

# SAINT SEBASTIAN. AN ICONOGRAPHIC STUDY: FROM PAINTING TO FILM

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## *Resumen*

Este artículo busca una primera aproximación que permita una mejor comprensión sobre la iconografía de San Sebastián tomando, en primer lugar, como referencia lo que sobre él recogen las fuentes literarias tales como la *Passio* y su reflejo en el arte. En segundo lugar, se analiza la evolución de la iconografía de este santo militar hasta el arte contemporáneo, partiendo de las fuentes escritas, así como la influencia de su modelo iconográfico y su primer martirio en los medios audiovisuales actuales, tomando como ejemplo una gran cantidad de obras representativas entre las que se destacan seis pinturas medievales, siete pinturas renacentistas, un grabado del siglo XV, una escultura renacentista, cinco pinturas barrocas, dos dibujos del siglo XX, dos ejemplos pictóricos siglo XXI y cuatro fotogramas de películas representativas, tanto de su contexto europeo como americano.

## *Palabras clave*

San Sebastián; martirio; flecha; iconografía; hagiografía; medios audiovisuales

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## *Summary*

This article aims to show a first approximation which allows a better understanding of the iconography of St Sebastian. Firstly, it will be considered what literary sources such as *Passio* refers about him. Secondly, this thesis will analyze the evolution of the iconography of this military saint until Contemporary art, taking into account some written sources. Finally, it will be given consideration to the influence of his iconographic model and his first martyrdom in audiovisual media, taking as an example a large number of representative works, among which six medieval paintings, seven Renaissance paintings, a fifteenth-century engraving, a Renaissance sculpture, five baroque paintings, two twentieth-century drawings, two XXI-century pictorial examples and four stills stand out. of representative films, both from its European and American context.

## *Key words*

St Sebastian; martyrdom; arrow; iconography; hagiography; audiovisual media



## Introduction: History and martyrdom of St Sebastian

The sources about St Sebastian are diverse. One of the most important texts of Late Antiquity and the fundamental basis for these investigations is the *Acta Sancti Sebastiani Martyris* (BHL 7543), known as *Passio Sancti Sebastiani*<sup>1</sup>, traditionally attributed to St Ambrose, although it was written in the 5th century by the monk Arnobio, “the Younger”. Likewise, the *Golden Legend* of Jacobus de Voragine is presented as another source for the study, analysis and dissemination of the legend, martyrdom, iconographic model and the cult of St Sebastian during the Middle Ages. Other sources are focused on more specific details, as St Ambrose’s *Commentary on Psalm CXVIII*, which indicates the origin of St Sebastian in Narbonne within a Christian family, his childhood in Milan and his transfer to Rome. It is also relevant the *History of the Lombards*, written by Paul the Deacon (c. 720 - 799), a collaborator of Charlemagne. Although it has some inaccuracies, this work narrates how an apparition revealed that the plague epidemic which devastated the territory at the end of the 7th century would not cease until an altar dedicated to St Sebastian was founded in the Church of Saint Peter ad Vincula.

Considering the sources, Sebastian was a saint originally from Narbonne and raised in Milan who became a chief of staff (*princeps*) of the First Cohort at the time of Emperor Diocletian<sup>2</sup>, in which he was respected by all, especially by the Emperor, in spite of being him unaware of his quality as a Christian.

Sebastian complied with military discipline, but he did not participate in the idolatrous sacrifices. As a Christian, he exercised the apostolate among his companions, while he visited and encouraged imprisoned Christians. It was after the imprisonment of two young men, Marcus and Marcellianus, when Sebastian began to be known publicly as Christian. The two young men were arrested and given thirty days to deny their faith in God or continue to believe in Him. Sebastian, aware of the situation, went down to the dungeons to give them words of encouragement. From that moment on, there were many conversions and, consequently, martyrdoms, including that of the two imprisoned boys, Marcus and Marcellianus<sup>3</sup>.

Nevertheless, Diocletian also found out that Sebastian was a Christian and made him arrest. Sebastian was arrested while he was burying the martyrs known as the "Four Crowned"<sup>4</sup>. He was brought before Diocletian, who reproached him: “I have always had you among the best in my palace and you have acted in the shadows against me, insulting the gods”<sup>5</sup>.

St Sebastian was not intimidated by these words but reaffirmed his faith. The punishment ordered by the Emperor was that Sebastian should be tied to a tree and covered with arrows in non-vital areas of the human body, so that he would not die from the arrows, but rather bled to death and in intense and continuous pain. The soldiers, following orders, took him to the stadium, stripped him naked, tied him to a tree and shot him with arrows. Then, accomplished his mission and believing that Sebastian was almost dead, they abandoned his inert body riddled with arrows. However, his friends, who were waiting hidden, approached, and seeing him still alive, took him to the house of a Roman Christian noblewoman, called

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<sup>1</sup> Lapidge, M. (2018). *The Roman Martyrs*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp 88-137.

<sup>2</sup> Lapidge, M. (2018) pp. 95 (*Passio* 1).

<sup>3</sup> Lapidge, M. (2018) pp. 88-95 (*Passio* 1).

<sup>4</sup> Taking the *Passio* of Saint Sebastian in *The Roman Martyrs* (pag 125), the four Crowned Saints were: Severus, Severinus, Carpophorus and Victorinus.

<sup>5</sup> Carmona Muela, J. (2008). *Iconografía de todos los santos*. Madrid: Akal, p. 420.

Irene, who kept him hidden in her house and treated his wounds until he recovered<sup>6</sup>.

Once the saint recovered his health, his friends advised him to leave Rome, which he flatly refused. Therefore, he returned to present himself bravely before Emperor Maximian when he was in the middle of an offering to a god, which caused him total bewilderment since he considered the saint to be dead. Sebastian took advantage of this situation to attack with force against the Emperor and his beliefs. Maximian ordered him flogged to death, and this time the soldiers should ensure his death, throwing his body into the Cloaca Maxima at night to prevent the Christians make him a martyr. After his death, St Sebastian appeared in a dream<sup>7</sup> to St Lucina, showing her the exact place where his body was hanging from a nail and indicating the specific place where she should deposit it. At midnight, Lucina went to the place with her servants, they took the lifeless body of the martyr and buried him in the exact place shown in the dream, in an underground cemetery of the Roman Via Appia (today Catacomb of Saint Sebastian). For thirty days, Santa Lucina herself the place<sup>8</sup>.

Thus, this saint died on January 20, 304<sup>9</sup>, due to his defense of the spread of the Christian faith and the fight for the Church, for which Pope St Gaius appointed him defender of the Church. His burial place is in the Ad Catacumbas cemetery<sup>10</sup>, in an underground gallery, next to the memory of the apostles Peter and Paul, according to the *Jeronian Calendar*<sup>11</sup>. The *Calendar of Carthage* and the *Gelasian and Gregorian Sacramentary* attest his cult<sup>12</sup>.

During the plague of Rome in the year 680 his particular protection was invoked, so that St Sebastian was considered a special advocate against the Plague.

### Iconographic study: evolution and attributes

The attributes have a fundamental role for the development of artistic works, especially the mythological and religious types, and their subsequent study. The attributes can be defined as the symbols that serve to recognize the characters represented. In the case of saints, these attributes can characterize an individual (individual character attributes) or a category of saints (collective attributes)<sup>13</sup>. Individual attributes are linked to the life, legend or martyrdom of a particular saint; for St Sebastian, his characteristic attributes are the bow, the arrows and the tree trunk (for his martyrdom)<sup>14</sup>. The collective attributes would be the roll or book for each one of the apostles or Fathers of the Church, as well as the palm for the figure of the martyr.

Thus, the attribute-biography relationship of the saint referring to St Sebastian is reflected in the scenes of his life executed by artists of different origins and periods: St Sebastian in

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<sup>6</sup> Voragine, J. (2017). *Leyenda Aurea*. Madrid: Maxtor, pp. 97-100.

<sup>7</sup> Lapidge, M. (2018) p. 136 (*Passio* 89).

<sup>8</sup> Lapidge, M. (2018) p. 136 (*Passio* 89).

