Chapter 7
Early Christian and Byzantine Art

- As early as the second century AD, Christianity was not a recognized religion. It was a fairly small and scattered sect.
- At first glance, it offered the same as other cults that brought the promise of a life beyond the grave.
- Christianity emerged out of Judaism but differed in the recognition of Jesus Christ as the Son of God, who had died for the sins of all humankind, rose from the dead and ascended into heaven.
- Christianity introduced the concept that thought was as sinful as deed. And that humility, which was regarded by the Romans as a weakness, was a virtue.
- By the second century, the teachings of Christ were in circulation and were a source of controversy within the Roman empire.
- Roman cults had tolerated many other forms of religion and probably would have put up with Christianity but the latter soon became a community with a strong sense of self.
- It was this sense of community that caused anxiety among the non-Christian Romans.
- Christianity grew during the age of Augustus, and at the same time the pagan cults remained strong.
- In 249 AD the emperor, Decius, issued an order for all to sacrifice to the Roman gods, except for the Jews, who were exempt from this order because of the Roman respect for ancient traditions.
- This was the start of the widespread persecution of Christians because they refused to comply with the order, and the Christians preferred martyrdom with the promise of eternal life to complying.
- The last and cruelest persecution occurred in 303 AD when Diocletian decreed that Christians were to lose the privileges of Roman citizenship, had their churches destroyed, and their scriptures burned.
- In 313 Christianity was legalized by Constantine’s Edict of Milan.
- The power of the ideological base of the Roman empire had begun to disintegrate long before Constantine came into power.
During the political upheavals of the second century, the idea of a god emperor had become less appealing to many. Constantine calmed the Christians by placing himself as the ‘servant of God’ and having the Chi-Rho monogram inscribed on his standards.

Key Terms:
- pagans
- catacombs
- apse
- Ravenna
- martyrdom
- Domus Ecclesiae
- transcept
- emblemata
- Constantine
- composite order
- pendentives
- basilica
- nave
- Edict of Milan
- mosaic
- icon
- iconoclasts
- illuminated manuscript
- Insular
- renovatio
- Charlemagne

Learning Objectives:
- To see the similarity in the development of images of the Buddha and those of Christ.
- The development of the Christian church.
- The similarities of symbolism used in Buddhism and Christianity.
- The difference in Byzantine architecture from Early Christian ie Roman.
- To understand why the iconoclastic controversy occurred.
- The difference in the Christian art of Northern Europe from the Greek and Roman influenced Christian Art
- The importance of Charlemagne

THE BEGINNINGS OF CHRISTIAN ART
- Christians had adopted the sign of the cross, but for a long time had avoided explicit visual representation of the Crucifixion and of Christ himself until the late third or early fourth century.
- The first symbols invented by the early Christians were sematic.
- A fish was adopted as a visual representation of Christ’s name, and the lamb was based on St. John the Baptist’s description of Christ as the ‘Lamb of God’.
- In Rome, Christians took over the artistic, as well as the literary, language of pagans, changing only the meanings of the images.
The Good Shepherd (fig. 7.2)

- This statue is a classical representation of Christ’s own words “I am the shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep”.
- This figure was meant to symbolize benevolence.

The Breaking of Bread (fig. 7.4)

- The earliest Christian symbols appeared in Roman catacombs, which were underground cemeteries, running up to five galleries deep outside the city.
- These catacombs were used by the Christians because they did not believe in cremation, which was the normal treatment of the dead for the lower classes in the Roman Empire.
- Some of the paintings found in the catacombs seem to have been deliberately left open to interpretation.
- This painting appears to be of men and women at a table with wine and bread; yet the hidden meaning could refer to Christ’s transformation of water into wine and also a reference to the Last Supper.

