

The hypotheses regarding early christian art



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As Christianity was establishing itself as an official cult in the early centuries AD, it began to express its beliefs through a variety of sacred texts as well as visual representations. Although it may have existed earlier, the earliest recognizable Christian art that we have evidence of today dates back to around the year 200 AD. As Jensen points out, “ The style, technique, and materials that were applied to Christian art were not essentially different from those used in other artworks of that time and region” (15-16). Early Christians, although they originated as a minority cult, were not alienated from the surrounding Greco-Roman culture. Because of this, they adapted many of the motifs used by pagans and associated their own meanings with the motifs to serve their teachings. The Donna Velata, a banquet scene fresco, and a clay lamp from the first centuries AD support the claim that artwork in the beginning stages of Christianity is often ambiguous to modern audiences and difficult to identify as either Christian or pagan.

The Donna Velata, a Christian fresco of the figure of the orant, is found in the Catacomb of Priscilla. It is located in a cramped family-owned room called the “ Chamber of the Veiled Woman”, which was named for this specific image (Priscilla’s Catacomb). This painting dates back to the late second or early third century AD. This orant, like most, is a veiled woman, facing forwards and gazing upwards. Her arms are outstretched and slightly lifted towards Heaven. There are two images, one on either side of the orant, that portray the same woman. The most widespread theory regarding the two subsidiary depictions of the woman is that the one on the left represents her marriage and the right illustrates her motherhood. Also present is a dove on each side of this main composition, which is an important aspect to note in

the process of determining the true meaning and origin of the work. At first, it is not blatantly obvious whether this image was made for a Christian or pagan audience. This is due to the fact that early Christian art often used symbols from antecedent pagan motifs. The orant was a prevalent figure of late antique art. Jensen explains, "Both her posture and appearance are characteristic of classical prayer images" (35). It was most certainly not a pose limited to Christianity. Furthermore, the location of this fresco does not disclose much about its identity. The Catacomb of Priscilla is comprised of more than five miles tombs, which translates to approximately 40,000 burials. Both pagan and Christian persons were buried together (48. Catacomb of Priscilla). This proximity is demonstrated by a Christian painting located right next to one of Hercules, a Greco-Roman deity, in the catacomb. The symbol of the orant had several possible various meanings for pagans. The first, which is indicated by funerary context of the image, is that it was a semi-portrait of the deceased person. It emphasizes the filial devotion, honor, and obedience that the deceased gave to the emperor and gods during his/her life. Along the same lines, the other interpretation of the motif is that it is a personification of virtues that were accentuated during this era, such as piety, philanthropy, and the love of knowledge and wisdom. These then are seen as the virtues possessed by the deceased. Lastly, the posture implies a cross shape, which was a common, everyday motif during the pre-Constantinian era and beyond. The Christian understanding of the figure is slightly more complicated due to the fact it travelled through several periods, differing in both content and countenance. The orant consecutively advanced from the dimension of an exclusive embodiment of a virtue (unsurprisingly similar to that of the pagan perception of the image) to the

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portrayal of a definite, yet trivial person to the customary figure of the Virgin Mother, paramount biblical characters, and saints and martyrs. The fact that the orant is nearly always shown as a woman highlights the symbols' feminine attributes. Because of this, Christians often thought of the orant as either the soul of the deceased, further manifested by the funerary context of the image, or the church (in Greek, feminine ecclesia). Related to the pagan interpretation, Christians saw the orant as a representation of their devotion to the Church rather than the emperor or various gods. Textual evidence also exists to suggest the idea that the posture of the figure alludes to the sign of the cross. This iconographic figure was adapted to a Christian ambience with extremely little variation in presentation, other than a few changes in the content of props. This is where the doves play a critical role. Christian art often depicted doves in exchange for storks, which the pagans used. The doves symbolize the certainty of serenity for the soul of the departed; this provided comfort to the deceased's family. Additional evidence to support the belief that the Donna Velata is Christian in nature is that there is an image of the Good Shepherd on the ceiling above. The figure of the orant is not the only motif frequently used by both Christians and pagans.

