

Syndretizm and Abstraction in Early Christian and Roman Art

Within the 500 years of history from the introduction of Christian art around 200 CE until the ban on religious images in eighth century Byzantium, a continuity between the classical religious tradition and Christianity is evident. Syncretism, or the assimilation of images from other traditions, defined the Late Antique period's aesthetic transition into the first three centuries of Byzantine art creating a bridge between Antiquity and the Middle Ages. In late Rome, amidst a growing trend toward abstraction, classical forms and values were yielding to a symbolic realism in imperial secular art, setting the stage for later abstract spiritual values in Christian artworks. The late Roman world was experiencing a variety of problems. The rapid succession and violent overthrow of the imperial leaders, military disasters, growing inflation and taxation, along with the abandonment of traditional religion, opened the door for new trends in philosophy and religion that offered an escape from the realities of a harsh world. The Greek concept of a man-centered humanistic art was fading. Art shifted away from Hellenistic skills including foreshortening, atmospheric perspective, and re-creating reality, toward a two dimensional symbolic approach with a more rigid style. "The contrast of light and shadow, the generation of natural forms, and the optical effects of classical art, gave way to newly abstracted forms with a concentration on symbolism played against the classical backdrop creating aesthetic and emotional appeal." (Byzantine Art in the Making, p.114) The Arch of Constantine and the statue group known as The Tetrarchs are examples of the collapse of the classical art forms in official works of late Roman art. Both exhibit "characters with stubby proportions, angular movements, and ordering of parts through symmetry and repetition" (Art History, p.283) Symbolic importance was stressed rather than laws of nature. Simplified and stripped down to essentials, the images communicated forceful and direct messages. As the traditional Roman influence on art starts to decay, early Christian art continues the use of symbolism and demonstrates a continuity with the classical period by incorporating ancient symbols and ideas. Until Constantine the Great made Christianity one of the Roman Empire's state religions with the Edict of Milan in 313 CE, Christian art was restricted to the decoration of the hidden places of worship, such as catacombs and meeting houses. "In imperial Rome, citizens had the legal right to bury their dead in underground rooms beside the Appian Way, the city's chief thoroughfare. By the late second century some of the tombs displayed Christian symbols and subjects, suggesting the increasing confidence of the new religion in an otherwise hostile Roman environment." (Western Humanities, p.149) Most of the early representations in Christian painting were derived from Roman art, stylized to fit into Christian beliefs. "There are several reasons for this use of a common visual language; central to all of these reasons is the fact that adaptation to the surrounding culture was necessary for the survival of the new religion, and a primary cause of its triumph over the Greco-Roman religion." (The Beginning of Christian Art, p.27) The catacomb paintings were rich in images, using iconography and symbolism to convey the ideas of Christian resurrection, salvation, and life after death. The style of these paintings mainly focused on the message, rather than on the naturalism of earlier Greco-Roman art. "The mundane aspects of the scenes are disregarded; their settings contain a bare minimum of furniture and architecture. The figures themselves, apart from the faces, with their big, staring eyes, lack plasticity and their attitudes and gestures are quite unlike those of real life. They have no weight, no real contact with the ground, but seem to hover lightly just above it. The space surrounding the figures and objects is sketchily indicated,

everything is flattened, schematized. Clearly, for the artists who made these images, material reality counted for nothing, and one can only suppose that this habit of shutting their eyes to the physical world was a whole-hearted adoption of the new faith, in which the spiritual world was man's sole concern." (The Catacombs, p.73) The visual aspect of religion was very important, especially in an environment in which, for the most part, people did not read. This symbolic and syncretic religious art becomes an easy way to spread teachings, especially among a people that are used to seeing their gods as the Greeks and Romans. There are many instances of pagan images being either adapted to Christian use or placed alongside Christian images. Common motifs were used in the early Christian catacomb paintings melding Greco-Roman images into Christian artistic representations. Depictions of Jesus as shepherd, Christ as Helios, and the story of Jonah are all examples of syncretism used to convey religious messages within the fledgling Christian religion. In this paper I will focus on the image of the Good Shepherd. In the Catacomb of Callixtus, a third-century fresco depicts a youthful shepherd as a symbol of Jesus. A similar depiction can also be found at Dura Europas, in an ancient Christian meeting-house. Christ the Good Shepherd of the Twenty-third Psalm was often depicted as a beardless youth derived from the pagan god Apollo and with other ties to many Mediterranean mythologies. " Beyond the Apollonian parallels found in the depictions of the shepherd... one must think only of the Babylonian Tammuz, the Greek Adonis, and by extension, the Egyptian Osiris, who bears, as symbols of his royalty, a flail and a small staff that resembles a shepherd's crook" (The Origins of Christian Art , p.62) Other evidence of a continuity based on the mythological past are the musical pipes the shepherd is sometimes portrayed with, reminiscent of Orpheus figures surrounded by animals that listen to him play. "The profession of shepherd was associated with the Orphic cult leader Orpheus" (The Beginning of Christian Art, p.58) In early Christian art, the shepherd figure was sometimes portrayed as a man with a sheep on his shoulders; Christ as the shepherd leading the stray sheep back to the fold. Interestingly, this pose of the youth carrying an animal on his shoulders appeared in Archaic Greek sculpture as early as the sixth century BCE. Even though the shepherd and sheep convey a Christian message, the image adapts a familiar Greco-Roman theme-known already in popular art. From the first appearance of serious cracks in the structure of the Roman empire as a universal power, until the Early Byzantine period, artistic trends were dominated by a blending of traditional images, or syncretism, and symbolism conveyed emotionally by the increased use of abstraction. During this turbulent period, a firm foundation developed for medieval art both in the East and in the West. Throughout the Middle ages this same basic formula with its focus on symbolism was used many times in religious contexts to express similar ideas.

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