Early Christian and Byzantine Art

**Contents**

Early Christian Art

Christianity was a persecuted sect, so initially imagery was meaningful only to the initiated. Some images derived from words. The Chi-Rho (XP) monogram was simply a combination of the first two letters of Christos "ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ" in Greek, the early language of Christians. A fish was used as a representation of Christ's name, as the word fish in Greek provided the initials for 'Jesus Christ Son of God Saviour'; "ΙΧΘΥΣ". The shepherd and lamb, an image symbolising benevolence in pagan art now represented "the Lamb of God which taketh away the sins of the world" and "I am the shepherd; the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep".

Chi-Rho monogram, detail of sarcophagus c. AD 340
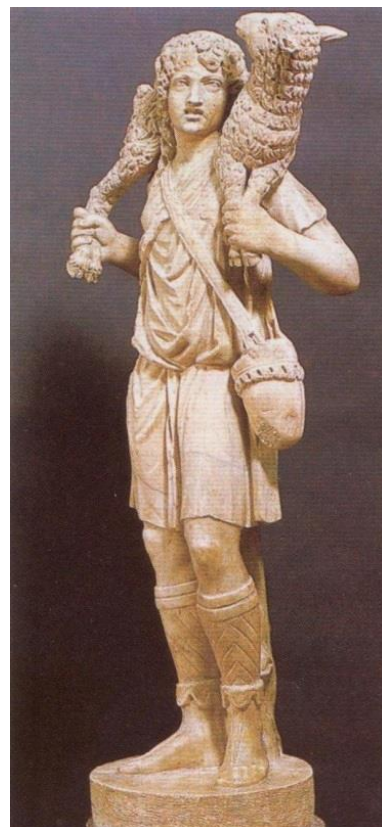
The Good Shepherd c AD 300

Buddhist art had been similar, using arcane symbols first then depicting Buddha in human form. Images of Christ developed later in Western art. The empty throne was used in both early Christian and Buddhist art: for the former symbolising God the Father in trinity images, with the son sometimes represented by a diadem. From early on, the Holy Spirit was shown as a dove – an image adopted throughout Western art in succeeding centuries. In this example, the deer stand for the faithful.

The Throne of God, probably Constantinople c AD 400.

The earliest Christian art appears in paintings in Roman catacombs which were developed by Jews and others (as well as Christians) because burial grounds were dedicated to the pagan gods of Romans. As Christians believed in resurrection, they insisted on burial rather than cremation which was the norm for common folk in Rome. Obvious Christian art did not appear in the catacombs - symbolism was safer - but some images were conveniently ambiguous: people at a meal might just be Roman festival or a Christian agape (a feast celebrating love), whereas believers could interpret the scene as either of two miracles (Christ turning Water into Wine or the Feeding of the Five Thousand), the Last Supper or the meeting of faithful in heaven.

Breaking of Bread, wall painting in catacomb of Priscilla, Rome, late 2nd century AD.

A first century ceiling combines the architectural style of pagan Rome with Christian symbols. The Good Shepherd in the centre is flanked by sheep, and the four arms of the cross end in semi-circular scenes telling Jonah's story. Between are figures making the open-armed gesture of prayer – the *orant* pose - taken from the pagan world. Simple images, but enough to recall to the believer's mind the Biblical themes they depict.


Ceiling in catacomb of Saints Peter and Marcellinus, Rome, c AD 340.

The Old Testament dominates. Aside from Jonah and the Whale, stories which pre-figure the sacrifice of Jesus were popular: Noah, Abraham sacrificing Isaac, Daniel in the lion's den, three Hebrew children in the fiery furnace. They reminded the faithful that salvation was possible and that the New Testament was prophesized by the Old. Paintings of mother and child are unlikely to represent the Virgin and the Child – Mary's importance to Church doctrine did not come to the fore until the 4th century. The catacomb image of a mother and child was more likely to illustrate Isaiah's prophecy: "*Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son and shall call his name Immanuel.*"

Constantine promoted Christianity and with its new status came a need for a less cryptic art. Large biblical scenes painted on the walls of the first churches answered this need. The *Arch of Constantine* in the Old St Peter's had a mosaic of Constantine accompanied by St Peter presenting a model of the church to Christ, but little remains of these scenes. Relief carvings on sarcophagi provide the best surviving evidence of pictorial Christian art.

