



# The Allure of Agony

Pain and the Naked Maiden  
The Eroticism of Violence and Torture

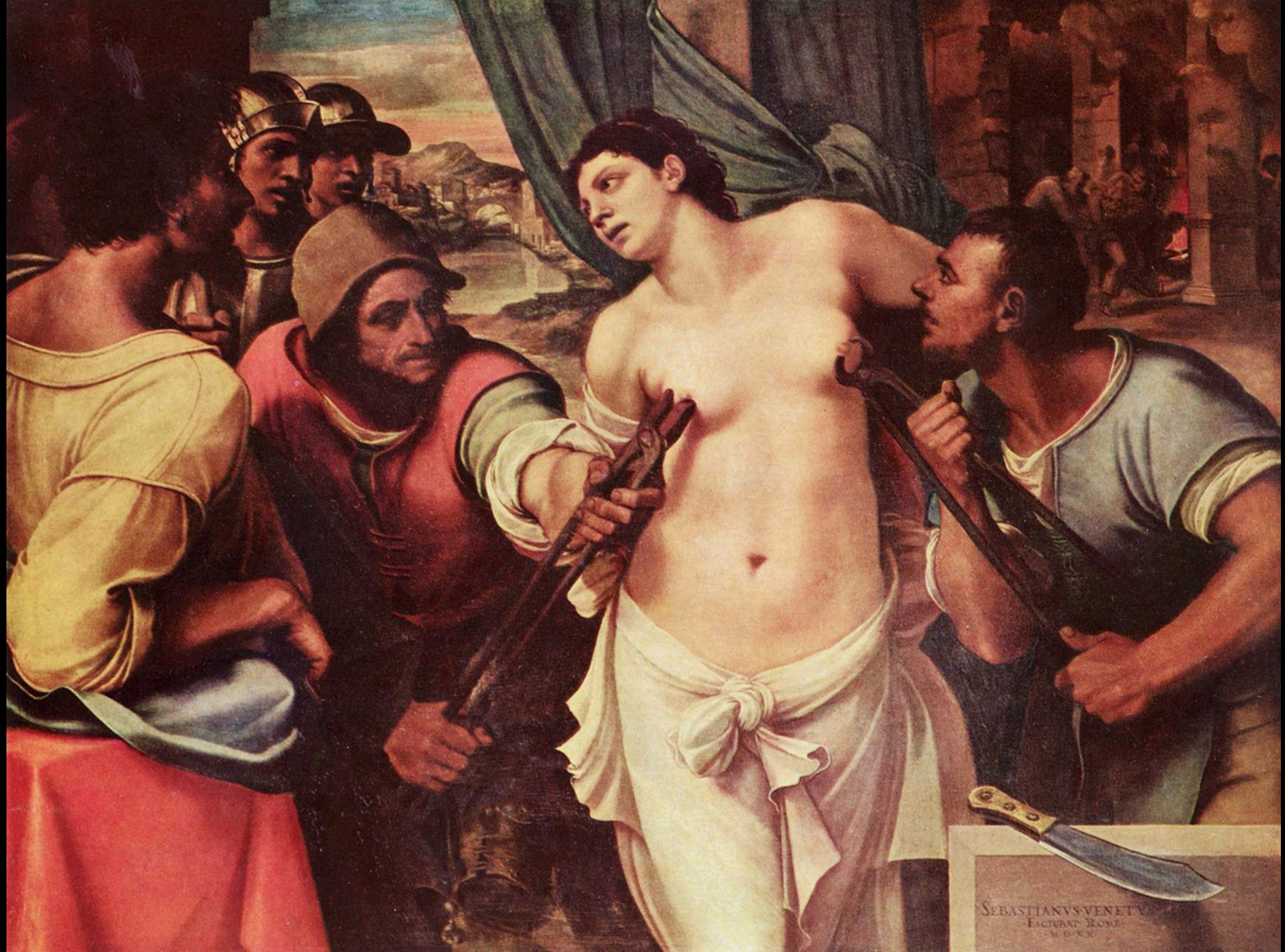
A Picture Essay by R. C. Smith

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Best viewed in full screen mode







Sebastiano del Piombo (1485–1547), Martyrdom of St. Agatha, 1520.

I'll never forget that moment, many decades ago in Firenze, when I walked into just another one of Palazzo Pitti's innumerable rooms with all their magnificent serene and pious paintings, and suddenly stood in front of this one – the expression of rapture on my face must have matched hers. And – this was long before the time of the Internet – they even sold picture postcards of it at the museum shop! Ah, those Italian vacations ...





