

Gods Among Us: Anatomical Devotional Icons in the Medieval Examined through the Lens of New Materialism

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ABSTRACT

Both China and Europe have independent traditions of crafting life-sized devotional icons of deities, specifically those believed to have once inhabited mortal human bodies such as Buddhas and Christ. In contrast to traditions of glorifying religious figures by depicting them at a monumental scale, these icons were built to reference the human body. Toward this aim they exhibit uncanny details that reference physical features such as skin, internal organs, and even bleeding wounds. This article discusses an Eastern and a Western example of “anatomical” devotional icons: the Buddha of Seiryōji, a 10th-century work created in China but currently on display in Japan, and the Cristo de Burgos, a “movable arms Christ figure” from 14th-century Spain. By comparing these two geographically distant devotional icons, this article demonstrates how the cultural context of an anatomical icon, including both a people’s spiritual belief system and their medical knowledge, must be understood to make sense of how these icons facilitated the experience of the sacred in a ritual context.

INTRODUCTION

The Buddha of Seiryōji and the Cristo de Burgos are life-sized sculpted devotional icons, which depict sacred figures believed to have once inhabited human bodies. The fact that they are both life-sized is striking. One would expect them to be either larger-than-life to demonstrate the power and importance of the sacred figures they depict, or smaller so as to be portable. The fact that they are life-sized appears to be a purposeful choice by their creators to make these objects appear human-like. This hypothesis is strengthened by the fact that both the Buddha of Seiryōji (see fig. 1), a 10th-century work made in China but currently on display in Japan, and the the Cristo de Burgos (see fig. 2), a “movable arms Christ figure” from 14th-century Spain, have other traits that reference living human bodies.¹ The Buddha of Seiryōji contains life-sized model of human internal organs, while the Cristo de Burgos has moveable limbs and realistic skin and hair. The two figures both display a collection of traits that reference human anatomy, giving them a human presence that invigorates their spiritual power.

The idea that objects can have a presence that translates into a specific experience for those interacting with the object is in line with the thinking of New Materialism. New Materialism is a way of thinking about objects which awards their material incarnation with agency and influence.² The concerns of New Materialism will be explored in this article’s discussion of the Buddha of Seiryōji and the Cristo de Burgos, including experiencing objects with multiple senses, materiality, movement, and ritual usage. By examining and comparing the characteristics of these anthropomorphic sculptures, it is argued that the naturalistic anatomical features of these objects enliven and empower them, ultimately allowing them to elicit both awe and respect in their viewers by depicting sacred figures as a living, tangible presence.

This article will consist of three sections. First, the Buddha of Seiryōji and the Cristo de Burgos will be put in historical context by means of comparison to other geographically and temporally contemporary artworks that are also noted for their anatomical traits.

The second section will delve into the mechanics of the Buddha of Seiryōji and the Cristo de Burgos that reference naturalistic anatomy. The article will conclude with a discussion of how these characteristics function within a ritual context in order to make the case that their anatomical traits—within the context of ritual—empower these objects spiritually.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The material culture of both China and Europe during the medieval period demonstrate the degree of medical and anatomical knowledge of their respective cultures. A key manifestation of these culture's medical knowledge is the visual symbology they use to convey medical concepts. The Buddha of Seiryōji and the Cristo de Burgos demonstrate their connection to anatomy by reflecting conventions of anatomical art from their respective cultures.

By the 10th century, the Chinese had a well-developed understanding of internal anatomy due in part to the findings of Yanluozi, a Daoist anatomist. Yanluozi produced a series of body charts entitled the *Charts of the Inner Realm* (see figs. 3 & 4), featuring depictions of the “magico-realistic inner torso” that demonstrates how 10th-century China understood human internal organs through the lens of their religious beliefs.³ For example, these depictions include references to Chinese numerology and alchemy (see fig.

3). They also include a multi-petal “flower” shape found frequently in Chinese depictions of internal organs (see fig. 4), often to represent the stomach (although in Yanluozi's renderings, they are placed where the lungs are located).⁴ Yanluozi's *Charts of the Inner Realm* demonstrate how spiritual teachings (in Yanluozi's case, Daoist teachings) are integrated into the 10th-century Chinese conceptualization of the internal torso.

