Early Christian Art
1957

In order to understand how Christianity slowly fashioned a completely new form of art out of the art of the Roman world, we must appreciate how man’s opinion of himself greatly changed from early classical times down to the late Roman Empire. The masterpiece of fifth century Greece, such as the Apollo on the west pediment of the temple of Zeus at Olympia represent the classical ideal of self-sufficient man. A man capable of both understanding and controlling his environment—it is ideal man—man seen and fashioned as one of the gods.

In the work of the fourth century sculptors, however, Praxiteles, in his Hermes and the Infant Dionysus, and in Skopas’s Dresden Maenad, we recognise already an unbalancing of the carefully poised equilibrium of the classical ideal. Hermes, is not, like Apollo, completely indifferent to his environment—the infant Dionysus disturbs him into tenderness, he protects the child from the world. He and the child are one thing—the world and its pressures are another. Tis ‘sense of environment’ as we may call it may be seen equally in Skopas’s Maenad, stirred into a state of physical frenzy by her own passionate temperament, and Dionysian rites in which she is performing.

In Hellenistic times this ‘sense of environment’ develops into an actual portrayal of setting. In Lysippus, for instance, in the Apoxymenos man is seen in a three dimensional reality, in a real space—and the portrayal of landscape becomes an important factor both in Hellenistic sculpture and Hellenistic painting.

In the Hellenistic world the expression of pain becomes an important factor, symbolised for us in the sculpture of the Pergamene School, in such pieces as the Laocoon and the Dying Gaul. In terms of its expressive qualities we may say that classical sculpture moves from ethos, to pathos, and from pathos to pain. The ethos of the fifth century, the pathos of the fourth, and the pain of the Hellenistic world.

This sense of pain and conflict at the heart of so much Hellenistic art does reflect the time of troubles and anxiety characteristic of the Hellenistic world, with its wars, movements of people and social upheavals. And the awareness of physical pain, deepened into a sense of guilt and sin, men began to seek within themselves for the cause of guilt. The beauty of the world of physical nature began to lose its enjoyment of men. The truth lay within. Already for Plato, writing in the 4th century BC, it was not the physical appearance but the idea or form of a thing, which held its essence, its true reality. Therefore for him the art of his day represented a double deceit, for was it not merely the reflection of a reflection?

This shift in viewpoint was fundamental. The world gradually lost its intrinsic beauty for Christian eyes. Physical truth—the human ideal ceased to be the goal of art: nature,
which could be seen, became a means, a symbol, to portray that which could not be seen. But this change only happened very slowly; for the Hellenistic style, as we shall see, possessed great powers of survival.

It seems that the new Christian religion began in the Hebrew communities of the East and made its first converts in the Jewish colonies inhabiting the cities of the Roman Empire. It is likely therefore that the earliest centres of Christian Art were also in the East. The excavations made at Dura Europos on the Euphrates would tend to suggest this. The history of the city extends from about 300 BC and later came under Roman rule.

Here is one of the frescoes from Dura Europos. It indicates an orientalizing of the Hellenistic style. The figures are tall, they face us frontally—they do not form a group—but stare out into space at the beholder. It is an interesting forerunner of Byzantine painting painted long before the art of Byzantium came into existence. A pair of priests are performing a ritual ceremony for ‘Conon, the son of Nicostratus’ and his family, but we do not know to what religious order the priests belong, except that they are dressed after the manner of the Semitic cults of the time. The figures stand in front of an architectural background, rather summarily treated. We find a similar sort of thing on Asiatic Sarcophagi of the time. Such representation clearly reveal how art was moving away from illusionistic images to a more formal more essentially religious, more holy imagery: from representations and scenes to icons.

But these are not Christian images. For the earliest Christian imagery we must turn to Rome: the greatest of the Hellenistic cities. Here in the subterranean cemeteries known as the catacombs cut into the tufa hills on the roads outside the city, we find frescoes which provide an unbroken sequence of Christian paintings fro about the end of the second to the fifth centuries AD. The new at reveals no difference, to begin with, in style, from the current art of the time: the difference is only to be noted in the iconography, in the recurrence of symbols of the early Christian faith: the fish-symbol, which symbolised the miracle of the loaves and fishes, itself a symbol of the Eucharist; the dove, which denoted heavenly bliss or peace; the Good Shepherd; the palm, symbolising spiritual victory; the wine, in one the wine is in the barrels; and Old Testament figures such as Noah and Jonah.

