Which image do you want?

5

One would think, what with Christianity having been born out of Judaism with its apparent prohibition of graven images, that the eventual triumph of Christianity over paganism in the Roman empire would have sounded the death knell for religious art in the Western part of the world. Just the opposite happened, of course. Christianity inspired and generated the largest body of religious art work the world has ever seen.[1] For its first 1,500 years Christianity was the cause of the vast majority of art works produced in the West. Not that it wouldn't have produced ***any*** religious art work, it's just that we would have expected it to run along the same lines as what we saw in the Jewish synagogue in Dura Europo: symbolic, narrative, and didactic; certainly nothing like the statues and images produced by the pagan Greeks and Romans. And, for 300 years, it did develop along the lines of the art work in the synagogue at Dura Europo. Yet, in the late fourth century, Christian art changed and moved exactly in the direction of the unthinkable. What happened?

36

"Emperor Octavian Augustus", **Roman sculpture, 1st c.**

The worship of the emperor began even during the lifetime of Octavian (in 27 BC the Senate awarded him the title Augustus: the Holy, divine Son, father of the native land, descendant of Venus and Aeneas). Here the emperor is depicted as Jupiter, the supreme god of the Roman pantheon. No one, of course, actually thought that Octavian was Jupiter, but it was not unusual to depict an emperor as one of the gods as a way of showing that the emperors were like the gods or equal to the gods.

(From The State Hermitage Museum website www.hermitagemuseum.org)

As we might guess the answer is somewhat complicated.

When Christianity appeared on the scene everyone in the Roman empire was quite used to seeing portraits of the emperor **[36]**. He was —it seemed, *literally*— everywhere: in the forum, markets, basilicas, even on the coinage **[37]** used for daily transactions. The image of the emperor was meant to make it clear to everyone that the business being conducted was actually being done in the name of the emperor. He was *present* throughout his empire. In a sense his image communicated his power.[2] While most emperors refused to be designated as divine until after they died (at least in Rome, where it was frowned upon by the conservative society there), some emperors jumped the gun and insisted that their images in the provinces be worshiped, making it a serious offense for anyone to refuse to venerate

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Denarius coin, Roman, ca. 20; inscription: "Tiberius Caesar Augustus, son of the Divine Augustus."

the image of the emperor. In any case, if he wasn't yet divine, the emperor was going to be after he died. Roman religion was a very civic religion. Failure to participate was considered disloyal and treasonous.

Images of the gods and goddesses were also everywhere: in temples, on street corners, in markets, and in private homes. The 2005-6 Home Box Office (HBO) television series, *Rome*, had stage sets of impressive historical accuracy. In several scenes a character approached a shrine on a street corner of a bustling urban neighborhood and made offerings (burned incense, lit a candle) and made a promise to do something for the goddess if a request he made was granted. Images of the gods were pervasive in Roman culture and posed a real problem for Christians. Some early Christian writers offered advice on how to avoid looking at them for fear of giving unintentional veneration.

There were also images of ordinary people: teachers, philosophers, lawyers, senators, and grandma and grandpa; sculpture portrait busts and funerary portrait panel paintings. In the case of the funerary portraits, it was the tradition to set up any portraits of deceased family members in the home where a funeral banquet was being held for a recently deceased member.

Such was the environment that Christians had to navigate for the first few centuries —the ubiquitous existence of pagan idols, state images, and family portraits.

But once Christianity was legalized and it became the state religion, in the 4th century, the Church was securely established and growing widely so polytheism and pagan worship of idols no longer threatened to reclaim converts. Constantine and subsequent emperors still had images erected around the empire and imprinted on coins but there was no longer a claim to personal divinity. And, when the practice and memory of pagan idol worship waned and imperial portraiture took on a more acceptable understanding, Christian portraiture began to be explored by artists and Church authorities.

38

***"Hera/Juno"* goddess of marriage (L); *"Mars"* god of war (R).**

We mentioned in a previous part of this series that most early Christian apologists were severely critical of pagan images while for the most part strangely silent concerning Christian ones that were beginning to appear. The reason was really quite simple. Christian images had not made use of a *portrait* format. Christian images did not emphasize the head and shoulders or upper torso of figures which is common in portraiture. Neither were figures isolated from a background, environment or context **[44]**. The format of Christian art was

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***"Moses"* strikes the rock and water gushes out, (detail) catacomb painting.**

generally 'scenic' or symbolic. As we have seen, prior to the late 4th century, Christian art narrated stories from the Old and New Testaments or used symbolic, metaphoric, and didactic imagery. A viewer of an early Christian representation of "Moses" striking the rock and water gushing out **[39]** would feel as though he was looking at a scene being acted out in a play. He would not have been attracted to the image as something possessing a personality or powerful presence. He would have taken away from the image a simple instruction, a jogged memory, or an analogous thought. But polytheistic pagan idols and images did have that attraction and it resulted in veneration and devotion from adherents **[38]**. Now, no one really thought that the small terra cotta or wood figurine — or large stone or marble statue— was actually ***the*** god or goddess but they did understand the image to be mediating the presence of the divinity in a special, powerful way just as the imperial image mediated the *presence* of the emperor.[3] That certainly was not true of early Christian images. Only the Eucharist —the actual Body and Blood of Christ—was understood by Christians as mediating the divine.[4]

