

Evolution of Christ through
Iconographic

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Over the years art is something that changes and morphs, this is especially true of Christian art. The evolution of images comes out of the different schisms of the church and denominations that have developed throughout the centuries, as well as cultural or political influences. When looking at the history and developments of Christianity and the world, the artwork produced reflects this, as well as the nature of the religion and the people who create the artwork. Christianity is a global religion that began in Jerusalem, and gained popularity in Rome in the fourth century, focusing on these areas as well as some other areas of the Mediterranean, the evolution of Christ in imagery shows what changes were made and why they were made, and if they are dependant on the time and regions that these images come out of, beginning with looking at images from the mid 3rd century and continues until about the mid 16th century.

The colony of Dura Europos, in modern day Syria was founded in 303 BCE by the successors of Alexander the Great¹. Eventually it became a Roman colony, and after the death of the historical figure of Jesus, Christianity became illegal. This is the case of Figure A, known as the Good Shepherd, which is over a baptismal pool. In the imagery there is nothing but a figure and his sheep herd, with two figures in the bottom section. The vagueness of the imagery can be connected to two possible reasons, the first being the illegal nature of Christianity at this time, and a possible conversion tool. It is easy to see the figure of the Good Shepherd being a conversion tool for early Christians to use to get Pagans to convert, as the pose is borrowed from earlier Pagan artwork. Pagans would understand the relationship between the Shepherd and the flock through their own mythology and writings, like with the *Odyssey*, when Helios' cattle are killed².

¹ Michael Peppard, *The World's Oldest Church* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 5.

² Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fagles, (New York: Penguin Classics, 1997), 282.

The other artwork in this area shows that the structure was in fact a church, but still there are no overt symbols to say that this shepherd is the figure of Christ, which is where scripture comes into play. In both the Old and the New Testament, there is writings on God and or Christ being a shepherd to his flock. In the Gospel of John in the New Testament, Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep³”. Just like the imagery of the Good Shepherd could be used to convert Pagans, it could also be used to convert the Jewish population of Dura Europos, through Old Testament writings from Isaiah, “He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep⁴”.

Furthermore, in future creation of Christian baptistries, the Good Shepherd is also used, as one is joining the flock through baptism⁵. Baptism is seen as one of the seven sacraments, that can lead someone to salvation, one of the most appealing things about Christianity. Salvation plays a key factor in early Christian art, and it also the theme of this piece. As mentioned before, there are two figures under the figure of the Good Shepherd, with a tree between them, which is symbol to indicate these figures are Adam and Eve, the perpetrators of original sin. With these figures positioned where they are, it tells the viewer that the only way to gain salvation and be absolved of sin, is through Christ.

The Santa Maria antiqua sarcophagus, Figure B, was made around 275 AD, and shows a mixture of not only Christian and Jewish imagery, but Pagan as well. Part of the sarcophagus is cut off due to the angle of of photograph. Beginning on the right side, two fishermen are cut off,

³ John 10:11

⁴ Isaiah 40:11

⁵Michael Peppard, *The World's Oldest Church* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016),100.

but it moves right into the baptism of Christ⁶. Like with the baptismal lunette from Dura Europos, the theme is salvation, especially with the fact that this is a sarcophagus.

When these highly schematized scenes are painted in the catacombs
or carved on sarcophagi, their presence next to the body of the dead
has the same meaning as the prayer of the burial office called the
commendatio animae; they enumerate the precedents for divine
intervention for one of the faithful, and express the desire that God
may exercise the same benignity toward the person who is now dead⁷.

Again with baptism being a sacrament that ensure salvation, being on a sarcophagus, it is a call to God to save the soul of the person who died. The Good Shepherd is next to the baptism, showing the mixture between Christian and Pagan themes.

