

THE DEPICTION OF BLINDNESS IN ART

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Throughout the ages, artistic depictions of blindness have reflected underlying ambiguity and ambivalence about the condition. Historically, a blind person was an unfortunate creature deprived of arguably the most precious sensory gift. Blindness was often believed to be a punishment for social or religious transgressions, and the blind were consigned to roles as beggars or wards of their families. In some instances, as compensation, they were believed to be endowed with special powers as prophets or musicians. Beginning in the 17th century a more enlightened view toward the blind emerged that allowed them to become more integrated into society.¹

The loss of sight was often meted out as punishment for a transgression against a god or other authority. Blinding features prominently in art from antiquity. The impact of blindness was sometimes mitigated by other abilities—musical or the gift of prophecy.

Antiquity

The blind harp player

This wall painting from an Egyptian tomb is emblematic of artistic means of denoting blindness. The subject's eyes are mere slits, and as a musician, he depicts a stereotypical occupation for one with early-onset blindness. In the Egyptian culture of that era, blind



Blind harp player, tomb chapel of
paätenemheb, RMO Leiden egypt saqqara
1333-1307 BC. CC BY-SA 2.0. Koopman,
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Odysseus and his men blinding the cyclops Polyphemus. CC BY-SA 2.0, Koopman, September 26, 2009



The Blind Prophet Tiresias with the Baby Narcissus, by Carpioni. Public Domain



Oedipus blinding himself, by Gottlieb. Wikimedia Commons

harpists occupied a high social status.¹ It was believed that, “while playing the musicians were in direct communication with the deity.”²

Polyphemus—a Cyclops

The mythologic Polyphemus was blinded by Odysseus and his men after some of their crew had been devoured by the giant cyclops. The Greek amphora from around 660 BCE is one of few surviving contemporaneous artifacts depicting blinding as punishment.

Tiresias—blind prophet of Thebes

There are several versions of the blindness of Tiresias.³ In one he is rendered blind by the Roman goddess Minerva after he inadvertently saw her naked while she was bathing. Minerva is implored by Tiresias’ mother to restore his vision, but she claims to be unable to do so. As compensation, she makes him a seer, and one who is able to understand the birds. In the painting by Carpioni, Tiresias’ eyes are closed, and he appears to be using his hand rather than his sight to acquaint himself with the baby Narcissus.

Oedipus

When a family tree looks like that of Oedipus’ (his mother is also his wife and the mother of his children) trouble is brewing and, per the gods, something bad is going to happen. When Oedipus learns that he has violated a taboo, he tears out two golden pins from the gown of his dead mother and wife, Jocasta, and pokes them in his eyes.⁴ The painting of the blind Oedipus with Antigone, who is both his daughter and his half-sibling, is also typical for the depiction of a blind person.⁵ The eyes are closed or disfigured, and the person depends on the use of a cane or staff and a guide.

Homer

Homer’s epic poems the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, poems were transmitted by wandering minstrels, many of whom were blind; minstrelsy in many societies was a favored occupation of the blind.⁶ The legend of the blindness of Homer may be based on a character in the *Odyssey* Demodocus, who was portrayed as a blind poet.⁷ A Greek bust of the blind Homer is in the Glyptothek Museum in Munich. It was originally part of a statue of a standing Homer. The closed eyes of a standing figure are an indication of blindness.⁸

In the painting by Bouguereau, Homer looks blind. He is holding a staff, being led by a young boy, and menaced by other boys and dogs.

Hebrew Bible

Blindness as punishment occurs in some stories of the Hebrew Bible; however, the cure of blindness becomes a possibility.

The Patriarch Isaac

There are multiple narratives concerning the blindness of Isaac described in the Book of Genesis. The simplest is that he lost his vision as a function of old age. He believed that a man dying without affliction risked judgment, he asked God to grant him an affliction, his eyes were dimmed. A second explanation is that Isaac was blinded as punishment for failing to see his son Esau's evil behavior—metaphorical blindness perhaps leading to physical blindness.

Tobit of Nineveh

Tobit was a pious man whose occupation was to bury the dead. His story is told in the Book of Tobit in *Apocrypha*. While he was sleeping, a sparrow defecated on his eyes causing blindness.

