1, and Luke 4. One of Rembrandt's students, Constantyn Daniël van Renesse (1626-1680) copied Rembrandt's religious paintings and prints in the master's studio. Van Renesse based ink and wash drawing (figure 16) on Rembrandt's unfortunately now-lost depiction of The Temptation of Christ. Figure 17 is one of Rembrandt's surviving preparatory drawings. Van Renesse and Rembrandt showed the devil as a chimeric hybrid, with a human bearded face, cloven feet, and a tail, holding out and offering a stone (see also figures 3a and 3c). According to the fourth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, the devil suggested to Jesus that he use his divine power to turn a stone into bread.

Jesus [was] led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil. And when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was afterward an hungred. And when the tempter came to him, he said, If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread. But he answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God (Matthew 4:1-4).



Figure 16. Van Renesse. Temptation of Christ.
The British Museum. CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.



Figure 17. Rembrandt. Drawing, 1640.
Public Domain.

Rembrandt was more interested in representing Jesus - whom the apostle Paul called the "last Adam" and the "second man" - than in representing the first Adam, the "first man," or the first woman (1 Corinthians 15:45-48). During his lengthy and productive career, Rembrandt produced several dozen paintings, etchings, and finished drawings of the face and life of Jesus. The only subject Rembrandt spent more time on was self-portraits, which number more than one hundred. An inventory of Rembrandt's home in 1656 revealed that he kept two paintings entitled The Head of Christ and various self-portraits in his bedroom. He used both subjects for spiritual meditation (see [DeWitt, 2011](#)). Indeed, throughout history, many artists have utilized the subject of Adam and Eve both for personal and communal reflection.

Conclusion

This brief essay has addressed the iconography of Adam and Eve in a variety of contexts. The biblical text's vivid descriptive language lends itself to visual imagery:

- 1) "the serpent said unto the woman, 'Ye shall not surely die'"
- 2) "the woman saw that the tree was good for food and that it was pleasant to the eyes"
- 3) "she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband and he did eat"
- 4) "They knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons" (Genesis 3:4-7).

Artists translated this simple, yet affecting, story into stylistically diverse images that functioned variously as decorative motifs, biblical illustrations, theological instruction, aesthetic paradigms, and personalized scenes for reflection. The story of Adam and Eve is one of a relatively small set of Old Testament narratives that Christian artists historically used for public and private biblical interpretation. Artists also frequently portrayed Old Testament accounts of Noah's Ark, Abraham's Sacrifice of Isaac, David and Goliath, and Daniel in the Lion's Den. Those stories, however, convey the importance of faith and courage in the face of adversity. Artistic portrayals of Adam and Eve's *original sin*, on the other hand, reminded Christian adherents of their need for redemption. Not coincidentally, depictions of Christ's Crucifixion are among the most common artworks derived from the New Testament. Using iconographic analysis to place these themes within distinct contexts helps historians understand their complex functions and significance.

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