Some of the earliest frescoes are preserved in the catacombs of Domitilla. It is not certain how old they are. They have been dated as early as the end of the first century AD but some later investigators (like Wirth) claim that no catacomb is earlier than the third century AD.

In the Domitilla catacomb we find the Good Shepherd. Note the breadth of the painting, its impressionistic rendering, which is so much a part of late Roman illusionistic painting. The close relation to Roman painting becomes even clearer
when we see the image in its architectural setting. A roof has been panelled off and we see decorations of birds and garlands on a ceiling, such as one might have found in a Pompeian house, though here more summarily rendered—and in a *tondo* a the top of the roof we see the good shepherd. This little *putto* or cupid, on our next slide, also from the Domitilla catacomb, will show how pagan themes persisted side by side with the new Christian symbols.

Many of the frescoes depict **Old Testament subjects**—not surprising perhaps when we realise that Christianity in its early forms, was a spiritual movement growing out of (indeed a kind of heresy of) Judaism. But these Old Testament frescoes attained a special symbolical significance in the new context of the Christian faith.* They frequently [*?] scenes of deliverance. In out next slide, **Noah in the Ark**, dating to the second or early third century, in the Domitilla Catacomb, symbolises the power of salvation, and the dove, in a special sense, the salvation of the soul and spiritual peace. One of the most popular of such images is that of **Jonah**. Here he is shown in a fresco in the catacomb of Callixtus dating to the second half of the 3rd century. He is shown being flung overboard, the monster waiting impatiently to see him (like a Pekinese pup waiting for a bone), the monster vomiting him up, and finally Jonah, safe and sound, sleeping under the miraculous gourd-vine outside the walls of Ninevah. Such an image was clearly an allegory of the resurrection.

Another important symbol of early Christian art is the **orante**. The orante woman is a symbol of prayer. She is clearly not intended to be a portrait because she sometimes appears on the epitaph of men. Here again we meet the prevalence of Hellenistic ideas: for the Hellenistic world delighted in using female figures to personify abstract ideas. **The Good Shepherd** is a similar example. The idea of the Food Shepherd goes back at least as far as the Moschophoros of Archaic Greek Art. And Hellenistic art provides several examples of the good shepherd, as in our next slide. Our next slide shows the Good Shepherd in a Christian context in the Domitilla catacomb. The fresco is dated to about the 4th century. Note that the illusionism of Hellenistic art: the shorthand rendering of the trees of the animals, the suggestion of real space, the naturalistic …

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Our next slide is a mosaic from the great apse of S.Pudenniana in Rome, and was executed toward the end of the fourth century, tough it has been restored extensively. It provides us with a good illustration of the way in which the illusionism of Roman wall decoration was being modified and transformed by the iconography of Christianity. Christ is enthroned, and surrounded by his apostles. They wear Roman togas, and the rendering of the drapery retains strong classical associations. This is the first datable instance of the use of the bearded [type] for the depiction of Christ. The earliest representations of this type have been found in Syria, but it is probable that the bearded Christ finds his ultimate prototype in the bearded Zeus, especially the
Olympian Zeus of Phidias, so famous though the ancient world. The bearded Christ gradually won favour over the beardless Apollo type which we have seen in earlier examples. The treatment of the sky is naturalistic bit in it we see the symbols of the four evangelist: the angel of St Matthew, the Lion of St Mark, the Ox of St Luke, and the Eagle of St John. The city behind Christ is probably intended to represent Jerusalem, and the Cross may be intended to represent the votive cross which stood on the hill of Golgotha, probably from Constantine’s time. On either side of Christ we see two allegorical [girls]: one represent the Jewish section of the Christian Church, she is the personification of he Ecclesia ex circumcisione, and she holds a wreath over St Peter, the head or representative of the Jewish section of the Church: and on the right we have the Ecclesia ex gentibus, the section of the Church arising rom the gentiles, and she holds a wreath over St Paul, head of the gentile section of the Church. The variety of the poses of the [?] and the flexibility of the drapery reveals the revival of the Latin classical tradition. It the enormous cross, the symbols of the Evangelists, the solemn head of Christ surrounded by a halo, cutting it away from its material setting, and the feature of benediction reveal how religious symbolism is conflicting with and challenging the naturalistic tradition.