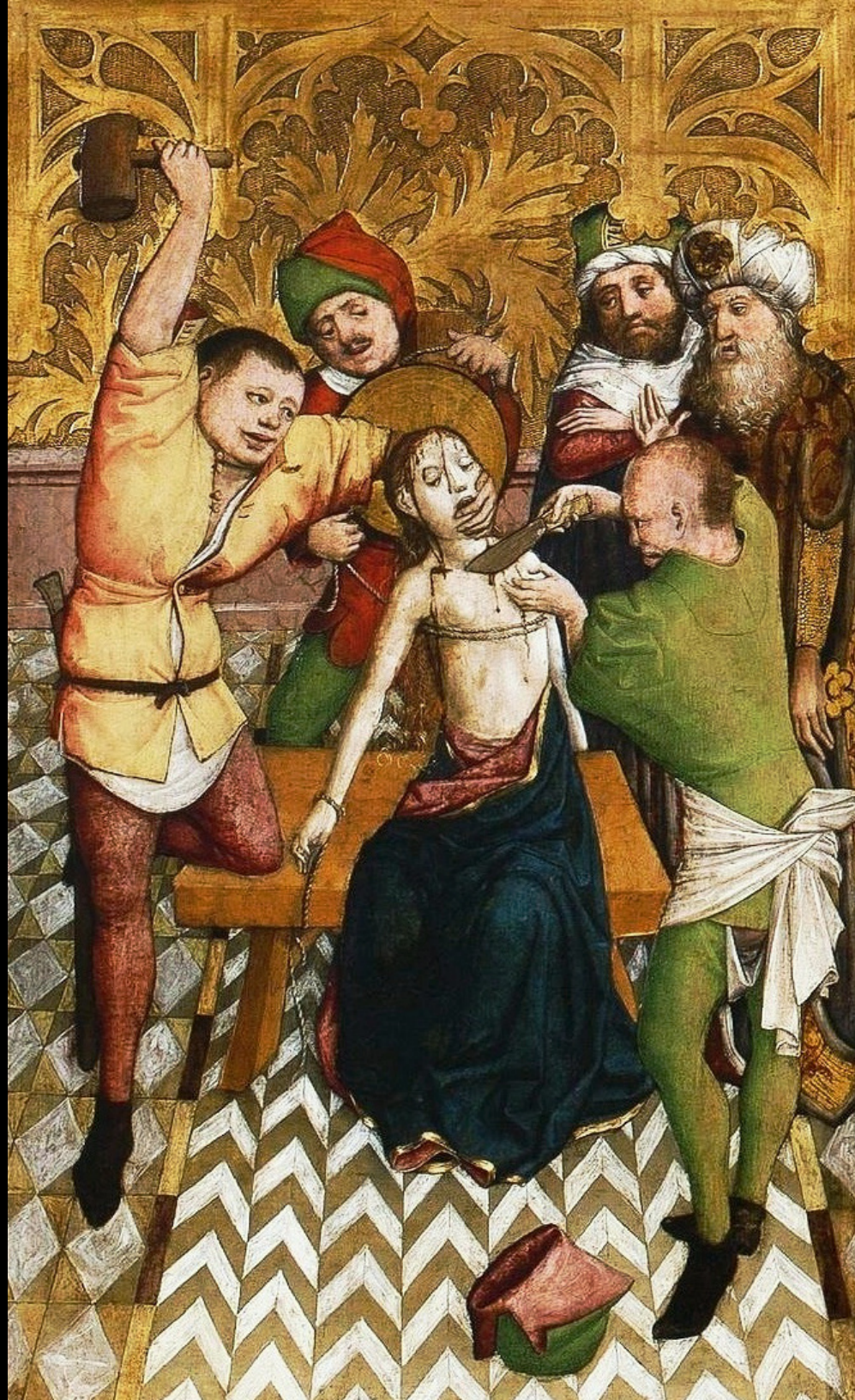


Francesco Guarino (1611–1651 or 1654), *Martirio di sant'Agata*, ca 1640.  
Chiesa parrocchiale di Sant'Agata Irpina, Solofra.

This may be the most aesthetically pleasing picture of St. Agatha ever painted, and I think the artist meant this picture and the tortured martyr's beauty to be enjoyed, not (or not only) to be beheld in pious contemplation.

(Whether the Italian legal system of the time had given the artist the opportunity to watch a similar scene in reality, I do not know. North of the Alps, the law stipulated that breasts were to be ripped off with red hot pincers, as a prelude to a woman's execution when her crime – usually witchcraft or infanticide – merited a more painful punishment and a more exciting public show than merely her quick death by sword, rope or, not so quick, fire. Even as late as 1768 Empress Maria Theresa's *Constitutio Criminalis* still specified this sanction prior to beheading. Italy, though, out of their more sophisticated aestheticism, may have preferred blades to pincers, but I lack knowledge in this matter.)







Wilhelm Kalteysen (1420–1496), St. Barbara, 1447.  
Altarpiece.

