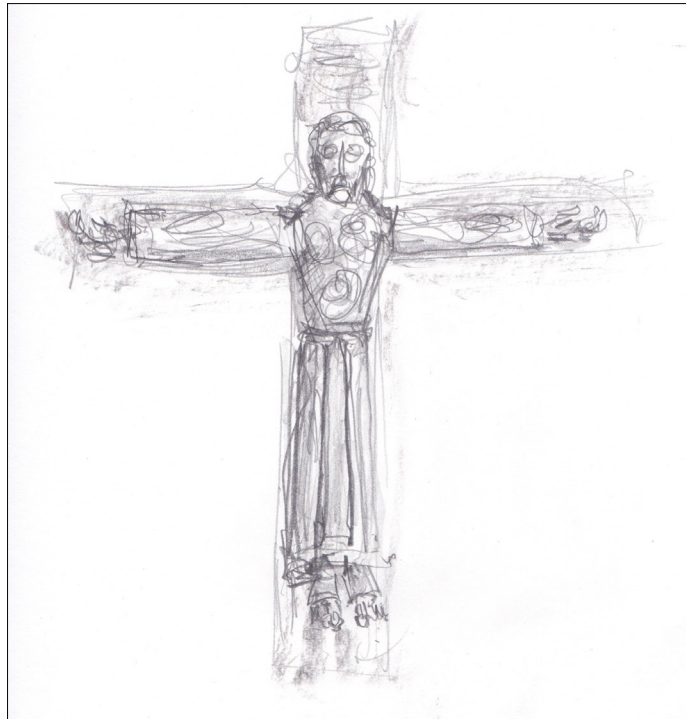


A Powerful Medieval *Volto Santo* Crucifix

Metropolitan Museum, NYC.

Walking through the Metropolitan Museum on my way to an exhibition I planned to see, I caught sight of, hanging high above a doorway in the Medieval section, a large and striking crucifixion sculpture. I paused to look, and then looked some more, struck by a strange emotional power it conveyed. I spent about ten minutes looking, then proceeded to my intended exhibition. That evening, I found myself thinking about the crucifixion sculpture repeatedly. I drew it from memory as part of that thinking and decided I needed to go back to study it.



First sketch, from memory.

The next day I returned to the Metropolitan for a second day of study. I photographed, drew, and looked hard at this artwork for about an hour. I read the Met's notes and did online research. I looked and studied. I retired to another room to sit and make notes. I returned to look at the sculpture to study it from different angles, trying to figure out what it was conveying, and how, and why it was so powerful.



The crucifixion sculpture as seen hanging on the wall, Metropolitan Museum, NYC. (Photo, MOR)

Unlike crucifixions one might normally associate with Christian iconography, the figure of Christ here was fully clothed and perfectly upright. The nearly naked, twisted, suffering Christ of other crucifixions was not being presented here. This figure was perfectly alert – upright, head erect, eyes wide open, fully aware and looking out. The figure conveyed something very other than pain and suffering.

I was reminded of the Byzantine *Kristos Pantokrator* (*Christ Ruler of All*) images with their de-

piction of Christ as majestically “in charge”, richly clothed, and very definitely not suffering. But this figure did not come across as a “ruler of all”. Like the Pantokrator it was calm and composed and fully clothed, but it was something other than “ruler”. It was, after all, crucified. It was something other – but what? And why?



Kristos Pantokrator, Hagia Sophia, Istanbul.

The Met points out that this crucifixion sculpture was done about 1200 AD in northern Italy and is an example of what is known as a “Volto Santo”, or “Holy Face”, crucifixion. In Medieval Italy, there developed a tradition of crucifixion sculptures in this style. The first and original “Holy Face” crucifixion dates to about 700 A.D. and became associated with a complex set of legends about its origins (carved by Jesus’ follower, Nicodemus, except for the face which was magically carved by an angel overnight while Nicodemus slept; transported magically by oxen without drivers; etc.) This sculpture became an object of pilgrimages to Lucca, Italy, where it came to rest. The most striking and unusual visual aspects of the Lucca Holy Face sculpture were: first, that the Christ figure was fully and expensively clothed; and second, that it was not at all in a twisted tortured posture. On the contrary, the Lucca figure appeared almost at rest. The 13th century Holy Face sculpture I was studying on the wall of the Met adhered to those iconographic motifs, but its emotional impact was, as I reacted to it, vastly different from



The Lucca Holy Face sculpture.

the original 700 A.D. sculpture. And the crux of that difference appeared to lie in the face.

