

APPROACHING EARLY CHRISTIAN ART

An introduction to interpreting sacred images

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When approaching any expression of human creativity there are always a few elements to bear in mind if you do not simply want to enjoy it “instinctively”, but wish to “understand” it. The first rule is not to take anything for granted. The second is to be aware that your reading is necessarily influenced by your own culture and personality. The third is to make a difference between what is possible and what is certain.

Early Christian art is a tricky one. The very word “creativity” is not the most appropriate in this context, since early Christian art (we usually speak of a period from the second to the sixth centuries) was not an expression of personal inspiration but a codified visual support of faith. It developed in a society where the founding values of culture were religion (as opposed to science/economics), community (as opposed to the individual), and authority (as opposed to relativism). In order to understand it, therefore, we cannot apply the same categories of thought that we use today. Furthermore, no “scientific” evidence (in the modern sense of the word) can help us in our effort of interpretation. But, if the distance in time makes it difficult for us “moderns” to access early Christian art with ease, the fact that it was influenced by a general system of ideas rather than by the singular character of an artist or the political preferences of a patron allows us to come to a valid interpretation once we understand its cultural/religious context.

CRACKING THE CODES OF EARLY CHRISTIAN ART

Thus, the next question we should ask is: what did characterise this specific faith and which were the codes used by art? The strength of Christian faith depended both on its empowering message and on its capacity to adapt. This is what we call “enculturation”. Christian faith was shaped by two main cultures: the Jewish and the Greco-Roman. At the same time, it soon became a culture in itself with an irreversible impact on the realities it came into touch with. Some key elements of Christian faith are:

THE BELIEF IN A MEDIATOR/SAVIOR OF HUMANITY

This belief was present both in the Jewish and in the Greco-Roman religions. However, the most striking difference was that the Jews believed in a Messiah still to come, and that pagans worshipped gods or semi-gods with mythological characteristics. Yet Christ entered “history” by sharing the destiny of humankind: Christ was not only God but also a real man among men. The incarnation of God, ie, God becoming a man, gave art a specific dignity: the Jewish prohibition of representing the invisible God (cfr. Exodus 20:4-5) was no longer relevant as God had become visible in Jesus Christ. Furthermore, Christ’s salvation is universal, as opposed to the pagan “elitist” approach. For instance, Mithraism involved a limited number of adherents (and only men) who had to follow a strict initiation. This universal dimension is reflected, for example, in the very architecture of Christian churches, which were “halls” open to the faithful, as opposed to the small “cella” of Greco-Roman temples containing the statue of the divinity and which the faithful were not allowed to enter.

THE BELIEF IN CHRIST AS THE CENTRE OF HISTORY AND DESTINY

For Christians, Christ is the centre of everything. All that happened before his coming was a preparation for it. Both Old Testament and some pagan beliefs were interpreted by Christians in the light of Christ’s message. Christ is the ful-



ANCIENT TEXTS AND SOURCES FOR UNDERSTANDING EARLY CHRISTIAN ART

- Old and New Testament
- Apocrypha
- Writings of the Fathers of the Church (early Christian authors)
- Ancient Liturgical Practises and Readings
- Pagan Mythology
- Pre-existing Iconography (Greco-Roman and Jewish)

In Rome, fine examples of early Christian art, particularly sarcophagi, can be seen at the Vatican’s Pio-Cristiano Museum. The church of Santa Pudenziana, the Mausoleum of Santa Costanza and the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore contain very early Christian mosaics. The catacombs offer the earliest known examples of Christian frescoes.

fulfilment of the promise that God made to his people and to all humankind. This is why early Christian art constantly represents old prophets and biblical characters as foreshadowing of Christ himself.

THE BELIEF IN THE RESURRECTION OF ALL

This idea had started appearing among some Jews as well (the Pharisees, though not the Sadducees), but did not have a clear shape and was linked to the expectation of a messianic kingdom. Greco-Roman religion, more focused on the present life than on the future, only believed in the deification of heroes and emperors. Greek philosophy conceived eternity as the immortality of the soul, and considered the body (the matter) as something inferior and ephemeral. Christians believed instead in the resurrection of the flesh (a "glorious" body not better qualified). The belief in the resurrection of the body and the very incarnation of Christ, meant that flesh and matter were no longer

despised.