A well-known Christian fresco of a banquet scene can be found in the Catacomb of Callistus. This image dates to the third century AD. It depicts seven young men sitting at a table and enjoying a meal. There appear to be two platters of fish on the table, along with five baskets of loaves of bread on either side of the table. Almost every adumbration of a meal, whether a painted fresco or a carved sarcophagus, in the early centuries includes fish

as a menu item. Banquet scenes, along with the figures of the orant and Good Shepherd, are some of the most prevailing depictions in early Christian funerary art. The Christian portrayals of meals have notable similarities to preceding and concurrent Roman and Greek funerary motifs. Between the second and fourth centuries AD, pagans illustrated two fundamental types of banquet scenes. The first shows the subject lounging on a couch. In front of this person is a three-legged table abounding with loaves of bread, chalices of wine, and often numerous other food items. Jensen further details the form, " Another diner may appear in the scene, often a woman (the spouse of the deceased) seated on a straight chair" (53). The other, less familiar representation includes a variety of diners who are sitting in a half-ellipse around a sigma table and partaking in a genial meal. Christian banquets were known to have a particular iconography. This included seven diners at a table filled with plates of fish, loaves or baskets of bread, and cups of wine. The fresco in the catacomb of Saint Callistus most closely resembles a Christian banquet scene because of the number of diners and the number and type of foods present. It is not known what this specific scene is designed to signify. Some plausible options would be a narrative scene, such as the Last Supper; a liturgical action; or a liturgical meal, like the Eucharist or an agape meal, which were celebrated on the feast days of saints. However, given that the image is located in a catacomb, the context points to the idea that is an artist's rendering of a funerary banquet or a post-resurrectional scene, which would give the deceased's loved ones peace by aiding in their recollection of Christ's promises of eternal life and everlasting joy for all who followed him. Lastly, it could depict the heavenly celebration that was prepared for the deceased. This idea is connected to the custom of

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sharing a funeral meal. There are many other examples of symbols used by Christians and pagans alike besides the frescoes of the orant and banquet scene.

The lamp top, a work of Christian art, portrays one of the most common motifs in the Roman Empire. It was discovered in Rome, and it is comprised of an impressed circular plate, a pierced handgrip, and a spout. There was a hole for the wick to come through and a hole into which oil would be poured. Given that lamps and candles were the only light source at that time, these were ubiquitous household items. This particular one is made of a reddish clay, and it was mold-made. It dates to the early third century AD. This lamp top depicts a beardless, young shepherd. He is facing the front and wearing a short, belted tunic as well as boots. The man is carrying a sheep on his shoulders, and there are seven other sheep standing around him. The heavens are pictured in the sky above the shepherd. To his right and left, there are images of a dove standing on a box, a man being spit out onto shore by a large fish, and a man lying under a tree. The Good Shepherd was an almost ever-present motif in the Roman Empire during the centuries in which Christianity was developing into an official religion. In late antiquity, the Good Shepherd carried the general connotation of charity, generosity, and compassion. Jensen expresses the problem all motifs of this era have, "It is not always possible to identify a single image of the shepherd definitely as Christian or pagan, since both communities valued charity and were concerned about the afterlife" (37). Hermes, the deity affiliated with the desire for a blissful afterlife, was the precedent to the Good Shepherd. It also bears semblance to the Greeks' and Romans' sacrifice to their gods. Like the

lamp, many images of the Good Shepherd, such as the quieres of augustus, personify the heavens. In particular, this lamp is so unique and beneficial for today's art historians because the name of the artist, Florentius, is imprinted on the underside of it. Florentius's workshop was known to construct clay lamps embellished primarily with pagan motifs, like numerous gods. On the contrary, this specific lamp was made for a Christian patron. This is made obvious by the other images alongside the main motif of the Good Shepherd. The dove and box are a reference to Noah's Ark, and Jonah is the man being expelled onto the shore from the depths of the great fish and reclining under the gourds. To Christians, the Good Shepherd is a visual allusion to many different ideas. First, during times of persecution and danger, this image expressed safety and security. The scene is usually set in the bucolic, which evokes hope for a peaceful and lush paradise in the viewers. Shepherd imagery is ubiquitous in the Old and New Testaments in the Bible. Christ can be portrayed both as the sheep, as in the sacrificial lamb, and as the shepherd, as in the protector of his flock — the church.

To present-day art scholars, the majority of visual art from the early centuries of the cult of Christianity seems to have enigmatic interpretations, and it is challenging to determine whether a piece is Christian or pagan, as demonstrated by the examples of the Donna Velata, a banquet scene fresco, and a clay lamp. However, it is important for modern day scholars to develop an understanding of early Christian art because it is a visible depiction of what was truly relevant and meaningful to Christians in the second through the fourth centuries. In order to do this, art historians are often forced to simply base illustrations' intent and message on their location and context.

For example, if a work of art is found in a catacomb, it likely suggests a theme related to the afterlife. Frequently, art historians must turn to the subsidiary images in order to decipher the authentic significance of a picture and to determine whether an image is Christian or pagan because the main characters are so similar in composition and iconography. Due to this reliance on hypotheses and interpretations that are not able to be proven accurate or inaccurate, it is impossible to be certain when defining early Christian art. This issue not only affects art history, but also every field of knowledge. Our daily lives are filled with situations that involve reliance on theories unable to be proven, and interpreting art is no different. Therefore, doing so should not worry us or make us feel uneasy.

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