Early Christian and Byzantine Art
Second term, June 1958

T. Rice *The Beginnings of Christian Art*

This evening we shall concern ourselves with early Christian and Byzantine Art. Christianity was, of course, an eastern religion based upon the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified outside the walls of Jerusalem on or about the ear AD 30 for disturbing the *Pax Romana*. The earliest members of the faith were Jewish; indeed the evidence of the recently discovered Dead Sea Scrolls would suggest that some of the sacraments of the Church, such as baptism and communion, were already a part of the ritual practice of a Jewish monastic sect situated on the shores of the Dead Sea, during the century preceding the birth of Christ. The apostle Paul, however, who came from the flourishing Hellenistic city of Tarus where there was a well-established school of Greek philosophy, did much to cast Christian thought in an Hellenistic mould. The new religion won its earliest converts among the less-privileged classes of the cities and towns of the Empire: slaves, artisans, and those of servile origin, and, especially after the destruction of the Jewish state under the Emperor Titus in AD 70 among the Jews in exile in Roman cities. Among the more important of these cities were Antioch, Alexandria, Ephesus, and Rome.*

In studying the beginnings of Christian art, we must remember that we are not studying the art of a whole culture, like the culture of Egypt or Greece. For Christian art grew up within the wider context of Roman Imperial art just as the Christian religion grew up within the context of Roman Imperial urban society. We are, in short, studying an art within an art.

Christianity was successful: and we can find one explanation or that success in the history of ancient art itself. The prevailing mood of Greek classical sculpture of the fifth century BC is of physical well-being, dignified figures, and contentment. The frieze of the Parthenon,* presents us with a people in harmony with their environment, a people not much burdened with a sense of guilt and the fear of death. This ethos, this balance was, as we have seen, disturbed in the fourth century B and there is pathos, pain, and brutality enough in Hellenistic art. In the altar of Pergamon, the Laocoön, the Farnese Bull and so on. Concern with pain and death deepened into a sense of built and sin: me began to seek within themselves for the cause of their sufferings. The portrait busts of the later Roman Empire provide n eloquent testimony. The faces are no longer self-confident, they are contemplative, introspective. [C.R. Morey’s *Early Christian Art*] Already for Plato, writing in the fourth century BC it is not the appearance by the idea or essential form of a thing that constitutes its reality. So that or him the art of his day represented a double deceit: it being no more than the reflection of a reflection. This shift in viewpoint took place very slowly, for the
Hellenistic ideal, as we shall see, possessed great powers of survival, but the shift was fundamental, and not to be denied.

Rome was one of the earliest centres of Christianity, and Rome, of all cities provides us with the most complete record, broken as it is, of early Christian art. Excavations made beneath St Peter’s Basilica during the war and since, have revealed beneath the lower church, the foundations of the earlier church known to have been dedicated by the Emperor Constantine to St Peter, in about AD 325 and beneath the pavement of Constantine’s church a Roman cemetery—the Vatican cemetery has been excavated—most of the tombs of which were built between 125 and 300AD. The earlier tombs are all pagan: but some of the later provide evidence of Christian burial. Here, in our next slide,* is a street excavated by the side of the tombs, and here* is the interior of a pagan tomb, Tomb I: with its panelled decoration and birds on a white ground painted in the lunette, with two large birds, a peacock symbol of immortality, and a goose. These birds, or at times, cupids, Psyches, and animals wandering about in gardens of vines and flowers symbolize the pagan soul in the peace and security of the Elysian Fields. In the tomb of the Marci there is a mosaic depicting another pagan them: the death of Pentheus at the hands of his mother and some other Theban women who are tearing him to pieces in a drunken Bacchic frenzy. In sharp contrast to this, there is in a later Tomb, ‘Tomb M’, a wall mosaic of Christian inspiration, dating not later than the middle of the 3rd century, ad therefore the earliest Christian wall mosaic so far discovered. A luxuriant vine in three shades of brilliant green is depicted against a bright yellow background. In the centre is a beardless male figure, with a fling coat, a nimbus, and spreading rays. His left had holds a large globe. Other walls of the tomb depict Jonah falling into the fish’s mouth, his hands outstretched. On another, there is a fisherman casting a line. On another the head of the Good Shepherd with the sheep, laid across his shoulders. All these are well-known symbols of early Christian art—the vine must therefore be the true vine, and the figure that of Christus-Helios, Christ the Sun.