The Early Christian *Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus* shows a number of incidents – Christ raising Lazarus, Abraham preparing to sacrifice Isaac, Pontius Pilate washing his hands, Daniel in the lion's den and others – but deployed with no narrative sequence. However, Christ is a dominant figure in the centre: in the lower register riding into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday; above enthroned between St Peter and St Paul. The seated figure flanked by two standing attendants appeared in imperial Roman art and also occurs in Buddhist art (Buddha flanked by Bodhisattvas).
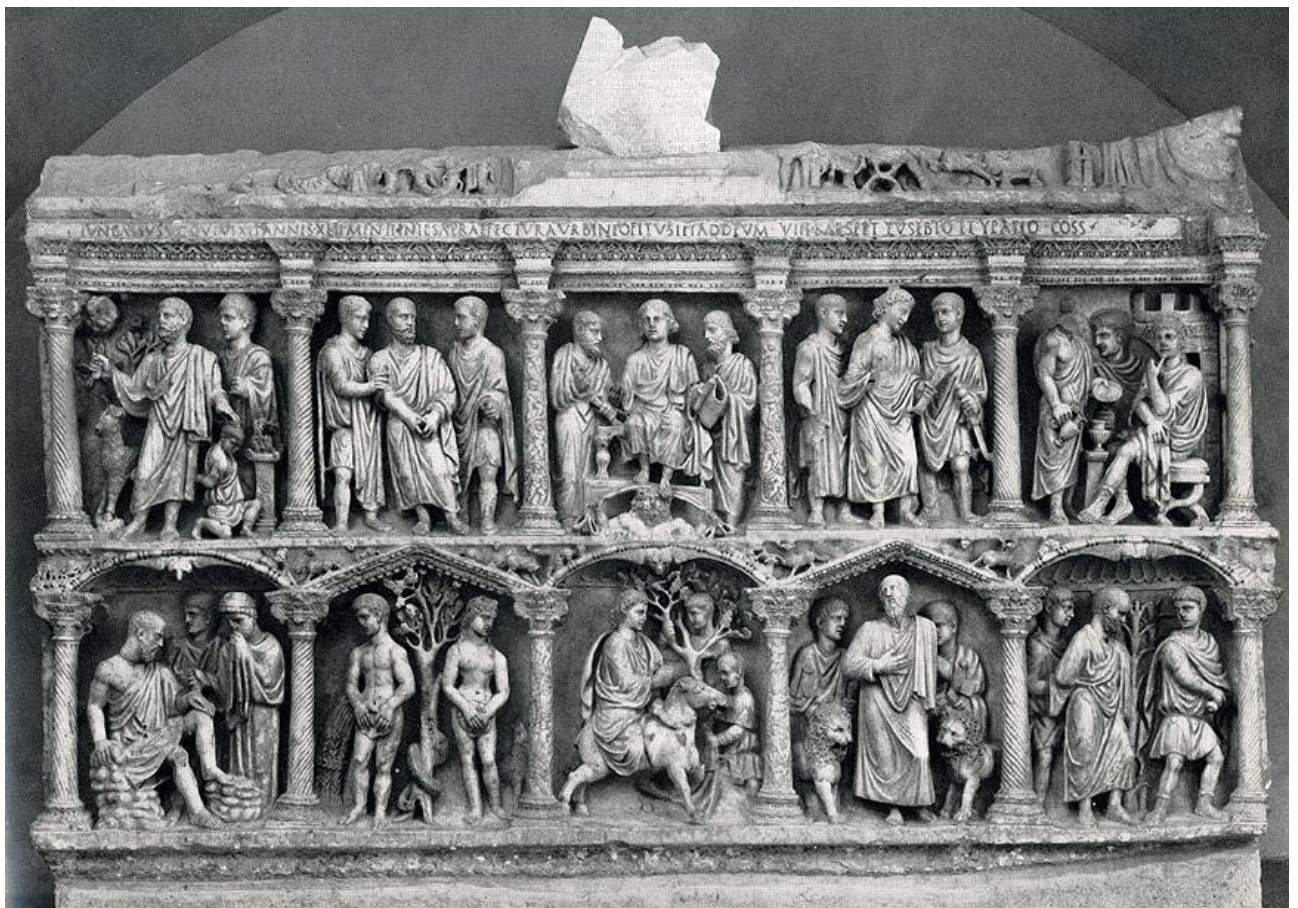
Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus, AD 359, St Peter's Rome.

Christ appears not in a Roman toga but a Greek *pallium*, which had come to be associated with philosophers and teachers. He is not bearded as a philosopher would commonly be represented, but has a fresh adolescent face – the sculptor seems to have taken the youthful Apollo as his model. This image of eternal youth recurs in Early Christian art. This beardless Christ wearing a *pallium* appears in a mosaic at Ravenna. The robe is in imperial purple and Christ's figure is larger than those of his disciples. The hands of the disciples are covered – as was usual at the time for subjects bringing tribute to their ruler (in the celebration of Mass until very recently, the deacon carried the plate of bread with veiled hands).

The Miracle of Loaves and Fishes, c AD 504 Mosaic in S Apollonare Nuovo, Ravenna.

The youthful figure continued to be used for Christ until well into the Middle Ages. An entirely different image – lean-faced, long-haired and bearded – first appears in a 4th century catacomb painting. A version appears on a sarcophagus carved about 390 in Milan (then an important Christian centre), standing with apostles confiding the new law to St Peter. A more mature appearance evidently was felt more appropriate for Christ the Law-Giver.

Sarcophagus, detail, c AD 390, S Ambrogio, Milan

Zeus or Jupiter may be the inspiration. A more awe-inspiring figure of authority evolved in mosaics. In early art Christ was represented as the miracle-working healer, the great teacher or the law-giver.

The bearded figure was destined to become the norm, but several centuries would pass before it was invested with the idea of the Man of Sorrows. Scenes of his passion always stopped short of depicting his humiliation and the Crucifixion is generally avoided - crucifixion was one of the penalties inflicted on common men and, thus, perhaps considered demeaning (although, that was the very point). The cross was rendered not as a symbol of suffering, but of triumph and resurrection – sometimes fashioned in gold and with precious stones.

Christian hatred of pagan idolatry led some to condemn representational art – Tertullian claimed the devil created *"sculptors, painters and producers of all kinds of portraits."* The absolute ban on images of God was strictly observed: until the 12th century, just a hand reaching down from heaven. Epiphanius, bishop of Salamis (died 403), in a letter to the emperor Theodosius urged that paintings of Christ and the saints were objectionable and should be removed or white-washed over.

Apse mosaic, detail, AD 402-17, S Pudenziana, Rome

Nevertheless, such paintings were valued by the faithful for whom they were not only religious images but educational ones. Theological support was found for this widespread desire for images. The original version of the Nicene Creed (325) stated that Christ had *"for us men and our salvation came down and was made flesh, and became a man"* – hence he could be represented by a man.

Emperor Theodosius proscribed non-Christian cults in 392, but many upper-class citizens clung to the old gods. Hence, artists were working for both pagan and Christian clients. Consequently, some Christian images have a Classical style. Here, attention is given to the natural fall of draperies and the modelling of bodies and, through them, the expression of different emotions. These features which would soon disappear from Christian art and remain lost for centuries until revived by Giotto [see Late Medieval chapter].
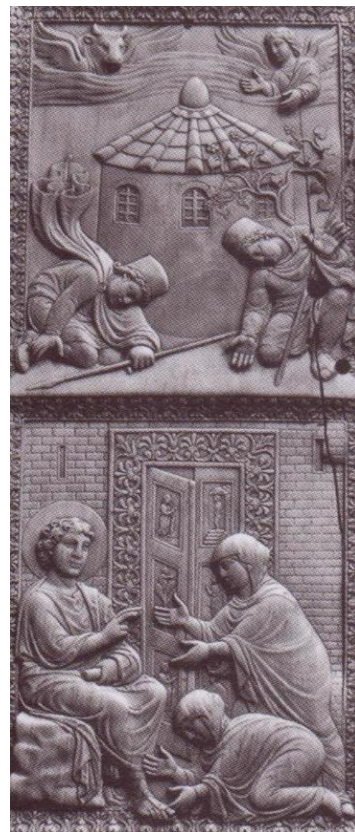
Holy Women at the Tomb, ivory c AD 400, Castello Sforzesco, Milan

