



GRESHAM COLLEGE  
*Founded 1597*

## **Christian Themes in Art: The Passion in Art Transcript**

Date: Wednesday, 12 January 2011 - 1:00PM

Location: Museum of London



## **The Passion in Art**

The Rt Revd Lord Harries of Pentregarth  
Gresham Professor of Divinity

### The Catacombs

Thousands of inscriptions relating to the deceased. No depiction of the crucifixion. Main theme that of deliverance from death- suggested by symbol and story

Inscription in Catacomb of Commidilla.

P for Pax. Alpha and Omega, Revelation 1, 8.

Epitaph to Antonia from Catacomb of Domitilla

The anchor a symbol of hope in Roman world. See also Hebrews 6,19 The fish a symbol of Christ ICTHUS-IESOUS CHRISTOS THEOU HUIOS SOTER-Jesus Christ Son of God, saviour.

"But we small fishes, named after our great ICTHUS, Jesus Christ, are born in water and only by remaining in water can we live." (Tertullian, 2nd century theologian writing of Baptism.)

Jonah cycle from the Callisto catacomb

A number of examples, using Roman figures, e.g. Endymion and the dragon/fish but clear Christian message. Matthew 12, 40.

Sarcophagus with passion scene, mid 4th c, from Catacomb of Domitilla. (Now in Museo Pio Cristiano in the Vatican)

Note the wreaths, symbol of victory in games and poetic contests, worn by the gods. Large figure of Christ, depicting importance.

Central panel shows both cross and resurrection, two aspects of one victory. According to Eusebius Constantine had a vision of the cross before the decisive battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312. Afterwards his soldiers adopted the Chi Rho (the first two letters of Greek for Christ) sign on their banners (The Labarum). The doves show the peace of Christ going out to the world. Above the central panel, sun and moon (cosmic significance) and eagle wings (sign of Jupiter). Roman culture a visual culture. The emperor present through his image. Now Christ replaces figures of Greek and Roman myth. This is a victorious Christ shown by the triumphant emergence of the faith in the Roman empire, and for the individual a sign that death and evil are defeated.

Coin of Emperor Jovian (363-364) and Valens(364-378) with Labarum.

Most distinctive Christian symbol until 6th century

Magical amulet with crucifixion. Late 2nd-3rd century.

Engraved gem with crucifixion. Mid 4th century

Bloodstone intaglio covered in magical names. The name of Christ crucified, giving power over death, used even by pagan magicians.

Magical amulets widely used in Graeco-Roman world. Condemned by church, but custom persisted. The earliest depiction of Christ on the cross that has survived. Note unusual features. So also unusual Carnelian personal seal, with apostles at the crucifixion. Related to 4th century carvings on sarcophagi, in which a procession of apostles salute the cross. The conquest of death of which the apostles are witnesses.

Crucifixion scene on wooden doors of St Sabina, Rome, 432

Ass-headed Christ crucified, Palatine Graffito

Ivory Plaque, 420, in British Museum

Why did the image of Christ on the cross appear so late in orthodox contexts? Crucifixion a badge of shame (cp gallows or electric chair), not abolished until 4th century. Christians mocked for worshipping a god on the cross, as in early 3rd century Graffito found in servants quarters in Palatine palace. "Alexamenos worships his God." Surprising that there is no image even in mosaics of 6th century St Apollinare Nuovo. May be a genuine reluctance. Disputes about the nature of Christ, how to do justice to his humanity and divinity. Wanted to proclaim victory over evil and death, and his divinity. Difficulty with doing this in scene of cross.

The earliest surviving depiction of Christ on the cross in one of four ivories in British Museum. Victorious Christ, (body upright, arms outstretched, eyes open) juxtaposed with despairing Judas. Jesus with a halo-vigorous, strong body, sign of divinity. Tree, a sign of life after death in Roman iconography.

The Crucifixion and Resurrection together. Rabbula Gospel, 586

Rabbula probably head of the scriptorium of monastery in present day Syria. Syriac Christianity important, but

not so well known. Note Christ alive, in Colobium, (priestly?) with beard, nails through ankles. To be seen in conjunction with empty tomb below. The women at the empty tomb and the Chairete scene( Matthew 28, 9). "Christ has burst his three day prison" A unified truth of the victorious Christ.

St Pudenziana, Rome, 400. Jewelled cross (Crux Gemmata) in Apse mosaic

Pillar stone at Reask in Co. Kerry, 7th c

Ahenny, Tipperary, North Cross, 8/9th c

Muredach's Cross at Monasterboice, 9/10th c

Ruthwell Cross, Scotland, early 8th c.