<sup>9</sup> Voragine, J. (2017) *Depositio martyrum* in M. Lapidge (ed). *The Roman Martyrs*. (pp 88-137). Oxford: Oxford University Press 2018. The oldest written source preserved on the martyrdom of St Sebastian was written around the middle of the 4th century, in which only the name of the martyr, his place of burial in the catacombs and the date of his festivity are stated.

<sup>10</sup> Lapidge, M. (2018) pp. 88-137 (*Passio* 89).

<sup>11</sup> Bobichon, P. (2008). *La plus ancienne littérature grecque chrétienne*. Paris: Editions Assouline, p. 206.

<sup>12</sup> Goñi, J. A. (2010). El buen conocimiento de las fuentes litúrgicas in J. A. Goñi (ed). *Paulo Rena Liturgia Online magazine* (Vol. VIII, pp. 246-259, espec. 198-199).

<https://paulorenaliturgia.com>

<sup>13</sup> Monreal Tejada, L. (2000). *Iconografía del cristianismo*. Barcelona: El Acantilado, p. 12.

<sup>14</sup> The attributes of this saint began to develop frequently at the beginning of the 5th century and survive today.

his first and second martyrdom, St Sebastian exhorting Marcus and Marcellinus, etc. However, no other episode has been so widely represented as the passage of his martyrdom, which shows the saint tied to a post or tree and with his torso and legs pierced by arrows, according to the *Golden Legend* ("the Emperor commanded that they take him out into the field, tie him to a tree, and have a platoon of soldiers fire their bows at him and shoot him to death")<sup>15</sup>. The number of arrows which struck his body stands out from this episode, which is usually numerous: "they left him turned into a kind of hedgehog"<sup>16</sup>. Other texts, such as the *Flos Sanctorum* by Pedro de Ribadeneyra, insist on this idea: "they discharge as many arrows in him, that his sacred body did not look like the body of a man, but a hedgehog" (Fig. 1).

Delehaye claims that this huge quantity of arrows explains the fury of the persecutions during the rule of Diocletian and Maximian, which increased notably and was exercised with an unknown rigor until then<sup>17</sup>: "It is not enough that St Sebastian is crossed by some arrows; is riddled like a hedgehog"<sup>18</sup>.

Taking into account the sources and attributes, this section will focus on two points of iconographic evolution: the representation of his physique and the representation of various scenes. The selection criteria of the successive images collected, analyzed, commented on and linked in the sections developed below, is justified by their universal nature, as well as their artistic masters, and their connection with the sources on the saint, such as the *Passio* or the *Golden Legend*. These pictorial works were pioneers in the representation of the saint in their historical context and consolidated their importance or hegemony over the years and/or centuries until they influenced other great works developed in the 20th and 21st centuries in new languages artistic, such as fashion world and audiovisual media.

#### *Representations of the physicist: Old St Sebastian and rejuvenated*

According to Proestaki<sup>19</sup>, there are no representations of St Sebastian in the Byzantine world until the 15th century in Crete, due to Western influence, and from the 16th century in other settings of post-Byzantine tradition. The first iconographic representations of the saint are found in Rome in the 5th century and in them, he is represented as a person with a hieratic and impersonal expression, of a certain age, with gray hair and beard, and dressed in a tunic, holding the crown of martyrdom with his right hand. His representation lacks specific features, practically homogenized with that of other saints. Only the identification of the written name allows to distinguish it (*SCS Sebastianus*). This happens both in the fresco of the crypt of St Cecilia in the Catacomb of Callistus, in which St Sebastian appears together with other robed saints, and in the 7th century mosaic in the Church of San Pedro ad Vincula in Rome (Fig. 2).

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<sup>15</sup> Voragine, J. (2017). p. 101.

<sup>16</sup> Voragine, J. (2017). p. 102. In some representations, such as the painting of Giovanni del Biondo (1370), preserved in the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo in Florence, exorbitant figures are reached. This work represents the archetype of the iconographic model par excellence thanks to the intrusion of the loin cloth on the saint over his half-naked body covered by numerous arrows while he is tied to a tree. Del Biondo captures the torture of the hammer that is cruelly applied by the squad of soldiers in charge of killing the saint, represented in the lower part of the work.

<sup>17</sup> Delehaye, H. (1998). *Les passions des martyrs et les genres littéraires*. Bruselas: Société des Bollandistes, p. 247.

<sup>18</sup> Delehaye, H. (1998). The translation is mine, p. 205.

<sup>19</sup> Proestaki, X. (2010). *Saint Sebastian: the martyr from Milan in post-Byzantine wall paintings of the 16th and 17th centuries and the influences from Western painting*, *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*. *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*, vol. 34(n.1), p. 81.

The fact that various mosaics and frescoes in different places in Italy show an identical image denotes the monotonous evolution of the reproduction of this saint<sup>20</sup>. The argument for this type of representation (old and bearded), which prevailed during the Middle Ages and lasted until the 15th century, is because of his military profession as captain of the Emperor's guard<sup>21</sup>. It is not surprising, then, that he generally appears dressed as a soldier, taking as a reference the text of the *Golden Legend*, in which the esteem and friendship of Diocletian and Maximian towards him is recorded: "Diocletian and Maximian distinguished him with their friendship, and they esteemed him so much that one and the other kept him at the head of the first cohort, whose job was to give escorts to the emperors"<sup>22</sup>.



Fig. 1. *Second martyrdom*. Giovanni del Biondo. Triptych of St Sebastian. c. 1370. Opera del Duomo Museum [https://bmong-es.wiki/Giovanni\\_del\\_Biondo](https://bmong-es.wiki/Giovanni_del_Biondo)



Fig. 2. *St Sebastian*. 7th century. Church S. Peter ad Vincula. <https://www.ucm.es/-bdiconografiamedieval/san-sebastian>

There are representations with small variations on this, as in the predella of the Coronation Altarpiece, where St Sebastian is dressed not as a soldier but as a noble along with other holy martyrs<sup>23</sup>. With a halo and the palm of martyrdom as befits his condition,

<sup>20</sup> Darríulat, J. (1999). *Sébastien le Renaissance*. Paris: Lagune, p. 310.

<sup>21</sup> Réau, L. (1997). *Iconografía del arte cristiano*. Tomo II, vol 5. Iconografía de los santos. Barcelona: Ed. Del Serbal, p 196.

<sup>22</sup> Réau, L. (1997). *Iconografía del arte cristiano*. Tomo II, vol 7. Iconografía de los santos. Barcelona: Ed. Del Serbal, p 194.

<sup>23</sup> Among these, it is common to see him forming a couple with St Fabian, since his festivity was celebrated on the same day. This is how it appears in the Sigena altarpiece, painted by Miguel Ximénez, and preserved in the MNAC (Fig. 3). Along with the luxurious clothing in the manner of a medieval knight, the signs of the hammer to which St Sebastian was subjected are emphasized. According to Sebastian y Solaz, their

the fact that he is dressed as a noble stands out, adorned with a brooch of precious stones, which would highlight his social status, that of "noble and outstanding man"<sup>24</sup>; nevertheless, they all have similar faces, without expressive individuality. However, each of them shows the martyrdom instrument which characterizes them and differentiates them from each other, so that St Sebastian is recognized by the arrow in his hand.



Fig. 3. Miguel Ximénez. *St John the Baptist, St. Fabián y St. Sebastian*. c.1494. MNAC. <https://www.museuacional.cat/es/>

Another variant, although less frequent, is the one in which St Sebastian appears with the attribute of the arch, as in the Eccehomo Altarpiece in the Cathedral of Teruel. In this, he appears carrying an arrow in his left hand and a bow in his right one. Undoubtedly, the presence of the sword that protrudes from under his wide red cloak alludes to his condition as a soldier. According to Louis Réau, "the Spanish school almost always represents St Sebastian dressed (...) instead of attributing him a military suit or armor - which, being a Roman centurion would be logical - the Spanish painters disguised him as young man equipped for hunting, with bow and arrows in hand"<sup>25</sup>. Other examples are the altarpiece of the Virgin of Montserrat executed by Bartolomé Bermejo and Rodrigo de Osona in Acqui Terme; the panel by Joan Mates (1431), in the National Art Museum of Catalonia in Barcelona, and the altarpiece of St Thecla and St Sebastian by Rafael Vergós in Barcelona Cathedral, where the saint appears dressed as a hunter.