The Chinese appear to have been the first to have made and employed anatomical mannequins.⁵ Anatomical mannequins made their first appearance during the Song dynasty (960-1279 C.E.), and continued to be produced through the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644 C.E.).⁶ Among the most famous Song Dynasty anatomical models are life-size bronze sculptures used to identify acupuncture points (see fig. 5), one of which even contained removable wooden organs, an inclusion which resembles the placement of cloth internal organs in the Buddha of Seiryōji. In Medieval China, the trend of inserting internal organs into devotional sculptures corresponds to the introduction of medical mannequins containing internal organs.⁷

In comparison to China, Europe was something of a late bloomer in the medical field. The first European mannequins clearly associated with the study of anatomy are a series of small ivory models with removable internal organs from the seventeenth century (see fig. 6). Most are about 15 cm in length,

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and were kept in small wooden boxes with velvet or satin cushioning. This class of miniature ivory anatomical models usually had removable ivory organs, occasionally painted in different colors in order to help differentiate them.⁸ While these mannequins demonstrate internal anatomical knowledge on par with the Chinese anatomical prints by Yanluozi, they postdate Yanluozi by seven centuries.

Anatomical mannequins in Europe postdate our object of interest, the Cristo de Burgos, by three centuries. However, the fourteenth century was a formative period for the study of anatomy in the West—the first formal studies and exploration of the human body known to have employed dissection, since the third century, were performed during this period. Anatomist and surgeon Montino de Luzzi was responsible for this return to dissection, and published many prints of internal organs in a folio entitled *Anathomia* (see fig. 7).⁹ The creation of the Cristo de Burgos corresponded with a renewed interest in anatomy, and perhaps even the beginning of a return to scientific medical inquiry in Europe.

At the same time as de Luzzi's renewed interest in anatomy (the early gothic), animated sculptures of Christ which had moveable joints, known as "moveable arm crucifixes," became very popular. Their popularity persisted throughout the Late Medieval period.¹⁰ They were differentiated from other crucifixes by the inclusion of anatomically correct mechanical joints at places on Christ's body, such as the shoulders and elbows. These joints were made of interlocking wooden units, with metal or wooden nails holding them together (see fig. 8).¹¹ Moveable arms crucifixes had the ability to be posed in lifelike configurations, intensifying their naturalism and making them appear more lifelike to worshippers.

THE ANATOMICAL TRAITS

One of the most lifelike of the class of objects referred to as moveable arms christ mannequins is the Cristo de Burgos, a moveable arms crucifix covered

completely in calf skin in order to conceal its mechanical joints and give the illusion of human skin (see fig. 2). The calfskin is overlaid on a thin layer of wool batting, giving the surface of the object the appearance and springy supple quality of human flesh. The result is a texture so lifelike that during the 17th century it was rumored that the Cristo de Burgos was covered with human skin.¹² The clear intention of allowing touch to be a critical element of the viewers' experience is one of many aspects of the Cristo de Burgos that are best understood through the lens of New Materialism. Contrary to how one would normally experience sculpture in a strictly visual sense, the Cristo de Burgos is meant to be experienced tactually as well as visually.

In addition to the Cristo de Burgos' lifelike skin, it stands apart from other moveable arm crucifixes through its use of real hair, attached to the head and beard of Christ with an adhesive (see fig. 9). Compared to the majority of moveable arms crucifixes that have their hair carved into the block of wood that composes their head, the animal hair attached to the Cristo de Burgos is notable for its attentive naturalism (see fig. 10).¹³ Additionally, the teeth and eyes of the Cristo de Burgos are intricately rendered with careful brushstrokes (see fig. 9). Unlike other, less detailed, moveable arm crucifixes which have a mask-like appearance, the Cristo de Burgos is expressive due to the careful rendering of its face (see fig. 10). The Cristo de Burgos distinguishes itself from other moveable arms crucifixes through its extreme attention to naturalism.

The Cristo de Burgos is intended not only to appear human-like; but also to remind viewers of the magnitude of Christ's suffering. The Cristo de Burgos is set apart from other moveable arm Christ sculptures by the graphic wounds covering its body in a greater quantity and with increased emphasis, compared to other moveable arms crucifixes (compare figs. 11 & 12).¹⁴ Thick dark drops of blood densely blanket the body of Christ, pouring from gashes across the body and the puncture wounds on Christ's hands and feet (see fig. 11 & 2). The gravity of these injuries is intensified by

the human-like appearance of the Cristo de Burgos making the injuries seem especially genuine, even gruesome. These wounds reference the physical body of Christ in a gambit to emphasize his suffering on the cross.

It is notable that the technology of life-size wooden sculptures with moveable joints appeared in the East long before its debut in Europe. In the 11th-century Liao dynasty, there are many examples of life-sized wooden mannequins with a cavity in the torso to store deposits of cremated remains (see fig. 13).¹⁵ The Liao dynasty mannequins are carved from individual solid pieces of wood connected by axle joints and socket joints, which can be used to pose the figure in different positions, making them very similar in construction to moveable arm crucifixes (compare fig. 13 & fig. 14).¹⁶ The hands and faces of Liao Dynasty mannequins are rendered with particular care, and contain more detail and more naturalistic curves than their plain boxy torsos, since only the hands and head would be shown when the mannequins were dressed (see fig. 15). In contrast, moveable arms crucifixes tend to be detailed throughout because Christ on the cross is typically depicted wearing only a loincloth (see fig. 2). Life-sized poseable mannequins in the East share the West's concern with naturalism, illustrating that there is a shared cross-cultural sense of what makes a sculpture lifelike.