From Domus Ecclesiae to the Christian Basilica

- The earliest Christian place of worship that we know about was at Dura Europos and was not built to resemble a place for worship.
- In fact it was an ordinary private home in the poor district.
- This structure had a central courtyard surrounded by rooms, which may have been made to accommodate some 50 people.
- During the years of persecution, Christians congregated in such a building and which was referred to as *domus ecclesiae*, from the Latin word for private house and the Greek word for assembly.
- After the legalization of Christianity in 313, there was a need for a larger space to be used for the congregating of the masses.
- A direct decision was made to break away from the Roman pagan temple plans.
- The first Christian churches were built under the patronage of Constantine and were based on the public secular architecture, the basilica.

Plan of Old St. Peter’s (fig. 7.12)

- The original church was built on the Vatican hill in Rome, with funds supplied by Constantine.
• It has been discovered that the original building incorporated the real wall of the basilican hall, but it was moved back to create a transept to accommodate large congregations of pilgrims.
• At the end of the nave was a huge arch, which had a mosaic of Constantine accompanied by St. Peter presenting a model of the church to Christ.

St. Costanza (fig. 7.13-16)
• Christians also built round churches on a site that was either hallowed by an event in Christ’s life or above the tomb of a martyred Christian.
• Costanza was the daughter of Constantine and this was her tomb.
• The dome rises from 12 pairs of granite columns with composite capitals.
• The mosaics were of geometric designs and panels of rambling vines with children joyfully engaged in the vintage.

The Image of Christ
• After Christianity became the official religion of the Roman empire, a need arose for a new visual language which was less cryptic and allusive than those of the catacombs.

Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus (fig. 7.18)
• Junius Bassus was a prefect of Rome who died in 359.
• The figures on this piece were carved in the Classical spirit and were well proportioned.
• On this sarcophagus there is no narrative sequence, as the scenes are placed on separate stages, separated by colonnettes.
• Christ is given a central place in the composition of both the bottom and top register.
• Christ is dressed in the Greek pallium, which in Italy had come to be associated with philosophers and teachers.
• Here, as in other Early Christian works, Christ is depicted with an adolescent face.

The Miracle of the Loaves and Fishes (fig. 7.19)
• The adolescent appearance of Christ continues but with a more ritualistic cast.
• Christ is seen here in the Greek pallium of imperial purple cloth and has the three pronged halo.
Apse mosaic (fig. 7.21)
- Within this mosaic, Christ has a more authoritative, awe-inspiring look.
- The bearded image became the familiar depiction of Christ.

Ravenna
- Ravenna was the most important city in Italy from 402 until the mid-eighth century.
- The use of mosaics on walls and ceilings increased with the introduction of lightweight squares of glass along with a new type of cement used to fix the squares.
- Glass also increased the color range and reflected light, with gold leaf backings by setting the pieces at a slight angle.
- It was not until the fifth century that the medium was fully exploited for wall and vault decoration in churches in Rome and Ravenna.

The Good Shepherd (fig. 7.28)
- The Mausoleum of Galla Placidia is the earliest building in Ravenna with preserved mosaics.
- The building follows the cruciform plan and was originally attached to a church founded by Galla Placidia, the daughter of Theodosius.
- This mosaic is over the main door and depicts Christ as the Good Shepherd in a landscape resembling those from Pompeian paintings.
- Spatial recession is indicated by the foreshortened sheep and the twisting body of Christ.
- The figures have already begun to lose their solidity as the illusionistic devices of Hellenistic and Roman painting were being renounced by the Church.

Justinian and his Retinue (fig. 7.29)
- The emperor Justinian and his empress, Theodora, are depicted on the lower walls of the apse at St. Vitale.
- The figures are in a frontal pose, looking directly at the spectator with no reference to spatial illusion.
- The individual features of the faces suggest portraiture from life.
BYZANTINE ART

• The foundation of Constantinople as the new capital of the Roman Empire, in the former Greek city of Byzantium, had far reaching consequences.

• The move of the Roman Empire’s capital to this new location began to divide the empire, and Constantinople grew into the richest city in the empire and as the main center of artistic patronage.

Ecclesiastical Architecture

• Only written accounts of the buildings erected for Constantine in Constantinople are available to us today.

• One of the churches we know about was original in a design which combined the centrally plan church with the cruciform plan.