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presence in said altarpiece would be justified by "private devotions"<sup>23</sup>, cf. Sebastián, S. y Solaz, A. (1969). Teruel monumental. Teruel: Instituto de estudios turolenses, p. 107.

<sup>24</sup> Mezquita Mesa, M. T. (1990). *El retablo de la Coronación*. Teruel: Instituto de estudios turolenses, p. 112.

<sup>25</sup> Réau, L. (1997). Iconografía de los santos. En *Iconografía del arte cristiano*. (Tomo II, vol 5, p. 198). Barcelona: Ed. Del Serbal. Same opinion gets Sonia Caballero, cf. Caballero, S. (2009). *Sobre la iconografía de San Sebastián*, in M. D. Tejera Pablos (ed), *De Arte*. Revista de Historia del Arte (n. 7, pp. 105 – 113). León: Universidad.

It was, however, at the end of the Middle Ages, specifically in the 14th century, when a new type or transformation of iconographic representation appeared which triumphed in the 15th century: that of St Sebastian as an Apollonian young, dressed in a tunic or as a soldier and holding the arrows (proof of his trial). Although it coexisted with the image of the elderly saint, the iconography of the half-naked young man at the time of his martyrdom (tied to a tree or a column and shot with arrows) ended up becoming popular and replaced the previous one in the representations of the saint<sup>26</sup>. Some scholars, such as Ferguson and Hannah Marks, have considered the cult and this rejuvenated appearance to be a direct transfer from the sculptural type of Apolo Lykeios<sup>27</sup>, insofar as he shares the physical attributes of a radiant ephebe. This seems evident in representations of the saint from the 14th century to the 17th century.

Examples of this St Sebastian in Spain are the altarpieces dedicated to the Coronation from the 15th century and to the Eccehomo from the end of the 15th century or beginning of the 16th century, which represent St Sebastian dressed in various ways, but always rejuvenated, holding the attribute of the arrow and more exceptionally the bow. Also *St Sebastian* made by Villar del Cobo has the aforementioned characteristics: rejuvenated face of the saint, dressed, with the attribute of the arrow (in this case there are three like the three nails of the Redemptive Passion of Christ), without forgetting the sword.

### ***Brief chronology of the representation of scenes from the life of St Sebastian***

Undoubtedly, the most represented scene is that of the first martyrdom. However, the emergence of this type of representation continues to be a cause of intense debate, since for some scholars its origin is estimated at the end of the 13th century, in manuscripts such as the *Heures à l'usage de Tours* preserved in the Bibliothèque nationale de France (Ms. Lat. 1202, fol. 138v)<sup>28</sup>. Those who place this iconographic model at the end of the 13th century were Duchet-Suchaux and Pastoureau, while Darriulat delayed it to the 14th century<sup>29</sup>. However, what is sure is that this representation became popular during the Renaissance<sup>30</sup>, as it can be seen in a late Gothic painting of St Fabian and St Sebastian, by Giovanni di Paolo -the main figure of the Sienese School of the 15th century-, preserved in the National Gallery in London<sup>31</sup>, in which St Sebastian appears tied to a tree trunk and shot by 20 arrows<sup>32</sup> (Fig.4).

<sup>26</sup> Duchet–Suchau, G. y Pastoureau, M. (1996). *Guía iconográfica. La Biblia y los santos*. Madrid: Alianza, p. 310. However, critics do not seem to agree with regard to the chronological appearance of this new iconographic type. Jacques Darriulat ([1999]. *Sébastien le Renaissant*. Paris: Lagune, p. 257), delayed its appearance at the end of the 14th century and exposes the unknowns raised around said appearance and considerable diffusion of it: “Before the end of the 14th century, Saint Sebastian has never been represented nude. After the Cuatrocento, on the other hand, the image of the young man executed by the archers sums up the entire history of St Sebastian. Its abrupt appearance, from the end of the 14th century, and especially its extraordinary diffusion from the middle of the 15th century, remain enigmatic. The reproduction of this body exposed to the cruelty of the archers is therefore spontaneous only in appearance. It could not be the result of chance, and its appearance on the scene responds to reasons that we do not know” (The translation is mine).

<sup>27</sup> Marks, H. (2017). *An examination of the interaction between Renaissance Arts and their antique sources*. Glasgow: University, p. 37.

<sup>28</sup> Carmona Muela, J. (2008). *Iconografía de todos los santos*. Madrid: Akal, p. 158.

<sup>29</sup> Darriulat, J. (1999). *Sébastien le Renaissant*. Paris: Lagune, p. 106.

<sup>30</sup> Pacheco, F. (1990). *El arte de la pintura*. Madrid: Cátedra, p. 673.

<sup>31</sup> Pacheco, F. (1990) p, 674.

<sup>32</sup> The recent restoration of this work has recovered the original position of the raised left hand and forearm as well as the 20 arrows that pierced his body, most of which would have been repainted. On the lower knees are kneeling brothers of the lay Brotherhood, dedicated to the Seven Works of Mercy, dressed in black with white

Among the numerous examples of this first martyrdom, the works of Marco Zoppo stand out (Fig. 5), marked by a calm expression, in connection with God. Mantegna, for his part, painted two scenes of the martyrdom, characterized by the inclusion of classicist elements such as columns and arches in substitution of the tree trunk (which will be definitive), to dignify and enrich the representation itself of the saint. Another contribution of this artist to the iconography of St Sebastian is the placement of the saint on a platform or a bucket tied to the ruins of the pagan world where some plants slowly grow as a symbol of the firmness of the Christian faith<sup>33</sup>.



Fig. 4. Giovanni di Paolo. *St. Fabián y St. Sebastian*. 1475. National Gallery [https://arthive.com/es/artists/437~Giovanni di Paolo/](https://arthive.com/es/artists/437~Giovanni%20di%20Paolo/)



Fig. 5. Marco Zoppo. *St. Sebastian* (c. 1475) Courtauld Gallery. <https://www.meisterdrucke.es/artista/Marco-Zoppo.html>

Mantegna also introduces luctuosity similar to hagiographic stories, by fixing the arrows stuck not only in the body, but also in the head of the saint, being a great iconographic reference assumed by current horror movies<sup>34</sup> (Figs. 6 y 7). This reflection of the exacerbated violence to accentuate the passion of the scene of martyrdom is closely linked to the theory of Delehaye regarding the procedures used by hagiographers to capture the reader's attention: "The hagiographer [...] understands that in order to impress his reader, it is necessary that the smell of burning flesh is smelled, that the blood flows, that the bones are exposed, that the entrails escape through an open wound"<sup>35</sup>.

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veils and holding spoons used to collect alms. This is a votive painting offered in favorable response to a prayer. HYMAN, T. (2002). *Sieneese Painting*. London: Thames & Hudson, p. 174.

<sup>33</sup> Durando, G. (1996). *Razones de los oficios divinos*. Madrid: Alianza, p. 148.

<sup>34</sup> Another example where this luctuosity is observed is in the "Martyrdom of St Sebastian" (1440), attributed to Peter Maggenberg, exhibited in the church of Our Lady of Valère, in Sion (Switzerland): the blood flows abundantly from the wounds of his body and the arrows hit, in front and behind, the head of the saint tied to a column.

<sup>35</sup> Hippolyte, D. (1998). *Les passions des martyrs et les genres littéraires*. The translate is mine. Bruselas: Société des Bollandistes, p. 207.



Fig.6. Andrea Mantegna. *St. Sebastian*. 1456. Vienna History Museum  
<http://mundodelmuseo.com/ficha.php?id=180>



Fig.7. Andrea Mantegna. *St. Sebastian*. 1480. Louvre Museum.  
<https://www.artehistoria.com/es/obra/san-sebasti%C3%A1n-8>



Fig. 8. Antonio Pollaiuolo. *Martyrdom of St. Sebastian*. 1475. National Gallery. <https://painting-planet.com/el-martirio-de-san-sebastian-antonio-del-pollaiolo/>



Fig. 9. Alonso Berruguete. *St. Sebastian*. 1526. Museo nacional de la escultura de Valladolid. <https://arte.laguia2000.com/escultura/san-sebastian-de-alonso-berruguete>



Fig. 10. Alberto Durero. Xylography of St. Sebastian (c.1499). Art Hermitage. <https://www.alamy.es/-alberto-durero-san-sebastian-primera-columna-estado-1499-image259428085.html>

The pictorial example painted by Antonio Pollaiuolo (Fig. 8), unlike the previous ones, focuses on the exact moment of martyrdom, with St Sebastian raised almost to the top of the tree trunk, while his executioners, in the lower body and armed with bows, are prepared to shoot him, a model taken directly from the *Golden Legend*<sup>36</sup> and closely linked to the works of Mantegna. In the Spanish case, Alonso de Berruguete highlights (Fig. 9), whose sculptural work presents the moment after the martyrdom of the saint, when all his arrows have been extracted, leaving numerous sores on his body, which is the result of the mix between Renaissance imagery and classicist models.