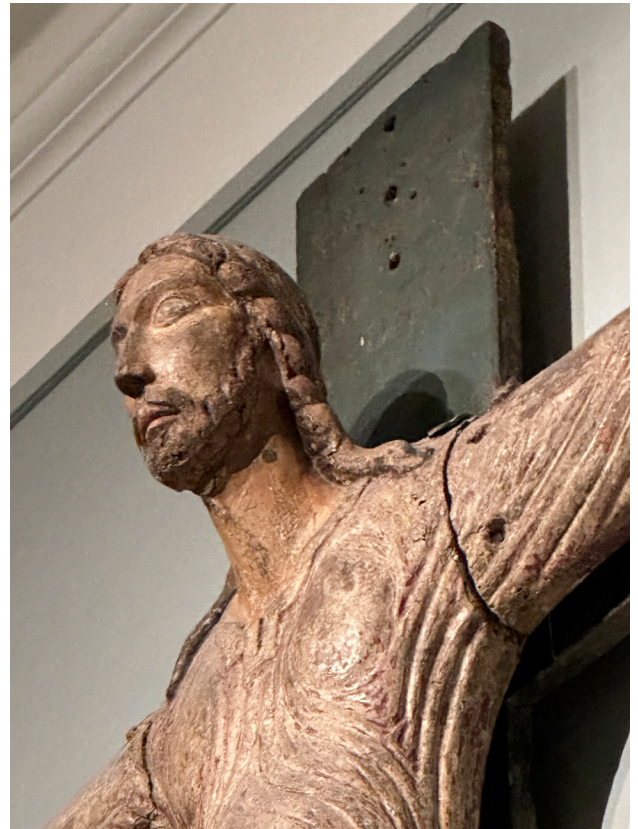


The face of the Met's 13th century Christ.
(Photo: Metropolitan Museum)



Thinking and looking, looking and thinking, I tried to understand what was happening in the face. It conveyed neither this nor that, that nor this. It is, quite strikingly, neutral. It is certainly not anguished as are so many crucifixions, but neither does it appear majestic or, to quote the Met's description, with which I disagree, "in glory". It is almost as if this face, this being, is ignoring us. His eyes are wide open. They were, in their day, painted and there remain traces of the polychromy. We can see the remains of very large dark pupils painted into the wide-open eyes which look straight ahead, neither up (to heaven?) nor down (at us?) nor off to the side in thought or pain. Like all large crucifixes of the era (this one is somewhat larger than life – more on that later), this crucifixion would have been installed at a height, probably above an altar, and the Met replicates that with their installation high on a wall above a doorway, the bottommost point of the sculpture being about 9' above the floor. But the eyes of this Christ are not looking down at us supplicants. They are effectively ignoring us.

From our vantage point below the sculpture, it at first appears the head is tilted upward, but seen from the side we realize it is not. It is perfectly level, with the neck thrust slightly forward in a very natural way. The head is neither lifted up nor tilted down but appears to be looking straight ahead, ignoring, oblivious to, not reacting to all around it.



The angle of the head is perfectly natural and relaxed.

And the mouth. What is going on with the mouth? It almost appears to be downturned, in a sort of dour, "I'm an unhappy guy" look. But on looking more carefully, I felt: No, it too is more neutral. It is more just "there", without expression. When viewed from a straight-on, eye-level position as in the Metropolitan photo below right, we see that the mouth is indeed somewhat downturned with that effect augmented by the downward curvature of the mustache. But as I looked and looked, I felt the mouth was not expressing displeasure or pain. It came across, especially when seen from below as intended, more the mouth of someone who is in his own world, oblivious of me



The mouth of the figure: Left, seen from below as it would have been installed above an altar; Right, seen straight on.
(Photos: Metropolitan Museum)

or my world.

As I studied the face I was reminded of the facial expressions one frequently sees on Asian sculptures of the Buddha. Most frequently these include a very slight lift at the corners of the mouth suggesting the bliss of enlightenment, or even, as in the Indian sculpture below, a suggestion of welcome to us unenlightened.

