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# Obliteration, Ostension, Ostentation: The Visibility of the Sacred Body in Catholic Culture

Jenny Ponzo

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## 1. Introduction

- <sup>1</sup> This paper delves into issues of visibility in representing the bodies of sacred or religious characters in the Christian-Catholic art, and in particular in sculpture.<sup>1</sup> The main focus concerns the field of tensions connected to the opposition between the inside and the outside of the body. The latter can be considered as a set of concentric layers the accessibility of which is ruled by a tangle of aesthetic, cultural and religious values. More specifically, a complex axiology of visibility regulates what layers it is considered acceptable or unacceptable to exhibit depending on the context and the subject's role. In other words, in the considered corpus of artworks, the layers surrounding (the clothes) and composing (skin, organs, bones...) the body of the sacred characters are separated by *thresholds*<sup>2</sup> which result crossable or not according to a complex and dynamic semiotic system that I will try to pin down in what follows.
- <sup>2</sup> The aesthetic and religious sensibilities governing the definition of these thresholds vary across time. It is well known, for instance, that the threshold of acceptability for the exhibition of the naked human body shifts significantly across time and between different cultural and artistic contexts. Thus, in periods such as the Renaissance nudity was more frequently and realistically represented than in the Paleo-Christian period and High Middle Ages. Similar shifts concern the representation of the inner parts of the body or of dead bodies. Even though a diachronic perspective is surely compelling for in-depth research on this topic, my main goal here is to identify some general semiotic issues that recur in Christian-Catholic tradition across time and still play an influence on contemporary imagery and aesthetic-artistic sensibilities. What is at stake here is one aspect (circumscribed to sacred art, and especially to tridimensional

manufacts) of the more general problem of the clash between the idea of the ineffability of the sacred and the persistent need to represent it, which has been the subject of numerous reflections from a semiotic perspective.<sup>3</sup> This problem of the representability of the sacred is in turn related to an issue regarding *corporeity*, a term proposed by Finol (2015) to define the dynamic set of imageries that a culture attributes to the body as a semiotic object. Moreover, several scholars have proposed reflections about the *openness*<sup>4</sup> of religious images and artifacts (Didi-Huberman 2007), questioning the greimasian opposition englobing/englobed (Leone 2014) and using terms such as “ostension” and “ostentation” (Dondero 2007).

- 3 Based on these theoretical premises and taking into consideration sculptures which provide the access to different layers surrounding and composing the body of sacred characters, it is possible to identify two main regimes of representation of the inside. These two regimes can be defined as two poles in relation to the category of figurativity: at one pole is placed what I propose to call the regime of “obliteration”, characterized by the fact of making the inner level perceivable, but in an abstract way, deprived of figurativity. At the other pole is placed the regime of “ostension”, characterized by the fact of representing the inner level in a figurative manner. As we will see, these poles do not represent a dichotomy, but rather the bornes of a field of tensions, as there are different degrees of figurativity in the representation of the inner layers of the body of the sacred characters. To conclude, I will also discuss a third regime, “ostentation”, which represents a marked form of ostension.

## 2. Obliteration

- 4 The regime of “obliteration” characterizes artifacts in which the body of the represented character mainly works as an exterior shell, the inside of which bears scarce or no figurative value. The following analysis focuses on three types of artworks that well exemplify the different degrees of inner figurativity of the sacred bodies represented through this regime: the hollow colossuses, the dressable statues, and the concentric statues. In hollow colossuses the inner level results accessible but appears deprived of figurative elements. In the dressable statues, the inner layer of the body—the layer of the naked skin and of the bodily shapes—is represented with different degrees of figurative precision, even though often the bodily consistence of the character is only roughly evoked, since the realistic representation of this inner dimension is not a pertinent or desired feature. In the concentric statues the obliteration concerns the representation of the inner layers of the body of the main character, which works as a shrine or a container, i.e. as an englobing surface containing other figurative representations, especially anthropomorphous figures.

### 2.1. Hollow colossuses

- 5 A first instance of hollow colossus is represented by the statue of Saint Charles Borromeo, which overlooks the lake called Lago Maggiore in the town of Arona (in the region of Piedmont, in north-west Italy). Locals familiarly call this benevolent giant the “San Carlone” (in which the particle “-one” has an augmentative value). This artwork with its internal structure of stones, bricks and iron and external covering of hammered copper sheets stands almost 35 meters tall. It was designed by Giovan

Battista Crespi, alias “Il Cerano”, and constructed by the sculptors Siro Zanella and Bernardo Falconi; the sculptors also slightly modified the original project by making the statue larger. Construction was completed in 1698. The colossus of Saint Charles served as a model for Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi in planning the structure of the Statue of Liberty, as declared in a plaque at the foot of the latter.<sup>5</sup>

6 Figure 1



The colossus of Saint Charles Borromeo, Arona.

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Colossus\\_of\\_Saint\\_Charles\\_Borromeo#/media/File:San\\_Carlo-Arona\\_01.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Colossus_of_Saint_Charles_Borromeo#/media/File:San_Carlo-Arona_01.JPG)

- 7 Saint Charles is represented in episcopal clothing; he holds a book in his left arm and blesses the town of Arona with his right arm (a design element that required a reinforced metallic structure to be constructed so as to withstand the fierce local winds). The colossus is hollow so that visitors are able to enter inside his body, climb up to his head and admire the landscape below (fig. 2):

Behind the pedestal two spiral staircases lead to the balcony where a door hidden in the pleats of the Saint's cassock leads to another spiral staircase and steep vertical stairs that come out at the top of the statue. From here it is possible to take in the view through a series of portholes where the eyes, ears and nostrils are, or through some apertures along the back.<sup>6</sup>

8 Figure 2



Staircases inside the colossus of Saint Charles

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Colossus\\_of\\_Saint\\_Charles\\_Borromeo#/media/File:Ultimo\\_tratto\\_della\\_scala\\_verticale\\_per\\_la\\_salita\\_al\\_Colosso.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Colossus_of_Saint_Charles_Borromeo#/media/File:Ultimo_tratto_della_scala_verticale_per_la_salita_al_Colosso.jpg)

- 9 When viewed from an external standpoint, this statue does not differ from other majestic sculptures, often portraying religious figures, of which the most famous example is probably the *Cristo Redentor* with his arms outstretched over Rio de Janeiro.<sup>7</sup> This kind of perspective, characterized by high visibility and the construction of a bottom-up gaze, is based on a set of *debrayages*. What distinguishes the Saint Charles colossus from the majority of the other statues like the Brazilian statue of Jesus, however, is the fact that visitors can also *enter* the statue, thus giving rise to potential *embrayages* that entail not only touching the statue itself, but also accessing an *inner* perspective and even the possibility of looking out from the statue's eyes and thus metaphorically taking on the saint's own point of view. This metaphorical assumption of the saint's gaze is actually quite weak, however. Indeed, the act of entering the statue brings about a temporary rupture of the standard contract requiring the observant actant to consider the statue in question as an iconic representation of Saint Charles Borromeo. If this implicit pact remained valid, the observant actant would (expect to) be brought under the saint's robes, to see his body and even the interior of his body; such an act would hardly be acceptable, much less for the figure of a bishop, represented specifically in his authoritative institutional—that is, ecclesiastical—role (a point which will be further developed below). In other words, the observant actant of the statue is projected in such a way that at the moment in which the door at the base of the colossus opens and the observant actant is able to cross the englobing layer and access the englobed, what necessarily takes place is an infraction or rather suspension (or, at least, a significant attenuation) of the iconic value of the statue—namely, of the consciousness that the statue represents Saint Charles Borromeo.