• One of the first indications of the new direction Byzantine architecture would take was provided by the capitals of columns.

• The capitals were carved in the Corinthian order, which was traditionally reserved for important public buildings, and were copied with variations that became increasingly pronounced.

• The Classical idea of regularity and uniformity was modified as stiffly curving leaves of acanthus were ruffled, and volutes were replaced with human and animal heads.

• Now diversity was prized as is seen with the carving of ‘basket capitals’ which were flat, lacy, open work patterns, deeply undercut by drilling.

Hagia Sophia

• This was known as the church of Holy Wisdom in Constantinople.

• Mathematics was, at this time, regarded as the highest of the sciences and the architects of Hagia Sophia were known to have been mathematicians.

• This church was built at the command of the emperor Justinian, with the idea of outshining all other religious buildings being the goal.

• This church was designed at the same time that Justinian was trying to revive the glory of the empire and to establish his own autocratic power.

• The plan of the church was a large rectangle enclosing a square space.

• There are huge piers at the corners to carry the dome.
• The dome is the dominant feature of the church.
• The dome does not rest on a drum as it does in the Pantheon, but on four spherical triangles or pendentives rising from the piers.
• The use of the pendentives is a Byzantine design.
• Coming out from the arches are half-domes of the same diameter and below them, smaller half-domes.
• The piers are made of ashlar; the walls and vaults are of a rather thin brick set in mortar.
• The use of bricks for the roofing was too much, and the dome collapsed in 558 to be replaced by one slightly higher in 563.
• Another difference between this church and Roman architecture is that the dome takes the attention away from the facade.

The Classical Tradition
• Justinian’s reason for patronage of Christian architecture was to try to create a monolithic state with one set of laws, one religious creed, and one ruler.

The Transfiguration (fig. 7.42)
• The Transfiguration is Christ transforming in glory and conversing with Moses and Elias.
• This apse mosaic, from the Church of the Monastery, is one of the many well-preserved mosaics and is considered to be among the finest of this period.
• In the border of the mosaic are the heads of the apostles, 16 prophets, and King David.
• Christ and three disciples are depicted as men not as symbols.
• All of the figures are boldly modeled forms and the landscape has been eliminated.
• Christ is surrounded by the almond shaped aureole which is done in four shades of blue, the darkest in the center close to Christ.

Icons and Iconoclasts
• Small portraits of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the saints were in great demand throughout the Byzantine world.
• These visual images had a stronger emotional appeal than the intellectual conceived symbols of Early Christian art.
During the sixth and seventh century, the line between an image which was an aid to thought or prayer and one that was itself an object of worship was blurred.

The fury of the Iconoclasts broke loose in the early eighth century against what they saw as the worshipping of images.

An edict of 730, issued by Emperor Leo III, ordered the destruction of all images that showed Christ, the Virgin Mary, saints or angels in human form.

The conflict between the Iconoclasts and the Iconodules raged on for 113 years.

No controversy about works of art has ever aroused such passions, and those who were caught with an icon faced punishment by flogging, branding, mutilation, or blinding.

The Virgin and Child enthroned between St. Theodore and St. George (fig. 7.46)

This painting was meant to be an aid for prayer.

The heads of the two angels are foreshortened while the Virgin and Child have substance and weight.

The figures invite a face-to-face meeting with the holy people depicted.

The Triumph of Orthodoxy

The defeat of Iconoclasm was officially proclaimed in 843 on the first Sunday in Lent, which is still celebrated in the Eastern Church as the festival of the Triumph of Orthodoxy.

The controversy established a doctrinal statement on the value of images of Christ, the saints, and angels.

This document was limited to mosaics and paintings but not to sculpture, which was never approved by the Eastern Church.

In accordance with the concept of orthodoxy, Byzantine artists began to look back to the sixth century for models.

Byzantine art was governed by strict conventions, such as the figure of a saint had to face the spectator in order to act as a channel for prayer to his or her prototype in heaven.

The iconographic program was limited to those regions which looked to Constantinople instead of Rome for doctrinal authority.