Typical cross from Armenia. The Cross as a tree of life.

The Finding of the true cross by Helena. Pierro della Fransesca at Arezzo.

Helena, mother of Constantine, visited Jerusalem and located the holy sites. A large cross was erected on Golgotha, wood covered in precious metal and jewels. Pilgrims, when they returned home erected stone crosses. Based on the pre-Christian standing stones, Menhirs, with Celtic decoration, many have survived at the edge of empire, West and East. Sometimes the stone carving reflected the metal and jewels on the Jerusalem cross, and the canopy which Constantine had erected over the Holy Sepulchre. The stepped base representing Golgotha.

Text of "The Dream of the Rood" carved on Ruthwell Cross

The Tree itself

Borne on the air, light wound about it,  
-a beam of brightest wood, a beacon clad  
in overlapping gold, glancing gems  
fair at its foot, and five stones  
set in a crux flashed from the cross tree.

Around angels of God

All gazed upon it  
Since its first fashioning fair.  
It was not a felon's gallows,  
For Holy Ghosts beheld it there.  
And men on mould, and the whole making shone for it  
-Signum of victory.

The cross as a symbol gained in significance when after Jerusalem had been captured by the Persians, the emperor Heraclius recaptured it and returned the cross in triumph in 629. Gave rise to the feast of the uplifting or exaltation of the cross. Stories of the cross brought to the West by the Crusaders and became subject of art, e.g by Pierro della Fransesca in Arezzo.

Ivory Plaque from Metz, 9th century (originally a jewelled bookcover)

There was a revival of classical art under Charlemagne, created Roman emperor in 800, but it was the Christian classical art of the 4th century. The crucifixions from this period were highly allegorical, depicting Christ as King and redeemer of the whole cosmos. Above the sun and moon worship him.(References in the OT to this reflected in crucifixion account). Angels receive his soul. Ecclesia receives his blood; synagogue with banner gazes in awe. Longinus and Stephaton (from apocryphal gospel). The dead are raised, and satan(the snake) is defeated. At the bottom are sea and earth.

Lothair Cross, 1000, with cameo of Augustus on front

Lothair Cross, 1000, with figure of dead Christ on back.

Gero Crucifix, Cologne, 975

The Ottonian dynasty, like the Carolingian one, pursued renovatio, the renewal of society and art in the light of the Christian Roman past of the 4th century. As part of this they emphasised the kingly rule of Christ, underlining the sacral basis of their own sovereignty. So on the front of the Lothair processional cross, the people will have seen a cameo of Augustus. On the back, however, facing the priests and King in procession, was Christ dead and humiliated. There was a move in the West in the 10th century to emphasise the humanity of Christ, which included his painful death. The Ottonian concept of sovereignty integrated royalty and humility. The motto of Mathilda, the mother of Otto I was dignitas cum humilitati.

The earliest and most moving of the depictions of the dead cross on the Christ from this period is the Gero crucifix. There is no undue emphasis on the suffering as such, but a poignancy. This is also the earliest free standing work of art in the round that has survived. Because of its earlier pagan associations this was under

suspicion.

Wall painting of the crucifixion, 741-52 in church of St Maria Antiqua, Rome

Icon of the Crucifixion, 8th century? St Catherine, Sinai

Christ dead on the cross, Hosios Loukas, 1020

Christ truly human and fully divine, yet one person. This was the theological dilemma for the church for centuries. It affected art, for if Christ was shown dead, what about his divinity? Hence early pictures show him alive. The issue resolved in art in the 8th c by showing him dead on the cross but also overcoming Satan and death (The Anastasis). Earliest surviving icon at Sinai. Contrast closed eyes, crown of thorns and blood from side with one from St Maria Antiqua. The one in Hosios Loukas, in mosaic, represents the standard iconography that emerged after iconoclasm. Monumental simplicity. Blood dripping onto Golgotha, where skull of Adam was buried, and onto Mary and John. Word in Greek for crucifixion, and John 19, 26 and 27.

When Cardinal Humbert came to Constantinople in 1054 he was shocked "How do you come to fasten to Christ's cross the picture of a dying man" and was one of the reasons for the anathema. Why so shocked?- but this had already been depicted in Germany. The loin cloth rather than colobium?

Volto Santo, Holy Face, Lucca, 12th c

Volto Santo, Duomo Borgo Sansepolcro, 8/9th or 12th c

Catalan "Majestad", Barcelona, 12th c.