- 10 The inner “englobed” level is made up of a narrow, empty space divided up by the staircases in a rhythmic manner. The visitor’s eyes are drawn by the openings onto the landscape and the material structure of the statue’s interior. From the inside, the body of the Sancarlone presents itself as a combination of fragments held together by evident weld joints and large bolts, and this effect further contributes to the attenuation of the iconic value of the statue because, when viewed from the inside, the integrity or unity of the figure of the sainted bishop is clearly revealed to be a technical artifact. Moreover, the inside looks like the negative of the figure. This semiotic effect can be compared to the one identified by Jacques Fontanille in his analysis of Marcel Duchamp’s pieces involving prints and molds of inner parts of the human body; indeed, reflecting on Duchamp’s paintings and drawings, Fontanille (2004: 173, my translation) observes that “To make the human body signify as a play of inscriptions and imprints means to overcome its iconic representation.”
- 11 This effect is particularly evident if one looks at the inner form of the face: seen from inside, the face of the colossus resembles a mold or mask and its expression is, of course, radically altered (fig. 3). The distortion in this case further contributes to overturning the iconic effect of the exterior figure. The view of this empty mask is somehow disquieting, the kind of effect that Ugo Volli describes as *profanation*: “A really fake face, for example an unworn mask, has something shocking, it is violence if not profanation” (Volli 2002, p. 123, my translation). Studying the englobing/englobed relationship in general terms, Leone (2011, p. 4, my translation) notes that “In abstract terms, while the decrease in the perceptibility of the englobed entity consists in its more or less progressive disfiguration, the increase in this perceptibility consists in its more or less gradual re-figuration.” In the case under consideration, however, the opposite dynamics are operating. Seen from the outside, the colossus carries a clear figurative value; its personification via the affectionate nickname Sancarlone attests to this value. Seen from the inside, however, the icon of Saint Charles appears deformed and de-figured, as is particularly evident if one looks at its face. This consideration leads us to question the validity of applying the englobing/englobed distinction in the case under consideration: while Leone (2011) describes the passage between the two layers as an act of *dévoilement*, in this case this act is more radical and can instead be described as a *breakthrough*. It is precisely this radicality that would make it quite unbearable for the statue to maintain the same iconic value once the visitor has crossed the border of the englobing layer.
- 12 Figure 3





The face of the colossus of Saint Charles seen from inside

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Particolare\\_interno\\_del\\_viso\\_del\\_Colosso\\_di\\_San\\_Carlo.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Particolare_interno_del_viso_del_Colosso_di_San_Carlo.jpg)

- 13 This deformation, extraneous to the “standard” mechanism through which the englobed is revealed, can be compared to the distorted view Hall (1966) pointed out in his study of proxemics: according to Hall, when two people move so close together as to have the least possible distance between them, the one he calls “intimate” distance, the presence of the other person becomes very engaging and the extreme proximity leads to a distorted view of them. People visiting the colossus and who are “englobed” in its body surely find themselves at an “intimate” distance from this figure of the saint and have a deformed view of its appearance, a view caused not only by proximity but also, as mentioned above, because what they are looking at is the “negative” image of its body and face.
- 14 Hollow colossuses of sacred characters are still proposed in the contemporary age. For instance, a 98.15-meter-tall statue of “The Mother of All Asia Tower of Peace” was inaugurated in Batangas (Philippines) in 2016.<sup>8</sup> As the name itself suggests, this work hybridizes the genre of anthropomorphic sculpture and the architectural genre of the tower. This mixture can be seen in the way the piece presents a figurative representation of the Virgin Mary’s face, hands and clothes alongside elements characteristic of buildings such as windows and balustrades. This hybrid quality also appears in the colossus of Saint Charles, but in the case of the colossus of Batangas the architectural quality is unquestionably more accentuated (for instance, there are glass planes in the windows, a much wider and more complexly shaped interior, and an imposing terrace built on the Virgin’s hands).
- 15 A further instance is provided by the 7-metrer-tall statue by Oliviero Rainaldi, set up in front of the Roma Termini train station in 2011.<sup>9</sup> The head of the figure shows the features of Pope John Paul II while the body is once again abstracted: the head is supported by an open cloak, the inside of which is hollow and freely accessible to

visitors; they can take shelter underneath it, perhaps while waiting for a bus or train. The structure of this statue and its strategic obliteration of the body is reminiscent of the one characterizing the colossus of Saint Charles, and this comparison proves even more significant if we consider that the cause for the canonization of John Paul II was still open in 2011, and ended in 2014 with the official recognition of his sanctity. This kind of representation is therefore deeply connected to the Catholic notion of sanctity, based on the idea of a human figure being particularly close to God: this proximity, in turn, presupposes a series of representative strategies for dealing with the representation of the saint's body. One of these strategies is the symbolic obliteration of the body, as in the case of the colossal statues of Saint Charles and John Paul II, both of which present a realistic representation of the face, symbolic clothing bearing specific cultural and institutional meanings, and accessible but hollow interior.

## 2.2. Dressable statues

- 16 A kind of ritual widespread in several parts of Europe consists in the ornament of a statue of the Virgin, which in festive occasions is covered in precious clothing. In these cases, the statue generally has its own wardrobe comprising various clothes that correspond to different liturgical celebrations. The operations of undressing and dressing the statue are shrouded in secrecy: only select women may enjoy the extreme privilege of serving the statue in this way and the statue itself is treated as a queen with her handmaidens, personified as a body the modesty of which must be carefully defended (Albert-Llorca 1995). Dressable effigies are not limited to the Virgin; they also include Jesus and saints. They represent a particularly apt object of reflection for my purposes here because they can be classified as representing different degrees of iconicity, ranging from realistic representations of the body, often covered with the underwear typical of the age in which they were forged, to highly stylized structures with more mimetic extremities (head and hands).<sup>10</sup> In the case of these latter, more stylized mannequins, reducing the iconicity of the represented body can be interpreted not only in terms of representational economy (the task of forming the shape of the body is relegated to the clothes covering the inner layer every time the effigy is displayed in public, so there is no need to depict the inner layer, which remains hidden, in more specific detail) but also as a strategy for reducing the risk of desecration associated with the possibility of accessing the intimate sphere of the sacred body not covered by the clothes: if this hypothesis is correct, this strategy works by producing an abstract representation of the sacred body, composed of a basic shape deprived of more iconic traits; such traits are instead provided *a fortiori* through the effigies' clothes and, therefore, directly on the more external (and consequently more "neutral") level.
- 17 These considerations lead to a better comprehension of why the possibility to see under—or rather inside—the episcopal robes of the colossus of Saint Charles or the pontifical robes of the colossus of John Paul II would appear quite ambivalent if the iconic illusion did not vanish or at least attenuate: in all these cases obliteration contrasts the potential desecrating significance of the act of touching and seeing the refiguration of the sacred body.
- 18 Ugo Volli (1997) defines fetish as a non-sign, i.e. an object deprived of its signified and therefore an empty signifier. Considered in light of Volli's theory, the strategies of