During the fifth century AD the centre of Christian art in Western Europe moves from Rome to Ravenna. In 410, Alaric, the Visigoth, sacked Rome. Rome ceased to be the political centre of the Western Empire. It seemed to the people of the ancient world of frightening proportions. (Indeed, St Augustine’s famous historical and religious work De Civitate Dei (the City of God) was written to reassure Western Christendom. The Roman Emperor took refuge in Ravenna. Safely surrounded by the marshy country to the south of Venice on the Adriatic coast, Ravenna continued to grow I importance throughout the fifth century while the rest of Italy was troubled by invaders.

It is here that the story of Christian art in Italy is continued, notably in the tomb of Galla Placicia dating to about 450.* It contains some of the finest and loveliest of the Ravenna mosaics, indeed, I should say, from a purely aesthetic point of view, the finest of all the early Christian mosaics. The tomb is a little cruciform structure, roofed by barrel vault which is completely covered by an extraordinarily beautiful mosaic tapestry of gold rosettes and stars on a brilliant blue ground.

Here in our next slide is the Good Shepherd from the tomb. He is seated in a landscape which still contains lingering elements of Roman naturalism, and there is still some sense of three-dimensional space. The lambs, too, though formalised, still possess affinities with naturalism. Yet if we compare the Galla Placidia Good Shepherd (which dates to the middle of the fifth century AD) with the much earlier Good Shepherd from the Domitilla catacomb (which dates to the second or third centuries AD) we gain some [measure?] of Christian movement away from Hellenic naturalism. In both cases you will not the continuance of the beardless type of Christ.
We notice a definite change in style when we turn to those in S. Apollinare Nuovo at Ravenna, built during the later fifth and early sixth centuries, and dedicated in 504 AD. That is, about fifty or so years later than the tom of Galla Placidia. The church contains one of the first if not the first series of paintings representing the life of Christ with any degree of completeness. This cycle is placed, as we see in our next slide, above the nave windows. Between the nave windows stand 32 figures. They stand on foreshortened pedestals against a golden background. It is not certain whom they represent, possibly figures from the Old Testament together with the four evangelists. You will note that this church mosaic is being used as a kind of over all tapestry to decorate the church and at the same time tell the Christian story. Here, in our next slide, is a mosaic of Saint Sebastian. Not how much ore formalised the treatment now is than in the Gall placidia fresco of the Good Shepherd. Th presentation is now full face—there is little attempt at foreshortening, the drapery falls in stiff stylised fields. The saint stares straight from the wall at the beholder—he does not commune with other images by his side, but projects his religious presence, as it were, from the wall, towards us. We are leaving the realm of classical art and entering the realm of Byzantine art. Our next slide shows St Agnes (or San Agnese) in which similar features are to be found.

During the second quarter of the sixth century (ie 525-550) we find architectural influence from the east beginning to challenge the traditional Latin Basilican plan, with its long nave and side aisles. San Apollinare Nuovo, built at the beginning of the fifth century, was a basilican church—but San Vitale, which we see in our next slide, (this is the exterior view) was planned as an octagonal church, and was based on the Domus Aurea, an octagonal temple which Constantine had built at Antioch.

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The mosaics within the Church provide splendid examples of the early Byzantine style. Our next slide shows Justinian and his Suite. The naturalism of early Christian art with its classical affinities has almost entirely departed. Although it is a real event that is being depicted, the figures are no longer set in a naturalistic background but rendered abstractly against a gold background. Justinian holds a paten or bowl for the Eucharist, implying the completion of the church and its dedication for service. Justinian is accompanied by the bishop Maximianus and two deacons. Justinian is accompanied by three courtiers of patrician rank, marked by the symbols on the shoulders of their tunics. At his extreme right is his bodyguard holding a shield which is emblazoned with the abbreviation of Christos, known as the Constantine monogram.

On the other side of the apse at San Vitale we see Theodora and her Ladies with two officials of the court. She is about to enter the vestibule of the church, from the atrium or front court of the church, which is indicated by a fountain. She holds a golden chalice in her hands, which she is about to present to the church. Spatial
relationship has here been eliminated. The size of the figures virtually fill the space. Whilst these figures certainly do not yet possess the fully developed formalism of the Byzantine style, indeed there is an element of casualness about their grouping, we certainly find here the announcement of Byzantine style.