It took some research to find examples of the Buddha that begin to match the neutrality I was seeing in this Volto Santo Christ figure. But they do exist, and it is interesting to compare their neutral



Two Buddhas, both with hints of a smile. Left: Chinese, 11th century. Right: Indian, early 7th century;



Two Buddhas with more neutral facial expressions. Left: Chinese, early 7th century. Right: Japanese, 13th century.

expressions with that of this Christ crucified. Both the Buddhas and the Christ appear fully at peace with themselves, but the Buddhas appear to be looking within themselves, whereas this Christ is very definitely looking outward at the world.

As I studied, I turned my attention to other aspects of the sculpture to try to understand what they were doing and how they were contributing to the emotional power I felt emanating from this artwork. The figure of the Christ is somewhat over life size. It is approximately 6'3" – that is, within the range of possible heights for a male, but very definitely tall even for our era – and therefore imposing simply by virtue of size.

The posture of the figure is even more striking than its size. There is nothing of the twisted, tortured pose one frequently sees in crucifixion iconography. On the contrary, this figure is perfectly upright. Nor is there any evidence of gravity or weight. The figure does not come across as hanging on the cross so much as standing in front of or even floating in front of the cross. Its back is perfectly straight, its neck extended slightly forward at a natural standing-position angle. There is a slight and



The naturalistic swell of the belly and the slight forward tilt of the neck and head suggest a normal upright standing pose.

very human swell to the belly.

In contrast to these very naturalistic details, the arms are extended wide and perfectly perpendicular to the torso, like a very deliberate and unnatural dancer's pose, and again suggesting the figure floating in front of the cross rather than hanging from or attached to the cross. The feet have nails through them attaching them to the cross, but are clearly not attached in any physically realistic way. Instead, like the whole figure, they float in front of the cross, their heels barely touching the wood. Just as the facial expression suggests the figure is ignoring the world around him, the pose of the body suggests he is equally oblivious to the cross. In a way, he is posing with the cross, but is



The arms are perfectly perpendicular to the torso. The feet touch the cross only at the heels. The figure floats in front of the cross. It does not hang from nor does it seem in any physical way to be affected by the cross.





The hands appear to be actively receiving the nails rather than passively “being nailed”.

in no way affected by it.

Studying the hands we see a similar effect. They are indeed nailed to the cross, and there are traces of red paint suggesting blood, but there is no sense of them bearing the weight of Christ’s body as he hangs from the cross. On the contrary, the pose of his hands is quite relaxed and, as with the rest of the body, just hovering “there”, in front of the cross. Moreover, the very relaxed pose of the hands suggests they are intentionally receiving the nail, rather than passively “being nailed”. Again I was reminded of the beatific hand



The receptive, welcoming hand of the same early 7th century Indian Buddha illustrated a few pages back.

gestures of some Asian Buddhas, where the hand is actively receptive, inviting, welcoming, receiving.

And what of the clothing, one of the salient features of the original Lucca Volto Santo and of its subsequent derivatives? Most strikingly there is the tunic, which is long and beautiful. This is a very dignified and attractively attired man. The Met uses the word “priestly” to describe the tunic. Whether priestly or not, it is certainly beautiful and striking and the figure wearing this garment is imposing in his beauty and dignity. The belt is quite long, certainly longer than necessary to cinch a



The beautiful, and expensive, clothing. (Photo: Metropolitan Museum)

tunic, another detail that adds to the impressive physical beauty of this garment and the man wearing it.