obliterating the body to avoid fetishism—or desecration—take on a paradoxical meaning. In fact, both hollow colossuses and dressable statues avert fetishism by providing a literal and material representation of its essence: their signifier is an exterior shell, but their inside, albeit accessible, is hollow and does not bear any specific meaning.

### 2.3. Concentric statues

- 19 In concentric statues, such as the Medieval “The Virgin of Mercy combined with Throne of Mercy” (fig. 4), the englobing layer can be opened and the englobed layer features other characters both painted and sculpted on the inside of the mantle and the area where the lower part of the Virgin’s body would be. In this case, the inside is characterized by strong iconicity but, at the same time, the body of Mary is also obliterated in the sense that it is replaced by the representation of the male figure sitting in the englobed layer.

- 20 Figure 4



Virgin of Mercy, combined with Throne of Mercy, from western Prussia, 1390s, Germanisches Nationalmuseum (Nuremberg)

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:GNM\\_-\\_Schreinmadonna.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:GNM_-_Schreinmadonna.jpg)

- 21 This wooden artwork is a sculptural realization of the iconography of the Virgin of Mercy, flourished during the Middle Ages and enjoying significant success even during the Modern age. In this iconography, the Virgin Mary typically stands with her outstretched arms holding her cloak open, thus offering protection to the faithful (who might include people in general, children, members of religious orders, particular subjects such as the artwork’s client or important clergymen, etc.). As the famous polyptych by Piero della Francesca shows (fig. 5), in this iconographic genre the Virgin

appears much taller than common human beings, thus reducing viewers to the size of children or even smaller.

22 Figure 5



Piero della Francesca, Polyptych of Misericordia: Madonna of Misericordia, 1460 ca, Museo Civico di Sansepolcro

[https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Piero\\_Pala\\_della\\_misericordia,\\_madonna\\_della\\_misericordia.jpg](https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Piero_Pala_della_misericordia,_madonna_della_misericordia.jpg)

- 23 The scale of this iconography is thus similar to the scale characterizing the relationship between the above-mentioned colossuses and their visitors.<sup>11</sup> In both cases, the basic value attributed to this relationship and communicated by the scale (among other semiotic devices, such as the outstretched arms-gesture) is the protection offered by the sacred figure. The use of scale thus has a pathemic impact not only in terms of magnificence, but also because it evokes the affection characteristic of the parent-child relationship.<sup>12</sup> This iconography also suggests that clothes should not be imagined as a single or monolithic englobing layer. Not only is the representation of certain naked body parts considered acceptable or normal in certain contexts or in relation to specific themes, but the gaze—or, in some cases, the whole person—of the observant actant is also authorized or required to penetrate inside the more external layers of clothing of the sacred “persona” without threatening or negating its sacredness or religious-institutional role.
- 24 Even though concentric and openable statues produced between the Middle Ages and Modernity represent several saints,<sup>13</sup> particular attention must be devoted to the Medieval iconography of the “Opening Virgin”, which can shed light on a further meaning of the body as a cover for a sacred and spiritual content:

Gold-painted wooden statues of the Virgin were often displayed on altars within monasteries or were used in private devotional contexts in the homes of the wealthy. In some cases a *Vierge Ouvrante* may have operated as a tabernacle or container for the actual Host. Even when the object did not literally contain the

Eucharist, it visually—and mechanically—demonstrated the way in which the believer gained access to the Christian God by means of his incarnation in Jesus and through the observant person's ingestion of Jesus in the Host, understood to be the body of Christ. Appealing to lay beholders, the *Vierge Ouvrante* offers an image of the cycle of creation and redemption and the cohabitation of male and female within a single form. (Brisman 2014: 2)

- 25 In this kind of artifacts, therefore, the obliteration of the inner levels of the body of the Virgin evokes the mysteries of the incarnation and of the Eucharist. In the latter, according to Catholic tradition, the body of the faithful becomes the container of the divine, i.e. the Host: the regime of obliteration proves to be an effective semiotic device to convey this idea of the body as a temple which serves to contain the sacred. It is also possible to hypothesize that a feminine body is particularly apt at this representation, due to its physiological capacity of hosting and making life grow inside it. In this kind of images, therefore, the inside works as a metaphorical representation of the spiritual interiority.<sup>14</sup>

### 3. Ostension

- 26 Concerning the regime of ostension, the analysis takes into consideration different strategies of representation of the layers of the sacred body, from the more external of the inner levels (the naked skin), to the more internal components (flesh and bones).

#### 3.1. Undressed bodies

- 27 In relation to the exhibition of the body, Catholic culture is deeply rooted in the value of modesty; indeed, this value can be traced back to the tale of the fall from Paradise in the Book of Genesis in which losing the state of innocence is connected to developing a sense of shame around nudity.<sup>15</sup> However, sacred art in all periods does involve naked bodies, or at least naked parts of the body, included in the representation of some recurring motifs such as the Garden of Eden, the Virgin Mary nursing the baby Jesus, and the spoliation of Saint Francis in the moment he publicly renounces his earthly goods. While nakedness has euphoric or neutral connotations in these motifs, in other cases it bears a strong dysphoric value: this is the case, for instance, in motifs of the fall from Eden, the last judgment, and the damned souls descending to or being punished in hell.<sup>16</sup> Probably the most powerful and certainly one of the most widespread ostension of nakedness in sacred art can be found in motifs of the Passion with their iconography of the “*Ecce homo*”, crucifixion and deposition from the cross. Of course, it is no accident that nakedness is used to illustrate these episodes of Jesus' story, as they are the most representative of his humanity and bodily mortality: depicting Jesus' suffering and dead body, totally—or almost totally—uncovered and exposed to the gaze of the viewer is a powerful strategy for conveying this idea of vulnerability and mortality and eliciting a strong empathic response.<sup>17</sup>
- 28 The principle of modesty, together with the transmission of a social meaning, is fundamental to the clothing code that the clergy follow in that religious garments must immediately indicate the status of the subject wearing them. As such, they have an *institutional* nature. Religious subjects are presented first of all as playing a *role* (priest, bishop, etc.), and only secondarily as individuals with their own personal features. In this sense, a religious person appears as a *persona* in the more ancient meaning of this

term as mask or social role, rather than the more recent and post-Romantic meaning of unique and unrepeatable individual (Mauss 1938). This tendency is particularly accentuated in the case of liturgical clothes: they englobe the body, minimizing its presence and leaving uncovered only the face and hands, that is, the body parts that play the main role in communicating and performing ritual. Part of the institutional meaning of the clergy's clothing is their untouchability: touching, altering, or lifting these clothes so as to bare the "englobed" body to the viewer's gaze are acts that bear a revolutionary and blasphemous significance. In this sense, liturgical and institutional clothes are indispensable devices for constructing the sacredness of the religious person, if we understand "sacredness" in its meaning of separateness and unattainability.<sup>18</sup>