Also it was relevant the dissemination of his iconography through xylographic prints from the 15th century, among which those made by Alberto Durero at the end of the century stand out. The mechanization in the production of these prints and the consequent cheapening of the product favored its diffusion and acquisition by a growing number of believers, coinciding with the rise of the plagues which devastated Europe strongly (Fig. 10).

Nevertheless, and in spite of the fact that the most frequent scene in the iconography of the saint is that of the first martyrdom, some representation of pre-martyrdom scenes can also be found exceptionally during the 15th and 16th centuries (in some geographical regions such as the Iberian Peninsula until well into the 17th century). The same does not happen with the scenes after this (healing by Irene, suffering of the final martyrdom or the recovering of his body from the Cloaca Maxima by Lucina), which had a marked presence, because they, together with the representation of Christ crucified, were the only representations of nudity allowed by the Church<sup>37</sup>. Good examples of the latter are both the triptych by Giovanni del Biondo (Fig. 1) and the one that appears on the side panels of the altarpiece painted by Pedro García de Benabarre (c. 1470) preserved in the Museo Nacional del Prado<sup>38</sup>. Regarding the representation of the second martyrdom itself, it is "St Sebastian" by Pedro García de Benabarre preserved in the Museo del Prado, or the "Martyrdom of St Sebastian" carried out by Veronese in 1558 exhibited in the Church of San Sebastiano (Venice) (Fig. 11). In both, some elements stand out: the use of the closed composition, the crowding of the numerous group of characters around the saint, the importance of Classic architecture as a scenography as well as the influence of the postulates made by Masaccio in relation to the scene: "... Their bodies invaded by anger, they surrounded Sebastian and inflicted him as many blows as they could until his body was left completely lied down on the ground, deepening his pain in the depths of the wounds from his arrows"<sup>39</sup>.

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<sup>36</sup> Morris, D. (1995). *La cultura del dolor*. Barcelona: Ed. Andrés Bello, p. 198.

<sup>37</sup> The martyrdom of Saint Sebastian became an excellent excuse during the 15th century for the study of male anatomy. Its development was such that during the 16th century the subject became a true Academy where the artist demonstrated his skills in the representation of the male nude, as shown by the news transmitted by Pietro da Cortona in the *Treatise on painting and sculpture*: "Baccio della Porta, to show that he knew how to paint nudes, painted a nude Saint Sebastian in Florence in a painting of a church, with a color that looked like flesh..." ; cf. Gila Medina, L. (2007). *Grandes artistas de la Edad Moderna*. Granada: Esdrújula, p. 302.

<sup>38</sup> Also a late episode, such as protection against the plague, emerged in the late Middle Ages. This type of representation of Saint Sebastian is similar to that of the Virgin of Mercy, in which the saint protects the devotees from the arrows of the plague with his cloak. A good testimony of this iconographic type is the work of Benozzo Gozzoli made in 1464 for the church of San Gimignano. Carvajal González, H. (2015). *San Sebastián, mártir y protector contra la peste*, in I. González Hernando (ed), *Revista digital de Iconografía medieval* (vol. VII, pp. 121-153). Madrid: Universidad Complutense.

<sup>39</sup> Nieto Alcaide, V. (1993). *Tommaso Masaccio*. Madrid: Historia 16, p. 85.

The iconographic development of St Sebastian during the 15th and 16th centuries ended up leading to the Baroque in pictorial and sculptural representations charged with sensuality and religious ecstasy of the holy martyr, whose head appears slightly raised towards the sky and with his mouth open, as an attempt to represent his petition for mercy for his executioners<sup>40</sup>. This iconographic model became a true academy, which is evident in artists as important as Rubens, in whose works the taste for the corporeal including the sweetness and tranquility marked by the face of the saint stand out. The representations of the saint made by Caravaggio exhibit the exact moment of the torture, accentuated by the violent contrasts of light, in which the social difference between St Sebastian and the characters that accompany him also highlight, with the closed X-shaped compositions in order to enhance the feeling of anguish (Fig. 12). Guido Reni makes scenes of the martyrdom more emotionally calm, marked by the sensuality of the nude and by a chiaroscuro, whose significant element is the look that the saint stares at the sky (Fig. 13).



Fig. 11. Veronés. *Martyrdom of St. Sebastian*. (c. 1528). Church of St. San Sebastian (Venice). <https://repro-arte.com/es/21920-el-martirio-de-san-sebastian-detail>



Fig. 12. Caravaggio. *Martyrdom of St. Sebastian*. (c. 1588). Museo Nacional de Varsovia. <https://wikioo.org/es/paintings.php?refarticle=A2A2F9>

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<sup>40</sup> Pacheco, F. (1990) p, 341.

The representations of St Sebastian made by El Greco (Fig. 14) are based on the *Golden Legend* and the *History of the Lombards*<sup>41</sup> and the stylistic characteristics of the painter are noted: the excessive elongation of the human body, the use of duller colors with a predominance of black, the presence of clouds in the scene to give more tension or the constant connection made between st Sebastian and st Maurice and with Christ.

In France, he was represented by artists such as George la Tour, who combined the Italian tenebrism typical of Caravaggio with strong and tense contrasts of light marked by the only illumination of a candle, together with an intimate and domestic atmosphere typical of paintings of the Netherlands, in the company of a few saints such as St Irene (Fig. 15).

From the end of the 18th century and the 19th century, the representations of St Sebastian almost fell into oblivion, standing out representations of a few saints such as St Teresa de Jesus or St Peter (very recurrent in Germany and Italy). It was due to the fact that there was a pictorial turn towards



Fig. 13. Guido Reni. *St. Sebastian*. (c. 1615). Palazzo Rosso. <https://historiaarte.com/o-bras/san-sebastian>

themes of a courtly and costumbrist character, as well as patriotic and sentimental scenes of Romanticism, the gallant character of court paintings, the mythological themes of Neoclassicism or French impressionist painting that focuses on the study of light, nature and exterior spaces. It leads to a completely disappearing scenes and portraits of a religious nature. It is in the 20th and 21st centuries when the Apollonian figure of St Sebastian from the Middle Ages recovers strongly because his image is associated with eroticism and homoeroticism, being considered by many intellectuals and groups a gay icon and influencing, in turn, a large and diverse number of artists, such as the Japanese writer Yukio Mishima and Federico Garcia Lorca<sup>42</sup>. In the case of Lorca, some drawings of the saint painted by the poet, such as the one made in 1927 and preserved in a private collection in Madrid (Fig. 16), highlight for minimizing the tragedy of the martyrdom by not staining them with the physiological blood that was required his companion and friend Dalí, perhaps due to the Apollonian character that the poet has imprinted on the saint, emphasizing that his "St Sebastian dies at all times"<sup>43</sup>, as Christ died. Lorca participates with these drawings of great purity of the Kandinskian principle of interior necessity, of poetic and abstract spirituality, with which an important part of his plastic work is impregnated<sup>44</sup>.

In close connection with Lorca, the figure of Salvador Dalí stands out, who, highly influenced by *Boccaccio's Decameron*, *Voragine's Golden Legend* and the iconography of the saint that emerged in the 14th century, made his less known drawing of St Sebastian in 1942 (Fig. 17).

<sup>41</sup> Long, R. (2020). *El Greco: Ambition and Defiance*. Yale: Yale University Press, p. 175.

<sup>42</sup> The presence of this representation will be considered below. Other example of the diversity of artists are Claude Debussy ("The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian", 1911) and Tennessee Williams ("San Sebastiano di Sodoma", 1984).