This is followed by what is known as a philosophical conversion, which appears often in Pagan funerary art⁸. The figures are incomplete in their facial features, but there is a man with a scroll, borrowed from Pagan imagery, with a woman in the orant pose, which is utilized in early Christian art to show prayer. Next to this is the story of Jonah, who spent 3 days in the belly of a whale, a typological story to that mirrors to the death and resurrection of Christ. On the far left of the sarcophagus past the boat with the fishermen, there is a figure melded with the sea and what looks like a trident⁹, which means it can be assumed that this is the Pagan god of the sea, Poseidon to the Greeks or Neptune to the Romans. Because of the illegal nature of Christianity, none of the Christian symbolism could be that obvious or straight forward, meaning a mixture of Christian, Jewish and Pagan imagery, to amplify salvation, and possibly conversion tools.

⁶ Charles R. Morey, *The Christian Sarcophagus in S. Maria Antiqua* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press for the American Academy in Rome, 1905), 148.

⁷ Andre Grabar, *Christian Iconography: A Study of Its Origins*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 10.

⁸ Charles R. Morey, *The Christian Sarcophagus in S. Maria Antiqua* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press for the American Academy in Rome, 1905), 150.

⁹ Ibid, 149.

Looking to Figure C, which is another sarcophagus made in the late 3rd century, showing just how much the Pagan and Christian art cross over. There are three shepherds surrounded by cherub like figures collecting grapes. This easily could be a Pagan sarcophagus in celebration of the god of wine, Bacchus to the Romans or Dionysus to the Greeks. Or the collecting of grapes could lead to the making of wine, which some of the cherubs are doing, representing wine as the blood of Christ in the Eucharist. The Eucharist is another sacrament to the Christians which ensures salvation¹⁰.

In the early 4th century, the Roman emperor Constantine came to power through the battle of the Milvian bridge, where he was said to have visions of the Chi-Rho symbol.

He said that early in the afternoon...he saw in the sky the trophy of a cross, composed of light, standing above the sun. He swore that he saw it with his own eyes, and that it bore this inscription: 'By this you shall conquer!' ...He was still pondering in his mind when night fell. While he slept the Christ of God, appeared with the same sign...and he commanded him to have a standard made in the same form, and to use it as a protection in battle...On this was placed the badge of our salvation, that is to say, the first two letters of the name Christ, Chi and Rho, the X intersecting the P in the middle¹¹.

So after he became emperor, Constantine legalized Christianity, and went on to create many Christian building projects during his lifetime. Figure D comes from Sta. Costanza, a building project done by Constantine in Rome, which was a mausoleum where his daughter, Constantina, was buried. Although Christianity is now legal at this time, Figure D is very similar to the last image with the three shepherds. Cherubs collecting grapes to make wine. Because of this, there is

¹⁰ Andre Grabar, *Christian Iconography: A Study of Its Origins*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 11.

¹¹ Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, trans. Averil Cameron, and Stuart George Hall (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 142-143.

an uncertainty about the figure in the center of vines. Could this be Christ, a Pagan god, or someone else entirely? Which begs the question with the legalization of Christianity, why this mosaic is still so vague. It is more likely than not that Constantine chose to appease both the Pagans and the Christians in Rome at this time. Though Sta. Costanza is believed to actually be a temple to Bacchus, as Constantina wanted to be buried in a more traditional royal Roman way¹².

Figure E is another sarcophagus, that is Christian and wants the viewer to know that without a doubt. The Chi-Rho symbol in the center, with Christ carrying the cross to the left as well as what looks like a early form of the flagellation of Christ, where the Roman soldier is placing the crown of thorns on the head of Christ and holds a stick in his hand. Then to the right, Christ is before Pilate. Although there are overt Christian symbols, the figure of Christ still does not look like the figure that is most commonly seen today. He does not have any beard, and so this representation of Christ is called the youthful Christ. But the most important thing that is on the sarcophagus, there is the cross, which is something that is shied away from in this early Christian art, because of the shame that crucifixion brings on a person.

