



Christian Themes in Art The First Christian Art and its Early Developments

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Nearly all the earliest Christian art that has survived is now in the Roman Catacombs and dates from the 3rd to the 5th Century. The catacombs are under the streets of present-day Rome but they were not places where Christians huddled away from persecution; they were Christian burial places, and it is therefore not surprising that, above all, we have inscriptions. About 45,000 inscriptions have survived from that very early period, more than half in Rome, 75% are of a funeral nature, and 13% of these have an unambiguous Christian symbol.

For example, one unambiguous Christian symbol from the 3rd Century was the alpha, the omega and the "P" for pax on a cross.

Of course, symbolism developed and became more sophisticated. On a burial plaque to a lady called Antonia there were the letters for the OINIA of Antonia. There was an anchor there which was a symbol of hope in the Roman world, and it was taken over by the Christians as a symbol of hope, but also, it forms a rough cross.

Another image is of two little fishes. The meaning for this seems to be connected with what Tertullian, a theologian, said in the 2nd Century, when he described "Christians like little fish, swimming in the waters of baptism and holding on to the cross of Christ." A very famous early Christian symbol from the Catacombs was the fish. The word "fish" in Greek, *ichthys*, forms the first letters of Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour. In one image it was linked with the multiplication of the loaves, or the loaves of the Eucharist, or a combination of both.

Now, what characterised this earliest Christian art was that it simply reflected the style of Roman art at the time, and very often, Roman imagery. Take, for example, a fresco of Christ as the good shepherd. The good shepherd was an image in Roman art as well as Christian art, and you can imagine how Christian eyes lit up when they saw that, because it obviously fitted so well with what is said in St John's Gospel, "I am the good shepherd", and there are lots of images of Christ as the good shepherd. We have very famous and rather lovely carvings of Christ the good shepherd which were done in the style of any other Roman statuary of the time.

I will now show a non-Christian, pagan image - the apotheosis of the emperor; the emperor being changed and rising to heaven. It reflects the period in the Roman Empire when the emperors were adopting Sol, the Sun God, shown by rays around their heads. This was the beginning of some sort of feeling for monotheism in the Roman world and amongst popular religion. Thus, imagine the extraordinary surprise when, last century, digging underneath the great Church of St Peter's in Rome, they saw, dating from AD 250 to 275, an image of Jesus, depicted in the form of an apotheosis. Instead of having the stars of the sun god, the star-like forms make a vague form of halo - or so scholars believe. The foliage was very typical of a Roman mosaic of the time - the Christian image is a mosaic. This shows how far those early Christians were prepared to go in taking over and baptising Christian imagery.

Now, obviously, one of the themes, above all, which Christians in the Catacombs wanted to convey, was the idea of God as a protector. Remember that, at that time, the scriptures referred to the Old Testament scriptures, and therefore Christians ransacked the Hebrew Scriptures in order to find imagery which would express their beliefs. A frequently occurring image is that of Daniel in the Lion's Den. It emanates from

Daniel Chapters II and III, when Daniel refused to obey King Nebuchadnezzar and worship idols, and for that, he was thrown into a den of lions, but, because of God's protection, he was kept safe. That is a very familiar image in the very earliest Christian art. Again, in the Book of Daniel, Chapters II and III, Nebuchadnezzar ordered people to worship idols. Three boys, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, refused to do so. They were thrown into a burning fiery furnace, but miraculously protected and this was used. So the Christians wanted to express, through these images, the idea of God protecting them, through the spasmodic persecution of the time and through death. The Church was persecuted from time to time, and very intensely when it was persecuted, which made this image endure.

Now, in the Catacombs, after a period, towards the end of the 2nd, early 3rd Century, there began to be images of Jesus, such as those showing Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. Jesus said, in connection with that story in St John's Gospel, "I am the resurrection and the life." Jesus was raised from the dead, he raised Lazarus from the dead, and he could raise those Christians who were buried in the Catacombs.