After the death of Theodosius in 395 the rift between the east and west part of the Roman Empire deepened, partly because he gave one each to his two sons. The east continued intact and prosperous, but the west, already poor, was ravaged and Rome was sacked frequently. Religious art flourished, however, because church building was promoted in Rome in the 5th century as never again until the 17th, largely because of popes. The walls of early churches in Rome had painted scenes, but the most important churches had the much more expensive mosaics. At Ravenna, the most important city in Italy from 402 to the mid-8th century, the daughter of Theodosius, Galla Placidia, founded a church and, as befitting the project of an emperor's child, elaborate mosaics were used.

The Good Shepherd, c AD 425, mosaic in Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, Ravenna

Techniques from Classical art appear here too: rocks separate the scene from the observer; depth is suggested by the foreshortened sheep, the twisted pose and the deepening of the blue sky at the top. Above, the vault ceiling looks like the stars in the night sky.

These methods were soon renounced too. Mosaics in S Vitale and S Apollinare in Ravenna have no sense of recession, and the figures are flat and posed frontally looking at the spectator, and communicating with each other only by gestures. Christ (young and beardless) sits on the orb of the world against a golden sky. The scene is set in paradise with its four rivers twisting below the orb like hair. The frontal placing of subjects can be seen clearly in *Justinian and his Retinue* (below to the left).

Half-dome of the Apse, S Vitale, Ravenna

Depth appears to be portrayed but Justinian's feet are behind the bishop while his cloak is in front. The gesture of the man on the right, carrying the censor, shows the image should be read as a procession moving to the right.

Justinian and his Retinue, Apse S Vitale, Ravenna

The decoration of the apse of S Apollinare has no illusionistic devices. Apollinaris, the first bishop of Ravenna, is in the centre, hands raised with six sheep either side, representing the apostles. Three more sheep placed at the top symbolise St Peter and his brothers St John and St James witnessing the Transfiguration. Matthew says that Christ took them up a high *mountain "and was transfigured before them: and his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as light. And, behold, there appeared unto them Moses and Elias talking with him."* The two prophets are shown emerging from the clouds, and the glory of Christ is symbolised by the jewelled cross in a blue star-studded disc. The hand of God reaches down from the centre.

Apse, S Apollinare in Classe, Ravenna

S Apollinare and S Vitale were built at a similar time, but the former is an Early Christian type and the latter the new eastern style. An embassy to Constantinople led by Bishop Ecclesius just before 525 may have brought back plans, possibly even an architect. The simple circular or cruciform designs in Early Christian churches were rejected in favour of a design, which by subtle interplay of solids and voids, bright light and shadowy spaces, creates in S Vitale a sense of mystery and awe – it is Byzantine architecture. After the re-conquest of Italy by Justinian's armies, Italy was no more than a province in an empire whose ruler resided far away in Constantinople and who no longer spoke Latin.

S Vitale, Ravenna

Byzantine Art

Constantinople was formed in 330 on the site of the old Greek city of Byzantium. When Constantine decided to use the city has his usual residence, it became the empire's centre of artistic patronage. The use of deep niches to mask or conceal the structure became one of the features of Byzantine architecture. Spatial effects were sought by architects – the mysterious and insubstantial in place of the self-explicit and the solid. The greatest monument to Byzantine architecture is the church of Holy Wisdom, Hagia Sophia.

Hagia Sophia, Constantinople

"Through the harmony of its measurements it is distinguished by indescribable beauty", said Justinian's court historian Procopius (who saw it built). Anthemius of Tralles and Isidorus of Miletus were known primarily as mathematicians; the former saying, *"architecture is the application of geometry to solid matter."*

Hagia Sophia, Constantinople

Volumes are not marked off (as say in the Pantheon), and the air of mystery and splendour must have been heightened by the dome being inlaid with a gold mosaic: *"it abounds exceedingly in gleaming sunlight, but you might say that the space is not illuminated by the sun from the outside, but that the radiance is generated within",* wrote Procopius. Justinian commanded the building of Hagia Sophia to outshine all other religious buildings. The consecration conducted in 537, only five years after the foundations were laid, prompted the emperor to remark; *"Solomon, I have outdone thee."* Hagia Sophia was built on a high ridge and everyone in the city could see the dome. Few, however, saw the breath-taking view that the modern visitor can enjoy – walking through the central door was reserved only for the privileged few.