<sup>43</sup> It is a ritual that Lorca's drawings contain one or several eyes, summarizing the punitive burden of morality and sexual castration close to the postulates of Surrealism and its psychoanalytic derivations. Cartés, Rosario F. "El mito de San Sebastián en Federico García Lorca. Breve estudio comparado", in Soria Olmedo, A., Sánchez Montes, M.J. y Varo Zafra, J. (coords.), *Federico García Lorca. Clásico / Moderno (1898-1998)*. Granada: Diputación Provincial, (2000), p. 175.

<sup>44</sup> Roldan, J. R. *Kandinsky was one of his favorite painters, and he leaves evidence of this in the famous conference given in Granada in 1928 and entitled "Sketch de la nueva pintura"*. Cited in Plaza 2014: 216-239.



Fig.14. El Greco. *St. Sebastian*. 1577. Museo del Prado. <https://www.museodelprado.es/coleccion/obra-de-arte/san-sebastian/>

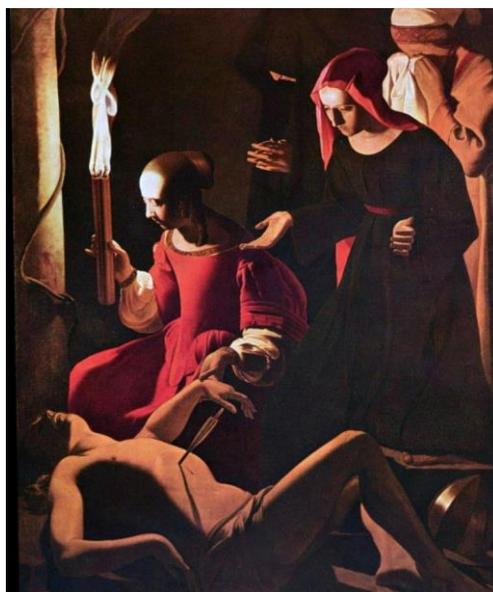


Fig.15. George de la Tour. *St. Sebastian and St. Irene*. 1634. Gemäldegalerie <https://www.lacamaradelarte.com/2020/05/san-sebastian.html>

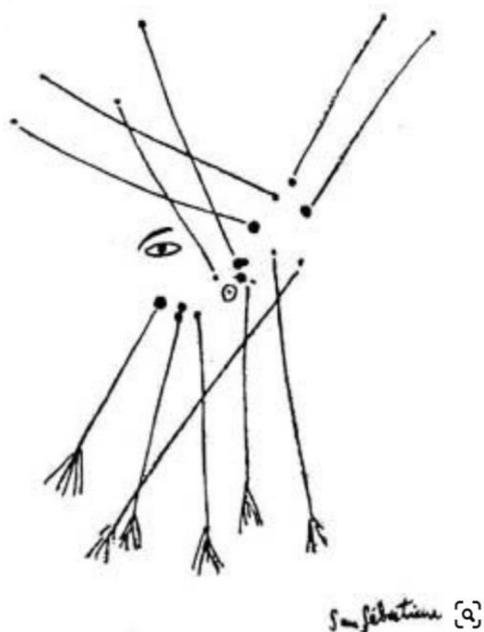


Fig. 16. Federico García Lorca. *Martyrdom of St. Sebastian*. 1941. Private collection. <https://wellntrubytumblr.com/post/165990238740/federico-garcia-lorca>

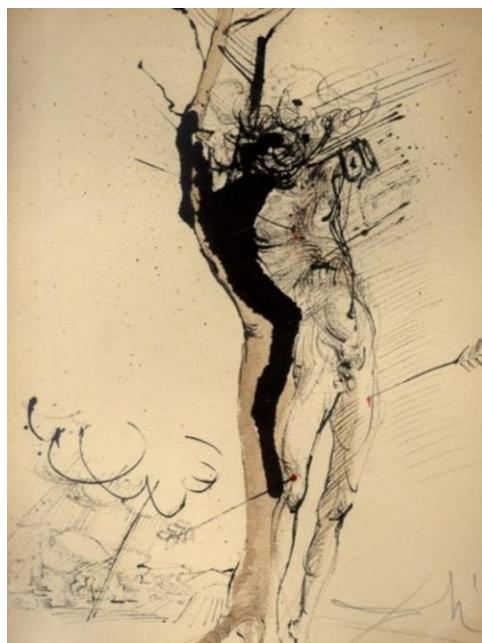


Fig. 17. Salvador Dalí. *St. Sebastian*. 1942. Private collection. <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/1270156519-80250982/>

In this way he established a debate about its iconography with his friend and colleague Lorca years before the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, as he testifies in his diary: "The arrows had all annotated its temperature and a small inscription engraved on the steel that said: Invitation to blood clot. [...]. Each drop of water, a number. Each drop of blood, a geometry"<sup>45</sup>. The drawing made by Dalí, connected with some of Lorca's drawings, shows the saint in an upright position, leaning his back on a tree trunk, under the classic influence of Greco-Roman busts, with his arm severed and his head almost non-existent, which is marked by numerous diagonal, curved and circular lines. The totally naked male body, where the genitals can be perceived very subtly, shot through by numerous arrows of simple diagonal lines, represented between the head and the hip, contrasts with the clear and precise definition of the arrows stuck in the legs, coming to show in some detail the bleeding produced by their wounds upon contact with the skin.

The obsession with St Sebastian and his iconographic model was of such magnitude in Dalí that in 1977 he created the "Wounded Amazon", under a strong iconographic influence of the saint, since the body of the Amazon is pierced by two large arrows in the shape of spear. It also unites the Greco-Roman classicist overtones in its sculptural character, the Freudian conclusions, its repetitive elements such as the egg, as well as its deep obsessions linked to the sexual sphere.

### **St Sebastian and the passion of Christ**

Following the theories of numerous researchers<sup>46</sup>, there is an interesting connection between the iconographic model of the martyrdom of St Sebastian and the model of the Passion of Christ. Réau was the first scholar who related the theme of the martyrdom of St Sebastian as an Alter Christus. For Réau, "the saint is almost always standing, tied to a tree, a post or a column, because of a contamination with Christ tied to the column or the flagellation of Christ"<sup>47</sup>. In reference to these two themes, Claudio Magris, analyzing the Baroque monasteries of Austria and specifically that of St Florian, states that "On the altar of St Sebastian, Albrecht Altdorfer painted some of his most impressive paintings, scenes of the Passion of Christ and of the martyrdom of the saint., A bestial and stupid violence under tragic and incandescent skies is unleashed that is fierce with the two condemned, clumsy and grim faces are cut out which show all the obtuseness of evil"<sup>48</sup>.

In addition, the interrelation between the martyrdom of St Sebastian and the Passion of Jesus is also produced by the number of arrows that crosses his body, as Josefina Lanzuela affirms: if there are three, the correspondence is with the three nails of martyrdom; if there are five, it is related to the wounds caused by the arrows, the five wounds of his Passion<sup>49</sup>.

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<sup>45</sup> Dalí, S. (1928). *San Sebastián*. Gallo, 1, p. 10.

<sup>46</sup> Numerous researchers, such as Juana Francés, Jaimie Baron and Ina Blom, place this work as the connection between East and West, Chinese graphic painting and European drawing, the link between Eastern expression and Western Christian religious fervor, as well as one of the great references of the emergence of the movement called European Informalism, which emerged after 1945 in said continent, being the works of Francis Bacon and the Cobra Group important testimonies of it.

<sup>47</sup> Réau, L. (1997). *Iconografía del arte cristiano*. Tomo II, vol 3. *Iconografía de los santos*. Barcelona: Ed. Del Serbal, p 196.

<sup>48</sup> Magris, C. (1990). *El Danubio*. Barcelona, Anagrama, p 105.

<sup>49</sup> Carmona Muela, J. (2008). *Iconografía de todos los santos*. Madrid: Akal, p. 105. Ya Réau, L. (1997). *Iconografía del arte cristiano*. Tomo II, vol 3. "*Iconografía de los santos*". Barcelona: Ed. Del Serbal, p 195, he had outlined that relationship with the wounds. For him, this assimilation with the figure of Christ also occurs with Francis of Assisi.