After a time, the Christians began to develop narrative stories as well as individual images, and one familiar narrative was the Jonah cycle. One example shows Jonah being thrown off the ship; swallowed by the whale; regurgitated up; and a very interesting symbol - Jonah relaxing in paradise. Of course, the biblical story does not say anything about Jonah resting under a lovely vine. It tells a story of a gourd which grew up quickly and then shrivelled away, and he got very fed up with it because it shrivelled away. So they twisted the story, and focused on this. Now, this is in fact the exact image of the Roman myth of Endymion and Selene, the Moon Goddess. Endymion was a very beautiful youth. The Moon fell in love with this youth, as Endymion was sleeping, and performed some kind of trick in order to keep him sleeping happily forever, so the Moon could continue looking. This was a Roman myth, which was depicted in art, and again, the Christian eyes lit up and decided that this would make a wonderful end to the Jonah cycle. So it was another very dramatic example of how those first Christians had no qualms about taking over non-Christian imagery that they felt expressed their beliefs. There is another image of the Jonah cycle and there are various other images. This brings out a point: that not only did Christians express their beliefs in frescos on the walls of the Catacombs, but as soon as they were able, they carved them on sarcophagi, great stone coffins, and here is a stone coffin for an early Christian, probably late-3rd, early-4th Century.

This, again, brings out another point that very little Christian art from the 9th Century has survived. This is because there was this terrible period of Iconoclasm that ruled and raged, on and off, for two centuries, from the 7th to the 9th Century. The Iconoclasts smashed all Christian art that they could get their hands on. Obviously, as a result of that, only if the materials were very durable or hidden away did they survive, and one of the reasons we have a good number of sarcophagi of course is because they are stone and they survive well.

Here is another sarcophagus, a very famous one, called the Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus, which is in the papal museum in the Vatican. I am not going to talk about all the scenes in detail this morning because I shall do that on one of the sarcophagi in another of my talks, but this is just to show that when Christians began to get a little bit wealthier and a little bit more respectable in society, they too could have the same kind of sarcophagi when they died as did Pagans. This is Junus Bassus, who was a Christian, who had a sarcophagus carved in the same way as any Roman gentleman or nobleman, but with Christian themes rather than with Roman Pagan imagery. Here is another sarcophagus, just to give you an example. You can see - Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. The scenes of Christ's life and death are told there in carvings on stone. Here is another one, from Ravenna, which still used very basic Christian imagery. There is Christ, with the halo, being surrounded and followed by Christians. Palm trees were a ubiquitous symbol of paradise for the early Christians, so that is their significance.

Now, here is a non-Christian image - one of the Fayun portraits. Those of you who have been to any great museum and looked at Egyptian mummies will have noticed that on mummies from the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Century, particularly in Egypt, there is piece of wood where the face would have been on which was painted a portrait of the person. This is a Fayun portrait of a young man from a mummy, who obviously died relatively young, and you can see that kind of Roman style from the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Century, the same sort of style as those of the portraits at Pompeii.

This of course is St Peter, one of the very few early icons that survived. This is from the 6th Century, and it survived because it was kept at Sinai. There is a very strong stylistic resemblance between the Fayun portrait and Peter; so again, it reflects the artistic style of the time. Also in Sinai, there is a wonderful mosaic of Moses receiving the law and Moses taking off his feet before the burning bush. They depicted Moses because St Catherine's Monastery on Mount Sinai is built on the place where they thought Moses

both saw the burning bush and also received the law. Also in Mount Sinai, there is a wonderful Apse mosaic of the transfiguration. This is the familiar transfiguration imagery which has persisted virtually unchanged from that time, right through to the present, and this is the first very good early example, dating from the 6th Century. Other icons have also survived at Sinai. This is another one, perhaps from a little bit later of the boys in the fiery furnace. These images persist, though interestingly, “Daniel in the lion’s den” and the “boys in the fiery furnace” eventually die out. They were not so relevant to later Christians.

Here, it shows an angel there, because the Book of Daniel says that there was a mysterious angelic figure who was there protecting them. The boys seem to be dressed in Persian dress, and they were taken by the early Christians to be a kind of foretaste of the three magi who came from Persia in order to worship Jesus. The image of the angel there was interpreted by Christians not just as an angel who would protect us in times of difficulty, but is an image of Christ himself, who would rescue our souls from limbo.

