Torture in Art Throughout History

Anna Danielson
Graduate, Graphic Design

Advisor: Lopa Basu

Abstract

Art is a valuable asset in drawing attention to difficult issues in a different way. Controversial and taboo subjects, such as torture, are often ignored in people's daily lives, but no subject is off limits in the art world. Exposing people to artwork that depicts torture provides them with a starting point to begin a conversation with others about a difficult subject or to dig deeper into their own minds. Sometimes the best work of art is not the most visually pleasing or beautiful, but instead the piece that connects to the viewer emotionally and makes them think about why it was created. By looking at the portrayals of torture in art from before 1275 B.C. through present day, I was able to learn about the reasoning behind why torture was used and why an artistic documentation was necessary. I continued my research of torture depicted in art by creating my own digital painting and an accompanying artist statement.

Keywords: art, controversial, taboo, torture

Torture in Art Throughout History

In art, the human body is celebrated; in many famous paintings and sculptures the subject is nude or scantily clothed. When studying art, students are taught to see these pieces for their visual qualities and the techniques that were used in their creation. This approach allows the students to learn how to critique art no matter their personal opinions on the content of the piece. However, sometimes it is impossible to look at certain works of art and see beauty behind the image when they are portraying terrible events like torture. Today torture is typically a topic too taboo to talk about in daily life, but in the art world no subject is off limits. How does the depiction of torture in art affect the viewer, and what is the purpose of its creation?

Torture has been portrayed in art since before 1275 B.C., but the reasons behind why torture was used and documented in an artistic way have changed throughout time. In the Renaissance era, torture was commonly used as a punishment for criminal acts. While the act of torture took care of the legal consequences that were mandated for breaking the law, it was also seen as a beneficial act for the criminal. In this time period, religion and spirituality played a major role in how people lived their daily lives. When a person committed a crime they were not only breaking a law created by the government, but they were also going against the word of the Lord. The pain and suffering that torture produced was seen as a way for criminals to take on similar qualities to Christ and hopefully provide them with the possibility of salvation. Salvation would only be an option if the criminals repented for their sins; if no repentance occurred the pain that they experienced would be seen as foreshadowing the cleansing trials they would experience in Purgatory or what they would endure during an eternity in hell. Other art forms such as writing and preaching also enforced the belief that people needed to live their life devoted to Christ and his teachings. Jonathan Edwards' sermon, Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God, used intense imagery and language in the hope that the sermon would awaken the audiences to the terrible reality that awaited the sinners of the world. To discourage others from committing the same crimes, an artist would be hired to create a visual record of the punishment of the wrongdoer. These powerful images would be displayed in areas of high traffic, such as a town square or in a church, where all of the citizens could witness the consequences of breaking the law (Guzik 22).

Artistic renderings of torture were not just limited to criminals. Many churches commissioned a series of paintings or frescos that depicted the saints undergoing their trials and tribulations, usually in the form of torture. Saint Bartholomew, for instance, was skinned alive because he was spreading Christianity against the king's orders (Please refer to Figure 1, p. 203). The main visual distinction in the portrayals of saints and sinners in art is how the face and body are portrayed. Saints are usually illustrated in a delicate way that suggests purity; they show little to no emotion because they are dying for a religious purpose that they believe in. Those who were punished for committing a crime are typically created using high contrast (extreme darks and lights) with their faces and bodies contorted in agony.

This difference between the bodies of the innocent, repentant, and guilty can be clearly seen in Lucas Cranach's woodcut, The Crucifixion (Please refer to Figure 2, p. 203). The middle figure, Jesus Christ, is in a serene position and seems to be unaffected by the pain he should be enduring. Jesus' lack of emotion can be related back to his decision to use his suffering as a tool to create salvation and redemption for the children of God. The two thieves that flank Jesus' sides on the other hand show varying amounts of distress and agony. While both of the thieves display the pain they are feeling in their faces and bodies, the one on Jesus' right hand side is depicted in a more tranquil form because, according to Luke 23:39-43, one of the thieves repented for his sins while the other simply hurled insults at Jesus. Many early depictions of Jesus' crucifixion draw attention to the positive message of resurrection instead of the physical realities of execution but in recent artistic portrayals, such as Mel Gibson's The Passion of the Christ, they focus more on Jesus being human and capable of suffering. This allows people to relate...
better to the sacrifice he endured for them.