In the early 4th century, some exploration about the figure of Christ in imagery. With the ability to show Christ outwardly, artist most likely wanted to explore how to do it. So images like Figure F appear with the youthful Christ using a wand to raise Lazarus from the dead. Although the wand imagery did not last long, the resurrection of Lazarus was a popular theme in funerary art, because of the idea of salvation after death¹³. The wand imagery did not last long because wands were associated with Pagan magicians, and with the growing popularity of

¹²Karl Lehmann, "Sta. Costanza." *The Art Bulletin* 37, no. 3 (1955): 196.

¹³ William Tronzo, *The Via Latina Catacomb: Imitation and Discontinuity in Fourth-Century Roman Painting* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1986), 53.

Christianity, Christians no longer needed to borrow Pagan imagery for conversion tools, but now to completely repurpose Pagan artistic conventions to benefit their religion.

The use of the Pagan artistic conventions to benefit Christianity through the use of tradition is seen with the first known image of the bearded Christ (Figure G), which comes out of the late 300s in Rome. In Pagan imagery some of the most important gods have beards. So by artists making the conscious choice to give Christ a beard, he gains the authority that these Pagan gods had, especially in a city like Rome, with a heavy Pagan past. It must be noted that even though early Christians did borrow symbolism from Pagan and imperial art, because of the legality, it does not mean that the artists were equating the Christian God and the Pagan gods¹⁴. In Figure H the continuation of giving Christ a beard in images, as well as the cross is seen. But this time the cross is only floating above the head of Christ, he not on the cross itself. It shows the relationship of Christ and the cross, but not the shame that comes from Crucifixion.

During the 6th century, Ravenna, where Sant'apollinare Nuovo is built, was conquered and ruled by Theodoric, who was an Ostrogoth king¹⁵. The Ostrogoths were part of a Christian heresy, known as the Arian, which denied the divinity of Christ, because of his human form. So although Sant'apollinare Nuovo has mosaics of the life of Christ, they exclude stories from the gospels that tell of the divinity. Figures I and J come from the top register of the nave walls of the Sant'apollinare Nuovo¹⁶. What is most interesting is the fact that they show the passage of time between Christ calling his first disciples to join him and the last supper. the youthful Christ at first, but in the last supper scene, he has a beard. So even with the missing pieces of the orthodox life of Christ, there is still a change in the way that his life is shown.

¹⁴Fredric W. Schlatter, "Interpreting the Mosaic of Santa Pudenziana." *Vigiliae Christianae* 46, no. 3 (1992): 291.

¹⁵ Joachim Poeschke, *Italian Mosaics 300-1300*, trans. Russell Stockman (New York: Abbeville, 2010), 134.

¹⁶ Ibid, 144-148.

Figure K is an image comes from a pilgrimage box, from Palestine, that has painted scenes on the inside lid, and holds different mementos from pilgrimages through the holy land. The center image is a youthful Christ actually on the cross, but he is still fully robed, as to not completely be associated with the shame of crucifixion. In the time of Constantine, pilgrimage became extremely popular as a means to collapse temporal distance between the pilgrims and the historical figure of Christ, to gain a deeper spiritual connection. In the artwork on the pilgrimage box, there are other scenes, that show modern buildings with scenes of the life of Christ, which mirrors the experience of the pilgrims who traveled to the area and walked where Christ did¹⁷.

Jumping a few hundred years, to the early 11th century, Figure L is representation of Christ being crucifixion from Greece. This is much different from Figure K and is closer to modern day portrayals of the crucifixion. Christ is bearded, but not fully robed, like with the pilgrim box, with just a cloth covering his lower half. The most important thing is the artist shows the anguish on Christ's face, and blood coming out of the puncture holes on his body. Underneath the feet of Christ is a skull, which is the skull of Adam, as it is believed that Adam is buried in the same place that Christ was crucified. Again the theme of salvation comes into play as only through Christ can the sin of Adam and Eve be absolved.