Here is another example of an icon which has survived from a little bit later, the 9th to the 10th Century, and shows Palestinian influence. It is less classical in its lines, but has its own particular charm of Christ’s ascension. There is another icon which has survived from there, dating from the 6th Century, of Mary surrounded by her two soldier saints, showing that, in the 6th Century, the person of Mary had begun to receive very great significance and prominence.

Ivory also survived iconoclasm. We have quite a lot of ivory from the first thousand years, and this is known as a consular diptych. When a person was made a consul in Rome, they had an ivory diptych made for them for their time of office, and this image obviously reflects the time when that consul was a Christian, and so, it shows a cross and an angelic figure.

Now, one of the places where there is a magnificent treasury of early Christian art is Ravenna. There are three great churches, two dedicated to Sant’Apollinare - Sant’Apollinare in Classe or by the port, which is this one, Sant’Apollinare Nuovo, and San Vitale. They have the most wonderful collection of 6th Century mosaics, from when the great Justinian was the emperor. This is Apse of Sant’Apollinare in Classe. It shows the saint, some sheep, representing Christians, a figure of Christ, and heaven. A close-up gives a better view and feel for the wonderful colours. Again, trees and flowers reflect paradise just as green is the colour of paradise in Islam today.

Now, that is all relatively straightforward, but now, when we come to San Vitale, we get some even more interesting imagery. It shows the great Emperor Justinian, surrounded by Bishop Maximus and various deacons and priests. Of course, it is Justinian at the Eucharist, bringing the Eucharistic bread as an offering at the Eucharist. Church and state were highly intertwined at this time – it was a form of Caesaropapism. The emperor was seen as God’s vice-regent on Earth and he worked hand-in-hand with the patriarch of Constantinople. They expressed this by great processions in the great Church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, at which the emperor would bring forth the bread for the Eucharist.

No less remarkable was his wife, Theodora, once a showgirl, if not something even more disreputable. She was a remarkable lady who saved Justinian’s life and indeed the whole Byzantine Empire at that stage, simply by her bravery when her husband was beginning to show cowardice.

A wonderful mysterious thing that sometimes appears in Christian depictions at this time is a curtain being drawn across, indicating there is some kind of ultimate mystery behind. So, Theodora also appears in the great procession at Hagia Sophia for the Eucharist, with her husband.

Now, at that time, people did not read the Bible in a straightforward, literalistic way. The idea of reading the Bible in a straightforward, literalistic way would have been totally foreign to most Christians for most of Christian history. They thought the bible had at least four different kinds of meaning – allegorical, moral, spiritual, and goodness knows what else, and therefore, when they read the bible stories they were always looking for these other kinds of meaning.

This is from the Church of St Vitale in Ravenna. It obviously reflects a time when the Eucharist was of fundamental importance to Christians, because there is a Eucharistic table. This is above the Eucharistic table in the Church. It is a mosaic. There are also two Old Testament: Abel, who brought forth his offering to God, which is what he is doing here; and Melchizedek, this strange who we know virtually nothing about. He appears in the Old Testament very suddenly, after Abraham had won a battle, and he is referred to as “Melchizedek the king, brought forth bread and wine, and he was the priest of the most high God” which is a wonderful, mysterious statement. It seems to have very little context. Again, it is obvious how Christian eyes and minds lit up when they saw that and said, “Ah yes, this is pre-figuring of the Eucharist,” and so Melchizedek appears with his offering, foreshadowing Christ, our great high priest.

This is another one of those wonderful symbolic scenes. It is in a mosaic arc and it depicts a Eucharistic table, and on one side, you have Abraham, bringing forth his hospitality to three angelic figures and on the other side, you have Abraham about to slaughter his son Isaac, but being prevented from doing so by God. Now, Abraham was a very important figure for early Christians, pre-figuring Christ in all sorts of ways.

