Images of Leprosy
Disease, Religion, and Politics in European Art
CHRISTINE M. BOECKL
Habent sua fata libelli

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Cover: St. Elizabeth Bathes a Leprous Patient, 1470–77, painted panel. Detail of main
altar, St. Elizabeth Cathedral, Košice, Slovakia. (Image courtesy of St. Elizabeth Cathedral,
Košice, Slovakia)

Cover design: Teresa Wheeler

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Boeckl, Christine M., 1933-
Images of leprosy : disease, religion, and politics in European art / Christine M.
Boeckl.
p. cm. — (Early modern studies series ; v. 7)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
paper)
1. Leprosy in art. 2. Art, European—Themes, motives. I. Title. II. Title: Disease,
religion, and politics in European art.
N8219.L35B64 2011
704.9'4961698—dc22
2011003348

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Acknowledgments

The ancient scourge known the world over as Hansen's disease, or clinical leprosy, has recently been the subject of numerous outstanding publications. This volume provides the latest and most comprehensive overview in the field from the art historical perspective.

Approximately ten years ago, the topic was suggested to me by medical historian Luke Demaitre (University of Virginia), whose most recent book, *Leprosy in Premodern Medicine: A Malady of the Whole Body* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), was essential for the conception of this study. I am sincerely grateful for his endorsement of my project. I thank Daniel H. Connor, M.D. (Georgetown University), for his help with the clinical and bacteriological aspects of Hansen's disease and the use of his photographs, which are invaluable contributions to this study. I acknowledge my indebtedness to John E. Bennett, M.D. (National Institute of Health) for introducing me to the latest editions of his key publication in infectious diseases, even before the volumes arrived at the libraries. The international experts Mark Spigelman, M.D., and Helen D. Donoghue, M.D. (UCL Medical School, Center for Infectious Disease and International Health), graciously provided information on crucial DNA data to complete the history of the disease. Additionally, I received important information from the European leprosy research facilities in Bergen, Münster, and Budapest, and I owe a debt of gratitude to Lorentz Irgens, Ph.D., M.D. (National Leprosy Register of Norway), and Eva Tank-Nielsen. Director Ralph Klötzer (Gesellschaft für Leprakunde, Münster) and Director Maria Vida (Semmelweiss Museum, Budapest) also contributed to this book. While visiting Budapest, I was very kindly received by the staff of this exceptional medical museum. Particular thanks go to historian Livia Köln, whom I must credit with supplying me with historical data and introducing me to the wealth of images still *in situ* in Eastern European churches. Thanks are also due to Jo Robertson, research officer at Oxford University (ILA Global Project on the History of Leprosy). I was fortunate to be able to work with Documentary Photographer Patricia Gallinek, R.N.,
who recorded leprosy missions globally; I received her permission to publish images depicting modern facilities and treatment options.

To my friends and colleagues at UMD, I am deeply indebted for their encouragement and input to my research, first and foremost Susan Jenson, who helped shape this book by extensive discussions of the material and her kind editorial assistance. With gratitude I also acknowledge the quintessential technical support of Elisabeth Hartjens (Imagefinders) in preparing illustrations for printing as well as the scholarly assistance of Elisabeth and her sister, Maria Wieken-Mayser, and of Konrad Groß (Erzbischöfliche Diözesan- und Dombibliothek Köln mit Bibliothek St. Albertus Magnus). Moreover I owe a debt of gratitude to Eva and Nicholas H. Allen (University of Maryland, University College) and Edith Wyss in getting my challenging project started. I also appreciated the help extended by Shirley Bennett, Diana Whithee, Marguerite Tassi, Elizabeth Ettinghausen, Bertha L. Gutmann, and Sally Wages. Special thanks are due to my revered former professor Jean Caswell for her continued interest in my work!