Moving to the mid 14th century, a similar approach to the crucifixion is done in Figure M to the last piece. Anguish is shown with blood almost like rain dripping from Christ's body. This piece came out of Venice, and is interesting because it is a mixture of Byzantine symbolism, but shows some Western conventions¹⁸, like the dress of the soldiers is contemporary. It is very

¹⁷ *Egeria: Diary of a Pilgrim*, trans. George E. Gingras. (New York: Newman Press, 1970).

¹⁸ "The Crucifixion," *NGA.gov*, last modified March 21, 2016, <https://www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/Collection/art-object-page.284.html#overview>.

different to other Italian art, with the amount of blood that is shown. In Renaissance art, the wounds of Christ are down played completely, to small pin pricks. For example the bronze sculptures (Figure N) done about 100 years late for the northern doors of the baptistery in Florence. The doors show scenes from the life of Christ, unlike Sant'apollinare Nuovo, the doors include scenes of Christ's divinity. The artistic style of the doors was done in the Greco-Roman fashion as they were created right at the beginning of the Renaissance¹⁹.

The lack of blood and size of the stigmata are very different than what we see in the north from around the 15th and 16th century. From Hans Multscher, Figure O is a painting of the resurrection of Christ, is created only about 10 years after the doors of the Florentine baptistry, but blood is still pouring out of Christ, even in the resurrection. Multscher used painful expressionism to show the true sacrifice of Christ as a way for the viewer to engage with the painting²⁰.

Staying in the North, moving to Figure P, which is part of the Isenheim Altarpiece, that was commissioned for the Antonite Monastery, which also functioned a hospital that dealt with patients the plague and St, Anthony's Fire²¹. Like the crucifixion art from the 11th century in Greece, the anguish on Christ's face is shown, and the toll that the crucifixion had on the body all together. This anguish and state of Christ's body is to mirror the suffering of the patrons in the hospital, as Christ has black pustules on his body like those suffering the plague²². Not only does this work to show the patron's suffering, but also shows a northern convention that comes out of Sweden. During the 14th century, a woman named Bridget began to experience visions of

¹⁹ Fred S.Kleiner, *Gardern's Art Through The Ages* (Boston: Cengage Learning, 2017),463.

²⁰ James Snyder, *Northern Renaissance Art*, ed. Larry Silver and Henry Luttikhuizen (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2004),74.

²¹ Ibid, 290.

²² Ibid,292.

the crucifixion²³, so some of Bridget's visions were incorporated into the work, which was common in Northern Renaissance works.

The last two images show the changes in Christ done by two artist, who come out of the same city at the same time, but their own spirituality is what causes them to make these drastic changes to the figure of Christ. First looking Figure Q, a painting done by Verrocchio, who is the teacher of da Vinci, though it is argued about how much Verrocchio actually did on this painting and so it is possibly a painting done by da Vinci. Da Vinci's art was created to mirror the creative hand of god in order to show faith, and he believed that his scientific investigations made him a better painter, to show realism²⁴.

Michelangelo's approach to his figures is much different than da Vinci and Verrocchio. The sistine chapel altarpiece (Figure R) has a scene known as the Last Judgement, and shows Christ in a resurrected form at the end of the world. Like Ghiberti and the baptistry doors, Michelangelo linked the body of Christ to classical ideals by making Christ beardless, nude, and muscular²⁵. Also Christ's small pin pricks are much different than the Northern depictions to amplify the sacrifice. Michelangelo's intent was to attempt to show how god had intended man to be before sin, and the perfected human, who has all their strength through their faith²⁶.

Through the span of about 1300 years, the portrayal of Christ evolved a lot, because of cultural, political, or spiritual reasons. These changes that occurred were made in order to fit the world that was around during the time for these early Christians up until the the Renaissance period where Christianity reached its height in artwork. Artwork of Christ still continues to

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Fred S.Kleiner, *Gardern's Art Through The Ages* (Boston: Cengage Learning, 2017),504.

²⁵ Marcia B. Hall, Takashi Okamura, and Barbara Burn, *Michelangelo: The Frescoes of the Sistine Chapel*, (New York: Abrams, 2002),178.