In the present age, religion does not play as large of a role in torture as it did in the Renaissance era, and the rationale in using torture has moved away from a form of punishment to an interrogation technique. With the end of the Cold War, the United States’ involvement in torture seemed like a thing of the past. That was certainly the case until the 9/11 attacks brought torture back into the public’s eyes (Pallitto 490). Because of the attacks on the Twin Towers, the search for members of the terrorist parties led the United States military overseas where they imprisoned alleged terrorists in Abu Ghraib, Iraq. Torture was used by the military in these situations as a way to obtain information from a source that was unwilling to share what they were hiding. While torture can sometimes produce reliable intelligence it is not the best way to gather information, especially when the people being held captive are innocent and are in no way involved with terrorist groups. Taxi to the Dark Side, the documentary film, begins with the unsolved murder of an innocent Afghani taxi driver who was taken for questioning and ended up dying from excessive physical abuse. The film uses this specific example as a starting point to explore the reasoning behind the corrupt techniques that were being used for interrogation purposes, and looked at the public backlash that was created when the Abu Ghraib photos were leaked. The public’s response to the newfound knowledge of what their military was doing caused great controversy, and artists took the opportunity to capture the pain and suffering of the prisoners on canvas and stone.

Fernando Botero, a famous figurative artist that is known for his depiction of overweight and inflated figures (Please refer to Figure 3, p. 204), created a series of over eighty drawings and paintings as a reaction to the photos that were leaked from the Abu Ghraib prison (Please refer to Figure 4, p. 205). He used these paintings as a way to express his anger at the hypocrisy of the entire situation. He abandoned his traditional style to better represent the anger he needed to get out of his system; his usual inflated figures were transformed into muscular and solid beings. Botero created these paintings quickly by using harsh brush strokes and dark, dirty colors. This series has been shown all over the world, but it does not provide the typical evening at the museum experience. The drawings and paintings feature nudity, blood, bodily functions, and humiliating scenarios that allow the viewer to empathize with the prisoners like they were never able to before (Baker). Botero once said: “Art is important in time, it brings some kind of reflection to the matter. We have analyzed this thing [the infamous Abu Ghraib photographs] from editorial pages and books, but somehow this vision by an artist completes what happened. He can make visible what’s invisible, what cannot be photographed.”

In a photo, a photographer just clicks a button to capture a certain moment in time, but an artist has to put in time and energy. This concentration of energy and attention brings additional depth and emotion to a subject that other media cannot fully replicate.

Artwork depicting torture is a valuable way to draw attention to the issue in a different way. Like Botero said, art has a part of the artist’s energy and soul in the piece, which allows for a unique and emotional viewing experience. Sometimes, the best work of art is not the most visually pleasing or beautiful. It is instead the piece that connects to the viewer emotionally and makes them think about why it was created. It does not matter if the artist used the right techniques or visual qualities; the importance of paintings and sculptures that feature torture is not based on how they were created but why.