I want to mention gratefully several individual scholars and international institutions. In my hometown, Gerhard Schmidt (University of Vienna), Renate Trnek (Akademie der bildenden Künste), Gudrun Swoboda (Kunsthistorisches Museum), and Irmgard Hutter (independent scholar in Byzantine studies); at Munich’s Alte Pinakothek, Martin Schawe (Curator of Early German and Netherlandish paintings); at Washington, DC’s National Gallery of Art, Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. (Curator for Dutch Art), Margaret Morgan Grasselli (Curator of Old Master drawings), and Andrea Gibbs (Image Collection); Gudrun Bühl, Gerrianne Schaad, and Natalie Tetriatnikov at Dumbarton Oaks; and C. Griffith Mann at The Walters Museum of Art, Baltimore. At the National Library of Medicine, National Institutes for Health, Stephen Greenberg with his profound knowledge of rare books and images in the collection, kind and resourceful Crystal Smith (reference librarian), and historian Michael Sappol all have been of great help. Indispensable for my research were Paul Williamson (Curator at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London) and Joe Plommer (Academic Image Rights Assistant, Victoria and Albert Museum, London) who searched beyond the call of duty all possible sources to provide me with the correct high-intensity images. He also facilitated the process of getting the required
permission papers ready on time. Similarly when time was of essence, I received assistance from Diane P. Naylor (Chatsworth's photo librarian).

Special thanks are due to historians Raymond and Elizabeth Mentzer (University of Iowa) for their extensive input and their support of my project from its inception. I acknowledge the beneficial advice of several theologians who generously donated their time and shared their expertise: Fr. Martinus Cawley, Shawn Madison Krahmer (St. Joseph's University), and Stephen Vicchio (College of Notre Dame of Maryland).

Richly illustrated art history publications are a special challenge to any press. I am extremely grateful to Nancy Rediger, Director/Editor-in-Chief at Truman State University Press, along with her excellent staff. I want especially to thank Teresa Wheeler, designer not only of this book's striking cover but of the cover for *Images of Plague and Pestilence*. The excellent work produced by copy editor Barbara Smith-Mandell cannot be expressed in words; production editor Judy Sharp is largely responsible for great legibility of the fifty-some illustrations in this book; and last but certainly not least, I thank Michael Wolfe, General Editor for the Early Modern Studies series.

Most of all, I thank my dear friend, Dee Fischer, for her dedicated efforts in preparing my book manuscripts for publication! I also thank Frances Kianka for scholarly advice, editorial skills, and support when under time pressure. Further, I thank my former graduate student Lucia Plachy for her efforts in executing my extensive correspondence in Slavic languages. Finally, I want to mention José Girón (Bank of America) for solving at a critical moment my wire-transfer problems to Eastern Europe.

There cannot be any doubt that the manuscript has improved as the result of the anonymous readers’ astute observations and thought-provoking questions; I am sincerely beholden to them. I am deeply grateful to my children and their families for their loving support and especially for their assistance with computer technology, without which my efforts would never have gone to print.
Introduction
An Ancient Disease in European Images

“Leprosy remains unique in the annals of human disease, in its epidemiological pattern, and in the social and religious reactions which it engendered,” wrote Keith Manchester in his seminal article, “Leprosy: The Origin and Development of the Disease in Antiquity.” Because leprosy is still a global concern at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the disease recently generated a great deal of attention in a number of scholarly fields, from medical science to literary reviews. This volume analyzes select artworks spanning over a millennium that portray persons suffering from leprosy. The topos lepra and its visualization in murals, stained glass, book illuminations, sculpture, and other media probably first appears in the fourth century CE. Subjects depicted in these images are based on scripture and hagiographic accounts; secular topics are rare. This inquiry highlights the significance of leprosy themes in mainstream Western art—incidentally, the only culture to develop that topic. Byzantine visual conventions, although illustrating the same biblical scenes, never investigated clinical manifestations of the illness.

Although this volume is an interdisciplinary art historical handbook covering art, history, medicine, and religion, it uses terminology customary to the field of art history, since images are the primary documents and art history provides the fundamental debate. Discussion of style is restricted to comments on the realism of clinical leprosy markers. Comparisons of historic sculptures and paintings with clinical photographs, a methodology I developed in Images of Plague and Pestilence: Iconography and Iconology, present the reader with a tool to gauge the medical knowledge of the artist, physician, and/or patron, by investigating the manifestations of Hansen’s disease in medieval and early modern representations. This exploration pursues several objectives—all essential for a novel art historical analysis. First and most significantly, it discusses the status of modern medicine and reviews how knowledge of leprosy was gained over the last two thousand years and how it affected the visual arts. Recent DNA research opened a new approach
to the long-debated topic: is the biblical lepra the same sickness as clinical leprosy (i.e., Hansen’s disease)? Analyses of scenes depicting Christ healing a leper, included in chapter 2, provide evidence that Western art illustrated the symptoms of the stricken in such a way that one can identify the manifestations as clinical leprosy. Chapter 4 also presents original research that describes the developments in leprosy iconography (description of the image).