The statue of St Sebastian, in the chapel of the same name in the town of St-Ségal, in the French Finisterre, is one among the numerous images that represent St Sebastian with his body pierced by five arrows. Also another example is the Altarpiece of the Christ of the Church of Commana, also known by the name of "the Five Wounds", in the French region of Brittany, from the end of the 17th century. This altarpiece was made by the sculptors of the Marinade Brest for and on behalf of the Five Wounds brotherhood<sup>50</sup>. The Divine Redeemer, located in the central part of the baroque altarpiece, is seated in an attitude of showing the faithful the five wounds of His Passion, a fact that justifies the presence of St Sebastian, located to the left of Christ, regardless of the fact that his body is pierced by six arrows<sup>51</sup>.

Emile Male estimates that "By these arrows that riddled him, people recognized the patron saint of archers and undoubtedly the heavenly doctor who cures the plague". Because of it the saint would also have a close connection with the Black Death epidemic<sup>52</sup>. The contemplation of these images would produce an effect of relief and consolation in the man who wishes to be freed from pain as a catharsis, and specifically from the plague that took place in the 7th century -as will be seen in the following section: "The side streets contain the statues of St Margarita and St Sebastian. [...] The second suffers conscientiously and serenely the ordeal that consisted of wound him with arrows without touching any vital center, but does he not know that his sufferings can prevent or cure the terrible plague plague?, Wasn't it necessary that he one manifest great serenity to calm the anguish of his faithful"<sup>53</sup>.

### St Sebastian and the plague

According to Minocchi, St Sebastian was considered from the end of the 7th century as a patron saint who was invoked against the plague, since it was related to the rain of arrows. Following Paul Diacre in the *History of the Lombards*, in the year 680 a terrible plague epidemic spread through Italy, being especially aggressive in the cities of Rome and Pavia. However, the plague did not end until an altar dedicated to St Sebastian was built in the Church of Saint Peter ad Vincula in Rome<sup>54</sup>. As a consequence, from this moment on, he began to be invoked in plague epidemics, consolidating himself as a patron saint of great importance.

However, numerous were the plague epidemics that devastated Europe between the 6th and 8th centuries, with epidemics that lasted between nine or twelve years, and, later, between the middle of the 14th century and until the beginning of the 16th century, the plague reappeared almost every year in one place or another in Western Europe. Finally, after small outbreaks, the plague disappeared from the West in the 18th century. According to Manetti, the peak of the scourge of the plague, which is repeated cyclically between the 14th and 18th centuries, coincides with that of devotion to the saint<sup>55</sup>. The reason for this devotion would be, according to Delumeau, that "since St Sebastian had died riddled with arrows, they were convinced that he was keeping the arrows of the plague away from his protégés. (...) However,

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<sup>50</sup> The brotherhoods played an important role in the development of sacred art, not only at the architectural level but also at the pictorial level, according to Emile Mâle (Mâle, E. (1990). *L' Art religieux a la fin du moyen Age*. Paris: Armand Colin, p 176).

<sup>51</sup> Minocchi, S (1911). *Il martirio di S. Sebastiano*, Nueva Antología, nº 154, pp. 440-450.

<sup>52</sup> Mâle, E. (1990). *L' Art religieux a la fin du moyen Age*. The translate is mine. Paris: Armand Colin, p 190.

<sup>53</sup> Pelletier, Y. (1989). *Lesenclos bretons*. The translate is mine. Madrid: Alianza, p. 45.

<sup>54</sup> Bougard, F. (1996). *Paul Diacre: Histoire des Lombards*. Paris: Brepols, pp. 95-170.

<sup>55</sup> Marinetti, G. (2000). *Il contagio e i suoi simboli*. Pisa: Ed. Dante, p. 28.

after 1348 his cult acquired an extensive development<sup>56</sup>.

The association of St Sebastian with protection against the plague<sup>57</sup>, with divine origin, is not new. Since ancient times there has been a popular belief that the plague (symbolized by arrows) was a punishment sent by divine anger against the faults committed by men throughout their lives. Thus, in the *Iliad* 1.53, "nine days up and down the host (*scil.* the Greek army) ranged the god's arrows"<sup>58</sup>. In turn, the *Old Testament* has several passages in which the God of the Jews sends his arrows to men to punish their sins (Psalm 7, 12-14). Certainly, and as Trens recognizes, "The idea of representing the effects of divine wrath by means of arrows, it is, the death with all its train of evils, is ancient. It is found in the depths of all literature and popular traditions"<sup>59</sup>. To this, one could also add the plastic testimony at the end of the Middle Ages in the panel made in 1424, preserved in the Niedersachsches Landes Museum in Hannover, which shows Christ sending plague arrows to the earth (Fig. 18), or the expressive illumination of 1437 which occupies the fol. 164 of the Siena Account Book, attributed to Giovanni di Paolo, which represents the disease as a terrible monster that shoots arrows at an unsuspecting man (Fig. 19).

For this reason, the artists, when it came to representing this St Sebastian protector against epidemics, did not take long to appropriate the themes of the Virgin protecting people with her mantle and the arrows launched by God against men to give them the latter the metaphorical sense of calamity or epidemic<sup>60</sup>. Following the model of the Virgin, the saint protects a multitude of faithful who invoke him under his mantle extended by two angels, on which the arrows of the plague come to break. This is how it is represented in "St



Fig. 18. *Christ sending over the earth the arrows of the plague.* Altarpiece of the Carmelites of Göttingen. 1424. Niedersächsches Landes Museum. <https://reproarte.com.es/selecci-on-de-temas/a-estilo-renaci-miento/219-20-el-martiri-de-san-sebastian-detail>

<sup>56</sup> Blanco, A. (1988). *La Peste negra*. Madrid: Anaya, p.70. Also Monreal Tejada, L. (2000). *Iconografía del cristianismo*. Barcelona: El Acanalado, p. 237.

<sup>57</sup> In order to curb divine wrath, numerous saints were erected as protectors or advocates against the plague, so the list would be quite long to enumerate. Among them would be St Sebastian, St Roch, St Egidio, St Chistopher, St Valentin, St Carlos Borromeo, sponsored by the Jesuits, St John Nepomucene and St Crispin. However, and despite the local character or depending on each country, St Sebastian and St Roch have been the saints most invoked against plague epidemics, with a universal character, cf. Contreras Mas, A. (2007). *Enfermedades y santos protectores en Mallorca medieval*, Bolletí de la Societat Arqueològica Lul·liana, n° 63, pp. 41-62.

<sup>58</sup> Lattimore, Richard (2011). *The Iliad of Homer*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

<sup>59</sup> Carmona Muela, J. (2008) p. 138.

<sup>60</sup> This theme enjoyed great popularity from the 14th century. In the oil painting of the "Madonna of Mercy with Saint Roch and St Sebastian", belonging to the Pasarese School of the 18th century, the Virgin is observed, crowned by two angels and accompanied by both saints, protecting with her mantle a group of people who, judging by their white habit and black roquette, could belong to the Congregation of Our Lady of Mercy.

Sebastian intercessor" (1465), made by Benozzo Gozzoli for the nave of the Church of St Agostino in St Gimignano, Italy, on whose pediment of the plinth in which it is installed appears the inscription which allows it to be identified: "sancte Sebastiane intercede pro devoto populo tuo"<sup>61</sup>.

This facet is most clearly shown in the post-plague memorials that, up to and including the 18th century, were built in rural or urban churches, such as in Timisoara, in western Romania, or in Budapest and the center of the medieval city of Buda. In the latter, in 1713 it was erected a column crowned by the statues of the Trinity in the center of the Plaza de la Santísima Trinidad, as it seems to be the tradition in many of these cases. Dedicated, therefore, to the Plague and the Holy Trinity, the image of St Sebastian appears in the lower body of the column with great prominence, in the company of other saints, in appreciation for the cessation of the plague that occurred at the beginning of the 18th century. St Sebastian is found tied his hand and foot up to a trunk at the waist with a thick rope, which serves to hold up the cloth that partially covers his body, and pierced by three arrows, two of which have disappeared<sup>62</sup>, those located in the middle of the arm and the leg on the right side, although his trace remains. St Sebastian is here accompanied by other saints considered intercessors against the plague, such as St Roch, dressed in the pilgrim's habit, and St Christopher, carrying the child Jesus.