- 29 When the body parts of members of the Church are exhibited, this act is felt to be marked in relation to the prevailing tendency to cover as much as possible. These marked uncoverings can be either functional or aimed at the mortification of the flesh and humiliation of vanity. This is the case, for instance, with the bare feet required among Mendicant orders and male tonsure in the monastic tradition. In other cases, it is more difficult to distinguish between functionality and humiliation: for instance, the reason why many female orders oblige nuns to shave their heads even though they wear a veil can be explained as meeting both the functional requirements of hygiene and the need to mortify feminine beauty and vanity. The act of undressing to subsequently wear religious garments is well regulated by the liturgy, and the details of this act are defined by the different religious orders. The coding of this act also has a parallel in iconography, where this topos is closely connected to the idea of leaving the earthly world, of a radical change of life, even symbolic death, that is to say, conversion (Zarri 2021: 25). These connotations are thoroughly represented in the exemplary stories of Saint Francis and Saint Martin<sup>19</sup> and in the relative iconography.
- 30 The cultural tendency to identify a figure's clothes with their institutional *persona*, especially counterposed to nakedness as a revelation of the vulnerability and mortality of the individual's body, is still quite common today. A perfect example is the sculpture representing Joseph Ratzinger created by Jago (aka Jacopo Cardillo), the young artist appointed by the Vatican in 2009 to create a sculpture of Pope Benedict XVI. The Vatican refused to take possession of the statue on the grounds that it did not respect the established parameters, but it nevertheless praised the artistic quality of the piece and indeed Jago was awarded the Medaglia Pontificia award in 2012 for his work. The sculpture, called "Habemus Papam", was also displayed in the Italian pavilion at the 2011 Venice Biennale. When the pope abdicated in 2013, however, Jago decided to "undress" the figure of Benedict XVI so as to reveal the humanity hidden underneath his institutional robes. Ratzinger's vulnerability is signified by a highly realistic representation—or rather *ostension*—of his naked body, complete with wrinkles, extreme thinness and fragility. Jago consequently changed the title of the statue, to "Habemus Hominem".<sup>20</sup> The media readily grasped the provocative and revolutionary significance of this artistic operation and devoted a great deal of attention to it; its significance was even augmented by the metaphorical fragmentation of the statue when Jago decided that the piece would be sold off in portions, each with a minimum value of 20 Euros, through the start-up "Feral Horses".<sup>21</sup> In this case, the strategy of ostension of the naked body of Benedict XVI gains a surplus of meaning and efficacy

through the syntagmatic relationship between the statue before and after the undressing act of the sculptor.

- 31 A further trace of this tendency can be detected in literature as well, but this time moving in the opposite direction: in novels and tales representing characters whose social or religious *role* comes to prevail over their individual subjectivity, these characters tend to be represented as statues and/or undergo a process of petrification. Such petrification can be considered a hyperbolic representation of the institutionalizing power of clothing, as these serve to diminish or even fully neutralize the mutability and impermanence characterizing the sphere of the body and emotions by fixing the *persona* in hieratic clothes and, metaphorically, in the static pose of a statue. As Leone (2015: 134) observes, the mythological and literary imagery of humans becoming statues and statues becoming live beings is connected to a dialectics of life and death:

Not only tales in which the bronze of statues turns into the flesh of the body underline the human disquiet about the relation between reality and appearance, between life and its simulacra; also tales in which this passage takes place contrariwise emphasize it. They are usually anguished tales: the human body, real life, turns, due to a prodigious event [...] into creature of stone, deprived of speech and vital breath. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* provide a compendium of these transformations; the most famous ones are those provoked by Medusa's gaze. If the first series of tales, where inert matter becomes alive, [...] voice human desire and simultaneously fear of replacing God, or even surpassing Him in power, petrification tales are probably related to the unconscious thought of death, of the human destiny to return to dust [...]. Going back from life to death, from the reality of life to its mere appearance (like a corpse that no longer hosts any vital breath) is the terrifying thought that recurs in tales of bodies turned into stone.

- 32 It is not surprising, therefore, that in various cases—at least in 20<sup>th</sup>-century Italian literature—the petrified characters are sometimes elderly men and women representing traditional, outdated social orders. For instance, the old marquis in the novel *La stagione della caccia* by Andrea Camilleri (1992) appears as a motionless statue encrusted with dust. Another example is the old lady embodying traditional aristocracy in decay in the novel *Le armi l'amore* by Emilio Tadini (1963): this elderly woman resembles a wooden statue, fixed or even nailed to her armchair-throne. In the novels by Camilleri and Tadini, the “petrified” individuals appear annihilated under the mantle of their social role, surviving as monuments of the past with only a spark of life left inside them.<sup>22</sup> In the case of the tale “Pietrificazione” by Italo Alighiero Chiusano (1989), however, the petrification involves a young man who, distressed by a romantic misadventure, climbs up onto the Milan Cathedral, makes his way onto a small platform and stands there, wearing a cap that makes him look like a friar. Progressively, year after year, his body loses its fleshly consistency and becomes stone while all the memories of his life fade away except for the one of his unlucky love: even in this case, therefore, the fixation entailed by petrification coincides with an attenuation of the subjectivity, especially if we understand subjectivity in the Greimasian sense of a subject defined by the fact of taking on certain values and then acting to realize them (Greimas and Courtès 1979). Chiusano's tale is significant for the purposes of my argument here in that it adopts an inner perspective: the narrator is placed inside the petrifying and then petrified body and shares with the reader his perspective. That is, he looks out from above (from the wall of the cathedral) and from inside the statue which is his body. A similar reversal of the perspective typical of