Agatha and Barbara – how could we fail to admire the two most popular torture poster girls of Christian iconography? The legends tell of all kinds of tortures martyrs had to endure, but artists have always felt that the greatest visual appeal lay in the torture of saintly virgins' breasts. Here is Barbara, painted for a church dedicated to her in Wrocław, now on display at the National Museum in Warsaw. I remember how I saw her there, a very long time ago, and couldn't help going back for her the next day ...





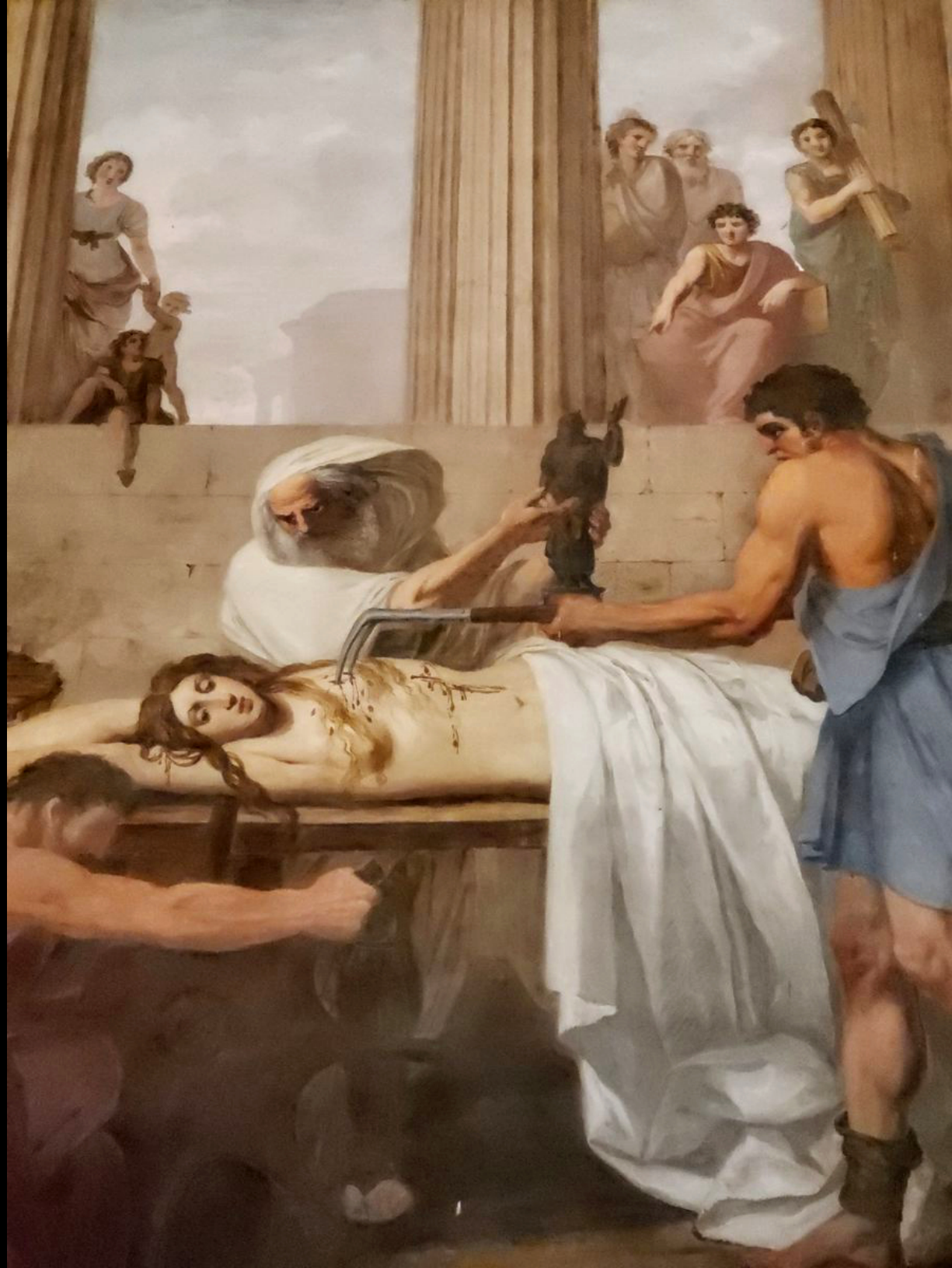
St. Catherine of Alexandria.

Fresco in a North Italian church – I’ve taken this photo some 30 years ago and, stupidly, do not remember where, but it may have been Bressano/Brixen.

Catherine, Christian martyr, ingeniously tortured and finally, when all the various tortures failed to break her, beheaded, on orders from the Roman Emperor Maxentius. “During her imprisonment, over 200 people came to see her, including Maxentius’ wife, Valeria Maximilla; all converted to Christianity and were subsequently martyred” – unfortunately, without getting painted.

