Religious Art

Overview of Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Asian Religions

Imperial Christian Art and Architecture

Early Jewish Art and Architecture
Europe and the Near East in Late Antiquity
The Catacombs of Ancient Rome
During the Roman era, Jews and Christian alike were buried in catacombs outside of Rome.

- Roman cemeteries were always outside the city. Why?
- Roman gravediggers were architects of the underground.
- In tufa, below Rome, they tunneled out streets and houses, with as many as five underground levels.
- Worked in the dark, 70 feet below ground, constructing corridors, shelves, small burial rooms.
- Some gravediggers were probably also painters who decorated the catacombs.
- Christians catacombs are the most well known, but Jews, devotees of Isis and Bacchus and other mystery religions were buried in communal catacombs.
- Burial in catacombs began in the 3rd century and continued until the 6th.
Jews, Christians and Muslims

• Three monotheistic religions from the Near East dominate the spiritual life of the Western world: Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

• Traditional Jews believe: God made a covenant with their ancestors, the Hebrews, making them God’s chosen people. They are awaiting the Messiah, “the anointed one”.

• Traditional Christians believe: that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah. They believe God took human form and preached among the people, was crucified, died, rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven.

• Traditional Muslims accept all the Hebrew prophets and Jesus as divinely inspired, but believe Muhammad to be Allah’s (God’s) last and greatest prophet. The faith of Islam was revealed to Muhammad six centuries after Jesus.
Religions of the Book

- Judaism, Christianity and Islam are all religions of the book.
- Written record of God’s will and words.
- Hebrew Scriptures
- Christian Bible which includes the Hebrew scriptures as the Old Testament.
- Muslim Koran which is the word of God revealed in Arabic directly to Mohamed through the Angel Gabriel.
Early Judaism

• The Jewish people trace their origins to a Semitic people called the Hebrews who lived in the land of Canaan.
• The Jews settled in Canaan, sometime in 2nd millennium BCE.
• According to the Torah, God promised the prophet Abraham that Canaan would be the homeland of the Jews, a belief still important to many Jews.
• Moses led the Jews out of slavery in Egypt to Canaan and on the way received the 10 commandments from God on Mt. Sinai.
• The commandments, inscribed on two stone tablets, were kept in gold covered wooden box called, The Ark of the Covenant in Solomon's Temple.
Solomon’s temple consisted of courtyards, bronze pillars, entrance hall, main hall and the Holy of Holies, innermost chamber that housed the Ark.

The Ark was guarded by Cherubim, attendant angels, perhaps like the winged genius of Mesopotamia.

In 586 BCE, the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem, destroyed the temple, exiled the Jews and took Ark.

In 539 BCE, Persians conquered Babylonians, allowed Jews to return to Canaan.

The Jews returned and built the Second Temple in Jerusalem.

From that time on Canaan existed under foreign rule, eventually becoming part of the Roman Empire.
Herod
King of Judea
37-4 BCE

- King of Judea under Roman occupation.
- Restored the temple.
- But in 70 CE, Titus destroyed the 2nd temple, (remember the arch) and all of Jerusalem.
- Once again the Jews dispersed and established communities throughout the Roman empire.
- The site of the former Temple in Jerusalem is now occupied by a Muslim shrine.
Early Jewish Art
• Female Pillar Figurine, 1000-586 BCE, Clay: hand-formed body, mold-formed head, fired
Jewish Museum, NY

Jewish Art

- Jewish law forbade the making of images that might be worshipped as idols.
- In early Judaism, this applied mainly to three dimensional sculpture.
- Jewish art was a combination of Near Eastern, Classical Greek and Roman elements.
- The art was depicted in both symbolic and narrative terms.
• Even though Jews lived in communities throughout the Roman Empire, not very much early Jewish art remains.
• Most of the surviving examples of Jewish art date to the Hellenistic and Roman period.
• Some wall paintings have been discovered in six Jewish catacombs, just outside of Rome.
• Probably in use during the 1st to the 4th century CE have been discovered just outside of Rome.
• The wall paintings are illustrated with Jewish themes, like this menorah.
Dura - Europos, Syria

- A variety of buildings found in Syria at an abandoned Roman outpost.
- Parts of a stronghold have been excavated there to reveal places of both Jewish and Christian worship in the 2nd and 3rd centuries.
When the citizens tried to fortify the outpost against an attack, they buried both a Jewish synagogue and a Christian church.