²⁶ Ibid, 159.

change depending on the region as well as the political aspects going on in those regions to fit the needs of the people.

Figure A- Good Shepherd, Baptismal Lunette, Dura Europos, Syria, c. 256



Figure B- Santa Maria Antiqua Sarcophagus 275



Figure C- Vine Harvest, late 3rd c.

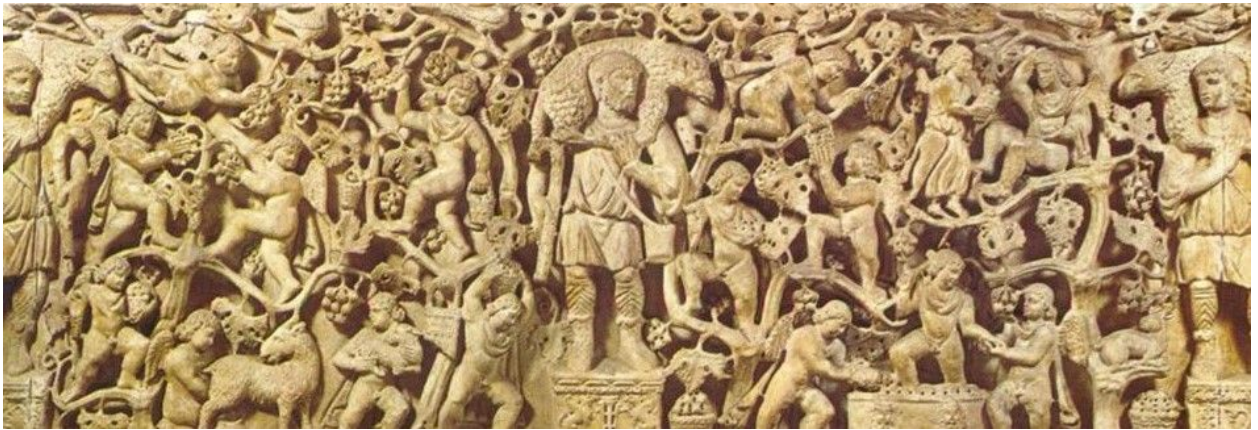


Figure D- Sta. Costanza, Rome 351



Figure E- Passion Sarcophagus, mid 4th c.



Figure F- Catacomb della via Latina, mid 4th c.