THE BELIEF IN A "PAST-PRESENT-FUTURE" KINGDOM OF GOD

Whereas Jewish hope revolves around a future messianic kingdom still to come, Christian faith focuses on a kingdom of God which has already started in the past with the coming of Jesus, which is always "contemporary" through the church and the sacraments (considered as the real presence of Christ), and which will reach its full completion at the end of time.

As an interesting aside, Christian architecture also reflects the fact that Christians interpret their faith as a journey involving these three dimensions, towards the fulfilment of time, towards the glory of Christ. As opposed to the pagan basilica (used as a law court or a place of trade) which usually had an entrance on its longer side and several symmetrical apses, the Christian basilica had a main-entrance on its shorter side and one apse at the end of the nave: this

gave the faithful a feeling of being drawn towards that end, which was the focus of the whole structure, and the location of the altar. The lines of perspective of the ceiling and floor, as well as the alternation of pillars and arches in the central nave also accentuated the feeling of convergence at that ideal point. As for the decoration of churches, narrative scenes referring to the past (dynamic development of the history of salvation, such as episodes from the Old and New Testament) are to be found mainly along the naves, whereas eschatological scenes (apocalyptic images, "visions", such as the Christ in glory on a throne) are represented in the apse, on the triumphal arch or on main-entrance doors.

This three-fold dimension of Christian faith explains why early Christian art has a deeply symbolic nature. The same image can be a combined reference to a) an event in the history of salvation (eg, the salvation of Noah, Jonah, the three youths in the fiery furnace); b) the sacrament of

baptism (eg, scenes involving water) and/or the Eucharist (scenes involving food or meals, and wine); c) the judgement and/or resurrection (eg, Jonah's rest, the fire of the furnace, the water of the flood).

ADAPTING TO THE PREVAILING CIRCUMSTANCES

Even in the absence of ancient documents specifically commenting on Christian works of art, we know that the aforementioned elements are fundamental to the understanding of early Christian art. It is key to remember that Christian faith, in its originality, was able to adopt many elements of the prevailing cultures by giving them a new meaning. It implied both change and continuity. Its early visual expressions (especially funerary art, such as the sarcophagi and the paintings in the catacombs) are probably the best examples of that. The proximity to Jewish tradition is clear in the choice of different episodes from the Old Testament. But also Greco-Roman culture was a shaping factor in Christian art. Both Christian style and patterns are very similar to those used by pagans. Some pagan images even become recurrent themes in Christian art, with a different connotation. For example, the **Good Shepherd** representing Christ and the **Orant** (praying figure) representing the soul of the deceased were direct borrowings. In pagan art, they referred to two fundamental virtues: the first, the *criophore* (ram bearer), symbolised *humanitas*, ie, Philanthropy (and could also refer to Hermes the psychopomp, who guided souls to the underworld, represented with a sheep/ram on his shoulders and associated with hope of a blessed afterlife); the second was a personification of the Roman *pietas*, ie, the religious respect paid to parents and ancestors, to gods and to the emperor.

This was the strength of early Christian art: its capacity to clothe an existing reality with new contents. It was both simple in form and rich in meaning due to its symbolic character. Its aim was to convey a message of faith across different cultures and traditions without fearing "contamination", but rather trying to "make the most of them".

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Clockwise (left-right from previous page):

Terracotta lamp showing the boys in the fiery furnace, 3rd-4th century AD

Statue of the Good Shepherd, Vatican Pio-Cristiano Museum

Pagan sarcophagus of Dionysus, satyrs and the seasons, including one holding a lamb, Museo alle Terme

Christian sarcophagus showing the story of Jonah, Vatican Pio-Cristiano Museum

Christ as the 'philosopher-teacher', late 4th century mosaic in the apse of the Church of Santa Pudenziana

'Orant' as Christ in an early fresco, House on the Caelian Hill