The site was abandoned and undiscovered until the 1920’s when it was discovered by a French army officer.
House Synagogue At Dura - Europos

- The first synagogue was built like a house, but contained an assembly hall with niches for the Torah scrolls, a separate alcove for women and a courtyard.
- After renovations in 244-45 CE, men and women shared the assembly space and residential rooms were added.
Interior House Synagogue
Dura - Europos
Figure 8-2 Interior of the synagogue, Dura-Europos, Syria, with wall paintings of Old Testament themes, ca. 245–256. Tempera on plaster. Reconstruction in National Museum, Damascus.
- *Finding Baby Moses in the River*
- detail of wall paintings, tempera on plaster,
- House Synagogue,
- Dura-Europos, Syria, 244-45.
• *Destruction of the Temple* and *Story of Moses,*
• detail of wall paintings, tempera on plaster,
• House Synagogue,
• Dura-Europos,
• Syria, 244-45.
The baptistery in the Christian Church at Dura-Europos.

- The architecture of the font is similar to that of a tomb.
- The room in which the font is constructed is separated from the assembly area of the community.
- The complex itself was converted from houses.
• Menorahs and Ark of the Covenant
• wall painting in a Jewish catacomb
• Villa Torlonia, Rome, 3rd century
- Maon Synagogue floor
- Israel Museum 530 CE
- mosaic detail.
Christianity 101

- One God, manifested in three persons called the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
- Jesus, was a Jew, a descendant of the Royal House of David, born in Bethlehem.
- Jesus is the Son of God, born of a human mother, Mary.
- At the age of 30, he gathered a group of disciples, both male and female.
- Preached about love and charity, personal relationship with God, forgiveness of sins and everlasting life.
- Initially Jesus limited his teaching to Jews, but his disciples, like Paul brought the message of Christianity to non-Jews.
Imperial (Roman) Christian Art

- The earliest Christian art and architecture was created during the time of the Roman Empire.
- Remember that Jesus Christ was born during the reign of Augustus Caesar, around the year 1.
- About 300 years later during the reign of the Emperor Constantine, Christianity was gaining many converts.
- Christian art and architecture of this period is very Classical Roman in style.
• Around 33 CE, during the reign of the Roman Emperor Tiberius, Jesus was crucified outside the city of Jerusalem, then a part of the Roman empire.
• The followers of Jesus, at first merely a despised handful, confounded the Roman authorities by their perseverance in the face of torture and martyrdom.
• The revolutionary Christian doctrine of a brotherhood of man appealed powerfully to the down trodden, the world-weary and disaffected people.
• With Christianity, came the promise of spiritual comfort, salvation and eternal life (a philosophy held by the Egyptians).
Early Christian Art

- Because Christianity had its roots in Judaism, early Christian art incorporates many symbols and narratives from Jewish scripture.
- Christians artists also borrowed symbols and themes from Classical mythology.
- **Syncretism**: process by which artists assimilate images from other traditions, giving them new meaning. (remember Antinous)
Examples of early Christian fresco painting can be found in underground tombs, such as the catacombs on Via Latina in Rome, shown here.

**Early Christian artists borrowed motifs from Roman mythology and gave them Christian significance.**

The figure of Hercules killing the serpent, on the left, came to symbolize Jesus Christ triumphing over Satan.

The peacocks on the tomb stand for resurrection because of a belief that their flesh does not decay after death.
The Good Shepard

• Most important syncretic image
• In pagan art he is Hermes with the sheep, or Orpheus among the animals
• But both Jewish and Christian artists saw him as the Shepard from the 23rd psalm of the Old Testament.
  – *The Lord is my Shepard, there is nothing I shall want*
Two examples
Early Christian Paintings of the Good Shepard
• The Good Shepherd, the story of Jonah, and orants, painted ceiling of a cubiculum in the Catacomb of Saints Peter and Marcellinus, Rome, Italy, early fourth century.
• Orant figures are worshippers with out stretched arms can be pagan, Jewish or Christian depending on the context of the piece.
• Lunettes tell the Old Testament story of Jonah being swallowed by the whale and then being released and repentant three days later.
• Christians reinterpret this as a parable of Christ’s death and resurrection.
• First lunette: Jonah is thrown from the boat.
• Second Lunette: Monster spits him out.
• Third Lunette: Jonah relaxing in the shade of heaven.
- Sarcophagus with a philosopher, and an orant
- A Good Shepard figure
- Old and New Testament scenes
- Santa Maria Antiqua, Rome, Italy, ca. 270. Marble
• Christian sculpture is even rarer than painting from the time before Constantine.
• Mainly only small statues and reliefs.
• These statue are from a set of small marble figures, c. 3rd century CE found in Asia Minor Many Good Shepard images.
• Four depict the story of Jonah, three from the whale story, one orant pose.
• Very lively and animated.
The Early Church Under Constantine

Imperial Art and Architecture

Constantine moved the capital of the Roman Empire from Rome to Byzantium, which he renamed Constantinople.
• After striving for 300 years to stamp out Christianity, the rulers of Rome, alarmed for their future, decided to support the Christian faith.

• As well educated, upper class Romans joined the Church they instituted increasingly elaborate organizational structures and ever more sophisticated doctrine.