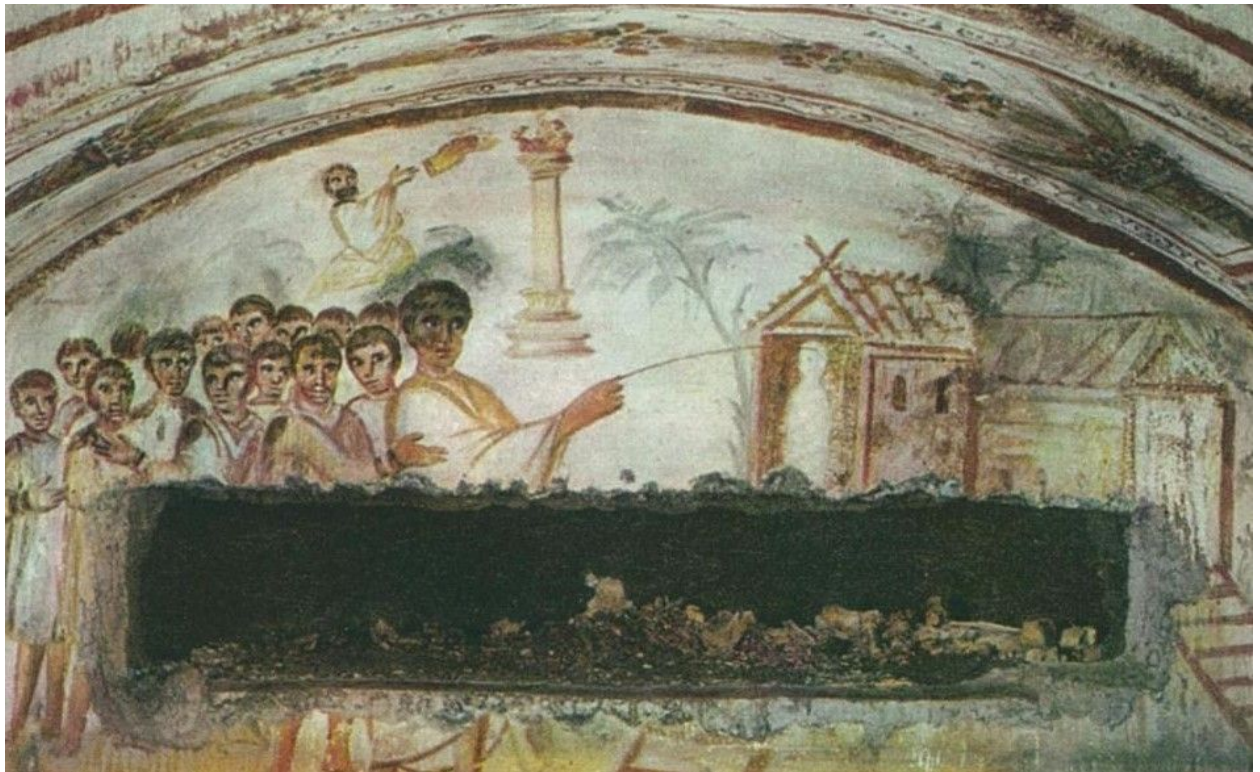


Figure G- Cubiculum Leonis late 4th c.