Like many (if not most) saints, Catherine of Alexandria is fictitious. In a brazen inversion of the roles of perpetrators and victim, Catherine, patron saint of philosophers and scholars, has very likely been modeled after the real person Hypatia of Alexandria – a Neoplatonist scientist, mathematician and philosopher, who was tortured to death by a Christian mob in 415 CE.





Mural at the church Santo Stefano Rotondo in Rome, 16th century.

I do not know the name of this saint – maybe St. Catherine, again – but the picture shows the scene very clearly: a heathen priest holding up a heathen statue, obviously demanding of the tortured woman to worship it. By saying a few meaningless words to him about a piece of carved stone she could save her life, but she chooses to die in agony, rather than to betray her God.

This is her decision, which has to be respected. But what about this God, for whom she dies? Being all-mighty, there is nothing he can possibly gain from her suffering and her premature death. Why, then, does he approve of it, why does he encourage such a sacrifice in others?

And, what mystifies me most, how is this working as an advertisement for this God? A God who lets his followers suffer and give their lives, for nothing but his own glory – how is this not a scathing criticism of his alleged benevolence, how does this make him appealing?





Unknown artist, Martyrdom of Saint Eulalia, 17th century.

Altarpiece, height 90cm (2.75ft), Museu de Granollers (Catalonia, Spain).

Note the crowned spectator, who, like us, probably muses where the flames will touch her next. There are two Saint Eulalias, BTW, who may have been one and the same, but Eulalia of Mérida is usually the one we see tortured with torches (the other one, if indeed she was another one, Saint Eulalia of Barcelona, who suffered thirteen different tortures before she was beheaded, is usually shown bound to an X-frame). Like all the tales of martyred devout Christian virgins, theirs (hers?) belong more to the realm of faith than that of history.





H. SIEMIRADZKI PINX. AD. MDCCCXC  
ROMA.



Henryk Siemiradzki (1843–1902), Christian Dirce, 1897.

Emperor Nero with his entourage in the arena, in a rather unlikely but picturesque scene. Dirce, in Greek mythology, had been the aunt of Antiope. Quoting Wikipedia: “Here she (Antiope) was discovered by Dirce, who had come to celebrate a Bacchic festival; she ordered the two young men (unknown to all, Antiope’s twin sons) to tie Antiope to the horns of a wild bull. They were about to obey, when the old herdsman, who had brought them up, revealed his secret, and they carried out the punishment on Dirce instead, for cruel treatment of Antiope, their mother, who had been treated by Dirce as a slave.” Not a perfect role model for a Christian martyr, it may seem.

It is not clear from what the girl on the picture has died – the original Dirce may have slowly perished, or the bull’s horns may have gored her, but, other than a little blood on the Christian Dirce’s ankles and right wrist (painted with loving attention to detail) where the ropes had cut her skin, her body shows no discernible damage – unlike the bull, felled by a spear, innocent victim of a situation he had no way to understand.

The large majority of those who died in the Roman arenas, of course, had not been Christians, but introducing a religious element was a way for an artist to make snuff porn socially acceptable. (So was mythology – to be on the safe side, the artist here has combined the two.)

A Christian damsel (Lygia) tied to a bull in the arena also features in *Quo Vadis*, where, alas, she is rescued by her devoted bodyguard Ursus.







Saint George Hare (1857–1933), *Victory of Faith*, 1891.  
National Gallery of Victoria.

The beauty and sexual appeal of the two girls is enhanced by the dark beauty of the lions in the background, and by our knowledge (and by knowing that they know) that they will die the next day, screaming, bleeding, ripped apart and eaten alive, their screams of pain and death mingling with the jeers and laughter of the spectators ... But for now (have they exhausted themselves with lovemaking?), let us enjoy with them the rest and peace that they find in the comfort of each other's presence, of each other's tender loving touch ...





Taddeo di Bartolo (1362/63–1422), Last Judgment, 1410.  
Fresco, San Gimignano Cathedral.

Not only naked saints, naked sinners too are to be tortured, for the edification of the faithful. Eternal torture, without even release by death to hope for – what an amazing idea! And isn't she perfect? The beautiful hair, now used against her, the look of resigned agony on her face, the liquid fire with which she is dowsed, how she desperately covers her breasts, while defenseless against the stunning double attack on her vagina – ah, we can imagine what her sins must have been! – but the small picture on the screen can only give you a faint idea of the effect it has when you enter the cathedral, leave the hot and hustling San Gimignano summer day behind, slowly adapt and open your mind to the darkness and silence and serenity of the sacred space, and then, larger than life and overwhelming in its artistic glory, have this vision right before your eyes ...

It was long before the age of the Internet when I first saw this, but they had picture postcards for sale ...





Unknown artist, Anne Charbonier.

Book illustration, *History of the Evangelical Churches of the Valleys of Piedmont* by Samuel Morland, 1658.