In this image we have the fusing, the conflation, of the image o Christ with the image of Apollo, the sun god in his chariot. An even more stinking example of the way the early Christians followed, and yet adapted, pagan iconography to their own purposes, will be found by comparing a third century pagan sarcophagus with a fourth century Christian one, both from the cemetery beneath St. Peters.* In the centre is a drunken Bacchus, holding his phallic wand and his wine pot, and supported by a Satyr, on one side and a half-naked maenad on the other. In the panel above them are the sea-Centours, who are ready to convey the remains of the alcoholic anonymous lying within to the sarcophagus to the Islands of the Blessed. The Christian sarcophagus of the fourth century* preserves the same general decorative scheme: bit now in the centre, between similar strigilated areas, instead of the drunken Bacchus there appears a young woman demurely dressed, with her head covered as St Paul required,, who holds out her hands. She is an orante figure: a personification of prayer and heavenly
bliss. The classical pilasters which flank Bacchus, have been replaced here by two palm trees, symbols of victory over death. But what is most striking is the preservation on the lid of the sarcophagus of the same pagan sea-procession of eight dolphins. These two example reveal the close association of pagan and Christian sarcophagus workshops in late-antique times, and the readiness on the part of early Christians to adapt the funery imagery of pagan cults to their own purposes.

The painting of the catacombs of Rome, which date from about the end of the second to the fifth centuries, provide ample corroboration of this adaptation of pagan themes. Some of the earliest frescoes preserved in the catacomb of Domitilla. In our next slide we meet several of the well-known symbols of the early Christian faith in the ceiling decoration of the tomb. In the central tondo: Daniel in the Lion’s Den, a symbol of deliverance from death; on the side, some orante figures, and paintings of the good shepherd, all intermingled with the cupids, flowers and birds associated with the Elysian fields. Here are some details: 1st as orante: 2nd an Eros and Psyche picking flowers: 3rd, Noah in the Ark, another symbol of deliverance. Here in our next slide is Jonah and the big fish from the Catacomb of Callixtus: we see him cast overboard, with the monster awaiting him: the monster casting him up, and finally Jonah resting under the miraculous gourd vine outside the gates of Ninevah. Here, in our next slide, is the Good Shepherd with his flock fro the Domitilla Catacomb, bit it dates considerably later, to the middle of the fourth century. The good shepherd motif possessed an ancestry that goes back directly to Hellenistic allegory, and may be traced back to archaic Greek votive images like the Moschophoros. I want you to note that the style of this fresco is freely, almost impressionistically rendered. Note the painterly version of the foliage, for example. This style is sometimes called the picturesque style, which is rather confusing. It contains many of the qualities of the Pompeian landscapes, like the Odyssey landscape and it is better known as the Illusionistic style. The source of this style is claimed by C.R. Morey to be Alexandria, largely because the types found in the catacombs are closest to the Christian iconography of Egypt than else where: but until the city of Alexandria is excavated the question must remain an open one.

Far to the East, however, on the fringes of the Roman world there had persisted a harsher and more vigorous style right through classical times which we might call expressionistic. In such works as the god Abu,* in our next slide, from pre-Dynastic times, and later in much Assyrian and Hittite art there is a compelling expressionistic power, a symbolic vitality, white distinct from classical naturalism. His art has a continuous history in the Near East, ad its expressionistic style been to lay an increasingly important part in the emergence of Christian art, as the tide of classical naturalism continued to recede.

The earliest monuments which show the style in the manner in which it affected Christian art are not themselves Christian. They appear to belong to the 1st century
AD and were excavated in the Temple of the Palmyrene Gods at Dura, on the upper Euphrates: at the extreme eastern marches of the Empire. We see* a pair of priests performing ritual ceremony: they are rigid and are posed in a severely frontal position: the rendering is 2 dimensional. Note the placing of the figures in an architectural setting, and the distorted perspective of the feet. Here, clearly, the half tines, the modulation of colour, and the hesitant line, of the illusionistic style is not present. And here* we may note how rhythm and decorative power are gained at Dura by the repetition of frontally passed figures.