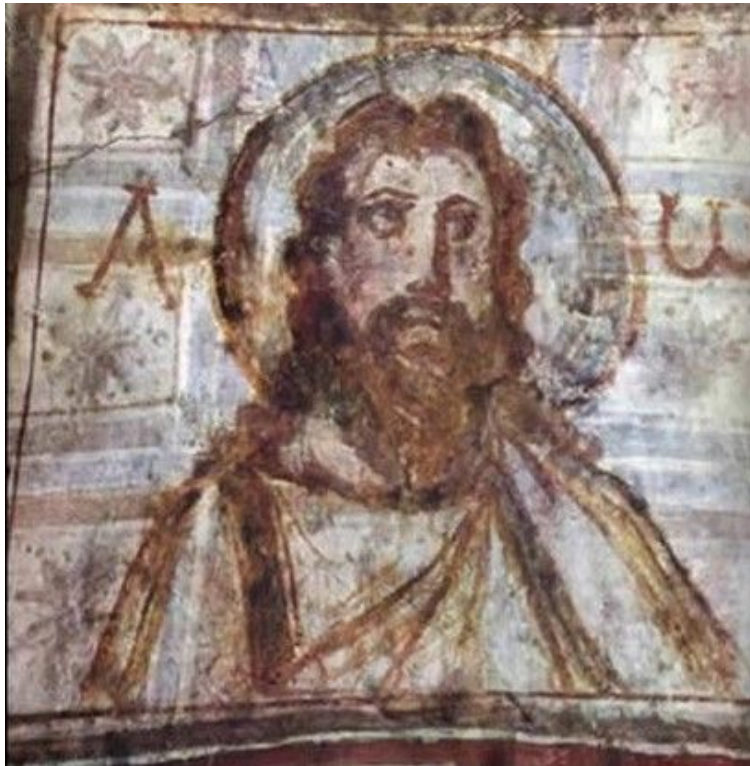


Figure H- Apse Mosaic, Santa Pudenziana 390



Figure I- Sant'apollinare Nuovo, early 6th c



Figure J- Sant'apollinare Nuovo, early 6th c

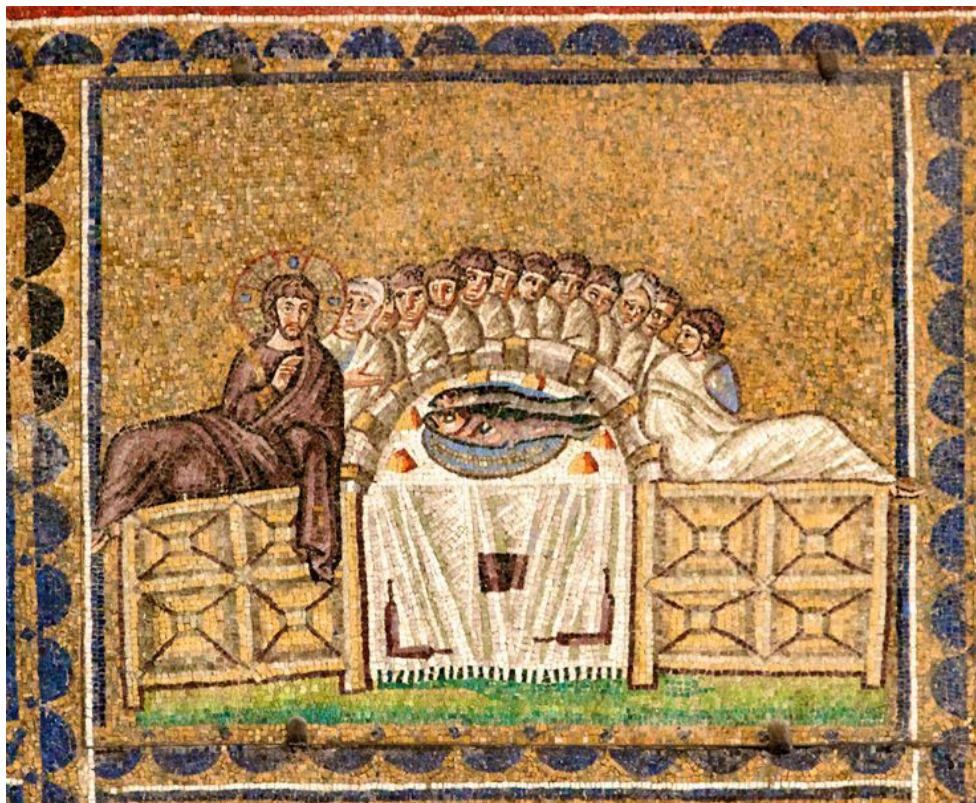


Figure K- Pilgrim Mementos, Jerusalem, late 6th c.



Figure L- The Crucifixion, Hosios Loukas, Greece, early 11th c.