Virgin and Child (fig. 7.48)

Since 431, the Virgin had gained increasing importance in Christian thought and came to be known as the great intercessor for mankind.
• From the sixth century on, she was given the prominence of being represented with the Christ Child in the conch above the high altar.

**Christ Pantocrator** (fig. 7.50)

• The beginning of the tradition of placing the image of Christ as 'ruler of all things' in the central dome is shown in this mosaic.
• In this image Christ is represented as the ruler and the judge of mankind.

**CHRISTIAN ART IN NORTHERN EUROPE**

• During the period known as the Dark Ages when migrant people from the East swept across the continent, after the collapse of the Roman Empire, there was a sudden flowering of Christian art in Ireland and in other remote islands off the north coast of England.
• The style which emerged has been called Celtic, Irish, and Hiberno-Saxon and was also known as 'Insular' for its isolation from the Greek and Roman worlds.
• Christianity had been introduced to England during the Roman occupation and during the Dark Ages the conversion of Ireland began.
• The Mediterranean Classical influence did not penetrate very deeply into this part of Europe.

**Incarnation initial from the Book of Kells** (fig. 7.55)

• Illuminated manuscripts were inscribed and decorated by monks.
• The pages from the illuminated manuscripts are among the most intricately beautiful ever painted.
• This image illustrates that a whole page was devoted to the Chi-Rho monogram.

**Interlace and Illumination**

• Freedom was given to the Irish poets to compose ballads in the vernacular and to the metal workers who went on using ornamental motifs in their designs.

**Latchet** (fig. 7.57)

• This object was for fastening clothes and was cast in bronze with enamel inlaid.
• The main motif on the disc is one favored in Celtic art, a triskele, which was three legs coming from a single point, each one curling round and dividing into spirals, the larger
of which ends in a bird’s head, the smaller in a kind of comma.

Carpet page with cross, from Lindisfarne Gospels (fig. 7.58)
- The same spiraling lines as seen in utilitarian objects, which sometimes ended in animal heads, also appeared in the more elaborate manuscripts.
- The border on this carpet page is composed of strange birds knotted together by ribbons, which pass from the wing feathers of one to the neck of the next.
- Within the image are symbols that were also used in the jewelry made for the migrant people from Europe.
- The scribe and illuminator reduced his figures schematically almost to patterns of flat colors.
- The cross itself is elaborate and set in a rich background.

CHRISTIAN ART IN WESTERN EUROPE
- Christian art on the continent remained true to its Classical origins.
- After they converted to Christianity, the art of the Teutonic people who, swept across the former Western Roman Empire in what was called the Migration Period, adopted Italian and Byzantine prototypes.
- The church building style established during Roman times continued in Gaul.
- Decorations of the churches were executed in stucco and paint instead of the expensive marble and mosaic.

Three saints (fig. 7.62)
- These are three of six larger than life figures of female saints done in the true Classical serenity and a severe elegance.
- The shape of the bodies is not evident under the drapery and the faces are void of expression.

The Carolingian Renovatio
- Charlemagne inherited an area which would cover modern day Germany, most of the Netherlands, the whole of Belgium and Switzerland, and nearly all of France.
- His territory also included the Lombard kingdom of Italy which stretched as far south as Rome.
- Charlemagne patronized scholarship and the arts on a lavish scale never seen before in northern Europe.
• He also recognized the importance of Latin for official as well as religious use.
• From Italy and elsewhere Charlemagne gathered to his court many of the most learned men of the day to school his priests and monks.
• These learned men also set about to restore Latin as a literary language by revising its spelling and devised a beautifully clear script in which official documents could be written.
• This restoration of Latin, to its Classical clarity, was accompanied by an attempt to reform the visual arts.
• It is seen more as a renovation of surviving traditions than as a rebirth of one that had died out.

Palatine Chapel of Charlemagne (figs. 7.64-66)
• St. Vitale in Ravenna served as the model for the imperial palace Chapel at Aachen.
• The columns of granite and marble were brought in from Italy.
• This structure is more massive than St. Vitale and the columns on the upper gallery are more for decoration than for support.