Christ as Priest, Langford, West Oxfordshire, 12th c

Christ as suffering king on the cross, Langford, 12th c

Metal crucifix with Christ as suffering king on the cross, 12th c

Psalter with Christ as both priest and king, 12th c

The Holy Face at Lucca is much venerated. Tradition says it was carved by Nicodemus, but present image dates from 12th c. Some now believe the one at Sansepolcro was the prototype. Also appeared in Catalan art( many fine examples in Museum of Catalan art in Barcelona). Lucca was on the pilgrimage route from Canterbury, and Lucca merchants traded in England, so image spread, e.g. to West Oxfordshire.

Christ is depicted as a priest on the cross, in a long robe. Revelation 1, 13 influential at the time. Christ also depicted as a suffering king. Many metal images in Great Britain and Scandinavia.

Emergence of free standing sculpture in Romanesque period after a gap of 600 years, due to pagan associations. Classical art influenced by linear Celto Germanic and Saxon styles. Powerfully expressive of calmness, severity and excitement.

Crucifixion, The Amesbury Psalter, 1250

The cross as a rugged tree. Rich history in legend linking it to tree of life in Garden of Eden and in Revelation 22. Poems and hymns on subject. Reactivated in 13th century by Bonaventure's meditations on tree bearing fruit for Christians to eat. Often shown sprouting leaves.

Blood from side first seen in Europe in 8th century, gives rise to devotion to the Sacred Heart-the wound a way into the heart of Christ.

1239 Louis IX receives what is believed to be the crown of thorns from Constantinople, in fact a chaplet of rushes as here. In 14th century became thorns.

Emphasis on suffering of Christ intensified through Anselm, (Christ became fully human), Bernard and his Cistercians, and the fact that Francis had a stigmata-this intense devotion brought to lay people. Encouraged to imagine they were there. Shocking nature of cross-its graphic potency-which made early Christians reluctant to visualise it in art made possible by new piety. Gothic style with elongated figures expressive of emotion.

The Man of Sorrows, Byzantine, 1260

The Man of Sorrows, print by Israhel van Meckenhem, 1490

An important devotional icon in Constantinople, brought to the Church of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme in Rome and much revered. Either head and shoulders or half length. Part of triptych, which Mary of Sorrows on other side. Reasons for importance. 1. The period 130-1500 saw development of private devotional art. 2.

Development of intense Franciscan spirituality.

"O how intensely thou embraced me, good Jesu, when the blood went forth from thy heart, the water from thy side, the soul from thy body. Most sweet youth what hast thou done that thou should'st suffer so? Surely I, too, am the cause of thy sorrow?"

3. Legend that the Pope Gregory (540-604) saw Christ like this when saying mass, an image which was put in a

mosaic icon.

The Carthusians to publicise their church had this print made. It has been well described as the most precise expression of late medieval piety. Part of a piety of intimacy, compassion, and intercession.

Tree of Jesse, Chartres Cathedral, 1150

Lily Crucifix, St Helen's, Abingdon, 1391

From the 11th century psalters and stained glass windows started to depict the tree of Jesse. Based on Isaiah 11, 1 and Mathew 1, 1-17.

It also came to be believed that March 25th, the Feast of the Annunciation, was the day on which Christ was crucified, hence the idea of Christ being crucified not on a cross but on a Lily, the sign of Mary. A number of depictions round Oxford, perhaps due to the influence of Duns Scotus (1264-1308) the first great theologian to defend the doctrine of the immaculate conception, a doctrine of growing popularity at the time. This painted panel discovered recently at the back of another one. Delicate beauty and repose.

Pulpit of Sienna Cathedral, Nicola Pisano, 1220/5--1284

Duccio (1255/60-1318/19. Crucifixion scene from Sienna.

Crucifix by Cimabue (1240-1302) in San Domenico, Arezzo.

In Italy highly dramatic, crowded scenes of the crucifixion were created, as in the Pisano and Duccio but also in contrast a singly deeply moving image for contemplation. The Fransiscan and Dominican revival affected art, for they wanted simplicity, just a single crucifix above the altar. Three crucifixes by Cimabue have survived, but two are badly damaged. Cimabue, with Giotto, the fount of the Italian Renaissance, but naturalism here combined with Byzantine spiritual ethos. Christus Patiens. The divine order to be reflected in art, but softened by the naturalism, and also perhaps reflecting the sombre mood of he times. 1260 predicted by Joachim of Fiore as the end of the world.