The Cristo de Burgos contains a cavity in its torso as well. However, unlike the Liao dynasty mannequins, it does not hold ashes but instead contains a small metal vessel intended to contain animal blood. This vessel is positioned in such a way that the blood it contains will ooze from Christ's side wound.¹⁷ This creates a gory display capable of potently reminding viewers of the enormous suffering Christ experienced on the cross. The Cristo de Burgos not only resembles Christ, but also references the internal physicality of Christ's earthly body through the use of kinetic blood.

Unlike the Cristo de Burgos, the Buddha of Seiryōji is not poseable but does have other anthropomorphic characteristics. One of the biggest differences between

this object and the Song dynasty bronze acupuncture mannequins is in their posture and gesture (compare figs 1 & 5). Although it is difficult to see on the above-eye-level altarpiece upon which the Buddha of Seiryōji rests, the body of the sculpture actually leans forward quite noticeably (see fig. 16). Additionally, unlike the bronze acupuncture mannequin that has its arms stiffly positioned at its side, the Buddha of Seiryōji's hand is raised in a gesture of teaching.¹⁸ The combination of this hand gesture and the sculpture's forward leaning posture creates an engaged pose that feels much more lifelike than the clinical pose of the Song Dynasty bronze acupuncture mannequins.

The Buddha of Seiryōji sculpture also references medieval Chinese medical practice through the use of conventions native to the anatomically themed artwork of medieval China. The cavity (see fig. 17) of the Buddha of Seiryōji holds a variety of objects associated with religious offerings, such as mirrors, incense, prayers, prints, and coins (see fig. 18) intended to venerate and enhance the sacred power of the sculpture.¹⁹ However, the largest and most interesting set of objects contained within this cavity descend as much from the East's medical tradition as from its religious tradition. Within the Buddha of Seiryōji are placed nearly life-sized silk models of human internal organs.

These intricate models reflect China's medical knowledge of the internal torso as reflected in the prints of Yanluozi. The organs come in an array of flesh tones and are covered in inscriptions (see figs. 19 & 20). They have been crafted with such care and attention to detail that many scholars believe they can link the different models to the actual internal organs they represent, both because of the models' fidelity to actual internal organs and because they share conventions of other tools of medical instruction in China.²⁰ Internal organs, particularly the stomach, are often rendered in a multi-petal "flower" shape in Chinese Medieval art.²¹ The Buddha of Seiryōji's largest internal organ model takes this distinctive "flower" shape (see fig. 20), reflecting the conventions of Medieval Chinese

anatomical renderings (compare figs. 4 & 21). The Buddha of Seiryōji reflects the medical knowledge of medieval China in both its fidelity to the human form and its use of conventions common to Chinese Medieval anatomical art.

WITHIN THEIR RITUAL CONTEXT

As has been discussed, both the Cristo de Burgos and the Buddha of Seiryōji have formal linkages to anatomy, but it can be difficult to understand why they were made this way. For example, why does the Buddha of Seiryōji contain such precious and beautiful objects without displaying them? And why does the Cristo de Burgos have such a complex and fragile mechanism for movement? In order to make the case that the anatomical characteristics of these two objects are intended to enhance their spiritual power this article will now turn to discussing how those stylistic qualities come into play during the rituals in which these objects are venerated.

Among the earliest examples of moveable-arm Christ sculptures from the 14th century are examples of moveable-arm Christ figures paired with “Pietas,” sculptures of the Madonna mourning Christ’s crucifixion while holding her deceased son in her lap (see fig. 22). This indicates that an early rationale for moveable arm joints on sculptures of Christ was so that they could be transitioned from an arms-spread position when displayed on a cross to an arms-at-the-side position when placed in the arms of the Virgin during liturgical plays.²² However, the moveable joints of these sculptures were not purely utilitarian, since there are contemporary examples of mechanized devotional icons in which their movement is more theatrical than useful. For example, moveable arms crucifixes are contemporaneous with sculptures of the Madonna and child in which the Christ child has a moveable head positioned on a dowel wrapped with string, which is tugged on to change the position of the Christ child’s head (see fig. 23).²³ Animated devotional icons of Christ, became popular in the early gothic due

to their theatricality, reflecting an earlier European fascination with mechanics.²⁴