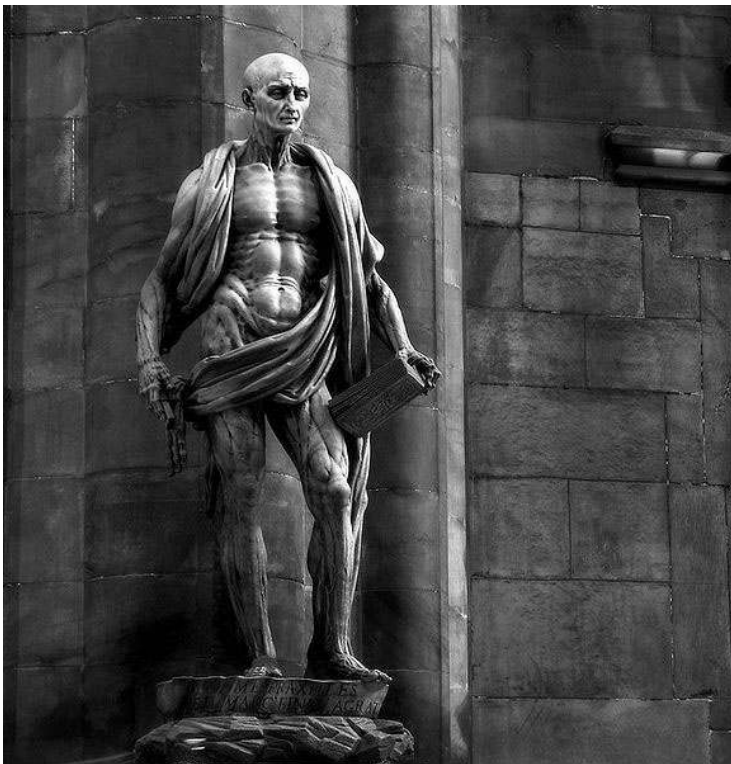


sacred art can be found in *Nostra Signora dei Turchi*, a novel by Carmelo Bene (1966) in which the protagonist identifies with the relics of the martyrs of Otranto and, in one particular passage, even takes on the perspective of the relics themselves from where they sit inside the reliquary.<sup>23</sup>

### 3.2. Flesh and bones

- 33 While on one hand the religious body dressed in institutional or liturgical clothes is considered untouchable and its unveiling or ostension appears provocative and may be interpreted as a desecrating act, on the other hand the Catholic culture has a strong tendency to exhibit the *inside* of the bodies of sacred people such as saints. This is the case with certain martyrological iconographic themes representing the moment of torture in which the inside of the saint's martyred body becomes visible, such as the evisceration of Saint Erasmus of Formia<sup>24</sup> or the flayed Saint Bartholomew the Apostle. The latter constitutes a particularly interesting example because, in several cases, his entire figure is represented without the skin and he wears the detached skin like a cloak: the most external layer of the body, in this case, is represented as a piece of clothing, i.e. an external covering for the body, and this fiction perhaps renders the extreme nakedness of the flesh less shocking and horrifying (fig. 6).

- 34 Figure 6



Saint Bartholomew flayed, Marco d'Agate, 1562, Dome of Milan  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:San\\_Bartolomeo\\_Scorticato.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:San_Bartolomeo_Scorticato.jpg)

- 35 Another instance of exhibiting inner parts of the body is relics, as these are often parts of the body of the saint such as bones, tissues and blood.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, a veritable “aesthetics of bones” can be seen in Catholic culture, especially in certain historical epochs such as the Counter-Reformation period and Baroque. Examples of this

aesthetics are bones used in artistic compositions, such as on the walls of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century ossuary of the church of San Bernardino alle Ossa in Milan,<sup>26</sup> and the so-called Catacomb Saints, exhumed from the catacombs in Rome in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, decorated with gold and precious jewels and venerated as relics all over Europe until the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Koudounaris 2013).

- 36 The Catacomb Saints provide an interesting object for reflection here. The way they are decorated surely sets up the relic-reliquary relationship described by Leone (2011, 2014), namely the act of veiling the relic and inserting it inside a semiotic device so as to deviate its meaning and people's veneration away from the body itself—with the associated risk of falling into idolatry—in order to direct the thoughts of the faithful towards transcendence. What is particular is that, in cases such as the famous relic of Saint Pancratius (fig. 7), the skeleton is arranged so as to appear as an entire body dressed in clothing but in such a way that portions of the bones remain visible. These visible portions evoke not the semantic field of nakedness, but the more intimate and “sacred” semiotic space of the interior of the body, of the bones. The relic of Saint Pancratius presents an external englobing layer composed of metallic matter and evoking the character's religious role (see e.g. the nimbus and military clothes of Saint Pancratius, a converted Roman soldier), and the observant actant is able to perceive the inside of this englobing layer: these features make the representative strategy of this relic comparable to that characterizing the hollow colossuses. However, there are important differences between these artifacts. In the case of the hollow colossuses, for instance that of Saint Charles, firstly the inside bears scarce iconic value and surely not an indexical one, secondly visitors find themselves in an empty space shaped like the negative or mold of the external form of the saintly figure, and finally they have the choice of whether or not to access the inside (their intentionality is demonstrated by the fact that, for instance for, the colossus in Arona, they have to cross the threshold of the door at the base of the statue and, nowadays, must also buy a ticket to enter the statue). The relic of Saint Pancratius, in contrast, immediately places the observant before a simultaneous view of both the outside and the inside, with no chance to choose. This inside is remotely either topologically or semiotically hollow; rather, it displays the most precious portion of the composition, endowed—like all relics—with an indexical value, namely the bones presented as authentic parts of the body of the saint. A similar meaning effect also characterizes other types of anthropomorphic reliquaries, such as those representing limbs. These reliquaries display various englobing strategies that differ in terms of the degree of visibility granted to the bone inside.<sup>27</sup> Reliquaries of this kind are also interesting because they exemplify different levels of integration of human (organic) and artificial (inorganic) matter in constructing the devotional—and artistic—object/body.

- 37 Figure 7



Relic of Saint Pancratius, Historical Museum of St. Gallen

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:Katakombenheiliger\\_pankratius.jpg?uselang=it](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:Katakombenheiliger_pankratius.jpg?uselang=it)

- 38 A further mechanism of ostension based on an indexical relationship between the body and its sign is constituted by the molds and prints and by some *acheiropoieton* images, which for the believer represent authentic traces of the sacred body or images authored by superhuman agents.<sup>28</sup> Didi-Huberman (2007: chapter 5), for example, provides relevant reflections about the Shroud of Turin, and reports some of the scientific experiments it inspired (for instance concerning the position of the nails on Jesus' body during the crucifixion). Gabriele Marino (2020) also provides semiotic reflection about the rhetoric of the scientific discourse in the debates surrounding the Shroud, and this leads me to mention a further way in which indexical representations of the inside of the sacred body are produced in contemporary culture, namely through scientific and medical images, such as radiographies. This is evident for instance in the case of Saint Pio of Pietrelcina: the acts of his cause for canonization contain a corpus of images, photographs and radiographs, of his stigmata, which were evaluated by a technical-medical commission, thus becoming part of a medical and legal discourse (Galofaro 2020). This medical-legal exposition of the sacred body, even in its internal layers, can surely be considered as a contemporary form of ostension, a further type of "negative" connected to an idea of authenticity.
- 39 The ostension of the inside of the body is closely related to the representation of the fragmented body. Reliquaries are not the only case in which the englobing substance prevents the observant's gaze from embracing the wholeness of the englobed object (this is also evident in the case of the relic of Saint Pancratius), but more in general representing the inside comes up against a structural or physical limit in that it is very difficult to represent the body's inside to the same degree of complexity and thoroughness that the observant is able to enjoy in views of the exterior of the body.