The four introductory chapters address clinical leprosy worldwide, the European history of the disease, societal responses, and the development of leprosy iconography. Because of the diversity of the subject matter, these chapters use a topical approach and may be read independently; they also serve as useful reference material anticipating some of the questions readers may have regarding later discussions in the text. Innovative blending of multidisciplinary issues introduces and frames chapters 5 through 7, the three chapters of iconological interpretations (meaning of the images). The last and most crucial segment of the book targets the main argument concerning iconological explorations regarding how the ancient scourge became an emblematic vehicle to recount and express the inherent symbolic meaning of the images. This section opens the proverbial window to the past that allows us to search for answers to the following questions: Who commissioned the works? What were the patrons’ motivations? What was the religious significance of the art? When, where, and, above all, why was a subject with little popular appeal depicted repeatedly? Finally, the book will consider the status of the victims: What attitudes were held by society toward the sick in general and the disenfranchised, leprosy-infected patients in particular, and how did history visually record these persons? This part of the discussion is presented chronologically, focusing on the evolution—how the subjects developed over time. I maintain that the various terrifying aspects of the disease become the overarching concept that unifies the discussion by introducing narratives about the lives of historic and legendary figures stricken with the dreaded illness. Rulers, beggars, saints, and sinners, the metaphor of leprosy supplies the background against which the enlightening stories are projected. Because the literature on leprosy is vast, a cursory annotated presentation of the most important sources, organized by the various disciplines, is included in the introduction.²
Chapter 1 includes information on current attempts to treat leprosy victims with multidrug treatments on an outpatient basis; this part was written under the expert guidance of Daniel H. Connor, M.D. To gain a historical view on contagion and on epidemiology, treatises available to medical practitioners at various periods regarding diagnoses, treatment, and prevention of the illness are cited. Luke Demaitre’s brilliant archival study of original medical manuscripts, *Leprosy in Premodern Medicine*, mentioned in the acknowledgments, is compulsory reading; it is one of the most important works in that field.

For medical questions concerning the leprosy discussions of chapters 1 and 2, several books are essential. Chapman H. Binford and Daniel H. Connor’s *Pathology of Tropical and Extraordinary Disease: An Atlas* is a groundbreaking publication that includes the seminal observations of Binford’s pioneering experiences at the time when effective drug therapy was not yet available. His co-editor, D. H. Connor, published his own field experiences more recently in *Pathology of Infectious Disease. Mandell, Douglas, and Bennett’s Principles and Practice of Infectious Diseases*, now in its 7th edition, is a key work. Other important medical handbooks I consulted included W. H. Jopling’s *Handbook of Leprosy*. The innovative and unique research project of Lorentz Irgens, M.D., Ph.D., *Leprosy in Norway: An Epidemiological Study Based on a National Patient Registry*, aided me in determining previously ignored environmental aspects of Hansen’s disease and how these could have been related to earlier events. Of utmost significance are the findings of the international team of DNA experts (C. D. Matheson et al.) published in 2009, which provides the first scientific evidence that leprosy was present in ancient Palestine at least since around the birth of Christ.

In 1974, Samuel Brody was the first author to undertake a truly interdisciplinary approach to leprosy in *The Disease of the Soul: Leprosy in Medieval Literature*. Katharine Park, Charlotte Roberts, and, above all, Keith Manchester produced numerous excellent, and more recent, publications on the divergent aspects of leprosy. For a brief review of the cultural history of the disease, see Sheldon Watts’s *Epidemics and History: Disease, Power and Imperialism*. Carole Rawcliffe’s *Leprosy in Medieval England* is an indispensable resource, with its wealth of information on pre-Reformation English art and its comprehensive discussions of leprosy legends and imagery. Marcia Kupfer’s *The Art of Healing: Paintings for the Sick and the Sinner in a Medieval Town* is considered a
Benchmark in Romanesque scholarship. Several innovative publications by David Marcombe also contributed to the content of chapter 3.

Iconography provides the foundation for this art historical analysis of leprosy, but this volume also contains an important compilation of textual sources that influenced, over a thousand-year period, the Europeans’ perception of leprosy; these are listed in the appendix. The analysis of leprosy themes begins with the Old Testament, which is remarkable in the often-contradictory connotations associated with saraät/lepra that provide vital information regarding how religion evaluated leprosy patients. Even though Latin Western art rarely illustrated these subjects, Kurt Weitzmann’s and John Lowden’s profound publications on a series of Greek Octateuchs are essential for our understanding of Old Testament traditions.