**Artist Statement**

As an artist, I try to create pieces that the viewer can emotionally relate to even if they are unsure about the reasoning or story behind the work. Tortured Soul was created to bring awareness about the people that were captured after 9/11 as suspected terrorists and what they endured while in captivity. I took inspiration from Marc Falkoff’s book Poems from Guantanamo: The Detainees Speak, the poems in this book gave me a chance to look into the minds of the prisoners and helped me to understand what they were going through emotionally as well as physically. The emotions I felt while reading these poems needed an outlet and through the creation of Tortured Soul I was able to make a visual representation of the feelings I experienced. Tortured Soul is a digital painting that metaphorically represents the alleged terrorists being imprisoned at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay. This is done through the use of different techniques and the visual correlation between the imagery and their implied connotations. A majority of the prisoners being held were older, but through the use of young and childlike facial features I was able to represent the innocence of the people who were being held captive. These people were held captive for no reason other than being taken by a bounty hunter on a whim or being in the wrong place at the wrong time. The dark, monochromatic color scheme signifies the depression and isolation that accompanied their fear and humiliation. I emphasized this feeling of hopelessness by creating a sense of endlessness filled with the fear of the unknown. This was done by having the figure swallowed by a dark expanse that extends to the edges of the piece. With the juxtaposition of the soft and hard edges throughout my digital painting, I was able to create a visual representation of the deterioration of the prisoners’ minds and bodies as they were being tortured for information that they did not have (Please refer to Figure 5, p. 206).

The best part about art is that there is no single way to view and interpret it. Art uses our own personal experiences, thoughts, and feelings to lead us on a journey of discovery and inspiration. For my digital painting I
Torture in Art Throughout History

I did not want to steer anyone’s thoughts in a certain direction; I wanted them to look at it and ponder about how it made them feel. I created this piece to connect to the audience on an emotional level as well as bring torture back to the forefront of our minds. Torture is a topic that people typically only hear about on the news when a big event is happening, but unfortunately torture is not limited to those publicized events. It goes on every day all over the world. Torture is used to break a person down mentally and physically, and the images I referenced showcased so much pain and emotion that I felt obligated to replicate that emotion in my own piece. Through the creation of this piece I was able to approach a difficult topic and experience deep emotions in a safe environment. I wanted to provide this experience to other people through the creation and display of my digital painting. Torture is a subject matter that does not normally get discussed, or is shown in a way that creates a safe environment to explore deep emotions and thoughts.

Works Cited


*Taxi to the Dark Side.* Dir. Alex Gibney. By Alex Gibney. 2007. DVD.


Figure 1: Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew
Fresco in Santi Nereo e Achilleo

Figure 2: The Crucifixion
Lucas Cranach the Elder
German, Kronach 1472–1553 Weimar
Torture in Art Throughout History

Figure 3: Mona Lisa
Fernando Botero
1977

Figure 4: Abu Ghraib Painting 52
Fernando Botero
2005
Absences fill our lives. As an abstraction of the nonexistent, these variables can present themselves in myriad and miscellaneous forms. Sometimes they begin as an insignificant loss, but with time they become a considerable burden. But on other occasions they erupt as bursts of agony, and develop into a more durable suffering, the intensity of which the host feels varies upon the absence of the object, person, place, or thing. It is even possible for the host to be unaware. However, being ignorant of the variable does not equate to being free. For absences are parasitic, they exist to be fulfilled. And it is how we choose to fulfill them, that defines us.

The motivation for my oeuvre can be traced to my primary absence. My interest in themes of sexual deviancy, dualism, spirituality, and the consequences that ensue were an investigation into how and why I’ve dealt with the absence. And inversely, the series of work presented thrusts the Absence into the foreground.

Being a gesture of resolution, this series is a narration of the relationship between myself and it. Each form, a conceptual entity manifested, is an embodiment of who I am, being affected by the Absence. The entities represented are my sexuality, identity, and spirituality. The final piece is the confrontation between myself and the Absence. To present the symbiotic bond between myself and the Absence, I employed the usage of the void. The presence of a void is the closest physical representation of an Absence. With the addition of the void, the objects are distorted, changing the context of each piece by making it incomplete. To refill the now empty slot, light and shadow acted as a form of concealment. However, as light and shadow are also intangible sources, whether they are penetrative of obscuring voids is speculative.

My intent is to portray my relationship with an absence, and request the audience to question how they interact with their own, or if they simply choose to remain absent.