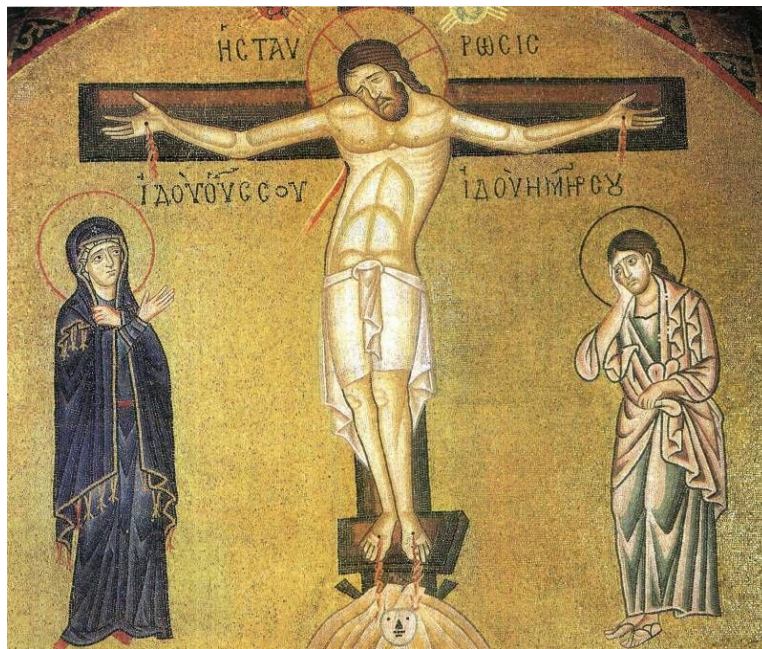


Figure M- Paolo Veneziano, Venetian, 1340

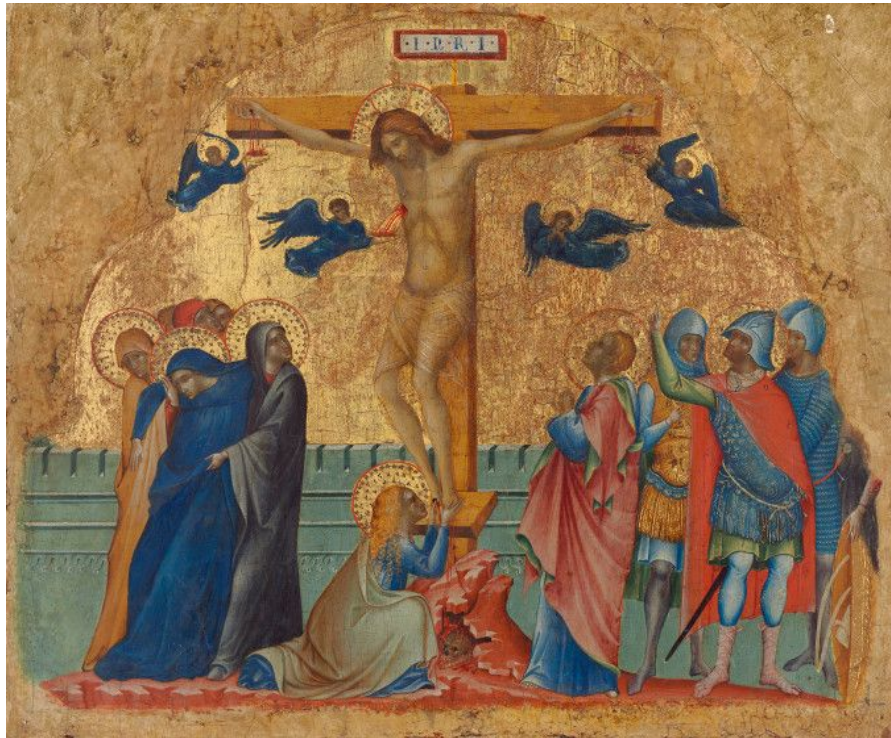


Figure N- Lorenzo Ghiberti, Northern Baptistry Doors, Florence, 1424

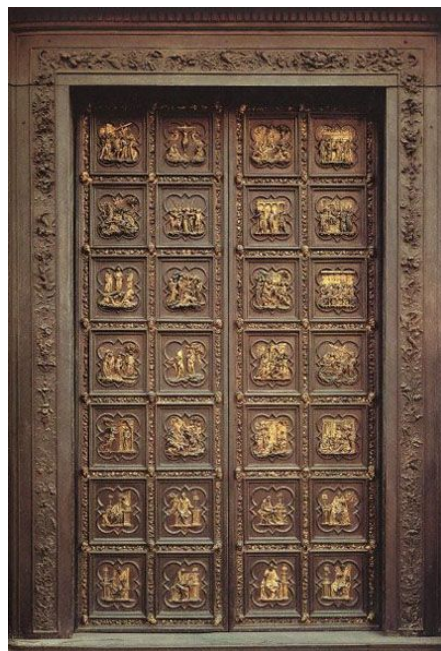


Figure O- Hans Multscher, Resurrection, Wurzach Altarpiece, Ulms, 1437



Figure P- Mathis Gothart Neithart, Isenheim Altarpiece, Antonite Monastery, 1515.



Figure Q- Andrea del Verrocchio, The Baptism of Christ, Florence, 1476



Figure R- Michelangelo, Last Judgement, Sistine Chapel, Rome, 1541



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