

Images of Christ

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

Christian art did not begin to flourish until after the adoption of Christianity as the Roman Empire's official religion. This lesson is about images of Christ and the relationship between pagan religion, Christianity, and the artwork from this period. Specifically, you will learn about:



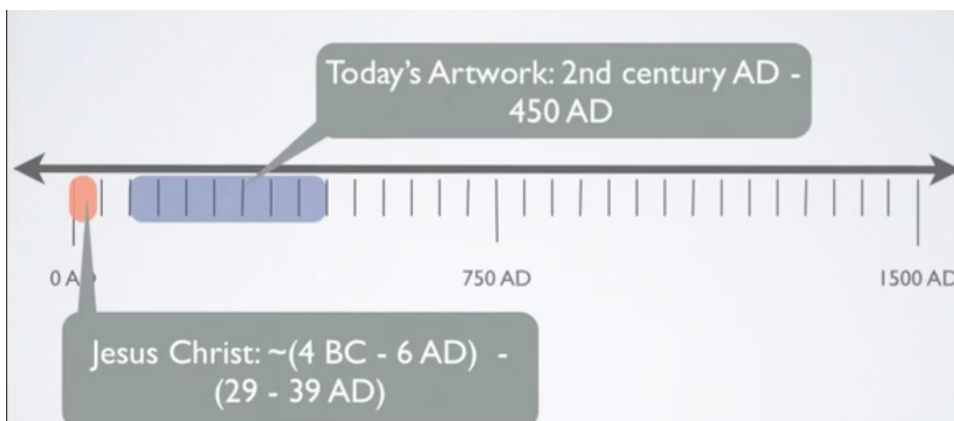
BIG IDEA

Early Christian art was influenced by the religion and culture of the Roman Empire.

1. Time Period and Location: Images of Christ

The lifespan of Jesus Christ covers only about 33 years. Interestingly, his official birth year is up for debate. The artwork covered in this lesson ranges from the second century AD to around 450 AD. The geographical region of this lesson is the Italian Peninsula, mainly two cities, Rome and Ravenna, both in Italy.

Below is the timeline highlighting the period covered in this lesson.



Here is a map of the Italian Peninsula with the cities of Rome and Ravenna marked.



2. Early Christian Art

One of the reasons that the study of Christian art is important is that there are no existing images of Christ from his lifetime. Images depicting Christ don't appear until sometime after his death.

Christian art really began to flourish after the adoption of Christianity as the Roman empire's official religion. In fact, Christian art wasn't publicly produced until after Constantine because of the fear that Christians would be persecuted and killed. Christian art shows strong evidence of **syncretism**, or a union of sorts between elements of the pagan and Christian religions. This cultural exchange between religions and philosophies isn't new, but it is interesting in how it affects traditional understandings of the Christian religion.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Take for instance, December 25. This is the official date for celebrating the birth of Christ, but scholars agree almost unanimously that this is most likely not the true date of his birth.

However, there are two pools of thought as to why December 25 was the chosen date. The first is that it is a mathematical calculation based on his supposed death during the Jewish feast of Passover. The second thought is that it was adopted based on a pagan religious celebration associated with the solstice and the return of the sun that was celebrated on or around December 25.

Although the origin of December 25 as the birth of Christ is debatable, the syncretism that is suggested in the works of art from this time is widely accepted by scholars.



TERM TO KNOW

Syncretism

Attempt at uniting differing or opposing practices in religion or philosophy

3. Christ as Good Shepherd #1

This example of Christ as good shepherd is from the catacomb of Priscilla, located in Rome, Italy.



Christ as a Good Shepard at Catacomb of Priscilla

2nd-3rd century AD

Fresco

Rome, Italy

Like other images of Christ from this time, he's shown as a youthful shepherd figure, an inspiration that likely stemmed from earlier Greco-Roman depictions of Apollo and Hermes as good shepherds.

This image also draws forth comparisons to an earlier example of Arcade Greek sculpture and its depiction of a calf-bearer, an example of which can be seen here:







Moschophoros (also known as Calf-Bearer)

570 BC

Marble

Rather than offering an animal for sacrifice, the good shepherd finds a lamb lost from his flock and returns it to the fold. The artwork of Christ carrying a sheep on his shoulders symbolizes the Christian religion, where Christ is the good shepherd and the fold is faith in the Christian God.

This is also an example of Christian **iconography**, or visual symbolism, that represents the Gospel narratives of Christ describing himself as the good shepherd laying his life down for his flock, which foreshadows Jesus' eventual crucifixion, a sacrifice scripture says is done willingly for the good of humankind.



TERM TO KNOW

Iconography

A type of visual symbolism; Christian iconography, for instance, might make references to the biblical story of the nativity.

4. Christ as Sol Invictus

Syncretism is evident in the mosaic “Christ as Sol Invictus.” Found in a mausoleum beneath the Basilica of Saint Peter’s in Rome, this is one of the earliest known images of a regal Christ. He’s also thought to be depicted as the sun god Sol Invictus, which was a later form of the sun deity in the Roman religion.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Below is an image of the mosaic “Christ as Sol Invictus”.



Christ as Sol Invictus in the Mausoleum of the Julii, St. Peter's Basilica

Late 3rd century

Mosaic

Rome, Italy

Pay close attention to the rays of light emanating from his head in the image above. Aside from the cross-like shape depicted, the halo or ring of light surrounding the head of Christ or other important church figures is a type of imagery seen in almost all of the later depictions of Christ. This is another example of syncretism.

5. Christ as Good Shepherd #2

This final image is another mosaic, this time for the mausoleum of Galla Placidia in Ravenna, Italy.



Christ as Good Shepherd at Mausoleum of Galla Placidia

425-433 AD

Mosaic

Ravenna, Italy



DID YOU KNOW

A mosaic is an image, typically on the ceiling, wall, or floor, created out of colored ceramic or glass tiles. The mausoleum of Galla Placidia is literally covered in mosaics and is considered one of the best surviving examples of mosaic artwork from this time period.



THINK ABOUT IT

What is interesting about this image of Christ as good shepherd is how he's changed in appearance from a youthful Apollo-like version of a shepherd to a much more regal- or imperial-looking version of a shepherd. It's quite obvious, given the dates of these creations and the manner in which they are depicted, that these are not actual likenesses of Christ but rather reflections of the people or cultures that created them.

This mosaic was created after Christianity became the main religion of Rome, and undoubtedly it reflects the desire to make the image of Christ appear more grand and imperial. Some clues to this are the use of the gold and purple robes, which are colors of the emperor, the golden cross-shaped staff, and his head bathed in a golden aura. This imagery of Christ as King is another common depiction in the Christian art that was to come.



SUMMARY

When Christianity became the Roman empire's official religion, Christian art began to flourish. In this

lesson, you learned about the **time period and location of images of Christ**. One of the reasons that the study of **early Christian art** is important is that there are no existing images of Christ from his lifetime.

You explored some examples of artwork in this lesson, including:

- **Christ as Good Shepherd #1**
- **“Christ as Sol Invictus”**
- **Christ as Good Shepherd #2**

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TERMS TO KNOW

Iconography

A type of visual symbolism. Christian iconography for instance, might make references to the biblical story of the nativity.

Syncretism

Attempt of union between differing or opposing practices in religion or philosophy.