The slender and sumptuous plague columns that were erected in the center of important squares in the capitals or other prominent cities of Europe, keep an obvious parallelism with those other sculptural representations, much simpler and more modest, which, on a pylon, place St Sebastian on the roads that give access to some towns, as is the case in certain cities in the Czech Republic. St Sebastian is a retaining wall, the symbol of protection that is invoked so that the fearsome plague does not enter and move away from the city and its inhabitants.



Fig. 19. Giovanni Di Paolo. *The Plague*. Siena account book. 1437. Biblioteca Comunale de Siena. <https://www.ellitoral.com.ar/corrientes/2020-3-29-1-0-0-pestes-la-buella-de-nuestros-miedos>

<sup>61</sup> Monreal Tejada, L. (2000), p. 236.

<sup>62</sup> Barker, S. (2007). *The Making of a Plague Saint. Saint Sebastian's Imagery and Cult before the Counter-Reformation*, in F. Mormando and T. Worcester (eds.), *Piety and Plague. From Byzantium to the Baroque*. (Vol II, pp 90-120). Kirksvielle: Truman State University Press.

### St Sebastian through photography and film

As a consequence of the huge development of the iconographic models of the figure of St Sebastian from the Middle Ages to the 18th century, especially that of the first martyrdom, the new modes and techniques of expression as well as the current audiovisual media have also echoed and, therefore, are participants in this model and iconographic diffusion with very varied reinterpretations, especially in the cinema. Nowadays, painters and photographers have internalized the message of the arrows and veiled purity cloths in place of sex, among other elements. Since the end of the 19th century with Boulanger, photography has given names as significant as Elisàr von Kupffer or Carmela Pinto. Antonio Roldán García has contributed to this iconography several pictorial-photographic works with a nod to Spanish avant-garde artists, some of which have been published in the book entitled "*Los Paisajes y el Amor*" (Fig. 20). The dissemination of these works has even adapted to the new times and has taken place through different social networks.

Similarly, the cinema and the advertising of commercial and fashion firms have resorted to the martyrdom of the saint. All of them have been removing or adding elements to the representation of St Sebastian, depending on their sensitivity or the format, such as the one adapted by *Versace*, which organized a parade in 1996 in which its male models wore clothing highly inspired by the saint, whose pictures were taken by the famous photographer Bruce Weber<sup>63</sup> (Fig. 21). A multiplicity of artists stand out from this immense development, with great pictorial works among which Antonio Bou, Claudio Bravo, Kevin R. Larson, Antonio Redondo, Claudio Tessari, Nahum Zenil, Ana M<sup>a</sup> Pacheco and Douglas Schmidt highlight, among others<sup>64</sup>

However, in the cinema since the peplum films, made during the 50s, the saint appears emulated. Thus, in *The Last Days of Pompeii* (Mario Bonnard, 1959), Arbaces (Fernando Rey) is shot dead like St

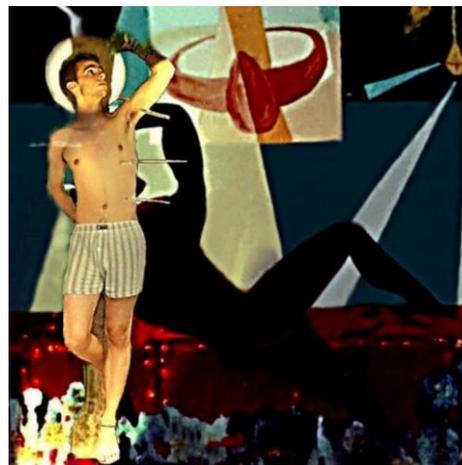


Fig. 20. Antonio Roldán García. *St. Sebastian*. 2007. <http://www.cronistasoficiales.com/?p=96828>

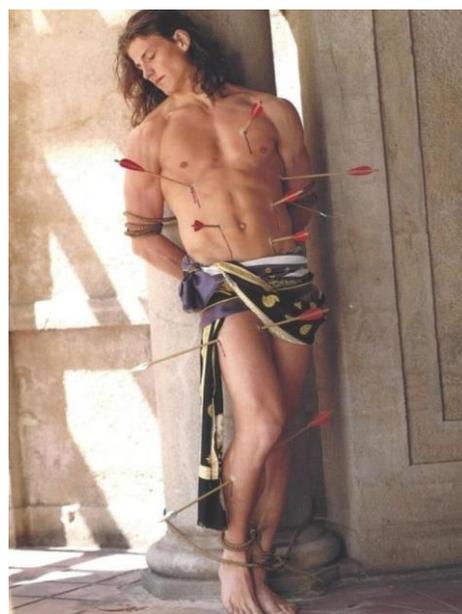


Fig. 21. Bruce Weber. *Versace. St. Sebastian*. 1995-1996. *Vogue Magazine*. <https://www.1stdibs.com/eng/fashion/books/fashion/gianni-versace-catalogue-bo-oke-uomo-no-29-autumn-1995-bruce-weber>

<sup>63</sup> Roldan, J. R. (2011). *Esto no estaba en mi libro de Historia del Arte*. Madrid: Editorial Almuzara, pp. 54-56.

<sup>64</sup> Among these works, the pictorial series by Antonio Redondo stands out, made up of more than 25 acrylic and oil paintings on canvas, with strong influences from Fauvism, Cubism and Picasso's blue stage with a strong influence of pain and sorrow, as well as like the works of St Sebastian by Douglas Schmidt with strong dignity of the character. Bellido Gant, M. L. (2014). *Historia de las artes plásticas tras la Segunda Guerra Mundial*. Granada: Port Royal, pp 156-158.

Sebastian<sup>65</sup> (Fig. 22). Nevertheless, it was in the last third of the 20th century that extensive development took place, with the sequences shot by prestigious directors, including Jarman, Humfress, Weigl and Defurne.



Fig. 22. Manuel Baquero and Dino Galiano. *The last days of Pompeii*. 1954.  
<http://efectosespecialescinespaniol.blogspot.com>

In 1976, in United Kingdom, *Sebastiane* was released, co-directed by Derek Jarman and Paul Humfress, shot in Latin and rated as “X” in the United States. It is considered a great reference due to the way in which Jarman and Humfress show the Apollonian version of the martyrdom of the saint, jovial in appearance and totally naked, tied to a circular wooden stick, without censorship, inspired by the pictorial works of the Baroque. Film critic Roger Ebert describes the scene: "brimming with the brutal sensuality of tribal candor, soldiers, surrounding Sebastian, flirt as if they were in a gay camp rather than a Roman garrison"<sup>66</sup>.

Continuing in chronological order, Peter Weigl directed *Das Martyrium des heiligen Sebastian* in 1984, taking *D'Annunzio's libretto* and Debussy's music as a reference. In this feature film, in relation to the episode of St Sebastian, starring Michael Biehn, he shot some shots full of vague homosexual eroticism, in a context of protest against wars and assassinations. However, if the dialogue with Diocletian was original, in its social adaptation of the 20th century, the adaptation of the *Dannunzian text* in the martyrdom scene was more impressive, stressing the importance of faith, purity, change and sacrifice, predominating the visual character in the scenographic language.

In 1985, *Mishima*, a feature film directed by Paul Schrader, was released, in which the reaction of the writer Yukio Mishima (*Confessions of a Mask*, 1949<sup>67</sup>) to Guido Reni's "St

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<sup>65</sup> A couple of years ago, in *Goliath against the giants*, Fernando Rey dies again, riddled with arrows. This was because the production team was the same, Manuel Baquero and Dino Galiano. The same thing happens in *The Colossus of Rhodes* (Sergio Leone, 1961), this time Erasmo Baccicucci replaces Dino Galiano. These producers were influenced by the model of St Sebastian made by Reni, due to the strong sensual charge, as well as by the one made by Mantegna, due to the arrangement of the arrows stuck in one of the main characters, especially the arrow in the neck.

<sup>66</sup> Sánchez Noriega, J. L. (2010). *Historia del cine*: Teorías, estéticas y géneros. Madrid: Alianza, p. 273.

<sup>67</sup> Mishima, Y. (1949). *Confesiones de una mascara*, Barcelona: Teide, pp. 209-210. The Japanese writer Yukio Mishima ended up feeling so attracted from his adolescence by the iconographic model of the saint's first martyrdom that he ended up photographing himself as a true St Sebastian, in whose martyrdom he saw the erotic pleasure of pain. (Fig. 23).