Now, this scene, on the one side, strings from the Old Testament story where three strangers, apparently divine strangers, appeared before Abraham who offered them hospitality, and they revealed their divine provenance. The early church took this as a foreshadowing of God as Holy Trinity. So, this was a very important image for the early Christians, because it is also an image of the Holy Trinity which invites us to share the Eucharist, which is to share in the divine life. Some of you will know the wonderful 14th Century icon of this scene by Andrei Rublev, perhaps the greatest icon that has ever been painted. It is deeply moving, with three angels behind the table, so graceful and, as it were, inviting the viewer in to share the divine life and to do so through sharing in the divine banquet at the Eucharist.

Now, this imagery here, of Abraham, and of Abel and Melchizedek, is still reflected in the words of the Tridentine Latin Mass of the Roman Catholic Church, words themselves which were derived from the old Roman rite. This is what the prayer in that Eucharist says: "Accept, as you agreed to accept, the offerings of Abel, your just servant, and the sacrifice of Abel, our patriarch, and that which your chief priest, Melchizedek, offered to you, a holy sacrifice and a spotless victim." As so often in Christian art and Christian history, there is this a wonderful sense of continuity that these figures, which were very early interpreted as foreshadowing Christ, were depicted in art from an early stage, get reflected in the words of the Eucharistic prayer, and continue to emerge in Christian art down the ages.

When I showed this image before, I concentrated on Justinian and his Eucharistic prayer. This is his bishop, Maximianus, and he has a wonderfully bejewelled bible. One of the important points to bring out from this period – 3rd to the 5th Century – is that Christianity emerged as a book religion. Early Christian books are called codices, or a codex, coming from the word "caudex", meaning a wooden block. Judaism was seen as a religion of the scroll, and Christianity as a religion of the book. Obviously, having books rather than scrolls meant illustration was possible. If you illustrate scrolls, they very quickly get rubbed off and damaged, but books can contain and safeguard and conserve illustrations in a much more possible way.

During this period there was what has been well described as the physicalisation of the bible. Expensive materials were used – note the jewels there and the expensive cover. It was used liturgically – it is being brought forward into the Eucharist. The Old Testament and New Testament were seen as a whole, with the New Testament superseding the Old, so there was Supersessionism, a view which most Christians today are very unhappy with. Thus, in one illustration, Moses appears with the book of the law, Mary with Jesus, and Ecclesia, or the Church, with the bible, and on this expressed the view that the revealed word of God in Judaism is fulfilled in Jesus, the word. This is brought to us by the church through the bible, the words of which point to Jesus, the word. There we have this physicalisation of the bible, and a close-up gives an even better view of the jewels there and its value.

There are some wonderful copies of early bibles. This one is known as the Sinope Gospel and it has sheer wealth of gold on the page, wonderful calligraphy, and at the bottom of the page, there is always a gospel scene - for example, Jesus healing the blind man. Here is another wonderful gospel from the 6th Century, the Rossanno Gospels, and this shows Jesus raising Lazarus.

Here are Old Testament prophets, who are named, and pointing, through the scriptures with which they are associated, to Jesus, the resurrection, the life, as the one who would raise the dead. So Old Testament, New Testament are seen as one with the one superseding the other. These were wonderfully rich and valuable bibles. They could only really be commissioned by emperors. Of course, they also had wonderful covers.

I am now moving slightly further to the West, because most of the art that I have shown you so far comes from the Christian East, centred on Constantinople, the Eastern Roman Empire. Well, of course the West had fallen into a state of disarray because Rome fell to the Vandals in 410. Tribes moving across Europe – Goths, Vandals, Visigoths - from the East moved down all the way to Spain, and there was pressure from Islam coming up from the South. It was a very difficult period for the West. However, under Charlemagne, who was crowned the first Emperor of the Christian Roman Empire in the year 800, the Christian West began to recover, and it also had an opportunity therefore to express its faith in art which was likely to survive.

