Early Christian Art: Between the Classical and the Medieval World

Architecture: Inventing the Church

**Basilica to Church**

Church plan and architectural parts

The Pantheon’s Legacy: Santa Costanza

The Problem of Images:

**Jewish heritage and Christian iconoclasm**

Early Christian Painting

**Catacomb frescoes**

**Syncretism**
The Roman Emperor **Constantine ended the persecution of Christians** in 313 CE. In 325, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire.

During the periods of persecution there had been no need/possibility of building public spaces of Christian worship.

But once the Church had become the greatest power in the realm, its whole relationship to art had to be reconsidered.

The places of worship could not be modeled on pagan temples, for their function was entirely different.
The interior of the **temple** was usually only a **small shrine** for the statue of the gods

(processions and sacrifices took place **outside**)

The church, on the contrary, had to find **room for the whole congregation** that assembled for service

Therefore, churches were **modeled on** on the type of **large assembly halls**

Which were known in classical times as “**basilicas**” (royal halls)

Basilicas were **used as covered market-halls and public law courts**
4 features:

1 spacious, well-lit interior

2 main **central hall** and **lower compartments** at the side

3 **focus on** the most important spot, the **apse** (where the chairman of the meeting, or the judge, could take his seat)

4 use of **columns** in the interior rather than the exterior (as in temples) to divide areas without breaking the space
Perhaps as early as 320, Constantine ordered the construction of a large basilica where Christians believed Saint Peter was buried (ca. 64 CE).

St. Peter was the founder of the Christian community in Rome.

The basilica would be replaced by a new building in the 16th century.

Our knowledge of it is based on written descriptions and drawings made before it was dismantled.
Plan of Old Saint Peter’s, Rome, begun ca. 320

**NAVE**, main central hall where the congregation assembled

**AISLES**, (wings) lower compartments at the side at the side

**APSE**, semicircular niche used for the high altar

**TRANSEPT**, novelty of Constantine’s church: a large hall at the end of the nave that crossed in front of the apse. It created a T form that would be later developed into the standard shape of Latin-cross church plan

**ATRIUM**, open courtyard to host the crowd of catechumens (almost converted)

PLAN OF THE BASILICAN CHURCH
The place where the **altar** stood was the place that in a pagan basilica was reserved to the **judge**, **emperor**, or presiding official.

The **nave** (ship) with **aisles** on the two long sides created a ample central space for **processions** and a place for the **congregation**.

Santa Sabina, Rome, 422-432
Santa Sabina is a rare example of early basilica church with its original interior that has not been rebuilt in later periods.

It can give us an idea of how Old St. Peter’s interior would look like (but this is much smaller).

The nave is lit by a row of windows above the aisles.

Corinthian columns and capitals, acquired from a second-century Roman building, underscore the directionality of the space.

And divide the nave from the aisles.

The columns support round arches.
Central-plan Churches

Roman architecture was reinterpreted for Christian buildings in another way.

The Pantheon’s rotunda and dome, were the main model for central-plan buildings:

They were first used by Christians as tombs, baptism centers, and shrines to martyrs.

Instead of the longitudinal axis of basilica-plan churches.

Central-plan churches have a vertical axis (the building develops symmetrically around the center).

Which makes worshipers focus on the dome (the symbolic “vault of heaven”) and on the central object (either the martyr’s tomb, or the baptismal font).
This is one of the earliest surviving central-plan Christian buildings:

the mausoleum of Costanza, Constantine daughter

The interior design of the Roman building is here modified to accommodate the ambulatory:

a ring-like barrel-vaulted corridor separated from the center by pairs of columns

It is as if the basilica elements were bent around a circle: the ambulatory corresponds to the aisles
As the conquest of Greece influenced Roman art in a Classical/idealizing direction,

the **conquest of Jerusalem** had a slower but equally great impact

**Jewish Law** forbade the making of images for fear of idolatry

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**Iconoclasm**: the rejection or destruction of religious images as heretical

*ORIGIN Greek from eikōn likeness + klēn to break*

Symbol of Jewish iconoclasm is the midrash of **Abraham**, the first patriarch, who smashed the idols made by his father
Christians had **Jewish origins** (cultural, social, historical, and religious),

but mainly thrived in a **Roman context**, where **images** were an extremely important aspect of **public life and communication**

They **wanted to decorate** their sacred spaces,

the **problem was how** to do that **without being pagan**

The whole issue of the image and its use in religion caused very **violent disputes**