Based upon eyewitness accounts, this is a scene from the massacre known as the Piedmont Easter. For centuries Waldensian heretics had settled in the mountain valleys of the Piedmont; after another attempt to convert them to Catholicism had failed, in 1655 the Duke of Savoy, Charles Emmanuel II, gave the order to liquidate them. In the days before the massacre the Waldensians had been tricked into sharing their homes and meals with the troops, not knowing they had been sent to kill them. At 4am on April 24, 1655 the signal was given, and the soldiers raped, tortured and killed about 1700 men, women and children, among whom they had lived, with astonishing enthusiasm and cruelty, given that they had no wrongs to avenge and no country to defend.

“No general account, however awful, can convey so correct an idea of the horrors of this persecution as would the history of individual cases; but this we are precluded from giving. Could we take these martyrs one by one – could we describe the tragical fate of Peter Simeon of Angrogna – the barbarous death of Magdalene, wife of Peter Pilon of Villaro – the sad story – but no, that story could not be told – of Anne, daughter of John Charbonier of La Torre – the cruel martyrdom of Paul Garnier of Rora, whose eyes were first plucked out, who next endured other horrible indignities, and, last of all, was flayed alive (...) – could we describe these cases, with hundreds of others equally horrible and appalling, our narrative would grow so harrowing that our readers, unable to proceed, would turn from the page,” writes James Aitken Wylie some 200 years afterwards, in “The History of the Waldenses.”

While the story of Anne Charbonier “could not be told” in 1860, it had already been illustrated in 1658, in Samuel Morland’s book. A captivating illustration, that almost seems animated – we see the pole getting planted into the ground, we see her slowly sliding down the thickening pole in increasing agony, back into the hands of her tormentors ... and then the image leaves us to our own imagination ...

**Sehr grewliche/erschrock-  
liche / vorvnerhörte / warhafftige Nurechte-  
tung/was für grausame Tyranny der Moscouiter/an  
den Gefangnen/ hinweggeführten Christen auß Lysland/ beydes an  
Mannen vnd Frauen/ vndt Frauen vndt kleinen Kindern/ begre-  
het/vnd was täglichs Schadens er ihnen in irem Land zufüget. Dey-  
neßen angezeygt / in was grosser fahr vnd not die Lysländer  
stecken. Allen Christen zur warnung/vnd bes-  
serung ihres Sündelichen lebens/ auß  
Lysland geschriben / vnd in  
Druck verfertigt.**



**zu Nürnberg bey Georg Keydlein. M. D. L. XL.**





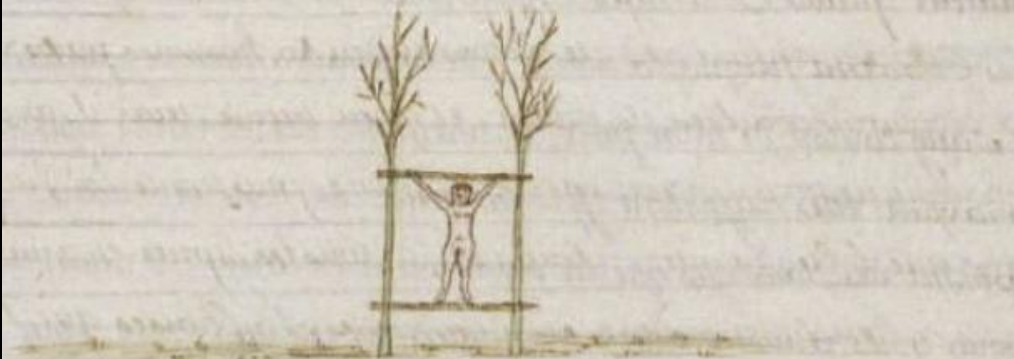
Unknown artist, Atrocities committed by Muscovite troops, 1561.

A leaflet from 1561, reporting alleged atrocities committed in the Livonian War (1558–1583). On the left side of the page the original leaflet, on the right side an edited version of the illustration – because I do not enjoy the sight of dead children, I have edited them out in my version of this picture.

Tentative translation: Very horrible terrifying truthful report of the cruel violence the Muscovites committed against the captured and deported Livonian Christians, men, women, virgins and little children, and what daily damage they do to their country, showing in what great danger and misery the Livonians are. As a warning to all Christians to improve their sinful lives, written from Livonia and printed in Nuremberg by Georg Kreydlein, 1561.

(Actually, using captive women for target practice makes sense – in the middle of a campaign it might be difficult to build proper targets, and by shooting at wood, like trees or barn doors, they'd risk damaging the arrowheads ...)

cent une partie dans le bois cherchoient les cannes les plus  
autres accommodoient deux perches de cette manière q  
rent un fait de Arule Cradre, pour y attacher cette mise



qu'ils eurent finy ils se mouroient, apres firent le vis de me  
adre et se mirent a Couv comme si ils eussent ete posseder du  
ours en Cricant ( cest leur coutume ) ils s'en firent au corps de



Unknown artist, Execution of a Natchez woman outside New Orleans, 1730.