New Testament scenes, on the other hand, primarily stressed Christ’s compassion in healing the suffering. Miracle cures make up the majority of leprosy subjects in Christian art and must have been illustrated in countless illuminated Bibles (not all of them survived, or have been studied) between the ninth and the nineteenth centuries. The Index of Christian Art (formerly The Princeton Index: Art before 1400), a thematic register combined with photographic illustrations, provides by far the most effective place to start research on this extensive topic. Although it is difficult to quantify leprosy images, the Index’s organization by subject matter, location, media, and dates is useful in gaining insight, for instance, into the number of extant manuscripts in a specific region. Moreover, numerous standard lexica assist with subject matter and lists of illustrations. Gertrud Schiller’s Iconography of Christian Art and E. Mâle’s Religious Art in France, the Late Middle Ages: A Study of Medieval Iconography and Its Sources present the best overviews. However, the discussion on “Aussatz und Aussätzige” in H. Aurenhammer’s Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie provides the most thorough treatment of the subject. Louis Réau’s Iconographie de l’art chrétien, though somewhat outdated, is still a valuable research tool. Lepra in de Nederlanden (12de–18de eeuw) and K. Grön’s richly illustrated article “Leprosy in Literature and Art” both introduce pertinent material. The same is true of W. B. Ober, M.D’s “Can the Leper Change His Spots? The Iconography of Leprosy.” Collectively these publications have approximately one hundred historical images illustrating patients of leprosy; many of the articles are written quite recently. Finally, Andor Pigler’s
Barockthemen is interesting primarily for the dearth of leprosy imagery, since the topic was rarely pursued after the Renaissance period.

On iconological interpretations, see Erwin Panofsky’s *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance*. Christ healing a leper is the most popular of all leprosy themes, revealing the Christocentric tendencies of the Carolingian, Ottonian, and Norman rulers. E. Kantorowicz’s *The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology*; James Snyder’s *Medieval Art*; Percy Schramm’s *Kaiser, Rom und renovatio*; and Janet L. Nelson’s fascinating *Charles the Bald* provide insight into the political background of that era.

The sixth chapter, focusing on patron saints of leprosy, deals explicitly with political theology (a theological concept dominated by political, social, economic, and cultural concerns). Numerous murals portray St. Sylvester baptizing and thus curing the “leprous” Emperor Constantine, a narrative based in part on the spurious ninth-century Donation of Constantine, which guaranteed great privileges to the heirs of St. Peter’s throne. For the historic background of this section, see F. Seppelt and G. Schwaiger’s *Die Geschichter der Päpste*. It contains more relevant historic details than the *Oxford Dictionary of the Popes* (yet the Dictionary is a far more recent publication). Since the sixth chapter deals largely with the time of the Crusades, both theology and history are essential for understanding religious leprosy subjects of that period. A remarkably large portion of the legendary medical patron saints originated in the East; similarly the translocation of Eastern cults and the adoption of Levantine medical knowledge may have influenced the developing Western European culture. In addition, the founding of new religious nursing orders brought changes in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries; on this, see for example, D. Marcombe’s *Leper Knights: The Order of St. Lazarus of Jerusalem in England*. Around 1200, these events triggered responses by the Latin Church that concerned the treatment of the leprous population, including the edicts of Lateran Councils III and IV and laws pertaining to the founding of leprosaria, all of which changed the fabric of European society for centuries to come. Although clinical leprosy was known in Europe since Roman times, circumstantial evidence supports the theory that crusader traffic contributed to the first “real” or “imagined” European health crisis of the Middle Ages. Franciscans and other mendicant orders were concerned with the physical and spiritual health of the poor and the sick, and over the centuries, as Christian theology
About the Author

Born in Vienna, Austria, Christine M. Boeckl studied art history and classical archaeology at the University of Vienna (Kunsthistorisches Institut). Emigration from Europe to the United States delayed the completion of her studies. She received her doctorate in 1990 at the University of Maryland, College Park. Dr. Boeckl taught art history for twenty years. She recently retired from the University of Nebraska as professor emerita and returned to her family in the Washington, DC, area, where she continues to publish numerous art historical articles in international journals. She is the author of another interdisciplinary book, *Images of Plague and Pestilence* (Truman State University Press, 2000).
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**Bold** indicates an image

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