Late in the 4th century Christian portraiture begins to make a tentative appearance in the catacombs. As common burials in the catacombs began to end, after the legal establishment of Christianity, people began to frequent the tombs of those buried in the catacombs who had been martyrs or had been otherwise holy and saintly individuals. Portraits of the saints began to appear in the catacombs as an indication that the saints' bones/ relics lay buried nearby, as in a sign that says, "Here he is!"[5] Special funerary churches or basilicas were built on top of the tombs and became pilgrimage sites. Often, the saint's bones or relics were transferred to a tomb or reliquary in the church above ground.[6] The shrines were decorated with the saints' portraits, and portraits of Peter and Paul, Christ and Mary.

Starting around the middle of the sixth century, individual portraits were often placed separately in a church were they would receive special attention aside and apart from any restrictive context. The location in the church was sometimes prominent. It was also not uncommon for portrait of saints to be displayed in a secular setting such as on the front of a building at a busy intersection or in the quiet corner of a private home.

Perhaps the Church's guard concerning idol worship was down. After all, the pagan gods were now disappearing as Christianity gradually

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dominated society. It was perhaps natural that as pagan images waned, Christian ones should replace them.

There was, however, a new threat to the sheep of the fold and it came in the guise of heretics *within* Christianity and not from a surrounding, competing pagan culture. The nature of Christ and his relationship to God the Father was a raging subject of debate among theologians. This and the beginnings of Christian *portraiture* may have created an atmosphere in which Christian images came under greater scrutiny by the theologians.

40

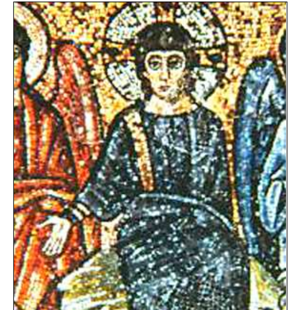
***"Christ",* from the Catacomb of Commodillia, Rome, mid 4th century**

The problem of the Incarnation

It took a while for Christians to settle on a standardized image of Jesus Christ. One of the earliest images that comes closest to how we now normally think of him was painted in the Catacomb of Commodillia **[40]**, outside Rome sometime during the late 4th century. He has long, flowing, wavy black hair, a fairly full beard and down-turned mustache. His eyes are large and dark, his nose is long, and lips, full. A halo surrounds his head and the letters *alpha* and *omega* bracket his head on the left and right. But in a sarcophagus carving from the same period **[41]** we

41

***"Christ between Peter & Paul",* sarcophagus of Junius Bassus, Vatican City, 357 (L); Different *'types'* of Christ in the same building; Church of San Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna, Italy, early 6th c. (Middle and R).**



42

***"The Good Shepherd",* Museo Pio Christiano, Vati-**

This comes pretty close to looking like an idol

see him depicted as young, clean shaven and with short hair. In fact, the second *type* of Christ appears more frequently in the early period. There are other types of Christ that combine or fall in-between these two in appearance. Some show him with long hair but without the beard and mustache, others as slightly more mature than the young type but with a short beard and short hair. The different types can even appear in the same church building as happens in the Basilica of San Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna **[41]**. There is also a *beautiful* type of Christ; young and handsome, smooth skin and similar to youthful Greek and Roman gods like Apollo and Dionysus **[42]**.

Why all the different *types*? How ***should*** Jesus be depicted?
That Jesus should be —or even could be— represented at all became the

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BBC ONE did a television series that researched and attempted to recreate what type of head and face Jesus might have had, based on the skull of a 1st century Jewish man.

subject of debate. Many writers claimed that Jesus could not be objectively depicted because there could never be a consensus on what he looked like. Some said that Jesus appeared to each person differently while he walked the earth; his appearance to any one person depended upon the needs and abilities of that person and the kind of savior that person needed. In the *Acts of Peter*, Peter described Jesus as *"this (God) who is both great and little, beautiful and ugly, young and old, appearing in time and yet in eternity wholly invisible… He is all things, and there is no other greater than He."* [7] There were several accounts of Jesus looking different to different people. St. Augustine of Hippo said that the fact that there were so many different descriptions of Jesus proved that no one knew what Jesus looked like.

