

# Jewish, early christian, byzantine and islamic art

[Religion](#), [Christianity](#)



Teri Wilson March 1, 2010 Professor Hollinger Module 5 JEWISH, EARLY CHRISTIAN, BYZANTINE AND ISLAMIC ART Every religion has its own approach to art and architecture. An assessment between different traditions can offer an illuminating insight into the varying religious outlooks and theologies. Architecture, as well as art, is influenced by a number of forces in society, in the environment, in the psychology of the people who produce it, and in different institutions.

It is an expression of inner feelings and beliefs and so naturally is influenced by religion in many societies. Religious architecture is created to experience the sacred, to provide a place into which spiritual energies flow and reflect a sense of the divine. Some religions speak of art directly or have tenets which influence what can and cannot be depicted in art. The scriptures of these religions are the theological basis and shape the way people express themselves, and this includes how they express themselves through art and architecture.

The architecture in Judaism, Christianity, Byzantine, and Islam has important similarities and differences that are a result of the teachings of these faiths. In the first centuries C. E. , Jewish communities could be found in every corner of the Roman Empire. The archaeological remnants and literary attestations of more than 150 synagogues throughout the empire make clear that Jews were integral to the urban landscape of late antiquity, well beyond the borders of Roman Palestine.

Asia Minor, in particular, was one of the most prosperous, Jewish communities (Stokstad, 164) The third-century synagogue in the Roman

garrison town of Dura-Europos, Syria, like the Christian meeting house and the shrine devoted to the Persian god Mithras that stood just yards away, was adorned with sumptuous painting. The Wall of Torah Niche had splendid murals with narrative scenes from the Bible covered the synagogue's walls; painted tiles of zodiacal symbols ornamented its ceiling (Stokstad, 165). Plaques with dedicatory inscriptions give some indication of the individuals and families who funded the building of such synagogues.

In building their monuments, Jews often embraced the Greco-Roman practice of paving the floor with elaborate mosaics, many of which demonstrate an understanding of the second commandment injunction against image making that may surprise today's viewer. In early Byzantine synagogues such as Hamman Lif in North Africa and Beth Alpha, Hammath Tiberias, and Sepphoris in Israel, specifically Jewish symbols—shofarot (ram's horns), menorot (branched lamps), and Torah shrines—might appear alongside pomegranates, birds, lions, and fountains (metmuseum. rg). Zodiac wheels with human figures also find a prominent place in the pavements of several synagogues, dated from the fourth to the sixth centuries, as do scenes drawn from the Bible or allegorized images of the River Nile. After the destruction of the Second Temple by Roman emperor Titus in 70 C. E—an event commemorated on the Arch of Titus in Rome and in Jewish liturgy—images of the Temple's furnishings, especially the celebrated gold menorah, or seven-branched lamp, became emblematic of Jewish religion.

Marble sarcophagi favored by wealthy Romans were adapted for Jewish use by incorporating a stylized relief image of a menorah (metmuseum. org). In

the catacombs of Rome, Jews placed gold glass disks representing the menorah and Torah arks at their tombs, as well as symbols of the festival of Sukkot just as Christians placed glass disks showing saints. All these images reference the destroyed Temple and invoke a hoped-for messianic age when the Temple would be restored. So wide-ranging are the contexts for the menorah that it is clear the symbol frequently served merely to distinguish a Jewish monument or a Jewish patron.

Seven-branched candlesticks appear in Roman and Byzantine art: in graffiti in the catacombs, inscribed on plaques, as a motif on seals, as decoration on glass bottles and on clay lamps all further testimony to the integration of Jews into late Roman and early Byzantine society (metmuseum. org). With the adoption of Christianity as the official religion, art was able, so to speak, to come above ground in the old pagan city of Rome, and painting, instead of being restricted to the decoration of the walls of the Catacombs or of small chambers and chapels, came into use on a large scale in the new churches that were at once set up.

At the same time patronage moved from the hands of the poorer classes to the richer, and artists of outstanding quality came to be employed as well as those of obscurer character, who would work for small fees (www. religion-online. org). To wall painting was added the more luxurious art of mosaic; numerous sculptures were done, and minor objects, often in expensive materials, were in addition produced in the service of the Church, so that art production became at the same time both more extensive and more luxurious (www. religion-online. org ).

A great deal of the work that was done at this time has of course perished, more especially that in fragile materials, such as textiles or paintings on panels, but a few mosaics of the fourth century and a good many more of the fifth survive in Rome, and there is quite a lot of sculpture, both on a large scale in stone and on a small in ivory. Something has already been said about the ivories, more especially the Consular diptychs, which necessarily form a part of the general picture, though it is not always easy to be sure of where they were made, as they are in a diversity of styles ([www. eligion-online. org](http://www.eligion-online.org)). Here we are concerned not so much with these things as with works which are essentially Christian and also undoubtedly Roman, such as the mosaics and wall painting, which are necessarily immovable or stone sculptures on a large scale in a material which was carved on the spot and quarried in the neighborhood. The earliest of the mosaics are those in the church of Sta Constanza, which was built as an octagonal martyrrium or tomb sanctuary between 306 and 337. It was converted into a baptistery in the fifth century, when the lateral apses were added.

Only the mosaics on the roofs of the vaulted aisles are of the same date as the original building. This roof is divided into eight compartments, and there are different designs in each, though only those on the three sets on each side survive; they are in pairs, balancing one another on each side. These mosaics, which consist in the main of scrolls and other diverse motifs shown in isolation against a white ground, are very classical in character; they are virtually floor mosaics transferred to the roof. The mosaics which decorated the central dome have not survived, though there is a sixteenth century painting of them in the Escorial.

They included scenes from the Old and New Testaments, bordered below by a river and separated one from another by caryatid figures, not unlike the dividing panels in the Baptistery of the Orthodox at Ravenna. In the apses which terminate the sides of the octagon to the north and south are figural compositions of a rather different character, depicting the " Traditio Legis", where Christ conveys futureresponsibilityfor preaching on one side to Peter and on the other to Paul. Our Lord stands in the centre of each apse, with the Apostle before Him, against a background of trees (catholic-resources. org).

The mosaics are probably to be assigned to the time of the building's conversion for use as a baptistery in the fifth century. They have, however, been very much restored at subsequent dates, and to-day appear somewhat clumsy (catholic-resources. org). Those in the dome probably belonged to the same date as those in the vaults of the octagon. Another similar church of this kind is the Church of Santa Sabrina, a fifth-century basilica in Rome. The basilica, constructed by Bishop Peter of Ilyria between 422 and 432 BC, is another must see (Stokstad, 170). Santa Sabrina, exterior is typical of the time, which is severe brickwork.

In contrast, the interior displays a wealth of marble veneer and 24 fluted marble columns with Corinthian capitals acquired from a 2nd century building (Stokstad, 170). Christianity subject matter is the prime source of art up to the modern era. We find religious art in all styles and the major artists used Christianity in most of their paintings and built structures for Christian churches. In conclusion, it can be seen that art is not just one thing.

It is a combination of devices which have taken thousands of years to grow and develop, through different religions, and through time.

I personally feel that art is not something that we can define or even begin to describe. Art is too much a part of life to single out on its own or define, especially, religious art. Trying to write a summary on a general view of what art is is virtually impossible. Art, inside of every person is seen as something different and unique making the definition of art diversified for every person.

Works Cited 1. [www. metmuseum. org](http://www.metmuseum.org) 2. [www. catholic-resources. org](http://www.catholic-resources.org) 3. [www. religion-online. org](http://www.religion-online.org) 4. Our book, " Art: A Brief History" by: Marilyn Stokstad