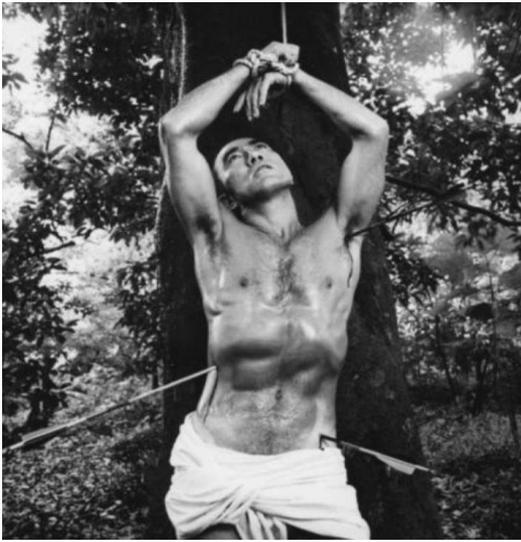


Fig. 23. Yukihiro Mishima. *Self-portrait as St Sebastian*. 1968. <https://ehuelodelalechuzga.com/2020/03/01/yukio-mishima/>

Sebastian" is reflected, a reaction of a strong homosexual charge and onanist (Fig. 23). This influenced various artistic manifestations, such as the triptych by Peter Colstee (1992) or the photograph by David Wojnarowicz (1999), who portrays Mishima's face dropped on the belly of a Sebastian with a bullet, superimposed on it the drawing of a Japanese child that springs from his reverie by masturbating and pinching his chest, offering a game between the occult and ethics, as a result of a fertile paranoia<sup>68</sup>.

In 1996, Bavo Defurne made a short film about St Sebastian martyrdom entitled *Saint*. In it, St Sebastian, played by Olaf Nollen, is portrayed as Diocletian's lover and represented under the aesthetics of black and white cinema as a saint with a very jovial appearance, almost an adolescent, in whose martyrdom he is tied to a prominent tree trunk, hands tied, highlighting his large white purity cloth and shot by three arrows as the same time that he directs his gaze

upwards like the St Sebastian made during the Baroque. The journalistic critic spoke of it like this: "Saint is a trembling current of images, which throbs in the execution of St Sebastian. Combining the bloody and pious aspects of the legends of the Catholic martyr, the film uncovers using homosexual references in the glorification of these beautiful and unrepeatable boys, in their tortured bodies..."<sup>69</sup>.

During the 21st century, there are numerous feature films which draw from the iconographic model of the first martyrdom of St Sebastian, as well as the Golden Legend and the pictorial representations made by great masters from the Middle Ages to the Baroque. Among them deserves to be highlighted *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (Peter Jackson, 2001) (Fig. 24), in which the character of Boromir is represented as an authentic St Sebastian dressed in medieval clothing and shot by the leader of the Uruk Hai, with numerous arrows stuck in different parts of his body, to protect Merry and Poppin, in the same way as the saint. A few years later, another of the titles influenced by the *text of Voragine* as by the work of "Christ sending the arrows of the plague over the earth" of the Altarpiece of the Carmelites of Göttingen is the film entitled *300*. It represents the scene of a shower of arrows launched by the king of Persia at the Spartans, where Leonidas is observed being shot at the battle of Thermopylae. In this case, the literary and religious character merge into a single story<sup>70</sup>.

Eventually, the theme of sagittation or the shooting of St Sebastian is highly recurrent in 21st century horror movies, where it is used to portray scenes of harsh and unpleasant murders towards representative characters of these feature films. Some examples are *Valentine* (2001, Jamie Blanks), in which the martyr is replaced by an innocent female figure, represented in an upright position while being shot by seven arrows aimed at the chest, with

<sup>68</sup> Baecque, A. (2008). *Teoría y crítica del cine*. Barcelona: Paidón, p. 204.

<sup>69</sup> Brew, S. (2021). *La vida secreta de las películas*. Barcelona: Anaya, p. 231.

<sup>70</sup> Brew, S. (2021), pp. 240-242.

wavy hair whose most immediate reference is the prints of Saint Sebastian made by Dürer. Likewise, in *Hostel: Part 3* (2011), directed by Scott Spiegel (Fig. 25), it is noted that the figure of St Sebastian is represented by a young male character, shot by seven arrows, in which the tree and upright posture are replaced by a chair and a sitting position. In addition, two facts stand out: on the one hand, the arrangement of the arrows are represented in the same positions as the martyrdom of St Sebastian of Mantegna and, on the other hand, the famous phrase before the sequence verbalized by one of the main characters in minute 78:54 is: "Go ahead, made flesh and blood, a saint who comes from the American continent on which you can bet".



Fig. 24. Peter Jackson. *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*. 2001. <https://tolkienrivendel.blogspot.com/2020/02/diferencias-libros-peliculas-senior-anillos.html>

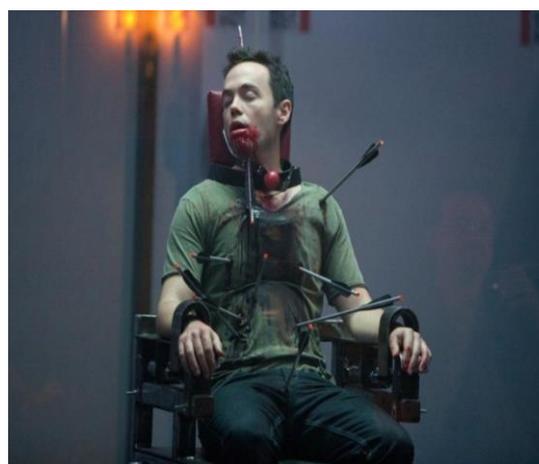


Fig. 25. Scott Spiegel. *Hostel: Part 3*. 2007. <https://www.tomatazos.com/peliculas/183516/Hostal-Parte-III>

## Conclusions

As a result of the investigations carried out and as the beginning of a later broader research of the works dedicated to St Sebastian, the influence that the martyrdom of St Sebastian had in a broad European context highlights.

Firstly, according to the studies of *Xanthi Proestaki*, there are no representations of St Sebastian in the Byzantine environment until, due to Western influence, his presence is first noticed in Crete in the 15th century. Although the type adopted is the most common of the Italian Renaissance, the young nude ephebe, with the exception of the perizonium, will be depicted on a neutral blue background typical of Byzantine art with some conventional plant elements.

Secondly, there are numerous martyrdom scenes with St Sebastian already in an attitude of dialogue with other saints, especially in his role as a military saint, already in intimate communication with the supernatural and in turn interceding for men, in a certain parallelism with the Redemptive Passion of Christ. All of them tend to privilege the staging of a unique and crucial moment in the life of the military saint, that of his martyrdom in defense of the faith.

Nevertheless, three types of representation of the saint can be highlighted. The first type of representation, from the beginning of the Middle Ages, is full-length and with a vital attitude and represents St Sebastian as a portrait, as a person generally of mature age, bearded,

with the crown in his hand and his identifying name. In this line, there are others that show Saint Sebastian rejuvenated and dressed in his clothes, holding the attributes of the arrow and the bow. The second type is fully immersed in a new type of representation that also sinks its roots in the Middle Ages and triumphs in later centuries. It shows the jovial martyr in his first martyrdom, tied his hand and foot up to a trunk or tree and arrowed for fidelity to God. The third type of representation, exceptionally for being of the second martyrdom, is characterized by the appearance of the half-naked saint lying on the ground while the soldiers end his life, beating him severely with flattened objects that they carry in their hands, such as sticks or clubs.

Lastly, the transmission of his representation was variable. During the high medieval period, its representation was less frequent, but it resurfaced with special force in the 14th-17th centuries, coinciding with the rise of the plagues that devastated Europe, as well as with the main plagues of the disease, prolonging its relevance to the Modern age. During the Modern Age, the mechanization in the production of prints and the consequent lowering of the price of the product favored the spread of the cult of St Sebastian and its acquisition by a growing number of faithful. In more current times, other media have been used, such as photography and audiovisual media, which have renewed, updated and decontextualized inherited representations, especially science fiction and horror cinema, which has made it an essential claim for the expression of the deep hidden passions and desires that underlie corrupted souls.

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