An important source for the study of early Christian art are the elaborate stone sarcophagi which were widely used in the later centuries of the Empire. An important series of them were produced in Asia Minor from the middle of the second to the end of the fourth century. One of the most important of these is the Sidemara Sarcophagus.* Here is a detail from it. All the sarcophagi of the series bear full length figures at the sides and ends: but by the fourth century Christian figures had replaced pagan ones. Christ is here represented between two apostles: long-haired, youthful and beardless. The classical reference is obvious for he is posed in the manner of the Hellenistic philosopher-type figure. But the frontal pose, the repetition of one figure after another, and the architectural setting, recall the Dura frescoes. And what has been called the colouristic carving of the stone, in which the drill is used extensively, is also a feature of eastern work, though a parallel will be found in the 4th century arch of Constantine at Rome. The Sidemara sarcophagus, therefore, provides us with evidence of a fusion of the expressionistic art of the East with the naturalistic idealism of the Hellenistic art.

I have already mentioned the illusionistic style and expressionistic style. But there was a third style which played a part in the formation of early Christian art: this is called Neo-Attic. It is as its name implies a conservative style seeking to preserve Hellenic forms against the impressionism of the illusionistic style and the expressionistic dramatics of Syria and Asia Minor. An excellent example of this is a beautiful sarcophagus probably from a Ravenna workshop dating from the fourth or early fifth century. On the long side it shows Angels, who, of course, find their artistic prototypes in the Nikes or Victories of Hellenistic art. They are supporting a wreath inclosing the monogram of Christ. Note the flying, and trumpet folds of the drapery, which also finds its source Hellenistic reliefs. The monogram consists of the Greek initials of Jesus Christ and is known as the Chi-Rho Cross. The two apostles in the philosopher-like pose may remind us of the Sidamara sarcophagus: but there the stance is three-quarter view not frontal, and the whole carving, which is excellent, is much more completely within the Greek tradition.

With Christianity the official religion: the erection of churches and the employment of artists to enrich them with fine materials became possible. Mosaic, commonly employed in Roman times tended to replace fresco in the decoration of Churches. One
of the finest of these early mosaics has been preserved in the apse of the church of Sta Pudenziana, Rome. It was probably done between 402 and 417. Christ is enthroned in majesty, with six apostles on either side: and behind them are two female figures who personify the Jewish and Gentile elements of the early church. Sta Pudenziana here personifies the *Ecclesia ex Circumcisione* and holds a wreath over the head of St Peter, Sta. Praxede personifying the *Ecclesia ex Gentibus* holds a wreath over St Paul, apostle to the gentiles. In the sky are to be seen the symbols of the Evangelists: the angel of St Matthew, the lion of Mark, the bull of Luke, and the eagle of John. The mosaic has been restored bit the Christ was probably always bearded: the bearded type now winning favour over the youthful clean shaven type of early times. The style preserves any classical elements, notably the naturalism of the drawing and drapery of the figures, and the architectural background recalls Pompeian wall decoration: but here there is probably an endeavour to depict a part of the city of Jerusalem, and the large cross on a hill above the head of Christ may be the artist’s conception of the large cross erected on Calvary in the time of Constantine. Once again, then, we meet a transition from a naturalistic style to a symbolic and expressive religious style. The variety of the poses of the figures and the flexibility of the drapery indicate the survival of the neo-attic tradition. But the enormous cross, the symbols of the Evangelists, the solemn head of Christ surrounded by a halo, and the gesture of benediction indicate how expressive symbolism is forcing the vestiges of naturalism into new channels.