• Christian beliefs were formalized at the first council of the Christian Church called in 325 by the Emperor Constantine at Nicaea a city in present day Turkey.
Early Church Organization

• Organized by geographical areas like the Roman empire.
• Senior officials, called **Bishops**, governed an area called a diocese, which was made up of smaller areas called parishes.
• A Bishop’s seat or “see” was often located in a Roman provincial capital.
• A Bishop’s church was called a **cathedral** which housed his chair, a **cathedra**.
• **Archbishops** controlled several bishops.
• The most important archbishops were from, Jerusalem, Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria and Antioch.
• Eventually the bishop of Rome became the head of the Western Church and the bishop of Constantinople became head of the Eastern Church.
Results of Constantine’s Approval

• The organizational structure of the Church as well as formal Christian practices led to the development of special buildings like churches and baptisteries, as well as special apparatus to support various rituals. **What does that mean?**

• Christians needed large well lit spaces for their worship.

• The Roman basilica suited their needs perfectly and many **basilica plan churches** were built.

• Some Christians preferred a more Eastern building plan, called a **central plan church**.
Imperial Christian Architecture and Art

- Basilica in Roman times meant "a royal hall."
- Christian basilicas developed a distinctive form.
- Common to most was the oblong plan with an entrance at one end, a Roman-style atrium, the sanctuary frequently terminating in a hemispheric apse at the opposite end.
- The long body was divided into a nave and aisle and covered by a double pitched roof, with roof beams either exposed to the interior or covered by a flat wooden ceiling.
- From the entrance, a congregation of 14,000 worshipers walked solemnly along a royal path to approach the altar of Christ.
- Around 324 BCE Constantine began a vast building program that included many Christian Churches.
- Among them, was a residence, a church and a baptistry for the bishop of Rome on the site of the Imperial Lateran palace.
- The church of Saint John Lateran remains the cathedral of Rome, but the Pope has lived in the Vatican since the 13th century.

The square in front of the Lateran Palace has an obelisk built by Pharaoh Tuthmosis III in Karnak, and placed in the Circus Maximus before being re-erected in its current place.
Perhaps as early as 320 BCE, Constantine also ordered the construction of a new basilica to replace the 2nd century monument marking the place where Christians believed Saint Peter was buried, c.64 CE.

Our knowledge of Old Saint Peter’s is based on written descriptions and drawings made before and while it was being dismantled, as well as the study of other churches inspired by it, and modern archaeological excavations at the site.
Old St. Peter’s, Rome
Figure 8-9 Restored cutaway view (top) and plan (bottom) of Old Saint Peter’s, Rome, Italy, begun ca. 319 (John Burge). (1) nave, (2) aisle, (3) apse, (4) transept, (5) narthex, (6) atrium.
Old St. Peter’s Floor plan
Most early Christian churches, like St. Peter’s, have been rebuilt, sometimes many times.

Fortunately, The Church of St. Sabina in Rome, constructed between 422-432 CE, appears much as it did in the fifth century.

Basic elements of a basilica church are clearly visible inside and out.
• The church was built in the 5th century, presumably at the site of the original *Titulus Sabinae*, a church in the home of Sabina, a Roman woman who had been martyred c. 114.
• The exterior is typical brickwork, which is in contrast to the beautiful marble interior.
Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome
Saint Mary the Great

• Built between 432-440.
• First church to be dedicated to the Virgin Mary, after she was recognized as the “bearer of Christ” in 431.
• The mosaics in the church reflect a renewed interest in Classical Roman art.
• The mosaics depict stories from both the Old and New Testament.
• These images served two purposes, one was didactic; to instruct the congregation about their faith, but they were also intended to glorify and praise God through their splendor.
• The philosophy was “to make churches the symbolic embodiment of the Heavenly Jerusalem that awaits believers”.
Santa Maria Maggiore
Parting of Abraham and Lot, Mosaic, Nave Arcade, Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome
Central Plan Churches
basilica-plan church

central-plan church
Central Plan Churches

- A second type of ancient building - the tholos, a round structure with a central plan and a vertical axis also served as tombs, churches and baptisteries in the early Church.
- Previously seen in Early Greek temple design.
- One of the earliest surviving examples is the mausoleum of Constantina, Constantine’s daughter.
- Built outside the walls of Rome, c. 350 CE.
- Consecrated as a church in 1526, dedicated to Saint Costanza, Italian form of Constantina.
Saint Costanza
Rome

- Central plan building
- Building consists of a tall *rotonda*
• A barrel vaulted passageway called an ambulatory encircles the rotonda.
• A double ring of composite columns supports the arcade and dome.
• Originally, the interior was covered in mosaics and fine marble.
• Mosaics remain in the ambulatory vault.
• Santa Costanza, Rome
• Ambulatory with Harvesting Mosaic
Part of ambulatory vault, St. Costanza, Rome