Being blind, Tobit sent his son, Tobias, to recover money from a relative. The archangel Raphael, in human disguise, offered to accompany him. On the way they caught a fish in the Tigris river, and the angel told Tobias that fish gall could cure blindness. On their return to Tobit in Nineveh, the fish gall was applied to Tobit's eyes, and his blindness was cured.

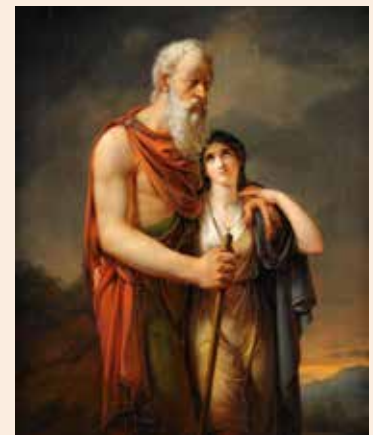
This etching by Rembrandt shows the blind Tobit groping toward an open door to greet his returning son but missing it after having knocked over the spinning wheel that his wife, Anna, used to make their living. Note his outstretched right arm, his cane, and his blank gaze—all common in the artistic depiction of blindness.

Christian Bible

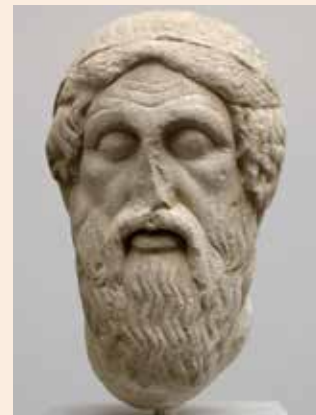
As in the Hebrew Bible, blindness as punishment also occurs in the Christian Bible. The healing of the blind and the restoration of sight play prominent roles in the art from this period.

Christ

In the Christian Bible, stories of Christ healing the blind play a major part in manifesting his divine powers. The earliest known artwork illustrating this subject was from 16 centuries ago in the Catacombs of St. Domitilla in Rome.¹⁰ The fresco, which has been lost but was described by a scholar who saw it, reportedly



Antigone and Oedipus, by Wickenberg. Public domain



Homer. Public domain



Homer and His Guide, by Bouguereau. United States Public Domain



Isaac Blessing Jacob, by Flinck. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

The depiction of blindness in art



The Blindness of Tobit, by Rembrandt. CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication



Christ Healing a Blind Man, by El Greco, 1578. Public Domain



The Blind Leading the Blind, by Breughel. Public domain

shows a supplicant in a posture of prayer, the gesture of the orans, receiving a healing touch from Christ.¹¹ The motif of the orans, which reflects the standard attitude of prayer adopted by the first Christians, is particularly important in early Christian art. A common theme in artistic works on this subject is the touching of the blind eyes of the kneeling supplicant by Christ's finger or hand.

Saint Paul

A cartoon of the blinding of Saint Paul is from the sixth century CE book, *Christian Topography*, by Cosmas Indiopleustes. It depicts Jerusalem and Damascus. Saul, soon to become Saint Paul, is shown with two other men throwing up their hands as they look toward the fiery rays which blind Saul and cause him to fall to the ground. His posture is referred to as proskynesis which conveys submission and unconditional acceptance of a ruler's will.¹⁰ The converted Paul is holding a book to his chest over a draped left arm and hand. The Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung described Paul's vision and conversion on the road to Damascus as following on "...the interaction of all the elements of [his] consciousness—intellectual, emotional, and moral."¹¹ Hence, his blindness, which lasted three days, may have just been metaphorical.

The blind leading the blind

The Parable of the Blind, by Pieter Breughel the Elder, was based on a quotation from the Gospel of Matthew regarding the Pharisees, "Let them alone; they be blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall in the ditch."

Breughel expands the number of blind men in the parable to six. Each appears to have a different eye affliction, ranging from corneal scars to absent eyes. The composition reinforces the chain reaction of the six falling in progression since they are joined by their staffs.