Such visibility is achieved in part by anatomic tables, for instance, but in this case as well each view represents only a single system (e.g. the muscular system, nervous system, etc.) rather than the totality of the inside. Despite its tendency to extreme realism, the religious culture under consideration is, of course, not specifically interested in anatomic concerns per se, and does not even try to provide a thorough representation of the inside; rather, it imbues the display of the single part with evocative meaning. Parts of the body appear—again—in martyrological iconography. For instance, the iconographies of Saint Lucia and Saint Agata typically represent these two saints with the parts of their bodies that were the object of martyrdom (respectively, the eyes and the breasts) separated from their figure, and often arranged on a tray held and displayed by the saint herself. A somewhat similar effect is found in the Christological and Marian iconography of the heart. Since at least the Modern age, it has been particularly common for artists to represent Jesus holding, in his hand, his own heart emanating rays of light and there is also a rich iconography representing Mary's disembodied heart, sometimes pierced by swords.<sup>29</sup> Another example is the widespread devotional practice of offering *ex voto* shaped like the specific part of the body (limbs, organs etc.) in relation to which the donor hopes to receive grace.

- 40 Traces of the aesthetics of the fragmented and de-composed body in relation to Christian-derived religious imagery can also be found in contemporary art, for instance the piece *Imitatio Christi* by Roberto Cuoghi shown in 2017 at the Venice Biennale. This artwork, made up of different settings and displaying a rich variety of fragments representing parts of the human body, contains in particular a rough representation of a human body standing on a metallic table in a position evoking crucifixion; this body is covered and uncovered with englobing layers of different kinds of material and is made visible in various phases of alteration, decomposition, and fragmentation.<sup>30</sup>

## 4. Ostension or ostentation?

- 41 If “obliteration” indicates the representative regime by which the body is evoked but its representation is based on abstraction, i.e. strategies that attenuate or eliminate iconicity, and “ostension” indicates the exhibition of the body, taking place through a plurality of strategies for regulating access to the englobed and inner layers, it is possible to hypothesize a third representative regime, which can be called “ostentation” and consists in the marked, exaggerated ostension of the sacred body. “Ostension” and “ostentation” are separated by a threshold that shifts according to different moral and aesthetic sensibilities.
- 42 The regime of ostentation is characterized by a marked use of a standardized iconography, which the artworks explicitly refer to but at the same time deliberately exceed. For instance, Maria Giulia Dondero (2007: 86, my translation) analyzes the photographic corpus of portraits of saints by Pierre et Gilles, Olivier Richon, and Jan Saudek and shows how the works composing this corpus are based on a “general mechanism that we will call of ostension/ostentation of their sacrality”. According to Dondero, these photographs representing saints tend to stress traditional iconography so much that they create an effect of overexposure and consequently the “death” of sacredness. In these cases, ostentation can be considered as a proper representative regime, as a textual, enunciational strategy that an analysis developed through a semiotic methodology can identify with a certain precision. However, in other cases,

“ostentation” appears as a regime of fruition, of reception of the artworks. In these cases, to paraphrase a famous aphorism, we could say that “ostentation” is in the eye of the beholder. The contemporary observer of the relics of Saint Pancratius, for instance, or of Saint Bartholomew’s statue, may not have the same aesthetic and moral sensibility of the observant actant entailed in an artwork produced centuries ago. The shifts in the cultural paradigms at the base of the representability of the human body determine a change in the way the artworks making the interior of the sacred body perceivable are interpreted. What in certain epochs is considered neutral “ostension”, in others can be considered marked “ostentation”, thus resulting disturbing from a moral and/or aesthetic perspective.

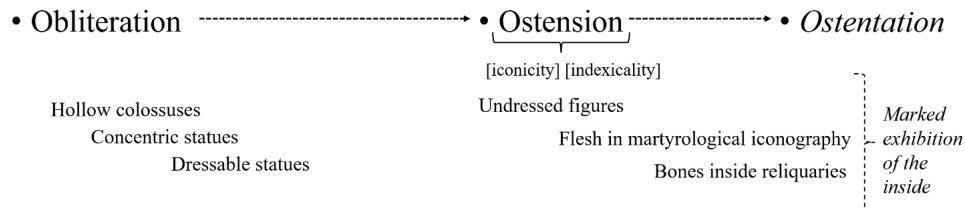
- 43 Ostentation, especially as a representative regime, can be detected through a set of marks. Dondero (2007) refers in particular to an overly emphasized use of iconographic themes and stereotypes. Beside these marks, the corpus analyzed herein suggests that an effect of ostentation can also derive from the syntagmatic relation between similar texts (it is the case for instance of Jago’s sculpture, before and after the operation of undressing); the fact of displaying immediately the inner layers of the body without leaving to the observant a freedom to choose how deep to see, as in the case of the martyrological iconography displaying the saints’ flesh with no veil, and of the reliquaries such as Saint Panchratius’. In the latter, the mark also concerns the indexical nature of the englobed layer: the mark here challenges the thresholds of visibility of the dead body, which vary from culture to culture and across time. If Baroque sensibility, for instance, accepted and even evaluated positively the display of bones (mainly for moral purposes, as in the theme of the *memento mori*, but also with a relevant aesthetic component), in our age the exhibition of real dead bodies, or of parts of them, is not tolerated as much.
- 44 The notion of ostentation can also shed light on different aspects and revisitations of what I called “aesthetics of bones” (see above). Indeed, echoes of this taste can be found in the mystical literature and hagiography, where descriptions of the bony bodies of saints devastated by fasting and illness are quite numerous (Ponzo 2021). Another instance is provided by stylite hermits—also called pillar-saints—, who openly displayed their extreme thinness by living on the top of a column. Anthropologist Niola (2015) argues that this practice’s goal was to theatrically show the martyrdom of abstinence to which these hermits voluntarily underwent. According to Simona Stano (2022: 216, my translation), this “regime of exposition” (in the sense of Fontanille 1989) is founded “on ‘wanting to inform’ (of the stylite’s body) and on ‘not being able not to observe’ (of those to whom this body is exposed), which often ends with death, also ostentatious, not to evoke suffering but, on the contrary, to allude to its overcoming and the resurrection of the flesh.” Stano (2022) and Niola (2015) compare this regime with the emphasized display of thinness characterizing the culture of the contemporary “homo dieteticus”, and in particular the aesthetics of the body of the top models, and identify a similar strategy of ostentation of bony bodies.