Many stories developed that sought to explain how the real image of Jesus came to be known. In one, Jesus left his image on a moist cloth and sent it to a king who had asked him to come and cure him of a serious illness. Jesus couldn't make the trip so he sent the cloth with his image on it. The king was cured. And, there is the story of Veronica's veil; Christ's image supposedly was left on her veil after his face was wiped with it during the passion. One legend even has Pilate painting Christ's portrait. And then, of course, there is the Shroud of Turin. All these stories show us a Christ who conforms nicely to our modern day notion of what Jesus looked like because it was the type of Jesus similar to the one in the Catacomb of Commodillia that eventually won out.

To St. Augustine, however, the only thing important was that Jesus Christ appear human. [8] But the opinion of Augustine did not satisfy all for there was a hotly contested theological debate concerning the nature of Jesus: Was he human or divine? The Church, eventually, officially, ruled that he was both fully human *and* fully divine. So, showing only Christ's human appearance in an image would seem be a lie as Jesus was also divine. Depicting only his human appearance would be a heresy as the image would deny the union of the two natures in the one Person of Jesus. Depicting Christ's divinity, however, was seemingly impossible. No one could picture a transcendent God. No portrait image could, truthfully, define divinity. The incarnation posed a very serious dilemma for early Christian imaging.

In spite of this dilemma, however, the early period of Christian art did emphasized a human Christ. There had been plenty of ways available to artists to *symbolize* divinity (such as halos) but the Christians didn't often use them (The Commodillia catacomb portrait did use a halo but it's of a later date). What we have, initially, in early Christianity is a Jesus *type* that is very human —like the miracle-working rabbi we mentioned in the last chapter. As the relationship of Jesus to God the Father became clearer the imagery did begin to employ symbols for his divinity in order to show Christ as a light to the gentiles, as a cosmic Christ, as the Divine Logos, and as the Second Person of the Trinity.[9]

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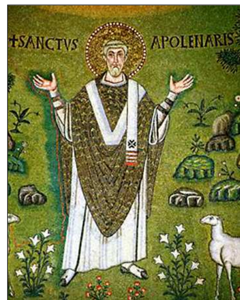
Arius was one of those who had taught that Jesus was a lesser being than God the Father. Sort of divine, but not eternal —created. This early heresy is known as Arianism. So, if you happened to be an Arian Christian responsible for ordering the mosaic decorations of an Arian Christian church you might direct that Christ be represented as a young male "action figure" of sorts, fully at home in the world of the Roman empire. In this way you would be expressing an Arian interpretation of the human nature of Christ. An Orthodox overseer (stressing the divine nature of Christ and conscious of the heresy of Arius) might order a Christ with a halo, sitting on a throne, looking wise and spiritual with long hair and a full beard, holding a scroll, and passing judgment, or instructing his disciples.

As it turns out, however, Christ as the young man-of-action type existed alongside the philosophical and wise older man type for quite some time and it really can't be determined that one represented one side of the debate more so than the other.

44

"St. Apollinare", Basilica of Sant Appollinare in Classe, 549 (L); "Veneranda" (the deceased; with arms raised) being led by St. Petronilla into Paradise, Catacomb of St. Domitilla (R).



And the saints?

Since saints are not divine, the debate concerning their images was different. How the images of saints were ***used*** was the center of the controversy concerning them. Controlling how the saints were represented, however, eventually solved that problem, too, for Church authorities. But, we are getting ahead of ourselves.

We end this part with an except of a reply Eusebius made to Constantia, the sister of Constantine the Great. She had requested that Eusebius send her an image of Christ. He is not at all happy with her request and his reply sums up the theological problem with which Church thinkers and artists struggled when Christian portraiture appeared on the scene.

> *You also wrote me concerning some supposed image of Christ, which image you wished me to send you. Now what kind of thing is this that you call the image of Christ? I do not know what impelled you to request that an image of Our Saviour should be delineated. What sort of image of Christ are you seeking? Is it the true and unalter-*

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able one which bears His essential characteristics, or the one which He took up for our sake when He assumed the form of a servant? (He goes on to explain why an image of Christ is impossible.)

…(and) *can it be that you have forgotten that passage in which God lays down the law that no likeness should be made either of what is in heaven or what is in the earth beneath? ...Are not such things banished and excluded from churches all over the world?*[10]

If this correspondence had taken place a little later in the 4th century you would not have blamed Constantia if she took it from Eusebius' reply that he didn't get out much. ✠

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[1] Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries,* (New Haven; Yale University Press), 83.
[2] Robin Margaret Jensen, *Face to Face, Portraits of the Divine in Early Christianity*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 52.
[3] Jensen, 67.
[4] Pelikan, 87.
[5] Jensen, 174.
[6] Jensen, 174.
[7] *Acts of Peter*, 20, trans. From Hennecke and Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 2:225-26; cited in Jensen, 140.
[8] Jensen, 139.
[9] Pelikan; the changing place of Jesus in the history of culture is the running subject of Pelikan's "must read" book.
[10] Cyril Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire, 312-1453*, 16

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