Justinian's patronage of architecture meant buildings he founded were scattered through his empire. The Church of the Monastery that he built on the slopes of Mount Sinai houses exceptional mosaics, probably by artists from Constantinople.
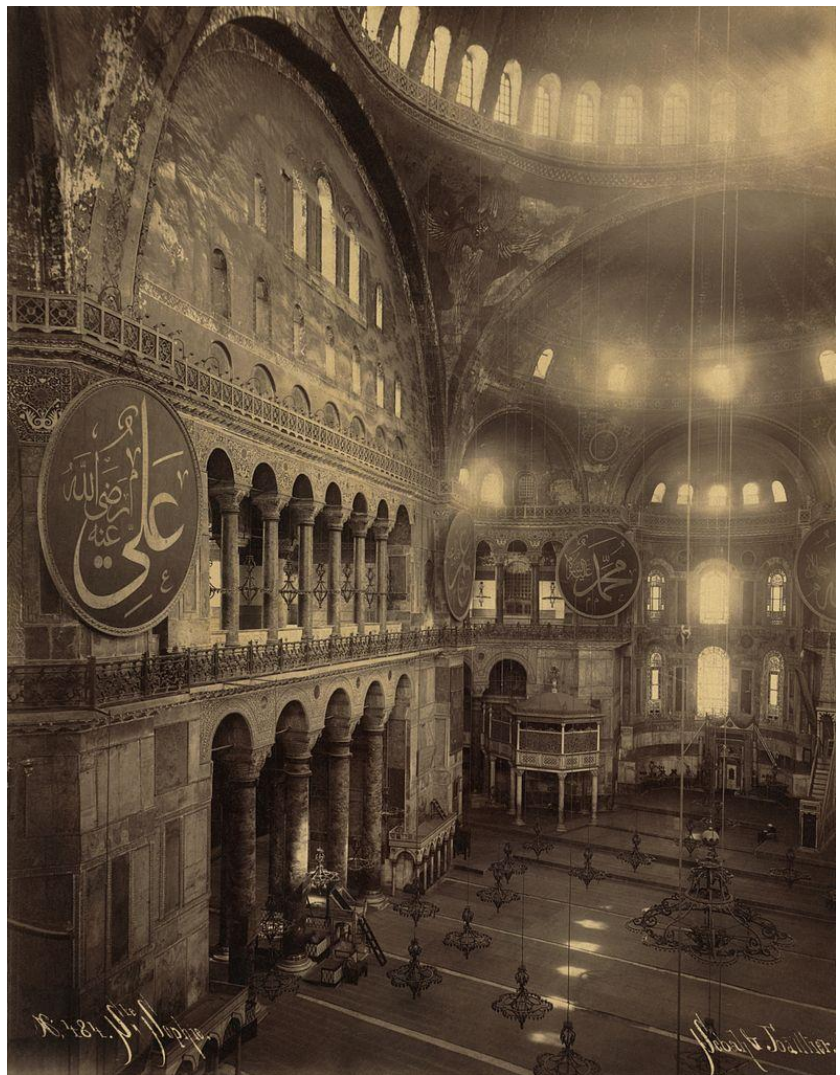
Interior of Hagia Sophia, Photograph taken between 1900 and 1910; firm of Sebah & Joallier

The Transfiguration c AD 550-65, Apse in the Church of the Monastery, Mount Sinai

Christ is shown talking to Elias and Moses, observed by the three prophets. Their bodies are modelled, quite unlike the flat figure of Christ in Ravenna. From the cross, the hand of God appears in a ray of light which is refracted into seven beams which fill the composition with radiance. A huge floor mosaic laid in the imperial palace at Constantinople at about the same time is in an entirely different style.

Pastoral Scene, 6th century AD, floor mosaic from the imperial palace, Istanbul.

Scenes are filled with naturalistic poses of men and animals, rendered in great detail. Trees and buildings are depicted with subtle gradations of colour. This secular art preserves Classical traditions, but most of the art from Justinian's reign is religious.

During this period miniature painting and book illustrations first became an important art form. A codex or book gradually replaced the scroll, being easier to read and less easily damaged. The flat pages provided a better ground for painting. Fragments of three 6th century illustrations survive. Text in gold and silver on parchment coloured with purple dye indicates they were made for the emperor. The best illustrations were painted in bright colours.


Rebecca and Eliezer, from the *Vienna Genesis*, detail 6th century AD

Rebecca is seen with Eliezer, the servant of Abraham sent to find a wife for Isaac. Rebecca is seen going to the well, and then giving water to Eliezer. Depicting several episodes from a story in a single scene became a practise continued to the 16th century. The walled city and the fountain nymph symbolizing the well seem to have been copied from Classical sources. Rebecca, wife of Isaac and mother of Esau and Jacob, was seen as a precursor of the Virgin Mary, and her meeting with Eliezer was construed as a parallel to the Annunciation.

The distinction between an image that was an aid to meditation or prayer and one that was itself an object of veneration was blurred in the 6th and 7th centuries. Small portable pictures – icons - of Christ, the Virgin and Child, and the saints were in high demand in Byzantium. They had a stronger emotional appeal than the intellectually conceived symbols of earlier Christian art. The move away from symbolism towards these kinds of images was officially sanctioned by the Council in Trullo in 692 which ordained that:

> *"the human figure of Christ our God, the Lamb, who took on the sins of the world, be set up even in images instead of the ancient lamb. Through this figure we realize the height of the humiliation of God the Word and are led to remember his life in the flesh, His suffering and His saving death and the redemption ensuing from it for the world."*

A more naturalistic style was adopted. *The Virgin and Child* is an example – the heads of the saints are foreshortened with the skill of a classical painter, the Virgin and Child have substance and weight, the saints seem portraits of ascetics. The hand of God can be seen once more.
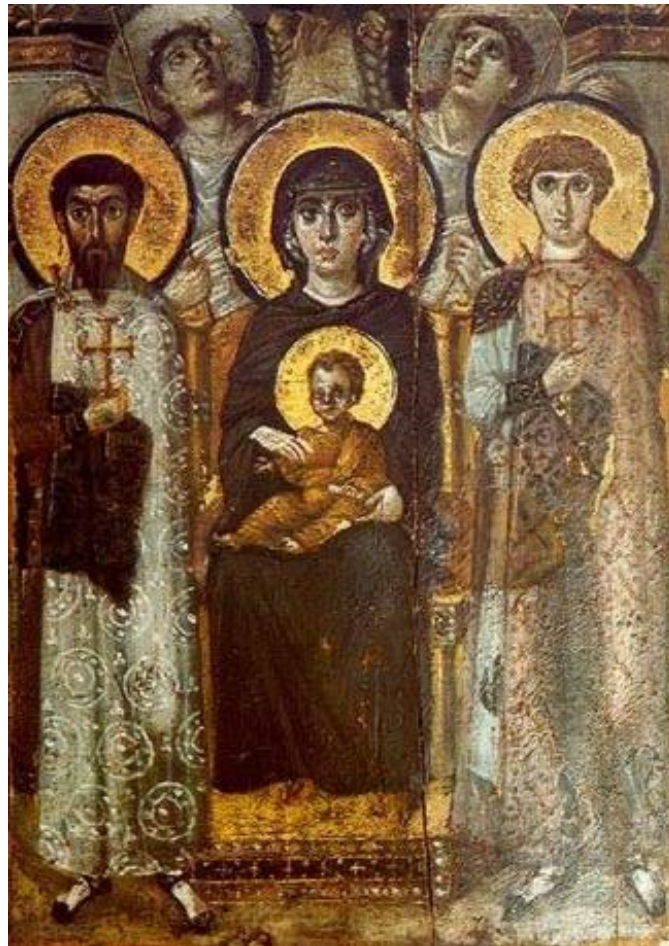
Virgin and Child enthroned between St Theodore and St George, 6th century AD, Monastery of St Catherine.