During an uprising, the Natchez had killed some 200 French colonists. The Tunica, a tribe who were French allies, offered the captive wife of a Natchez chief as a present to the French governor in New Orleans. He refused the gift, knowing that her fate at the hands of the Tunica would be much more satisfactory than what French justice could provide. For the night, he kept her in chains; the next day, April 10, after the Tunica had erected a wooden frame just outside the town, they were handed their captive back. They stripped her, tied her to the frame (nicely shown in the contemporary illustration), scalped her, and made her suffer “the slow fire,” that is, they slowly burned her to death with torches, one part of her body after the other, starting with her vulva, buttocks and breasts.

The French thoroughly enjoyed the spectacle, and some of the French women “larded” her with sharpened canes, the way they were used to pierce meat with sharp sticks before inserting thin strips of lard. (Whether they only stabbed her or actually put lard into her wounds is not clear from the reports.) A French soldier cut flesh from her vulva and ate it in front of her (he was later court-martialled). The Natchez woman, whose name has not come down to us, knew how to die well – never showing her pain, throughout her ordeal she derided her torturers for their lack of skills, and predicted that she would soon be avenged by her tribe. Her hopes and bravery were in vain, though, as the Natchez were subsequently defeated by the French, who sent most of the survivors as slaves to French plantations in the Caribbean.





Coenraet Decker (1650–1685), Flaying of a woman in the Orient.

Copper engraving, book illustration for the Dutch adventurer Jan Janszoon Struys's (ghostwritten) autobiographical travelogue "Drie aanmerkelyke reizen ..." (The perillous and most unhappy voyages of John Struys ...), 1676. To what degree the text can be trusted is disputed.

From Chapter 25, in the translation by John Morrison, 1684:

On the 9th [of June, 1671] happened a very Tragical passage at Scamachy, which, notwithstanding the horrible spectacle I had seen the Day before, made my Heart beat within my Breast, as it did many times after that, when it came into my mind. A Polish Woman and a Slave was taken by a Persian for his Wife. Whether she had som private Quarrel with him, or that she was conscious of som misbehaviour to him I cannot determine, however she came to my Patron the Polish Ambassador, first making a large Demonstration of her State, and of her Friends and Family in Poland, she requested that my Lord would vouchsafe her his Protection, till such time as she could meet with an opportunity to convey her self clandestinely home into her own Countrey. My Lord, at the earnest intreaty of som Domestics who were his Minions, assented: but after she had so privily held her self about the space of 14 days, her Husband got Intelligence by som Pick-thank or other, where she was, applies himself immediatly to Court, where (after a litle soliciting) he gets an Order to fetch her out, and use her as seemed good to him. But considering that the Domestics of my Lord were too numerous and a little unruly, he durst not attempt to make the demand, but went back again to Court desiring Assistance upon which the Prince sent som of his Officers, who when our People saw that they were com in a warrantable way, durst not oppose them, nor had they any conveniency to put her out of the way, so that she was forthwith delivered into the hand of her Husband. The Man having as was said permission to punish her at his own Discretion had already provided a Wooden Cross, upon which, with the help of his Servants, he bound her fast, being mother naked, and with his own hands flea'd her whilst yet living. I stood my self all the while at the Door with a great Company of Men, Women and Children, and heard her cry out most bitterly. Yet none thought that his cruelty was of so high a nature till we saw the Carcase, thrown out into the street where it lay an hour or two, and afterwards by his order was dragged into the Fields, to be devoured of the Eagles, and other Birds of prey: but he not satisfied herewith took the Skin and nailed it upon the Wall for a Monument and Warning to his other Wives, which were 12 in number, who never saw it but trembled, as indeed I my self did, so often as I went by the House, or passed by that way.







George Wesley Bellows (1882–1925), *The Cigarette*, 1918.

After all the deaths, after the noise of the battle, after her screams and his grunts, after the blood and the violent passion, they share a moment of tranquility, of quiet repose, she lost in her pain, he lost in his memories and thoughts. She knows she must not attract his attention, must not move, must not make a sound. Soon he will put out his cigarette, stand up, retrieve his knife, return to the war from which he had been granted a short break. She may survive, damaged in body and soul, if her wounds do not get infected. He may die in the next battle. But for a moment, time stands still for them, and we have time to take in all the touching details of this scene, as the artist has so lovingly depicted them.

