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The Crucified Christ

RISD Museum

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My name is Susan Ashbrook Harvey, and I am professor and chair of the Department of Religious Studies at Brown University. I teach the history of Christianity.

A crucifix is such a common image in our own culture.

It was in the Roman world in which Jesus was actually crucified as a living event and a living reality. It was something so horrific that early Christians never depict a crucified Jesus.

Around the 12th century, the date of the wooden sculpture we're standing in front of, one begins to see a much greater interest in depicting the death of Christ as something that is genuinely, physically, and humanly real.

This crucifixion would've been painted with colors. You can see some traces still of the red, and his ribs are showing. You can see on the left side in his ribs, the place where he was pierced with the lance; the wound in the side. It looks like the fragments of paint that are left show that this would've shown blood coming from that wound.

He sags a little bit with the weight of his death, but this is very much a depiction with majesty. He stands in the stance of the resurrection. That is, his arms out straight and his posture tall. There's as much an evocation of triumph in this crucifixion, as there is notation of his suffering with the wounds and the spots of blood.