

*Godsbody: The Roman Crucifix from its Beginnings to the Cinquecento*

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The long history of the crucifix in Italian art rests on the story that the mosaic of the suffering Christ at S. Croce in Gerusalemme was made by Gregory the Great from the bones of martyrs. Two aspects characterize this foundational myth: first, the explicit papal authorization of the image and, secondly, the identification of the material from which the mosaic was created. From this early medieval beginning through the crucifix made by Michelangelo for Vittoria Colonna and the widespread distribution of such works across patrician "picture rooms", the image came to dominate patterns of both commission and display.

Over the last twenty years the evolution of the great crucifixes painted on wood has been amply explored, but comparable works in ivory have been neglected. This lecture considers the fragment by Giovanni Pisano in the V&A and the same sculptor's versions in wood. Critical issues remain in the history of both art and pious usage – notably the relation between ivory and the "martyrs' bones" explored by this sculptor, and the action of Giordano Bruno who, at the age of 14, removed all the images from his cell in the Neapolitan convent of S. Domenico, leaving only the crucifix on its walls.

The entangled history, ideology, and aesthetics of Italian ivory carving range from Pope Gregory's supposed late 6th-century intervention through the "rules" for the representation of the crucified in post-Tridentine art laid down by Federico Borromeo.