There is a backstory to this picture. We are in Belgium, during the first weeks of WW I, the soldier is German. The German army was said to use a simple and efficient method to prevent the spread of syphilis and gonorrhea among their troops: soldiers were under the order, if they had a sexually transmitted disease, to cut off a breasts of each woman they raped, to warn off their comrades from the poisoned pleasure. It is a story that everyone loves to believe, though later it turned out that it wasn't true. In the next war the Germans, of course, more than made up for all the atrocities they had not committed in the previous one, but these real atrocities were far less sexy and people were more inclined not to be bothered by believing them.

With all its specific historical context, the scene is still timeless ... the soldier and the maiden ... the blade and the flesh ...

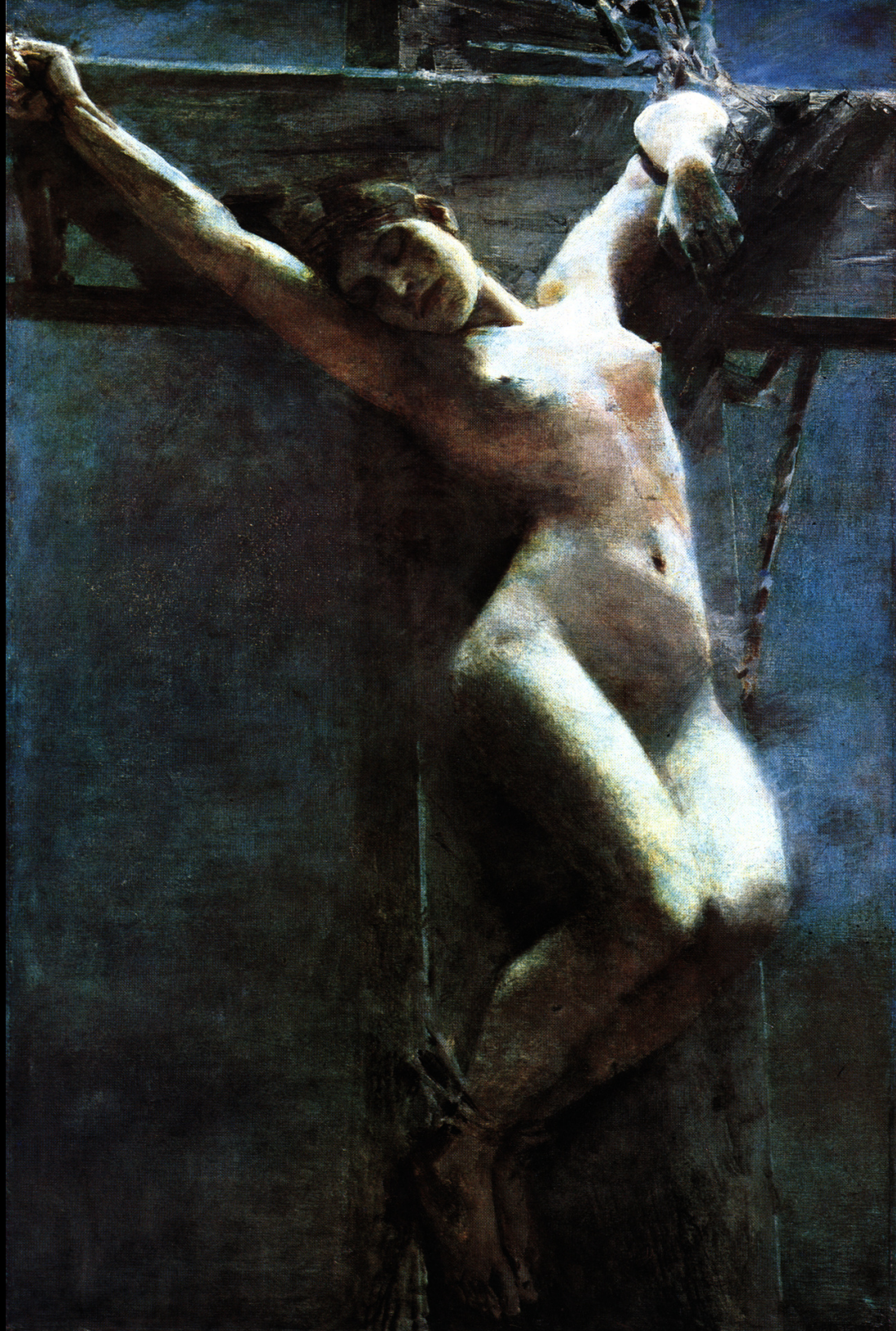




José de Brito (1855–1946), *Mártir do fanatismo* (A Martyr of Fanaticism), 1895.  
3 by 2.4 m (9 by 7 ft), Museu do Chiado, Lisbon.

Torture was abolished as part of the legal system during the second half of the 18th century. 19th century art then built fantastic torture chambers and amply populated them with tortured naked women, reveling in the new found freedom to depict them neither as willingly enduring saints, nor as rightfully punished sinners.

Even though the title implies a humanistic agenda, what else is this magnificent monumental painting but the exuberant celebration of a suffering woman's riveting beauty?