Medieval Period

Ecclesia and Synagoga

In medieval art and architecture, Ecclesia and Synagoga were symbolic of the Christian and Jewish faiths. Ecclesia was shown proud and triumphant with a crowned head, forward gaze, and bearing a crucifix. In contrast, Synagoga was shown blindfolded with head bowed and a forlorn appearance.

The blindfold symbolized the blindness of medieval Jews to Jesus as the Jewish messiah and, therefore to

the implication that Judaism as a religion was rendered unnecessary—a belief referred to as supersessionism.¹² This belief was universal in the medieval Christian church. These figures, almost always paired with each other, are frequently sculpted on either side of a church portal—the most famous example is from the Strasbourg Cathedral in France.

Blind Old Beggar

The blind were frequently viewed as guilty of something, or, as objects of pity.¹ In medieval times there was a growing demonization of the blind—the thought that they carried a grave, if unknown, moral fault. The social group to which medieval culture assigned the blind was mainly to begging, and there was concern that sometimes the beggar’s blindness may be feigned and fraudulent.

The painting by di Ribera shows a blind beggar with his cup upon which is inscribed “*Dies illa*” referring to the day of judgment and “*Dies irae*”—day of wrath. He and the boy who guides him are shown in a sympathetic poses. Both figures are shown wearing simple clothing, the boy’s torn and ragged. The old man’s eyes are closed, and his face is drawn and haggard. He has clearly turned his head upward, toward some sort of illumination, but his closed eyes suggest that he is only able to feel warmth from the light.

El Lazarillo de Tormes

Not all tales of a blind man and a boy were so respectful. In the 1500s, in Spain, there appeared a series of stories about a cunning boy, Lazarillo, and his blind master.¹³ They were both prone to deceit and trickery as depicted in a painting by Goya. At one time, this painting was interpreted as a physician examining a boy’s throat, but it is now believed that it shows the blind beggar inspecting and smelling Lazarillo’s mouth for a sausage that he had given him to cook. The boy told him that it was a turnip, not a sausage, and ate it.

Middle Ages to the Romantic Era

Shakespeare’s *King Lear*

Blindness figures prominently in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. The blindness of Lear was entirely metaphorical. He was blind to the true natures of his three daughters. Later in the play, in his madness, he was initially unable to recognize his daughter, Cordelia. Madness became a metaphor for blindness. It took loyal Kent



Ecclesia and Synagoga.
Wikimedia Commons



Blind Beggar and his Boy, circa 1632, by Jose de Ribera.
Public Domain



El Lazarillo de Tormes, by Goya. Public domain

The depiction of blindness in art



King Lear, Act III, Scene 7, 1829, by Johann Heinrich Ramberg. Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, DC. Image from Folger Digital Image Collection



Milton Dictating Paradise Lost to his Daughters, by Delacroix. United States Public Domain



Louis Braille, by Étienne Leroux. Svintage Archive/Alamy Stock Photo

to make him see how blind he had been, but by then it was too late.

On the other hand, the Earl of Gloucester was both metaphorically blind to the deceit of his younger son, Edmund, but also physically blind after being attacked by Cornwall.

John Milton

By the age of 44 years old, the English poet John Milton had become totally blind. The cause is uncertain, but bilateral retinal detachment, glaucoma, or an intracranial tumor have been proposed.¹⁴ His eye appearance was recorded as, “*gutta serena*” because he continued to have a clear pupil as opposed to “*gutta obscura*” which meant visual loss from a cataract or from scars of the corneas that could be seen by others.

Milton wrote in his *Defensio Secunda* that his eyes were “...externally uninjured. They shine with an unclouded light, just like the eyes of one whose vision is perfect. This is the only point in which I am, against my will, a hypocrite.”

He was forced to dictate his verse and prose to an amanuensis, sometimes one of his daughters. One of his best-known sonnets, *When I Consider How My Light is Spent*, is presumed to date from this period, and is the first reference Milton made in poetry to his blindness. This sonnet starts, “When I consider how my light is spent/Ere half my days in this dark world and wide.”

In the painting by Delacroix, Milton’s blindness is presented alongside the other senses that he retained: touch by means of his hand on the cloth table covering; smell by means of the flowers on the table; and hearing by means of the mandolin that his daughter on the left holds. The painting within a painting in the upper left is Raphael’s *Expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise*—the very subject of Milton’s dictation.