In icons the figures stare straight at the spectator. Devotion was paid to such icons as if they were themselves holy relics, which aroused the wrath of the Iconoclasts. Emperor Leo III's edict in 730 ordered the destruction of all images that showed Christ, the Virgin Mary, saints or angels in human form. The edict was repudiated by Rome and in the Western Church, but brought about 113 years of bitter conflict. A person harbouring an icon could be punished by flogging, branding, mutilation or blinding.

Iconoclasm was defeated in 843 – the victory officially on the first Sunday in Lent, and still celebrated in the Eastern Church as the festival of the Triumph of Orthodoxy. Orthodoxy from then on was a key concept in Byzantine art. Doctrinal differences between the Orthodox Church of Constantinople and the Catholic Church of Rome did not develop into a schism until the 11th century. For the arts the most important outcome of the controversy was a doctrinal statement on the value of images of Christ, the saints and angels, which were recommended because:

> *"the more frequently they are seen by means of painted representation the more those who behold them are aroused to remember and to desire the prototypes and to give them greeting and worship-of-honour, but not the true worship of our faith, which befits only the Divine Nature."*

Mosaics as well as paintings were lauded, but not statues – which were never approved by the Eastern Church. Byzantine sculpture is virtually non-existent.

For a century after the Triumph of Orthodoxy, artists were engaged in the slow work of covering the (previously bare, or made bare) vaults of larger churches with mosaics. In 867 the Patriarch of Constantinople extolled the recently finished mosaic above the apse of Hagia Sophia. This was the first of the new mosaics and the subject was not surprising. The Virgin had gained increased importance in Christian thinking since 431 when the Council of Ephesus declared her to be the Mother of God. She came to be regarded as the great intercessor for mankind and from the 6th century, was sometimes given the prominence hitherto reserved for Christ alone in the conch above the high altar. The earliest surviving example is in Croatia.

Virgin and Child, AD 867 (detail) apse of Hagia Sophia.

Virgin and Child, c AD 550, (detail) apse of Porec Cathedral, Croatia.

In the early Christian church, it is highly probable that women out-numbered men. Some came from high-ranking families (unlike the men) and chastity was valued by them as a supremely Christian ideal which set them apart from the pagan world. Even in pagan Rome chastity had been acknowledged as a virtue – Vestal Virgins enjoyed legal and other privileges. Early Christian teachers saw virginity in the context of Original Sin: through the Virgin Mary the fall of Eve was reversed. Formerly women had been the "gateway to the devil", now through their virginity they could be redeemed. In Heaven the rewards of a virgin were 60 times greater than those of an ordinary Christian; only martyrs were more favoured. Mary's virginity was central to the church from the 4th century on. Without it there would be no Son of God, for Jesus would just be another man. After 431 images of the Virgin began to proliferate. Sixtus III founded his new church in Rome (S Maria Maggiore) and dedicated it to the Virgin. His intention to glorify the Virgin Mary and the Mother of God can be seen in mosaics.

Annunciation, AD 432-440 (detail) triumphal arch over high altar, S Maria Maggiore, Rome.

She is attended by white-robed angels (not mentioned in the bible); Gabriel, like a Roman symbol of Victory, flies above her and the dove, symbolising the Holy Spirit descends towards her. On the left, the aedicule with a closed gate probably represents her virginity. Mary's social upgrading from carpenter's wife is underway – she is dressed in robes of a Byzantine princess with diadem and jewels – and she was sometimes said to be learned and well-read.

Mary was not always shown as an imposing figure. In a 6th or 7th century wall-painting from the monastery of Jeremias at Saqqara near Cairo, she is shown breast-feeding Christ – she holds her breast in her left hand while supporting the Child on her knee. The intimate humanity of such paintings probably had a great popular appeal.

Maria lactans, 6th/7th century AD, Monastery of Jeremias, Saqqara, Egypt

The Virgin and Child above the high altar became normal after the Iconoclast period in Byzantine churches. Another tradition established was the placing of an image of *Christ Pantocrator* (ruler of all things) in the central dome *"looking down from the rim of heaven",* as Byzantine writer described it. That at Hagia Sophia was destroyed when the church was converted to a mosque, but the most impressive example is in a little church near Athens. He is ruler and judge. The Virgin is the intercessor in the apse, represented as the Queen of Heaven enthroned on cushions of Byzantine royalty.

Byzantine art was regulated by strict conventions. The figure of the saint had to face the spectator in order to act as a channel for prayer to his or her prototype in heaven. Biblical scenes had to conform to norms, and gestures and colours acquired fixed meanings.
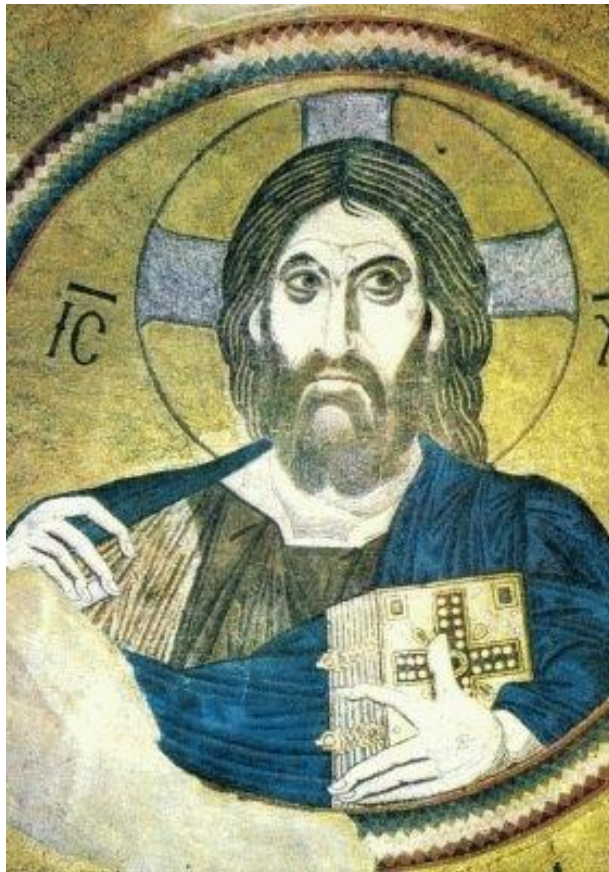
Christ Pantocrator, c AD 1020, dome of monastery church, Daphni, near Athens.