Albert von Keller (1844–1920), Im Mondschein (In the Moonlight), 1894.  
Oil on canvas, 1.5 by 1 m (4.5 by 3 ft).

In the moonlight ... We are not told who this woman is, or why she suffers and, we may assume, will die. The picture does not tell a story, it only *shows* – the beauty of her body, of her loneliness, of her pain. The virtuosity of the artist draws us in – into the night, into the shadows, into her presence – and then it leaves us there, alone with her, who suffers for us – alone, not able to touch her, not daring to make a sound that would disrupt the serene tranquility of this scene ...





Eduard Ansen-Hofman (1820–1904) (?), Slave Market.

Next to naked women in torture chambers, 19th century art, particularly towards the end of the century and into the next one, also loved naked slave girls in the Orient – and while the torture chambers of the Inquisition were only romantic memories anymore, the harems and slave markets were still real.

If you research this picture you'll find it attributed to Eduard Ansen-Hofman (1820–1904), or Eduard Ansen-Hofman (1862–1955), or Eugene Ansen-Hofman (1862–1955) – it's strange how even professional art dealers easily get confused by different painters of the same name. I think the attribution to Eduard Ansen-Hofman (1820–1904) is correct. Naked girls, and naked slave girls in particular, have been the artist's favorite subject, and there exist quite a number of different versions of this painting – proof of the public's understandable fascination with the topic. If I'm not mistaken, the younger Ansen-Hofman later continued his father's(?) profitable painted slave girls trade, but I have not found reliable information about it.







Otto Pilny (1866–1936), *The Slave Market*, 1910.

Otto Pilny spent several years traveling in Egypt and Libya, and subsequently created a large oeuvre of “Oriental” paintings from sketches and memory (and while this particular painting dates from 1910, in style and content it still belongs to the previous century).

From a British observer (Thomas Smee) we have this report: “... and a process of examination ensues, which, for minuteness, is unequaled in any cattle market in Europe. The intending purchaser having ascertained there is no defect in the faculties of speech, hearing, etc., that there is no disease present, next proceeds to examine the person; the mouth and the teeth are first inspected and afterwards every part of the body in succession, not even excepting the breasts, etc., of the girls, many of whom I have seen handled in the most indecent manner in the public market by their purchasers; indeed there is every reason to believe that the slave-dealers almost universally force the young girls to submit to their lust previous to their being disposed of. From such scenes one turns away with pity and indignation.” This is from a somewhat different time (1811) and place (Zanzibar), but the description would still be valid.

With great love for detail, the artist lets us appreciate the merriment of the men, the doleful resignation of the clothed slave girl, and the horror on the face of the naked one. Now, already having been forced “to submit to the slave-dealer’s lust,” what has she to expect now that causes her such acute fear? What has she overheard the men talk, what is it that the buyer has laughingly revealed to the merchant that he intends to do with her? We are as free to imagine it, as he is to do it ...





Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824–1904), *Le Marché d’esclaves* (The Slave Market), 1866.

To quote Wikipedia:

Maxime Du Camp [1822–1894, French writer and photographer], who had travelled extensively in the Near East, reviewed the painting from the 1867 Salon. He located the motif to Cairo’s slave market and described the painting as “a scene done on the spot.” Du Camp wrote:

“It is one of these more expensive women, an Abyssinian, that M. Gérôme has taken as the principal figure of his composition. She is nude and being displayed by the djellab, who has the fine head of a brigand accustomed to every sort of abduction and violence; the idea of the eternal soul must not very often have tormented such a bandit. The poor girl is standing, submissive, humble, resigned, with a fatalistic passivity that the painter has very skillfully rendered.”





Jean-Léon Gérôme, *La Vérité sortant du puits armée de son martinet pour châtier l'humanité*  
(Truth coming from the well armed with her whip to chastise mankind), 1896.

“Fatalistic passivity” is not how this ends, though.

Gérôme slept with this painting above his bed and was found after his death in 1904 with his arm stretched out towards it in a gesture of farewell.





Artemisia Gentileschi (1593–1653), *Judith and Holofernes*, ca. 1612.  
National Museum of Capodimonte, Naples.

This painting depicts the Biblical tale, but there is also a different story it refers to: that of the rape of the artist by the painter Agostino Tassi, whom her father had hired to be her tutor – Judith's face is the artist's self portrait, and the face of Holofernes is that of her rapist.

It is a passionate revenge fantasy, one that she has proudly revealed to the world (she even painted this picture a second time a few years later, almost identical except for the color of her dress), but in real life the account was finally settled on a different level: by her becoming one of the great painters of her age, and him, hardly known today except infamously for his part in her biography, being relegated to a footnote in the history of art. (Which, of course, is not to say that history always favors the righteous and punishes the wicked. Which is not to say that it always should. But sometimes it does ...)