

Legitimized Violence? Moral Ambivalence in Early Modern Art

The question of when violence is morally reprehensible and under what conditions it can be justified is a pressing issue in contemporary humanistic discourses. It is a topic that necessitates critical reflection and historical perspective, both of which this workshop endeavors to provide. The aim is to examine the diverse strategies used to legitimize, criticize, or ambivalently portray violence in the early modern period (14th–18th centuries). In premodern discourse, the moral evaluation of violence was subject to complex differentiations and was by no means universally reprehensible. Rather, the decisive factor in determining the morality of violence was why violence was used and against whom it was directed. Dante, for example, places the violent (*violenti*) in the seventh circle of hell in his *Divina Commedia*, but for him the sin lies not in the act of violence as such, but in the intention and malice of the perpetrators. This aspect later comes to be exaggerated in Machiavelli, who reinterprets immoral actions as virtues of rulers as long as they serve 'higher goals': By means of a model of virtue (*virtus/virtù*) linked to power (*vis*), violence is legitimized as the ability to assert oneself, e.g. against envious people, whom Machiavelli explicitly encourages the “good and wise man” to kill. During the Enlightenment, the view of violence was given a new moral-philosophical framework, which was judged in the light of reason, freedom, and autonomy. Thinkers such as Rousseau now understood violence as going against human nature and the idea of a civilized society. For others, however, it remained a necessary evil—for example, in criminal justice or revolutionary upheavals.

Art seems to draw on this ambiguity of moral judgments, exploring the fine line between violence and power, virtue and injustice. Early modern artists not only depicted violence, but also developed visual strategies that reflect the complex moral dimensions of violence. For instance, even *Caritas*, the symbol of God's love, was rendered at times as a violent personification, piercing the body of Christ with a dagger in depictions of the Crucifixion. And although Judith's victory over Holofernes is traditionally seen as the triumph of good over evil, artists following in Caravaggio's footsteps, such as Artemisia Gentileschi, Peter Paul Rubens, and Adam Elsheimer, push the moral justification of the act to its limits precisely by depicting raw brutality. Analogous shifts in meaning and emphasis can be observed in artistic interpretations of countless other biblical narratives, myths, and personifications – depictions that are always countered by images that celebrate nonviolence and stoicism as signs of triumph and moral superiority. Yet another aspect of this discourse emerges when considering representations of violence against nature or animals. In this context, artistic depictions uncover a view of moral imperatives beyond the interpersonal, raising questions about man's role in creation, personal responsibility, and the boundary between violence that is justified and pure cruelty. Finally, we cannot discount the violent potential of artworks themselves, for example as visual strategies to overpower the viewer, which can also be examined from the point of view of its period reception in how it was both actively reflected upon and subjected to moral evaluation.

Against the backdrop of the tension between moral and legal judgments outlined above, the workshop will examine the relationship between violence and morality in early modern art and art theory. From a premodern perspective, where does just violence begin and where does it tip over into injustice? How is this boundary visualized or reflected in art? What notions and norms of morality and justice can be gleaned from representations of violence in images? To what extent did early modern artists critically reflect on violence? And when do they present it as an ambivalent phenomenon, oscillating between destruction and renewal, power and powerlessness, justification and cruelty, virtue and vice?

The workshop will take place in two parts, each offering different perspectives on the relationship between violence and morality in early modern art. The first part will take place on December 11, 2025 at the Bibliotheca Hertziana - Max Planck Institute for Art History in Rome and will focus on the interactions between artistic practice and theological, moral, political and legal discourses. The second part will take place on January 22, 2026 at the DFG CAS "Imaginaria of Force" in Hamburg. The focus here will be on how violence is negotiated in connection with notions of strength, assertiveness, and power. The event is designed as a coherent workshop, with participants expected to take part in both Hamburg and Rome.

We invite proposals for presentations of 20 minutes (abstracts of 300-500 words and short CV), to be submitted by 30 June 2025 via the following link:

<https://recruitment.biblhertz.it/position/17924101>: We especially encourage PhD students to apply.

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