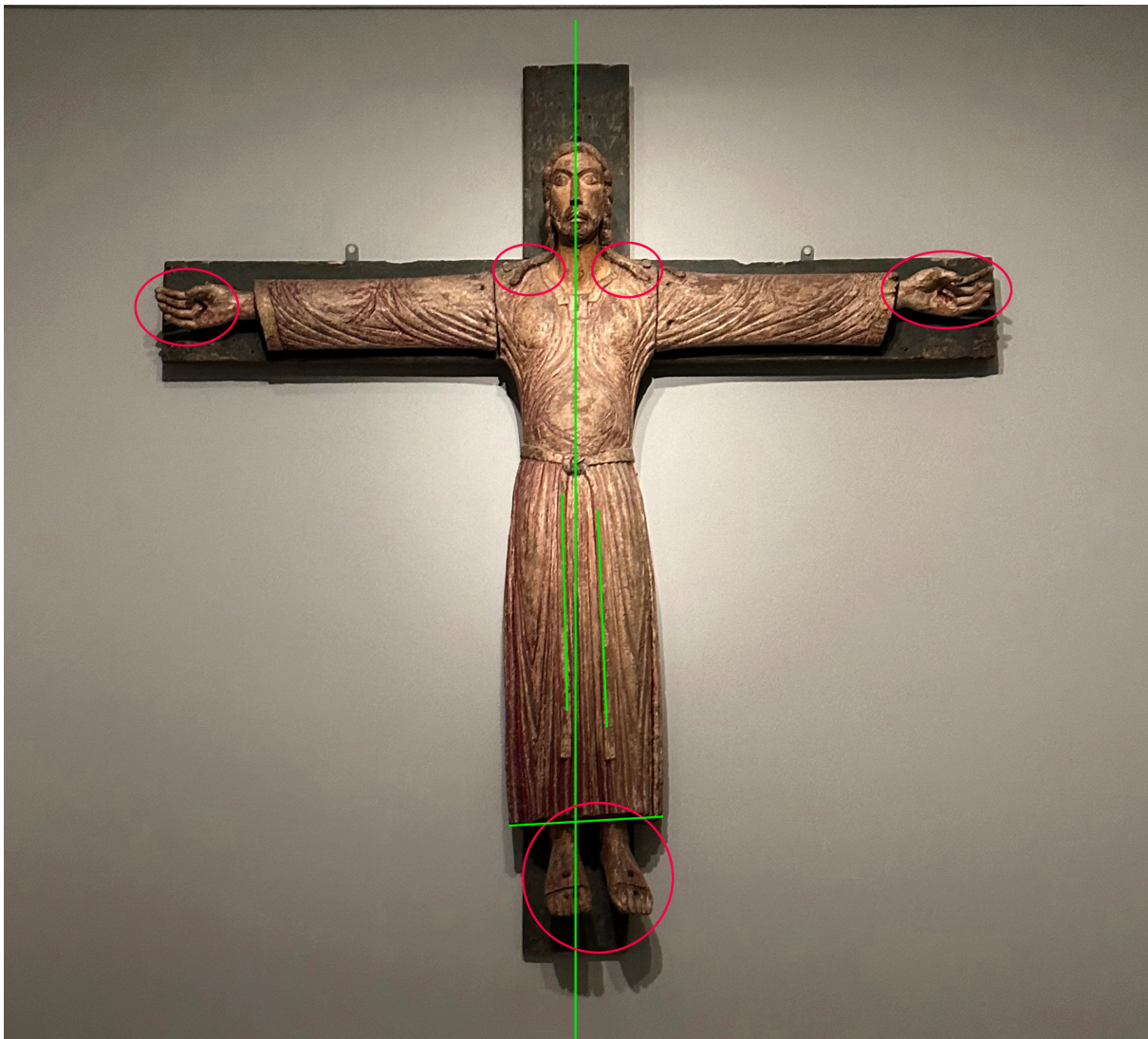
The conveyance of physical beauty is not limited to clothing. The man's face is wonderfully handsome, with a long straight nose, full lips, dense mustache, and curled beard. His hair is long and meticulously braided. His neck is long and strong. His chest is quite broad and his waist quite narrow. He is a strikingly, and deliberately strikingly, handsome man. And, as earlier mentioned, the figure is large, about 6' 3" tall – larger than almost all of us, but not so large as to feel inhumanly so.



The figure's beautiful face, long strong neck, carefully coiffed hair, strong pectorals and wide chest.
(Photo: Metropolitan Museum)

Everything combines to make this a beautiful, imposing specimen of a man – one who is like us in his humanity, but far beyond and other than us in ways it is hard to describe or understand.

That conflict we sense, that he is like us but at the same time so beyond and unlike us, of course lies at the heart of the man/God dual nature of the Christian Jesus. And that conflict is, in a beautifully subtle way, further conveyed and supported by the sculpture's use of symmetry and asymmetry. At first glance, the sculpture appears to be perfectly symmetrical. But it is not. There are numerous details where the symmetry is broken, and I believe quite deliberately so. The hand poses are not identical, with the forefinger of his left hand lifted up somewhat. The braids on each side of



Subtle asymmetries within the overall symmetrical gestalt. (Photo, MOR)

the neck are not identical, that on his right shoulder having slightly more of a curve. The long belt straps hang off center from the knot that ties them at the center of his waist. The hem of the tunic is tilted slightly downward toward his right. The feet are significantly offset to the left of his center. All of these details, which we may not notice initially, contribute to the perplexing and mesmerizing power of this beautiful, powerful Medieval *Volto Santo* sculpture.