During the 5th century the centre of Christian art in the west moved from Rome to Ravenna. In 410 Alaric the Visigoth sacked Rome, and it ceased to be the political centre of Western Europe. To contemporaries it was an event of frightening proportions. Indeed St Augustine wrote his great polemical work *Civitas Dei* (The city of God) at this time to show that Rome had been punished for its sins, that the destruction of civilization was not imminent, and that the City of God was greater than all the cities of men. Even so, the Roman Emperor took refuge in Ravenna which was surrounded by the natural protection of a maze of marshes and lagoons. Ravenna grew in importance throughout the 5th century while the rest of Italy was troubled by invaders. And it is here that the story of Christian art is continued; notably in the tomb of Galla Pacidia* dating to about 440. The exterior is small and unprepossessing, bit the interior contains some of the finest of all early Christian mosaics. The barrel vault of the little structure is completely covered by an extraordinarily beautiful mosaic tapestry of gold rosettes and stars on a brilliant blue ground. Here* in a lunette at the en of one of the transepts we have a most charming composition of deer drinking among magnificent formal scrolls on a deep blue ground. The good shepherd panel*, however, is the masterpiece of the tomb. The classical heritage is apparent in the youthful beardless Christ, and he landscape background of sheep trees and rocks, the animals being delightfully disposed about him.
The Baptistery of the Orthodox at Ravenna,* dates between 425 and 458 and is therefore roughly contemporary with the tomb of Galla Placidia. Here* the whole dome has been covered with a hierarchy of religious symbols. At the top the baptism is figured; and in the next register, the twelve apostles, against deep blue background; and below them a series of architectural compositions, each framing an allegorical scene which signifies the preparation of a vacant throne, for the Second Coming of Christ.*

The mosaics of Saint Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna, belong to the sixth century, and depict scenes from the life and Passion of Christ.* There are 32 standing figures between the nave windows. It is not certain exactly whom they represent possibly prophets and apostles Notice that here mosaic is being used as an over-all tapestry to enriched the church decoration and to tell the Christian story. Here* is St Sebastian from the same church. Note how much more formalised the treatment now is than the Galla Placidia mosaic of the Good Shepherd. The presentation is full face, there is little foreshortening, the drapery falls in stiff stylized folds. The saint stares straight from the wall at the beholder; he projects his religious presence as it were upon the worshipper. We are leaving the realm of classical art and beginning to enter the realm of Byzantine art.

This new style is seen more fully developed in the 6th century mosaics at San Vitale, Ravenna. Here is the Empress Theodora with her attendants. The church was dedicated in 547 in the presence of the Emperor Justinian and his wife Theodora, and the scene was commemorated upon the walls of the church. She is preceded by two officials of the imperial court, indicated by the purple of their robes, and is followed by seven of her ladies in waiting. She wears a heavily pearled crown and necklace, and the edge of her mantle is embroidered with an illustration of the visitation of the magi, for she is about to present a chalice to the church. They are waiting in the atrium of the church which is indicated by the fountain.

What is so interesting about this event is what Morey has called 'the denaturalisation of a real event'. True spatial relationships have been virtually eliminated, the figures are elongated and almost fill the space, and they have become almost flat silhouettes. We are here, as it were, standing upon the threshold of Byzantine art.

Before turning to Byzantine art, however, let us look very briefly at early Christian architecture. The early services of the Roman church after its acceptance by Constantine were probably held in Roman basilicas: buildings designed to accommodate large gatherings, and used as places of business and law courts. The basilica of Maxentius, which was being constructed between 310 and 320, that is, at the time Christianity was being officially accepted* was a rectangular building with large groined vaults covering a central nave. The lateral thrust of the walls are buttressed by the sloping walls about the side aisle roofs, and clearstory windows
provided extra light for the centre of the building. This basilican plan was the type used by Constantine for his great church above the Vatican Cemetery, which was begun shortly after the basilica of Maxentius was completed, probably in the 20s of the 4th century. There is a plan of it in Toynbee and Perkins shrine of St Peter. Our next slide will show what it was like: for basilican church of St Pauls outside the walls, appears to be based upon it. A portico was often added, which was called the narthex. Here are various plans of early Roman churches: and we may see the tendency to develop apses at the east ends to house the altar, and the development of transepts. Here is the interior* of Santa Maria Maggiore, a typical basilica plan: with Ionic columns, clearstory windows, an apsidal end for the altar, and a wooden ceiling. A special feature of early churches in Italy was the addition of an atrium in front of the narthex at the west end of the church. Based on the atrium of the Roman house this was a colonnaded courtyard, usually with a fountain in the centre, in which the penitent or the unbaptised, or royal persons might wait before entering the church. This is best seen in San Ambrogio, Milan.*