Although the mechanical aspects of moveable arms Christ sculptures may have been born out of a desire for novelty and theatricality, their subject and display locations emphasize that their purpose is one of religious devotion. The Cristo de Burgos spends the majority of its time displayed in the Cathedral of Burgos in Burgos, Spain. It is prominently displayed in the church, forming the focal point of the Chapel’s main altar (see fig. 24). This central placement insinuates that the Cristo de Burgos is meant to be looked at by worshippers, so that its outwardly apparent naturalistic qualities, such as its hair, lifelike skin, and gaping wounds, force onlookers to dramatically experience Christ’s passion. The mechanistic and naturalistic aspects of the Cristo de Burgos were chosen for religious reasons, namely animating the figure of Christ to provoke wonder and awe during religious ceremonies.

The Cristo de Burgos’ purpose as reflected in its design is best captured by its use in processions, in which the object is animated through its use in ritual. During religious festivals moveable arm Christ sculptures are paraded through the streets to the accompaniment of chants and song (see fig. 25). For example, movable arms crucifixes are often used during processions on Good Friday in which the crucifix is paraded through the streets, and at the end the Christ figure is removed to be laid to rest in a sepulcher. This ritual procession references the religious significance of Good Friday as the day Christ was crucified and buried.²⁵ These processions may even include the movable arms Christ sculpture being laid on the lap of an actress playing the Virgin Mary, harkening back to the early moveable arms Christ sculptures that were paired with Pietas.²⁶ The frenzy and movements of processions, as well as the proximity between the sculpture and believers during this ritual, enhances the drama imparted by the naturalism of this sculpture. This ultimately creates a spectacle which animates the statue, making the symbolic meaning it carries feel tangible and urgent.

In contrast to the public display of the Cristo de Burgos, the Buddha of Seiryōji is used in more meditative private worship. The sculpture is actually rarely seen, residing in a closed-off space in the Seiryōji Temple in Kyoto, Japan (see figs. 26 & 27). The object is only rarely viewed, and there is no indication that the items that reside within the sculpture are ever taken out for display. Rather, the objects within the sculpture are considered to enliven the sculpture merely by their presence within it, in particular the internal organs which are associated with Daoist teachings.²⁷ It is the materiality of the Buddha of Seiryōji and its internal inclusions which gives it its spiritual presence.

CONCLUSION

Anatomical knowledge informed how medieval people in both the East and the West chose to enliven their sacred depictions of the divine body. By understanding both the Cristo de Burgos and the Buddha of Seiryōji in their cultural and ritual context we can better understand what purpose lies behind their formal qualities which reference medical anatomical knowledge. New Materialism provides an object-oriented set of concerns through which to appreciate the spiritual power of these objects inherent in their physical forms.

The main difference in how these object's reference the anatomical is their concern for visibility. The Western object, the Cristo de Burgos, has its plainly visible references to anatomy. The calfskin covering the figure, its hair, and the gruesome wounds with dripping blood that cover the body, are all qualities that project outward, allowing the "humanness" of this depiction of Christ to be readily observed by those worshiping in its presence. In contrast, The Buddha of Seiryōji has its most striking reference to anatomy hidden from sight. Within the statue are painstakingly crafted silk models of internal organs which are highly realistic, especially when viewed in light of the anatomical knowledge of the day. These models and the offerings of incense and other things that accompany them are not meant to be

seen. It is materiality, not performance, that imbues the Buddha of Seiryōji with its vitality.

The ritual way in which these objects are venerated mirrors the public or private valence of their anatomical formal qualities. While the Cristo de Burgos is revered through public procession, accruing its power through being seen, the Buddha of Seiryōji is hidden from public view, gaining power through enigma. While these two objects are diametrically opposed in terms of how they are displayed and experienced, they both draw upon anatomical knowledge and the conventions of anatomical depiction to strengthen their lifelike presence.

Being understood as human in some way, or at least as alive, grants the objects the ability to animate their representation of Christ or Buddha. This in turn enhances their ability to elicit emotion and therefore their sacredness in the eyes of the viewer. They make these sacred figures feel tangibly present, allowing the worshipper to encounter the divine spirit "in the flesh."

NOTES

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Rachel wrote this manuscript in Spring 2016 for HART 376: East/West Medieval Visual Culture. Her research interest is ancient art, meaning artifacts that provide insight into the origin of symbolic thought. "Gods Among Us" was the first real art history research paper she wrote after recognizing that devotional icons and religious art in general can be overlooked as a source material for studying the origins of anatomical sciences and medicine. Through this paper, she found her interest in the subject of art history and will continue studying art history next semester at the University of Chicago as she pursues her doctorate. She would like to thank Rice Asian Studies Review for highlighting the unique histories and foundational contributions made by people from Asia.