On one thing nearly all early Christians were agreed, there must be **no statues** in their sacred spaces

Two main reasons:

- they were too much like pagan idols that were **condemned in the Bible**

- How would the poor Romans who had just been converted to the new faith grasp the **difference** between their old **pagan beliefs and the new message**, if they saw statues in the churches?
Early Christians’ ideas about **painting** differed:

- painting was **less used in Roman and Greek temples**
- painted images, as opposite to statues, are **not physically present** objects to be adored and considered divine themselves

Christians wanted to make clear that they did **not worship these images themselves** as the pagan did:

They worshiped Christ and the Saints **through** their images

- Paintings were accepted because they were **useful**

Pope **Gregory the Great** (6th century) wrote:

“**Painting can do for the illiterate what writing does for those who can read**”
Therefore, the type of art that was admitted was of a rather restricted kind: the story had to be told as clearly and simply as possible. And anything that might divert attention from this main and sacred aim should be omitted.

At first, artists still used the methods of visual story-telling that had been developed by Roman artists, but gradually they came to concentrate more and more on what was strictly essential.

The Good Shepherd, the story of Jona, and orants, painted ceiling of a cubiculum in the Catacomb of Saint Peter and Marcellinus, Rome, early 4th century.
One of the earliest forms of Christian art was developed in catacombs.

Catacomb: an underground cemetery consisting of a subterranean gallery with recesses for tombs.

Christians distinguished themselves from Romans in their funerary rituals:

While Romans usually cremated their dead, Early Christians, like Jews, buried them.

Before Christianity became the official religion, they were allowed to bury only in their private properties.

Therefore they used to buy small fields outside the city center. Catacombs developed into underground cities (9 miles, 4 million bodies).

Catacomb painting’s function:

The most important spots were decorated with frescoes for two main reasons:

- To inspire worshipers’ prayer through important episodes from the Bible and the Gospels related to death and resurrection.

- To give orientation within these dark labyrinths and signal tombs of martyrs and other important figures.
Formal analysis

Composition: the wall surface is divided into many framed scenes and isolated figures.

Composition is symbolic: images and frames compose a cross.

Style: frontal, rigid, not lifelike, no use of perspective:

the more lifelike they were, the more they sinned against the Commandment forbidding images.

What did matter was the message they conveyed.

*The Good Shepherd, the story of Jona, and orants*, painted ceiling of a cubiculum in the Catacomb of Saint Peter and Marcellinus, Rome, early 4th century.
The subject is strictly Christian:

Christ as the Good Shepherd (sheep were considered symbols of human souls)

4 lunettes: episodes from the story of 

Jona (considered a biblical prefiguration of Christ’s resurrection)

intermediate spaces: 

Christians in the ancient attitude of prayer

Let’s now focus on the central image:

Christ as the Good Shepherd
One of the most successful images in Early Christian art

Catacomb of Domitilla, fresco of the Good Shepherd, Rome, ca. 250
Catacomb of St. Callixtus, fresco with the Good Shepherd
Rome, Italy
Christ as the Good Shepherd,
Catacomb of Priscilla, Rome,
c. 100 -200
Where does this **iconography** come from?

The **Greek image of the Calf Bearer**, (a **pagan** offering a **sacrifice to Athena**)

Early Christians **adopted a pagan image** but **changed its meaning** that now corresponds to Christ’s words:

“the good shepherd gives his life for the sheep”

*The Good Shepherd*, Catacomb of Saint Peter and Marcellinus, Rome, early 4th century
the pagan Calf Bearer has been translated into a symbol of Christ, who, according to Christians, gave his life to save humanity (inversion in the relationship worshiper-sacrifice-divinity)

This process of cultural appropriation and combination from different sources is known as syncretism.

Syncretism: 1 the amalgamation of different religions, cultures, or schools of thought.

2 Linguistics the merging of different inflectional varieties of a word during the development of a language.

Another peculiarity found here, that would become a main characteristic of Medieval art is its more and more codified use of symbols:

Symbolism: an image is not just what it represent, but also stands for another image or encapsulates an idea (sheep=souls; shepherd=Christ)
Finally, the success of this image corresponds to Early Christian values:

---simplicity and humbleness (Christ was represented either as a shepherd or as a teacher)

Later, from the late fourth century on, he would be portrayed with attributes that Roman formerly used for imperial portraits: halo, purple robe, and throne