Now, this is Aachen, where Charlemagne built his church, in the same architectural style as San Vitale in Ravenna. This is the ivory book cover that also came from this period and which survived. This is Matthew writing because, on these gospels, they also liked to show the different gospel writers. Here is a water bucket, dated from 860 to 880, from the period of Carolingian art. It is decorated with wonderfully carved figures which are highly valuable, but it also had a liturgical use. Here is another ivory book cover of Christ and the Apostles, dating from 850-890. Here is another water bucket, again from this period of Carolingian, and then, later on, Ottonian art, because there was another revival of Christian art under the Ottonian Empire, emperors who came after Charlemagne. Here is another ivory plaque, or book cover, of the women at the tomb. You can see what wonderful works of art these are.

I will be talking more about Christian art in the West in subsequent talks, but I wanted to give a glimpse of some of the things which were going on in the West, under Charlemagne and Otto. They were trying to revive the classical Christian art of the time of Justinian and Constantine. There was a classical revival under Charlemagne and also under Otto. As so often in the past, they went back to classical prototypes in order to revive their own art, as of course we did in the West in the time of the Renaissance as well. However, the classical art that they went back to was not the art of Pagan Rome; it was the art of Christian Constantine and his empire and, perhaps even more, the art of Justinian, in the 6th Century, and his great Byzantine Empire. So you have this classical revival from those earlier Christian periods, but it was a very great period for art, both under Charlemagne and the Ottonians. This book of St Egbert is typical of the books that were being produced in the West at this time.

Charlemagne was King of the Franks before he was first Holy Roman Emperor so we need to discuss the state of art from even further west. This is from the Book of Kells, dating from about 800. It is an initial letter which has been elaborately decorated – this was one of the ways in which they made these books works of art. Here, we have an eagle's head, from the same Book of Kells, with a very characteristic Keltic style.

Now we come on to the last sort of period that I want to deal with today. After this terrible fight between the iconodules, the lovers of icons, and the iconoclasts, the destroyers of icons, eventually, those who loved icons prevailed in 843, and this was a huge triumph for the church. It is still celebrated as a great feast in the Orthodox Church. In the apse of the Church of Hagia Sophia there is this apse mosaic of Mary, like an empress, sitting on a throne, with the Christ child on her lap. We can date this very exactly because we actually have the sermon, in full, which was preached on the occasion of the unveiling of this on Holy Saturday in the year 867 by patriarch Photios. Although of course it was covered up for a long time, when Hagia Sophia was simply an Islamic monument, it has now been uncovered, and you can see something of its glory. Thus, the triumph of orthodoxy in 843 was a hugely significant marker in the development of early Christian art.

Also in the Hagia Sophia, there is this little mosaic, in an arc, and this is significant because this is how they saw themselves. It shows Constantine, who built the walls of Constantinople, and Justinian, who built the great Church of Hagia Sophia in the 6th Century, and both are making their offerings to the Christ child, on the lap of Mary, who is seen very much there as an empress. Constantine is offering the great city of Constantinople, with its wonderful walls, and Justinian the church he built to Christ.

In the post-iconoclastic period, the settled iconographic scheme for the church in the East which we still have today began to develop. They saw the church, with its decoration, as an entrance into paradise. For instance, there is a church in Rome, the Church of St Cosmas and Damian, in which this apse mosaic is kept. That mosaic has the inscription on it: "God's residence radiates brilliantly in shining materials; the precious lights of the faith in it glow even more."

At the entrance to the church in a place called Nola, the Bishop Paulinus wrote: "Christ's worshipers take the path to heaven by way of this lovely sward" that is this lovely green grass. "An approach from bright gardens," he went on, "is fitting, for from here is granted to those who desire it their departure to holy paradise." So it is that in so many of these churches we find flowers, animals, hunting scenes and fish - everything that will be in heaven.

This is the Church of St Cosmas and Damian, and it shows Christ set in a cloud of wonderful splendour. There is the word "Jordan", and this is trying to indicate that it is the River Jordan, and we go through the River Jordan of death in order to achieve the splendour, the brightness and the glory of heaven, where Christ is reigning in glory.