Isenheim Altarpiece by Matthias Grunewald (1460-1528)

John the Baptist an unusual feature, John 3,30. Pointing to the lamb of God. Painted for order of St Anthony, who tended sick, particularly those suffering from ergotism. Brought into chapel, praying for a miracle. If none occurred, they knew Christ was suffering with them. Also influenced by Bridget,(1302-73), founder of the Brigittines, with her visions of Christ's sufferings. Grunewald, with Durer, highly esteemed at time, but little discussed in 19th century. Picture shown in Munich in 1918/19 fitted German self-image of an anguished, martyred, people. So also German expressionism with which this painting has affinities. Later caught mood of 20th century with its terrible suffering. Paul Tillich, the greatest German painting ever. Grunewald lived in turbulent times, the peasants revolt, drawn towards Lutheranism. People had expected end of world in 1500.

The Crucifixion, Diego Velasquez, 1599-1660

Christ on the Cross, Rembrandt, 1606-69

It was usual to paint the crucifixion scene with figures, just Mary and John, or more crowded. In 17th century, particularly in Spain, Christ came to be shown alone.

Rembrandt began by painting biblical scenes in a grand, dramatic style. After the death of his three children, wife Saskia and bankruptcy, concentrated on ordinary people in a quiet, intense style. This painting, from 1631, (only discovered to be by Rembrandt in 1959) seems to be at point of transition. Jesus uttering the cry of dereliction against a dark background.

Morning in the Riesengebirge, Caspar David Friedrich, 1774-1840

Many fine portraits and landscapes in 17th century, but art on Christian themes uninspiring. The Romantic Movement brought a new intensity of religious feeling expressed through nature. Described as "spilt religion". Friedrich's painting's rich in symbolism, achieving their effect through a "strong intense polarity of closeness and distance, precise detail and sublime aura". Caught the mood of the solitary artist and the solitary viewer.

Christ on the cross, Georges Roualt, 1871-1958

Trained first as a stained glass window artist, then studied with leading artists of the time, including Matisse. Had a major breakdown. A devout Catholic. Desired to express strong emotion in art, especially a sense of the suffering of life and pity for the inner souls of human beings. Often painted clowns, and saw the suffering being beneath the "spangled garments". "Christ suffers until the end of the world" (Pascal)

White Crucifixion, Marc Chagall, 1887-1985

Chagall born in Russia of Jewish parents but part of the artistic community in Paris. Paintings express the joyous life of the Hasidic Shtetl. Influenced by Antokolsky who tried to reclaim Jesus for Judaism. In 1938 saw at first hand the first transportation of Jews and burning of synagogues-reflected in this picture. White light comes from the Torah, referring to a Jewish tale. The figure may be the Jewish wanderer of Yiddish tradition or Elijah who helps people in time of need. A Jewish Jesus suffering with his people? Or cross still a sign of reproach, this time

to Christians?

Christ of St John of the Cross, 1951

Purchased by Glasgow Art Gallery for £8,200 to savage criticism, too expensive, poor art-but immediately hugely popular, perhaps the most reproduced of all 20th religious pictures. Based on a drawing allegedly by St John of the Cross, set in Port Lligat in Eastern Spain, with figures from 17th century Spanish paintings. Painted in what he called his mystical period. "no more Surrealist malaise of existential angst. I want to paint a Christ that is a painting with more beauty and joy than have ever been painted before." The opposite of Grunewald. A Christ for the whole world.

Crucifixion No 5, 1991, Mark Reichert, b.1948

An American artist who uses a variety of media. Powerfully expressive of the horror of life.

From Stations of the Cross, Norman Adams, 1927-2005

Butterfly Crucifixion, Norman Adams

In St Mary's, the hidden gem, Manchester. He considered this the greatest work of his life. The Butterfly crucifixion captures something of the early church's sense of the cross and resurrection as a unified triumph.

Crucifixion, Craigie Aitchison, 1926-2009

Crucifixion

Very characteristic of his work. The second one hints at a resurrection.

Head of Christ, Maggie Hambling, b.1945

She paints a passion scene every Good Friday

Crucifix, Winchester Cathedral, Peter Ball, b.1943

A risen Christ wearing a heavenly robe patterned with cosmic designs. Arms outstretched as in crucifixion, but also inviting an embrace

Crucifixion, Helen Meyer. b.1929

From a set of Stations of the Cross

Christ on the cross Cecil Collins, 1908-1989

Direct access to spiritual experience, cp Blake, Raine, etc. The fool, the clown, angels.

The Menorah, Roger Wagner, born 1947

To be seen in St Giles, Oxford. Didcot power station which is also a Menorah and the gas ovens of Auschwitz.

The Cross, John Reilly, 1928-2010

Manages to express a sense of triumph, as well as suffering, through image of dance.

©Lord Harries, Gresham College 2011