This art exerted continuing influence in Christendom, but icons were limited to those areas who looked to Constantinople rather than Rome for doctrinal authority: Bulgaria (864); Kiev (Russia 988); and the Balkans. Byzantine art continued to develop with a great final flowering in the late 13th and early 14th centuries, and Constantinople remained a city of Christian scholarship and of art throughout the European Middle Ages: the greatest and most magnificent city on the continent, even after it fell to the Turks in 1453.

Christian Art in Northern Europe

Christianity, introduced into England during Roman rule, did not long survive the withdrawal of the last legions in 407 and the subsequent invasions by Angles, Saxons, Jutes and Frisians across the North Sea. Yet during the 500 years following the collapse of the Roman Empire – the Dark Ages of western Europe – there was a sudden flowering of Christian art in Ireland and in the various remote islands off the coasts of north Britain.

The style has been called Celtic, Irish and Hiberno-Saxon, but "Insular" captures its isolation. The most notable surviving examples are illuminated manuscripts, among the most intricately beautiful ever painted. *"Examine it carefully and you will penetrate to the very shrine of art … you might think all this was the work of an angel, not a man",* wrote a 12th century writer Giraldus de Barri when he saw one of them, perhaps the *Book of Kells*.

Incipit to John from the Book of Kells (folio 292r), early 9th century AD, Ink and colours on vellum.

In the early part of the Dark Ages, Ireland was converted to Christianity by St Patrick (461). The religion spread in a rural population through monastic communities. In the 6th century, monasteries were established by Irish monks as missionary stations – from Iona, across Europe to Bobbio in Italy. Lindisfarne was given to the monks of Iona in 634 and became the most important centre of religious thought and art in Britain.

Meanwhile, a mission from Rome in 597 had begun work in the Anglo-Saxon south of England and gradually moved north. The Irish Church had developed practices different to those of Rome and a schism was inevitable. The Synod of Whitby 644 brought all England under the spiritual rule of Rome and the effect, including that on art, was soon felt. St Benedict Biscop, founder of monasteries at Jarrow and Wearmouth, brought many paintings from Rome:

> *"in order that all men who entered the church, even if they might not read, should either look (whatsoever way they turned) upon the gracious countenance of Christ and His Saints, though it were but in a picture; or might call to mind a more lively sense of the blessing of the Lord's Incarnation."*

The classical influence in these paintings and some of the illuminations produced at Jarrow did not take hold – local artistic traditions were too strong. Celtic art had long used motifs assumed to hold super-natural powers. The triskele was one: three legs issued from a single point; each one curling round and dividing into spirals, the largest finishing as a bird's head.

Triskele latchet, 2nd century AD, bronze

Similar spiralling lines, sometimes ending in animal heads, appear in the early Irish manuscripts (from 600) and in the more elaborate ones of the mature Insular style of the *Lindisfarne Gospels*.

Carpet-page with cross, from the *Lindisfarne Gospels* (folio 2v), before 698 AD, ink, colours and gold on vellum.

The border is of strange birds knotted together by ribbons; wing feathers to neck. Knots appear in the frame, each in a square compartment. The pattern appears in jewelry made for people who flooded Europe from the east as the Romans withdrew. This gold bracelet inlaid with garnets and coloured glass, perhaps from Syria, has (like the *Lindisfarne Gospel* page) panels of rectangular stepped patterns surrounded by intertwined creatures.

Hinged clasp from the Sutton Hoo ship burial, 7th century AD.

The interlace or knotwork pattern of the *Lindisfarne Gospels* and many other Insular manuscripts was found also in the arts of Coptic (Christian) Egypt from the 5th to the 9th century. Irish monks had direct contact with Alexandrian monasteries. Interlace occurs also in northern cultures. The coiled and plaited ropes in Viking art in 8th – 11th centuries are one example. Interlace was thought to be a charm against evil spirits.

Eadfrith*, Matthew the Evangelist* from the *Lindisfarne Gospels* (folio 2v), before 698 AD, ink, colours and gold on vellum

Eadfrith was the scribe and illuminator of the *Lindisfarne Gospels*. He must have seen the paintings and illuminated Italian texts brought to Jarrow, but he rejected their illusionistic devices. His portraits of evangelists reduce the figures to almost flat patterns of colour in strong contrast to the Classical style.