The patriarch Germanus said: "The church is the earthly heaven in which the heavenly god lives and moves." That is why orthodox churches are most wonderfully decorated when they are at their best – in

the apse, in the dome, on the west door, frescos and mosaics around the walls – because the congregation is entering into a foretaste or a path through to heaven, and the Church is a foretaste of heaven.

If we move actually beyond iconoclasm, then a very good example of what we have is this little church at Osios Loukas, dating from the year 1020. It has a classic architectural design which emerged at that time, a cross in a square. Inside these little churches, the apse will contain a mosaic or a fresco of Mary with the Christ child. Now, this one is one of my favourites. It is actually from the apse of a little church of Torcello, which is an island on the Venetian lagoon, and it is interesting because many Byzantine craftsmen, mosaicists and so on, from Constantinople, went, in the 10th, 11th and 12th Century, to work in Venice and this is clearly the work of Byzantine craftsmen, with fundamentally Byzantine imagery.

Between the apse and the main body of the church would be a chancel screen though not the great kind of iconostasis which may be familiar from Russian churches, which run from ceiling to floor and are covered with panels. Those were a significantly later development. In the early stages of the church, there was simply a stone panel with some Christian imagery on it. These are peacocks, drinking from the fountain of the water of life. It was just a low screen to separate the chancel from the nave. In the dome, there would be a picture of Christ Pantocrator, Christ the ruler of all things, who is usually a rather severe figure. This is from the Church of Daphne, also in Greece, dating from about the year 1100. Round the frescos, just below and around the dome, there would often be angels and archangels.

Now, this is one of my favourites. In Cyprus there are these wonderful gems of churches in the Troodos Mountains. Outside, they look like nothing. They are hidden away, with great sloping roofs, because they needed to hide away from the time of Turkish occupation, but inside, you get entry into paradise, and this is one of my favourite churches, the Church of Lagoudera, dating from the 12th Century. It has wonderful flowing lines. One of the characteristic features of Byzantine art was the successive classical revivals, and this clearly was the result of another classical revival in the 12th Century. This is especially shown by the wonderful flowing lines of that most beautiful angel.

The corners, the squinches, those devices which enable the dome to go on the cross in the square, there are often the main scenes of Christ's life. Here, obviously, is the nativity scene. I am not going to talk about that in detail because I shall be doing so in another one of my talks, but, at the moment, I am just showing the classical scheme of iconography which grew up.

Then, just to give an example of what was slightly outside the Byzantine world, this is a Georgian enamel icon - quite early, 12th or 13th Century - of the presentation of Christ in the temple. Now, you can see that, in some way, it is classical Christian imagery, but the style is not classical; it is more a form of folk art – it has lovely colours and rather attractive faces of the people. In a way, it is quite simple, but very appealing. Just to remind ourselves that, although the influence of the Byzantine world did spread very far, there were areas outside it which were Christian and reflected their Christian faith in their own style.

In the church, as you went out of the west door, you may very well have seen a fresco like this. So, we get: in the apse, the Virgin and Child; the dome, Christ Pantocrator; the angels and archangels, the whole company of heavenly host in the band round the dome; in the squinches, the main scenes of Christ's life; perhaps round the wall various scenes of Christ's life; and as you go out of the door, in a classical scheme, the falling asleep of the Virgin Mary. In Greek, it is the Koimesi; in Latin, the Dormition and it appears because the Eastern Church prefers this to the Ascension. It has been described as the loveliest creation of all orthodox art. Mary is shown lying dead with St John bending over her and St Paul at the other end. Christ is coming down in order to take the soul of the Virgin up to heaven, and there are the angels going to help him. Christ comes down and takes the soul of the Virgin up to heaven. The Virgin Mary of course, in Christian thought of the time now was a fully ordinary human being in some sense, and therefore, if she could have her soul taken up by Christ into heaven, so could everyone else under the grace of God. This is another example of that same scene, the Koimesis. At one end of the Koimesis, there is always St Paul. St Paul always has a big domed head.

I have tried to cover quite a big sweep, mainly showing the East, and the development of the settled scheme of iconography in the 10th and 11th Centuries.