Louis Braille

Louis Braille figures prominently in the history of the blind. He became blind at an early age, and received his education at the Royal Institute for Blind Youth, housed in the Hôpital des Quinze-Vingts that had been established by King Louis IX in 1260 (and is still in existence today as a national ophthalmology hospital and ophthalmic research institute).¹⁵ The hospital’s name derives from the multiplication of the numbers in its title, $15 \times 20 = 300$, which is the

number of beds that were available—there being many blind people in the Paris region.

It was while Braille was a student that he improved and popularized the use of a system of tactile code that would allow blind people to read books and music.

20th century

There is no overriding theme to the portrayal of blindness in the 20th century, although there is greater abstraction in depicting it. Simultaneously there has been increasing interest in the psychological and sociologic meaning of blindness including how a blind person can enjoy or create art.¹⁶

Picasso

There is an atmosphere of despair and sacramental overtones in Picasso's painting of a blind man that dates to his Blue Period. *The Blind Man's Meal* presents a forlorn figure seated at a frugal repast.

In a letter to his friend Max Jacob, Picasso gives a precise description of the composition, "I am painting a blind man at the table. He holds some bread in his left hand and gropes with his right hand for a jug of wine."¹⁷ An empty bowl and a white napkin on the table complete the still life. The man's gaunt and angular figure, long thin El Greco-like hands, plain surroundings, and his blindness make his social disenfranchisement even more poignant.

Thirty years later, Picasso returned to the theme of blindness but in a more abstract way. In his etching there is a blind creature—a Minotaur—half man, half bull. The physical prowess and athleticism of the Minotaur are stripped away as the creature becomes vulnerable without his sight. He relies on the guidance of a small girl, depicted in profile with the minotaur's hand on her shoulder. She carries a dove, a contrasting symbol of freedom and peace, and a motif that appears frequently in Picasso's art.

Giorgio de Chirico

It is difficult to suggest blindness solely by the appearance of the eyes since they are relatively small in comparison with the face and the rest of the body. That is why closed eyes, blank stares, walking sticks, guide dogs, and children as guides have often been incorporated in paintings to indicate blindness.

Another way to indicate blindness, is to suggest the absence of eyes as in a painting by Giorgio de Chirico.



The Blind Man's Meal, by Picasso.
Alamy



Blind Minotaur Guided through the Night by a Girl, by Picasso.
Public Domain



Two Heads, de Chirico.
Public Domain

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The Match Seller, by Dix. Public Domain



Armagan. Untitled. Public Domain

Even though the two heads are without any particular facial features, the absence of eyes is made conspicuous by the linear, blindfold-like band on one figure, and by the arch-shaped openings on the other figure, which suggest empty eye sockets. In both cases the absence of eyes connotes blindness.

The Match Seller

Although in the 20th century a generally more supportive and less fraught relationship with the blind was evolving, in 1920 the German artist Otto Dix painted *The Match Seller*. This painting depicts the forlorn blind and amputee match seller who is ignored by passers-by, and even disdained by a dog. Although this painting may have had more to do with the artist's critique of Weimar Germany just after World War I, than to the status of the blind, it still shows an ambivalent relationship toward blindness.

Armagan

Armagan nearly personifies a quote attributed to Picasso, "Painting is a blind man's profession. He paints not what he sees, but what he feels, what he tells himself about what he has seen," except in the case of Armagan. He has never seen what he paints. He was congenitally blind, most likely due to optic nerve hypoplasia or aplasia. His technique was to create an outline using a braille stylus and then apply oil paint with his fingers.

A changing societal view

Ambiguity and a feeling of discomfort have been constants in the artistic depiction of blindness throughout the ages. However, some aspects of society's view toward blindness have diminished in importance over time, and blindness itself has tended to be represented in a more abstract way.

Today, we tend not to view blindness as punishment, and would never blind someone as punishment. We don't harbor grave superstitions about blindness, or mistrust a blind person. We are also less inclined to embrace the likelihood of a miraculous cure. Blindness is now viewed more from medical and rehabilitative perspectives, although these may not yet have been realized in its artistic depictions.

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