In the east the basilican plan was also used: but the lack of wood in some areas such as Anatolia led to the widespread use of domes erected not on a circular plan. This involved the use of pendentive construction, a description of which you will find in any architectural text. The most impressive example of the dome erected upon pendentives is Hagia Sophia built by the Emperor Justinian, between 532 and 537. The building originally possessed an atrium, and does possess an inner and an outer narthex. The aisles are groined vaulted. The great central apse of the nave so left, is covered by the huge dome upon pendentives, which buttressed by grand half domes at either end. These in turn are buttressed by apses. The side thrusts of the dome are carried by massive piers. An external view* of the building shows how the thrusts were distributed down the sides of the building the interior* so produced presents a magnificent interplay of concave surfaces. The dome has a magnificent row of windows at its base, and one contemporary wrote that it appeared ‘as if suspended from a chain from heaven’. Hagia Sophia is a triumph in the planning of internal space to create a transcendent al effect; and the effect produced of a rich floating interior is enhanced by the tapestry-like richness of the mosaics which obscure and blur the articulations of the structure, in one magnificent unity.

Hagia Sophia was basically a centrally planned church, although it pays homage as it were, to the basilican form. San Vitale,* built by Justinian in Ravenna, and completed in 547, is centrally planned without any modifications. It is an octagon in plan: the central dome being supported by a series of radiating apses, which contain a two storied ambulatory encircling the building. There is a deep chancel and apse at the east end and a long narrow narthex at the west. The centrally planned church never succeeded in supplanting the more popular basilican form either in the east or the west, ye it continued to play an important part in the history of European architecture. When Charlemagne built himself a new chapel at Aachen between 790(?) and 804 his
architects chose a centrally planed church based on that of San Vitale; and mych later the centrally planned church was to effect both the theory and practice of Renaissance architects.*

Finally, a few comments upon later Byzantine art in the East. A great deal of the work done at Constantinople between 500 and 00must have been destroyed in the period of Iconoclasm, which lasted fro 726 to 843, a period when the production of religious images was forbidden and may old ones destroyed. The Mosaic of St Demetrius between the two [doners?] from the Basilica of St Demetrius at Salonica belongs to the seventh century. The formal Byzantine style is here fully developed. Expressive dignity being combined with rich decorative effect.

With the defeat of iconoclasm in the ninth century Byzantine artists worked out n elaborate iconographic and formal scheme of church decoration, the details of which are best read in Otto Demus’s book Byzantine Mosaic Decoration. A deep religious symbolism underlay the whole layout of the decoration: with the heavens above and the earth below. Portraits of bishops and minor saints occupied the lower levels of the walls; angels and other divine figures occupied the vaults. Where there as a Dome s at Daphni,* the head of Christ Pantocrator, was usually placed at the top. Here in this majestic bearded figure is the culmination of that expressionistic style which we first observed in the frescoes at Dura. Where there was no dome as at Moneale Cathedral* the image of Christ Pantocrator, passed to the apse. Sometimes the figure of Christ was replaced by the Virgin,* as in the case of the magnificently elongated figure of the Virgin at Torcello—a beautifully balanced elongated figure silhouetted against a gold background.

Otto Demus has noted the way in which the figures in later Byzantine art are composed so that they would produce the maximum effect upon the beholder, or more correctly, the worshipper. In the mosaic of the Baptism at Hosios Lukas for example,* the River Jordan flows out from the corner of the niche, and the Angels and the Baptists face each other across the corner, giving the whole composition the effect of floating in space. The impression upon the beholder becomes one of the ruling considerations of the art. By a process of what has been called ‘anti-perspective’ the Byzantine artist elongate and enlarged the figures in the higher parts of the church, to counteract the effects of foreshortening, and again, the proportions of figures were adjusted to the curved surfaces they had, in many cases, to fill. By these means the Byzantine artist employed a kind of ‘negative perspective’ which made it possible for the beholder to come into the real presence of the holy figures which enabled the church to perform its spiritual function. The beholder was enabled to enter into the heavenly sphere of the holy icons which were not merely symbols but preserved something of the spiritual magic of their originals. Contemporary descriptions of the mosaics are written in terms which suggest the real presence of the scenes, and the persons depicted. They did not write for instance ‘Here you see how Christ was
crucified’ they wrote instead, ‘Here is Golgotha, here is Bethlehem’. What we have traced here, then, is how in the course of almost a thousand years, an art within an art had gradually evolved into a completely new and thoroughly unified form of experience based upon a different conception of man and his relation to the universe.
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