The other innovation made by Insular manuscript illuminators was the elaboration of capital letters into labyrinthine complexity, which culminated in the *Book of Kells* – inscribed and decorated by the monks of Iona around 807. An enriched capital marks the beginning of each brief passage of the four Gospels – 2000 capitals in all.
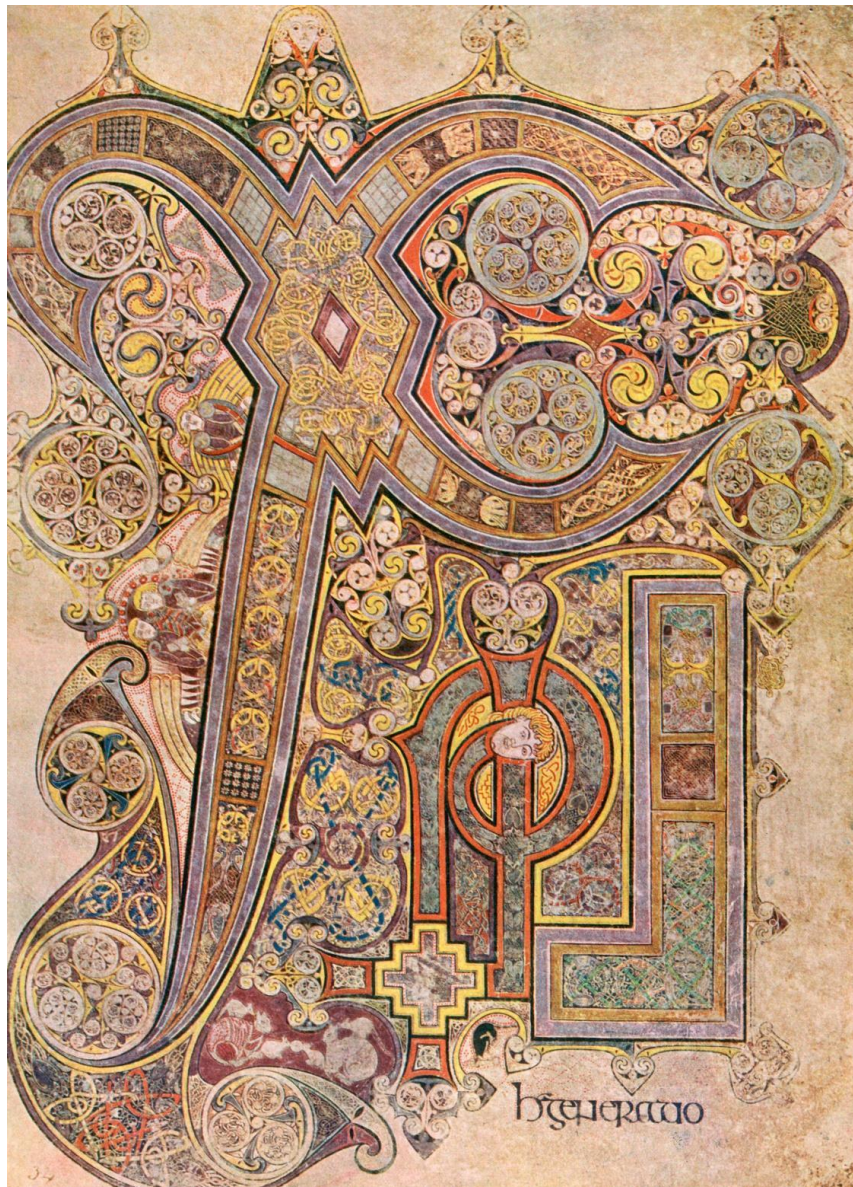
Incarnation Initial from the *Book of Kells* (folio 34), early 9th century AD, Ink and colours on vellum.

This opening of St Matthew's account of the Nativity is devoted to the Chi-Rho monogram, but is far from the austere symbol of early Christianity. Knots and triskeles can be seen within the sweeping curves. Angels on the outer face of the great X, the man's head in the middle of the P, and animals at the base (otter with a salmon, cats and mice) draw the eye. This is a rich style, with something of Oriental luxuriousness: a Northern approach to art which was an alternative to the Classical still being promoted by the Church of Rome.

Christian Art in Western Europe

Christian art in continental Europe remained tied to its Classical origins – partly perhaps because Latin was retained for the liturgy and theology, but the Migration period (5th and 6th centuries) saw Byzantine influences exerting themselves. In the relative poverty of western Europe (compared to the days of the Roman empire) although churches were built they were small. Marble & mosaic decorations were too expensive, so stucco and paint were used. This fresco found in a church near Milan has Byzantine influences and is a good example.

The Virgin Mary and St Joseph on the Way to Bethlehem, 8th to 10th century AD (detail) fresco, S Maria Foris Portas, Castelseprio.

Although Latin remained, it was corrupted. Charlemagne, crowned as King of the Franks in 771, spoke German but revived classical Latin for officials. He patronised arts on a lavish scale, and attempted to reform the visual arts. Often called the renaissance of Classical antiquity, Charlemagne's circle used the word *Renovatio* (renovation rather than re-birth). S Vitale in Ravenna was the model for Charlemagne's favourite residence at Aachen; the Palatine Chapel.

Charlemagne was crowned emperor by Pope Leo III in 800, and had already assumed the guardianship of the Roman Catholic Church. He entered the iconoclasm fray: in response to a Byzantine council in 787 working out a formula to allow images to be honoured, Charlemagne ordered his theologians to draw up a counter-statement (the *'Caroline Books'*) denying that images could be more than reminders *'of things that have happened'*.
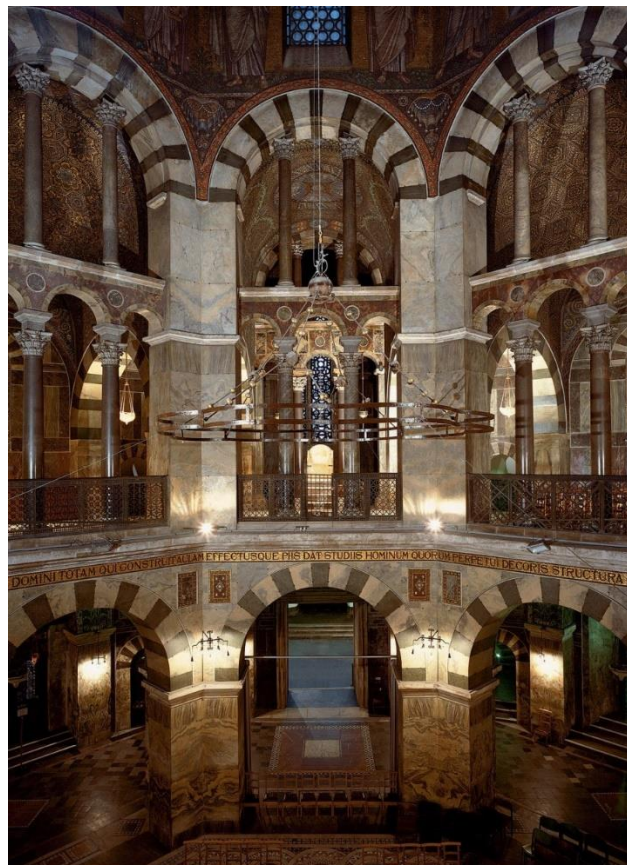

Palatine Chapel of Charlemagne, Aachen, 792-805 AD

Of manuscripts from Charlemagne's time, the most interesting is the *Coronation Gospels* (used from the 11th century onwards for the crowning of the Holy Roman Emperor). The only figurative decorations – the four portraits of the evangelists – have little in common with Byzantine art. Were it not for his halo St John might be mistaken for a staid Roman writer. The work includes an illusionistic trick with the footstool.