## 5. Conclusion

- 45 The research presented herein takes into consideration the representation of the inner layers of the body of sacred characters in artworks of Christian-Catholic inspiration, and individuates three representative regimes that can be schematized as follows:



– (Figurativity in the representation of the inner layers of the sacred body) +



- 46 These representations give rise to different kinds of perception: in certain cases, the perception of the sacred body happens exclusively through view, in other cases touch is also allowed (for instance, in some circumstances it is possible to touch the relics, dressable statues, etc.); the engagement of the senses is perhaps even more intense in the case of hollow colossuses where the whole body of the visitor is able to *enter* the statue. The tensions emerging from the analysis of the representative regimes identified can be ascribed to the general problems of the representability of the sacred—which ultimately cannot be fully perceived, seen, and penetrated—and of the perennial desire to give the sacred a material representation. This basic tension sheds light on the unresolvable oscillation between the two poles of obliteration (which provides access to the inside of the sacred body but abstracting from its materiality and figurativity) and ostentation (which satisfies the senses but ends up “killing” the sacred). The terms of this tension are of course regulated by the variables of the aesthetic taste, the moral thresholds regulating the visibility of the body and the issue of the institutional authority.
- 47 Regarding the latter, it can be useful here to consider the artworks which have been the subject of my analysis in relation to the concept of “sacred art”, such as it is defined by the Church. As specified in the dogmatic constitution *Gaudium et spes*, issued during the Second Vatican Council:
- [...] the arts are also, in their own way, of great importance to the life of the Church. They strive to make known the proper nature of man, his problems and his experiences in trying to know and perfect both himself and the world. They have much to do with revealing man’s place in history and in the world; with illustrating the miseries and joys, the needs and strengths of man and with foreshadowing a better life for him. Thus they are able to elevate human life, expressed in multifold forms according to various times and regions.
- 48 According to the Church, therefore, sacred art should illustrate the nature of the human being and evoke theological mysteries. The distinction between ostension and ostentation is partly connected to this idea of “sacred art”. The mechanisms of obliteration take a specific meaning when the figurative representation of the inside of the body would violate the institutional role—the “persona”—of a religious character such as a saint canonized by the Church (e.g. Saint Charles) or a pope (e.g. Benedict XVI). At the same time, however, the humanity and the body (skin, flesh and bones) of religious characters are displayed without veils in themes connected for instance to the Passion, to martyrdom, or in the cult of mortal remains of the saints. This tension informs Christian theology from Antiquity. As Didi-Huberman (2007) claims, the Christian mystery of the Incarnation deeply influences a religious imagery in which the vision of the flesh (especially of the wound, of the suffering flesh, and of the maternal womb) and the multisensorial perception of the inside of the body are recurring and

fundamental features. This tension is of course also animated by the axiology opposing body and spirit, which leads to strategies of obliteration such as the metaphorical representation of the inside practiced by the opening statues, which substitute the body of the sacred character with metaphorical representations of spiritual qualities and mysteries. A further tension governs the relationship between obliteration and ostension: while obliteration deprives of figurativity the representation of the inside, ostentation, to use an expression by Didi-Huberman (2007: *Ouverture*), characterizes “open images” which exasperate anthropomorphism to its limit, to the point of “reversing it”: thus, extremes end up by overlapping.

- 49 While this article focuses on a very specific matter, the representative regimes it identifies and explores can be extended—*mutatis mutandis*—beyond the corpus analyzed herein and the religious culture under consideration. For instance, the representation of the tension between obliteration and ostentation displays specific features in the artistic representation of the mystical ecstasy: many sculptures represent the intimate turmoil by the deformation and the pleats of the clothes and by the exhibition of parts of the mystic’s body. If the passage from obliteration to ostension relocates sacredness from the (institutional) clothes to the flesh, this means that the sacralization of the flesh derives from two different but complementary paths: suffering versus pleasure, which find a paradoxical coexistence in mystical experience and discourse.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, even though the tendency to ostension is undoubtedly particularly marked in Catholic culture, not only mechanisms of obliteration, ostension and ostentation can be detected in contemporary secular art featuring religious themes, but also in parts of the semiosphere largely independent from the traditional domain of institutionalized religion, as in the case of the “religion” of the contemporary “homo dieteticus” (Stano 2022, Niola 2015) and the relative over-exposition of bony bodies. Indeed, each culture has its own thresholds of representability of the human body (for instance concerning the exhibition or representation of dead bodies, fragmented bodies, and inner parts of the body), which constitute different, in some cases even contrasting, interpretative parameters in the way the artworks are received and interpreted. An enlarged reflection should surely take into consideration the specificities of each culture, but at the same time could try to use the idea of the sacred as a transversal category governing the strategies of representation of the human body, thus verifying if and how the visibility of inner layers responds, as in the cases considered here, to a delicate equilibrium between the exigence of representation of sacredness—which is by definition something ineffable and beyond ordinary experience—and the risk to “kill” the sacred if the representational regime is too marked with reference to specific thresholds.

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## NOTES

1. This paper is part of the NeMoSanctI project funded by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (grant agreement No. 757314).
2. On the idea of *threshold* from a semiotic perspective see Zilberberg (1993), on the idea of *visual threshold* see Didi-Huberman (2007: Overture).
3. See e.g. Janowitz (2021) concerning verbal language and Dondero (2007, 2008) about visual representations.
4. Didi-Huberman's idea of “open image” does not coincide with Umberto Eco's idea of “open work”, as claimed in Didi-Huberman (2007: Overture).
5. <https://www.ambrosiana.it/chi-siamo/gli-altri-volti-dellambrosiana/colosso-san-carlo-arona/>.
6. <https://www.statuasancarlo.it/the-statue/>.
7. Another example is the statue of the Madonna of the Rocciamelone, a colossal statue positioned on the top of a 3,538-meter-high mountain in Northern Italy: for a semiotic discussion of the meaning of this statue in relation to its geographical and spatial position, see Ponzo and Galofaro (2021). The considerations outlined there about the meaning of the protective gesture of the Virgin's outstretched arms can also be applied to the blessing gesture of the Saint Charles colossus.
8. A comprehensive view of the statue is available in this video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PPLOCT2wRJo>.
9. Pictures of the statue are available here: <https://www.walksinrome.com/blog/statue-of-pope-john-paul-ll-by-oliviero-rainaldi-rome>.
10. For an overview of these types of dressing statues, see the case studies collected in Bortolotti (2011) and Silvestrini (2021).
11. In particular, Rainaldi's statue appears reminiscent of the semiotic role played by the cloak in the iconography of the “Virgin of the Mercy”.
12. In the case of the colossuses, however, the meaning of the scale must also be considered in light of the statue's relationship to the surrounding landscape. For recent semiotic reflection on scale and, more in general, the format, see Migliore and Colas-Blaise (2022).
13. See e.g. the 19<sup>th</sup>-century openable statue of Johan of Arc (<https://www.anca-aste.it/it/asta-0019/scultura-francia-secolo-xix.asp>).



