



# The Historical Anatomization of the Sacred Heart of Jesus: Transformation of A Devotional Image

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## Introduction

Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus represents one of the most significant manifestations of Western Christianity, both for its theological dimension and its symbolic richness. Throughout history, this image has functioned as a visual condenser of fundamental concepts such as divine love, redemptive suffering, and compassion, becoming a central element of modern religious sensibility [1,2].

However, beyond its strictly spiritual dimension, the Sacred Heart has been deeply influenced by cultural and scientific transformations, especially by the development of medical knowledge concerning the human heart. From the Middle Ages to the present day, the heart has been the subject of multiple interpretations oscillating between the mystical and the biological (Figure 1). Advances in medicine—from the Galenic tradition to William Harvey's cardiovascular revolution—modified its representation, granting it greater anatomical realism [3,4]. In particular, beginning in the seventeenth century, the heart came to be conceived as a dynamic and functional organ, which encouraged the progressive incorporation of new anatomical features into religious art. In this way, the iconography of the Sacred Heart evolved from symbolic forms toward more naturalistic and faithful representations, in which the organ appears as a tangible, emotionally charged, and physiologically recognizable entity [5].

This study adopts an interdisciplinary approach that integrates art history, theology, and medicine with the aim of demonstrating that this symbol has not been static, but rather an image shaped under the influence of changes in the understanding of the human body itself [6,7].

## The Theological Origins of the Devotion

The devotion to the Sacred Heart has its roots in biblical tradition and early Christian spirituality, where the heart symbolizes human interiority and the relationship with God [8]. In many sacred texts, the heart is not merely a physical organ but the place where the moral and spiritual life of individuals is formed (Figure 2).

During the Middle Ages, Christian mysticism developed this idea by linking Christ's heart with the wound in his side as a sign of redemptive love [6]. Authors such as Bernard of Clairvaux and Bonaventure deepened this spirituality, while the visions of mystics such as Gertrude of Helfta consolidated the image of the heart as a spiritual refuge [1]. The institutionalization of the devotion took place during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries following the revelations of Margaret Mary Alacoque, which describe a flaming heart, wounded and crowned with thorns [9]. This devotion was promoted by the Society of Jesus and officially recog-

nized by Pius IX, later receiving theological consolidation through Pius XII's encyclical *Haurietis aquas* in the twentieth century [10].

From a theological perspective, Christ's heart is understood as an expression of both his human and divine love within a single

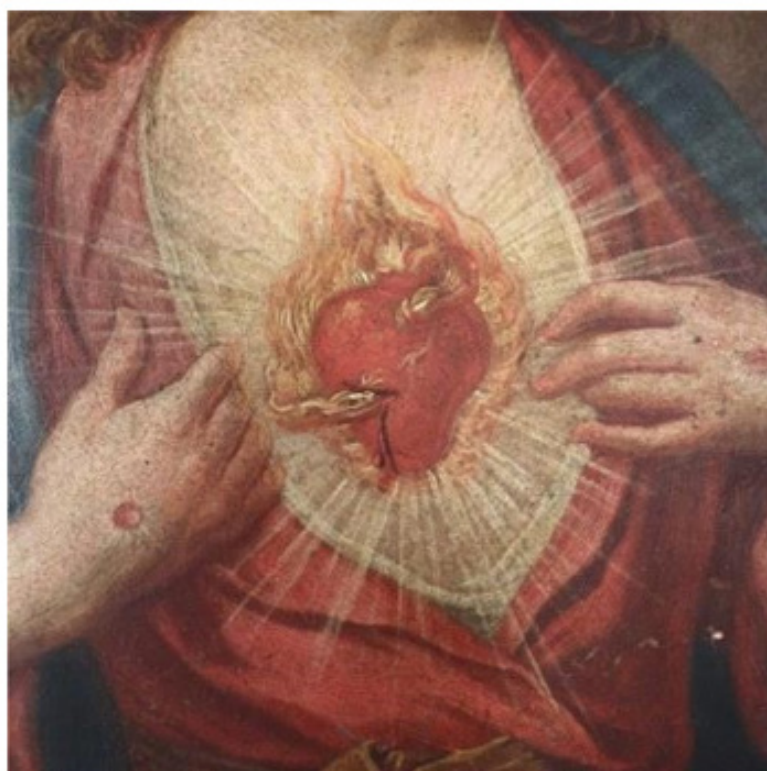
symbol, which enabled its veneration through a concrete corporeal reality (Figure 3). This facilitated the development of an explicit iconography, especially from the nineteenth century onward, when the heart acquired greater anatomical realism and stronger visual expressiveness.