- Images are *syncretic* like some in the catacombs.
- One section is a grape vine filled with classical cherubs who compete with the birds to harvest the grapes.
- All about harvesting grapes and making the grapes into wine.
- A typically Roman theme of the followers of Bacchus.
- In Christian context the wine became the wine of the Eucharist.
Detail of the grape harvest from the mosaics in the vault in St. Costanza’s Church. This theme appealed to both Christians and pagans alike.
Power shifts away from Rome

- As Rome’s political power dwindles, other Northern Italian cities gained importance
- Milan and Ravenna in particular
- In 395, Emperor Theodosious I split the Roman empire into Eastern and Western divisions; each ruled by one of his sons.
- One son ruled from Constantinople, (Istanbul) and the other Milan, (Northern Italy)
- When Milan was attacked by German tribes, the capitol was moved to Ravenna, on the east coast of Italy.
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Ravenna

- Ravenna had a secure location on the coast with good sea access to Constantinople.
- Ravenna was a well established city that had flourished under Roman rule.
- When Italy fell to the Visgoths in 476 CE, they used Ravenna as one of their headquarters.
- Still has a remarkable group of well preserved 5th and 6th century buildings.
Mausoleum of Galla Placidia,

- One of the earliest surviving Christian structures in Ravenna.
- Attached to the church of the Imperial Palace, now Santa Croce.
- Named for the Western emperor’s sister, the daughter of Emperor Theodosious, who was believed at one time to have been buried there.
- Cruciform or cross shaped building.
- Barrel vault covers each of the four arms.
- A penditive dome - a dome continuous with its pendentives - covers the space at the intersection of the arms.
- The interior of the chapel contrasts sharply with the interior.
- A transition designed to simulate the passage from the earthly realm into a supernatural one.
Two apostles in preaching poses flank a fountain. Doves flanking the fountain represent eternal life.
Lunette depicting the martyrdom of St. Lawrence, (notice the grill)
On the left is a cabinet holding the four books of the Gospels, signifying the faith he died for.
Classic scene of the Good Shepard is above the entrance way
c. 300 CE

How have things changed?

425 CE
• Ravenna mosaic has many classical elements.
• illusionistic shading.
• an attempt at a realistic landscape.
• More importantly the depiction of Jesus has changed.
• from simple Shepard boy to regal man.
• wears imperial robes.
• carries a golden staff that ends in a cross, instead of Shepard's crook.
Baptistry of the Orthodox, Ravenna

- Early 5th century CE
- Baptism of Christ and Procession of Apostles and Prophets
- Detail: John the Baptist baptizing Christ
- Notice the man in the river is he Father Tiber, the Roman River God?
- Still apparent Classical influences. Can you name some?
• Baptism of Christ
  – C. 400 CE, Mosaic, Ravenna

• Detail, Column of Trajan
  – C. 113 CE, relief sculpture, Rome
Sculpture

• In sculpture, as in architecture, Christians adapted Roman forms for their own needs.

• Commemorative **diptychs**, two carved ivory panels hinged together, originated with Roman politicians who used them to commemorate particular events.

• Christians adapted them for religious use, inscribing them with the names of people to be prayed for at Mass.

• Monumental stone sculpture can be studied in Christian sarcophagi.
Panel of a diptych found in Rome c. 400 ivory

- Tells the story both narrative and symbolically of Christ’s resurrection.
- Top panel the moment of resurrection
- Bottom panel the two Marys at the empty tomb.
- **The Harbaville Triptych** is a Byzantine ivory *triptych* of the middle of the 10th century with Christ in Majesty and other saints, now in the Louvre.
- It is regarded as the finest, and best-preserved, of the "Romanos group" of ivories from a workshop in Constantinople, probably closely connected with the Imperial Court.
Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus c.359

Roman official who according to the inscription was newly baptized and died in 359

The relief carving depicts many Christian narratives, but there are still Classical elements.
Figure 8-24 Suicide of Judas and Crucifixion of Christ, plaque from a box, ca. 420. Ivory, 3” X 3 7/8”. British Museum, London.
Despite tensions between Eastern and Western leadership, the Church did remain united as one for a thousand years, until 1054.

In 1054, The Western Pope and the Eastern Patriarch declared one another in error and the Catholic Church split in two.

The Pope would preside over the Western Catholic Church, now called Roman Catholic Church and the Patriarch of the Eastern Church together with his archbishops would preside over the Eastern Orthodox Churches.

This split, or schism, has remained to the present day.
Iconography of the Life of Christ

• 1. Annunciation
• 2. Nativity
• 3. The Three Kings
• 4. Baptism
• 5. Transfiguration
• 6. Washing of the Feet
• 7. Last Supper
• 8. The Betrayal
• 9. The Crucifixion
• 10. The Resurrection
• 11. The Empty Tomb
• 12. The Ascension
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