14. See Didi-Huberman (2007: *Ouverture*) for a discussion about this idea, in relation to both the iconography of the “Opening Virgin” and Erasmus’ reflection on the representations of the Silenus. Didi-Huberman (2007) presents an in-depth reflection about artistic issues connected with the mystery of incarnation. About the iconography of the “opening Virgin” see also Didron (1870).
15. For further semiotic reflections on the value of modesty and cultural codification of the acceptability of (various degrees of) nakedness, see Leone (2010) and Volli (2007).
16. About the nude in art, see Bussagli (2001) and Didi-Huberman (1999). Regarding the nude, art and mysticism, see Mathieu (1989).
17. By the way, this effect is thoroughly confirmed by mystical literature. A famous example is Theresa of Avila’s extreme reaction in front of the picture of the suffering Jesus covered in sores, the vision of which triggers her second conversion (*Vida* 9, 1).
18. Regarding the idea of sacredness, see Benveniste (1961: volume 2, book 3, chapter 1).
19. According to hagiography, the fact of renouncing his robes and remaining almost naked was a sign pointing to his definitive conversion: in this sense, the act of undressing can be read as an initiation (Longo 2021: 47-48).
20. A video made by the artist himself in which he carries out his operation of “unclothing” is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uqVwRookYJ0>; information about the statue is retrieved from <https://medium.com/feral-horses/il-busto-di-papa-benedetto-xvi-messo-a-nudo-da-jago-e-venduto-in-quote-5a725f7aac9e> and <https://www.lastampa.it/torino/appuntamenti/2018/10/31/news/habemus-hominem-il-busto-messo-a-nudo-del-papa-dimissionario-1.34056901>.
21. “Feral Horses” was an online platform where users could buy, sell and loan artworks in co-ownership. At the moment, the URL of its website [www.feralhorses.co.uk](http://www.feralhorses.co.uk) redirects users to another, similar platform: <https://www.artsquare.io/> (accessed November 10, 2021).
22. See Ponzo (2015, tome 1, pp. 129-138; tome 2, pp. 298-301, 342-346).
23. In relation to this point, see Ponzo (2019).
24. Painted for instance by Nicholas Poussin in 1628 (Vatican Museums), see here: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nicolas\\_Poussin\\_-\\_Le\\_Martyre\\_de\\_Saint\\_%C3%89rasme.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nicolas_Poussin_-_Le_Martyre_de_Saint_%C3%89rasme.jpg).
25. The most famous example of the latter case is Saint Januarius’ blood exhibited each year in Naples.
26. The official website of San Bernardino alle Ossa, with the history of the church and a photo-gallery of the ossuary: <https://www.sanbernardinoalleossa.it/>.
27. For instance, in the category of reliquaries shaped like clothed arms and hands, in some specimens the realistic representation of the clothing covering the arm is interrupted by a transparent panel displaying the bone inside (as in the reliquary of Saint Luke’s arm, part of the Treasure of Saint Marc in Venice), in others the bone is fully covered and only accessible through a monstrance which consists in a part of the covering panel that can be removed under certain, limited circumstances (such as with the 14<sup>th</sup>-century reliquary of Saint Anne’s arm in Genoa’s Museum of Saint Lawrence’s Treasure), while others are made of transparent material, thus making the bone visible nearly in its entirety (like the reliquaries of Saint Ludwig of Toulouse’s arm and Saint Luke the Evangelist’s arm at the Louvre museum), cf. Menato (2017) and Ameri (2019).
28. For an overview of acheiropoieton signs in different religions, see Monaci (2011), for a focus on acheiropoieton in Christianity, see Lingua (2011).
29. This imagery is connected to mysticism. For instance, the visions of Saint Marguerite Alacoque (1647-1690) played a crucial role in the diffusion of the cult venerating the Sacred Heart of Jesus and related iconography. For a semiotic analysis of the iconography of Jesus’ Sacred Heart, see Proni (2022).

30. See the photo gallery here: <https://www.robortocuoghi.com/artworks/imitatio-christi/>. For a semiotic analysis of this complex artwork, see Bove and Garuglieri (2018). Another contemporary artist representing fragmented bodies is Igor Mitoraj, who takes inspiration from the colossal statues of the Antiquity and their ruins – the ones characterizing the landscape of many Roman and Greek archaeological sites—to create works such as “Eros bendato” (<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mitoraj-with-person-in-sculpture.jpg>) involving a large, hollow head the interior of which is freely accessible to visitors. Mitoraj’s work has in common with the hollow colossuses analyzed herein not only the possibility of accessing the inside of the head and looking out from the statue’s eyes, but also the meaning effect granted by its large scale.

31. I thank Jacques Fontanille (personal communication) for this reflection. On mystical discourse, see Solís Zepeda (2016).

## ABSTRACTS

This paper presents an overview of the main semiotic issues surrounding the representation of the inside of the sacred body in Christian-Catholic material culture and art, in particular sculpture. The study of a wide range of artworks and devotional objects provides the grounds for applying, and sometimes questioning, well-consolidated semiotic notions such as Greimasian topologic oppositions and leads to an improved understanding of the strategies regulating the visibility of the sacred body in the culture under consideration. In particular, three representative regimes are identified and discussed. The first, obliteration, consists in making the inner level perceivable, but in an abstract way, deprived of figurativity (as in the case of hollow colossuses, concentric statues and dressable statues); the second, ostension, consists in the representation of the inside through strategies based on either iconicity or indexicality (respectively, for instance, in martyrological iconography and in artworks displaying relics); the third, ostentation, consists in a marked form of ostension, either as a textual strategy deliberately stressing traditional and stereotyped religious iconography or perceived as such by the observer based on moral and aesthetic thresholds culturally determined.

Cet article présente une réflexion sur les principales questions sémiotiques posées par la représentation du corps sacré dans la culture matérielle et l’art chrétiens-catholiques. Le point de départ pour cette réflexion est l’analyse d’un cas d’étude constitué par le colosse de Saint Charles Borromeo à Arona (Italie), une œuvre d’art du 17<sup>e</sup> siècle. L’article analyse ce colosse dans le contexte de l’esthétique du corps dans la tradition catholique et met aussi en évidence l’influence de cette esthétique sur l’imaginaire et l’art contemporains. L’étude d’un vaste corpus d’œuvres d’art et d’objets dévotionnels permet d’appliquer, et certaines fois de remettre en question, des notions bien établies en sémiotique, telles que les oppositions topologiques greimasienne, et conduit à une compréhension plus approfondie des stratégies appliquées à la régulation de la visibilité du corps sacré dans la culture concernée. De cette manière, ce travail se propose d’apporter une contribution dans un champ d’étude qui a récemment vu d’importants progrès, représentés par exemple par les recherches de Leone sur les reliques, les reliquaires et les systèmes respectifs de leur dévoilement ainsi que les recherches de Dondero sur l’ostentation du sacré.

## INDEX

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