A very different impression is given by the image of St Mark in a Gospel manuscript made for Ebbo, Archbishop of Rheims. The work is full of emotion – St Mark wrenched in tension out of all perspective; clothing vibrating and landscape heaving. His head is well-modelled with light and shade. The same nervous energy can be seen in the agitated little figures in the *Utrecht Psalter* (820-832 AD).

Saint John, from the Coronation Gospels (folio 178v), late 8th century AD, ink and colours on parchment.
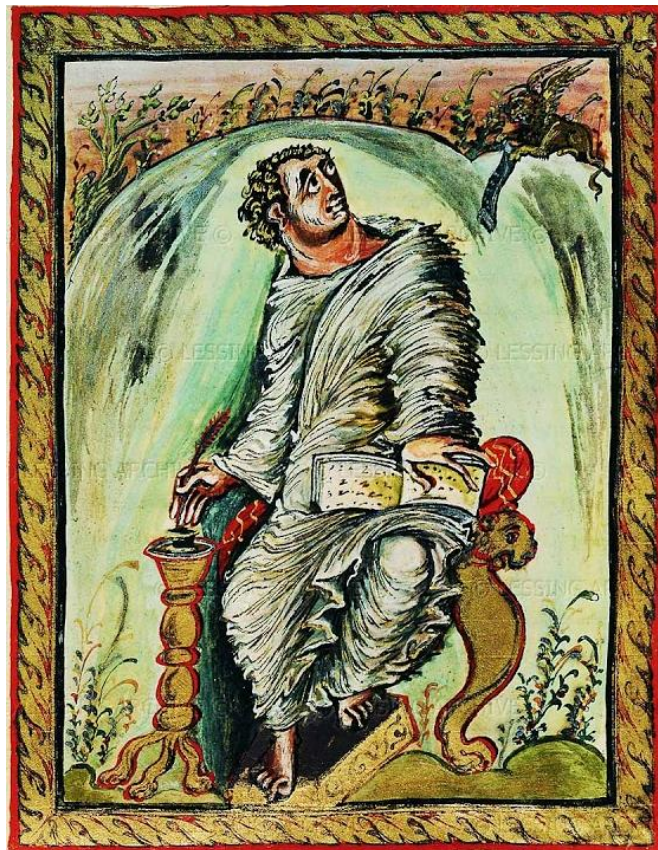
Saint Mark, from the *Ebbo Gospels* (folio 18v), between 816 and 835 AD, ink and colours on parchment.

The desire to capture the purity of Early Christian art is shown by the ivory carvings on a book belonging to Henry II. They are modelled on those of the late 4th century (such as the *Holy Women at the Tomb* above). The panel has crisp Roman like ornaments. At the top the hand of God reaches down from heaven between Apollo (sun) and Diana (moon) in their chariots; the Crucifixion is shown below; then the visit of the holy women; and finally, the resurrection of the saints which said St Matthew followed the Crucifixion *"and the graves were opened and many of the saints which slept arose."*

Book cover of the *Pericopes of Henry II*, early 11th century, ivory with gold, enamel, gems and pearls.

The Crucifixion had been rare in Early Christian art but dominates this panel and many others of the period. In the earliest examples (the wooden door of S Sabina, Rome) Christ's head is erect and his eyes open – there is no suggestion of agony or of death. On the ivory panel the body is racked and the head slumped on the shoulder. These two types co-existed: one emphasising Christ's victory over death, which dominated the thought of early Christians; the other his suffering for the sins of humankind, which gradually gained equal importance, especially in the Western Church where fear of sin overshadowed that of death. The Crucifixion rarely appeared in the art of the Eastern Orthodox Church.

Another difference between the two churches is manifest in a letter written by Pope Gregory I (590-604) to a bishop who had destroyed images to prevent them being worshipped as idols:

> *"To adore images is one thing; to teach with their help what should be adored is another … What scripture is to the educated, images are to the ignorant, who see through them what they must accept; they read in them what they cannot read in books."*

Thus, Western religious art was to be educational (or didactic) and became increasingly illustrative, so that stories could be understood easily by ordinary folk coming to church. In contrast, in the Eastern church, religious art was largely devotional – directing worship through icons to their prototypes in Heaven. In part these two approaches reflected the state of education: the Western church congregation was almost entirely illiterate, unlike the more advanced Byzantium. Interestingly these two approaches are combined in the ivory panel above: teaching about the crucifixion visually is framed by Byzantine enamel plaques of Christ and the apostles staring straight ahead to act as intermediaries for prayer.

Visual story-telling was vital in the West. Charlemagne is known to have ordered the painting of Biblical scenes in churches for didactic purposes though only a few damaged fragments remain. Scenes from the lives of saints became popular.   The oldest surviving example of a complete cycle is that devoted to St Ambrose on the back of the altar at S Ambrogio, produced by Vuolvinus, Italian sculptor and goldsmith.

Vuolvinus, *Scenes from the Life of St Ambrose*, c 835 - 40, silver partly gilt, S Ambrogio, Milan

During the 9th century artists began to abandon the logical construction of Classical models in favour of a new language of gestures and poses that gave greater importance to the inner emotions. It permitted the expression of profound spiritual ideas, and was to be the major contribution they made to later Western art. This spiritualising tendency did not find release in great works of art on a large scale until after Europe had emerged from the Dark Ages.

Charlemagne is the last great ruler of the ancient world. Charlemagne also shifted the centre of Western culture and civilisation from the Mediterranean to a triangle bounded by the Rhine, the Loire and the North Sea, where it was to remain for the next 600 years, until the Italian Renaissance.