Figure 1: Apariti3n to Margarita Mar3a de Alacoque.



Figure 2: Sacred Heart with a spear in its side.



**Figure 3:** Sacred flaming heart.

### The Influence of Medical Science on Iconography

The transformation of the iconography of the Sacred Heart of Jesus cannot be understood without considering the impact of advances in modern medicine. Beginning in the eighteenth century, developments in anatomy and physiology introduced new ways of understanding the human body, which were soon reflected in religious art (Figure 4). A key moment in this process was the discovery of blood circulation, which redefined the heart as the center of a dynamic system responsible for pumping blood throughout the organism [3]. This new conception profoundly influenced visual culture, encouraging a more realistic and functional representation of the organ.

As previously noted, throughout the eighteenth-century artists began incorporating more precise anatomical details into their representations of the Sacred Heart, including chambers, blood vessels, and muscular textures [5]. This process was made possible through the dissemination of illustrated anatomical atlases, which provided detailed visual models of the human body [11]. In the nineteenth century, this tendency reached its peak in popular devotional iconography, where the heart appears as a bleeding, pulsating organ fully integrated into Christ's body [12]. These images clearly reflect the influence of medical knowledge, but they also respond to a religious sensibility that valued cor-

poreality and suffering as means of identification with the divine.

The development of histology and clinical medicine likewise contributed to reinforcing the material dimension of the heart. The representation of denser and more detailed textures suggests an aesthetic approach influenced by scientific observation, though reinterpreted symbolically. At the same time, nineteenth-century medicine began establishing links between the heart and emotions, which reinforced its symbolic value as the organ of suffering and affection [2]. In this context, the Sacred Heart may be understood as a "theological-visceral organ," in which mystical, physiological, and emotional dimensions converge. This synthesis between anatomical realism and transcendent symbolism intensified the believer's emotional connection with the image, consolidating its role as one of the most powerful symbols of modern religiosity [7].

### The Contemporary Aesthetics of the Sacred Heart

During the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the image of the Sacred Heart has undergone profound transformation, adapting to new cultural, artistic, and social contexts. Following the Second Vatican Council, sacred art experienced a renewal that favored more abstract and symbolic forms, reducing the emphasis on the anatomical representation of the heart [13]. In theological



discourse, the image has been reinterpreted as a symbol of compassion, solidarity, and commitment to human suffering (Figure 5). In this sense, Christ's wounded heart becomes a metaphor for

the pain of the world and for the ethical response that such suffering demands [4,14].



Figure 4: Sacred Heart with valves (1767).



Figure 5: Anatomical morphology with all valves.

In the field of contemporary art, the Sacred Heart has been the object of multiple appropriations, ranging from institutional critique to aesthetic reinterpretation. These proposals challenge the boundaries between the sacred and the profane, demonstrating the symbol's capacity to generate new meanings [15]. Indeed, within the new digital environment, its circulation through social media and popular visual formats has expanded its reach, although it has also contributed to its symbolic simplification [16]. From post-secular perspectives, the Sacred Heart is interpreted as an emblem of shared vulnerability and an ethics of care, maintaining its relevance in a world marked by fragmentation and the search for existential meaning [5].

## Conclusion

The Sacred Heart of Jesus constitutes a paradigmatic example of the interaction between theology, art, medicine, and visual culture. Its historical evolution demonstrates that it is not a fixed symbol, but rather a dynamic image that has responded to changes in the understanding of the body and in forms of religious sensibility. The incorporation of anatomical elements into its representation, especially from the nineteenth century onward, reflects the influence of modern medicine on sacred art, giving rise to a "symbolic anatomization" of the heart [17,18]. This process expresses a culture that valued the visibility of the body as a form of knowledge and truth [19-24].

In contemporary times, the Sacred Heart has transcended strictly religious contexts, adapting to new languages and settings. Its persistence as a symbol demonstrates its capacity for reinterpretation and its enduring relevance as an image that articulates the human and the divine, pain and love, the visible and the transcendent [22].

Ultimately, this sacred image may be understood as a liminal image that condenses multiple dimensions of human experience. Over the years, its development has evolved significantly, and its study requires multidisciplinary approaches capable of understanding both its historical complexity and its continuous transformation within the framework of contemporary culture.

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