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Chloë Reddaway and Ben Quash

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Visual Arts and Christian Theology

Chloë Reddaway and Ben Quash

Christianity is sometimes described as a 'religion of the book', but visual art has long been used by Christians alongside and in addition to words, to express their experiences of and reflections about God. Its particular significance within some Christian contexts has been justified on christological grounds and based on the power of the image for those who believe that the divine Word became visible, tangible flesh. While art is a fundamental form of human expression – not a specifically Christian activity – for many Christians, visual art can be theologically expressive, capable of illuminating and influencing, and can be a theological medium describable in sacramental and epiphanic terms.

Christians have used visual art as a means of glorifying God and communicating belief since at least the second century CE. Despite iconophobic periods within some denominations, art has served didactic, commemorative, and inspirational purposes for much of Christian history, shaping experiences and colouring imaginations. From simple symbols, roughly executed in cheap materials, to exquisitely fashioned masterpieces, art has been a formative and transformative power in Christian lives.

The history of Christian interaction with art, and the history of *theological* engagement with art, are intertwined but not identical. Recorded theological reflection on art has been exceptional rather than continuous. The principal episodes in the history of theological discussion about images occurred at four main points in history: in the early Christian period (in a limited way); significantly during the Byzantine conflict between iconophiles and iconoclasts in the eighth and ninth centuries; again in the Protestant Reformation; and – to a lesser extent – in the Catholic Reformation that followed it. The theological commentary, debate, and polemic which arose at these times focused on questions of legitimacy and proper use. The passion with which such questions were argued – and the violence of iconoclasm – speak to the power of art, while its presence or absence in churches and domestic settings reflects both official theological and liturgical trends, and popular lay usage. Following this sporadic and controversy-driven history, in the twentieth century a gradual growth in theological interest in the visual arts led to the development of the discipline of 'theological aesthetics' or 'theology and the arts' including 'theology and the visual arts', which this article discusses.

Keywords: Theology and the arts, Images, Icons, Visual theology, Art, Revelation, Iconophilia, Iconophobia, Iconoclasm, Liturgical art, Devotion

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1 A scriptural theology of vision

Questions about the role and value of visuality and visibility are raised at numerous points in the Bible, beginning with the moment at which God creates light and sees that it is good (Gen 1:3–4). Theological treatments of the senses, both physical and spiritual, have likewise drawn on scriptural texts (as well as philosophical ideas) to celebrate the goodness of sight, giving it a high status in the spiritual life of Christians.

Christianity was a religion of visual epiphany before it was a religion of written testimony. The opening to John's Gospel announces that the first followers of Jesus – the divine 'Word' who 'became flesh and lived among us' – had '*seen* his glory' (John 1:14, emphasis added). John the Baptist (also in John's Gospel) did not say 'Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world'; he said '*Behold* the Lamb of God [...]' (John 1:29, emphasis added) – a line given new and continuing life in the Roman Catholic eucharistic liturgy when the consecrated elements are displayed to the congregation's eyes (Anglican liturgies such as the Church of England's *Common Worship* has 'Jesus is the Lamb of God', thereby avoiding controversy about the nature of Christ's presence in the elements). And it is in visual terms that Paul, in 1 Corinthians, describes what Christians ultimately hope for, when he writes that 'now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face' (1 Cor 13:12), thus laying the ground for what later Christian doctrine will call the 'beatific vision' as the ultimate end of human life. An analogous concern with eschatological vision can be found in 1 John 3:2: 'when [God] is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is' – here vision of God is presented as actively transformative of the creature.

Although difficult to reconcile with God's declaration that 'no one shall see me and live' (Exod 33:20), the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible is, likewise, generously populated with visual encounters, both with God ('theophanies') and with God's emissaries. These include the episode in Exodus 24, in which a large number of the elders of Israel are described as feasting with their eyes (and not just their mouths) as God is made manifest to them on Mount Sinai:

Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel. Under his feet there was something like a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. God did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; also they beheld God, and they ate and drank. (Exod 24:9–11)

This experience may be made possible by the fact that these leaders of Israel have been purified by the sprinkling of sacrificial blood shortly beforehand (Exod 24:7–8; and this may call to mind the New Testament again: 'blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God' [Matt 5:8; emphasis added]). The precise nature of what was seen (and how)

has been the subject of much speculation and some considerable wrangling in later interpretation. Nevertheless, in recording God's presence or activity in such vividly visual terms, Exodus places Moses, Aaron, and their companions in the company of Abraham (Gen 18:1), Jacob (Gen 32:30), Isaiah (Isa 6:1), Ezekiel (Ezek 1:1; 10:18–22), and others.

Whatever ocular experiences may underlie the written biblical texts, the Bible is now script not image. The biblical commandments' stern prohibition against making any likeness of God (Exod 20:4; Deut 5:8) remains powerful in Jewish as well as in many Christian traditions, as do strong affirmations of the preferability of hearing and reading words to the viewing of visual artefacts. The recollection of Moses speaking with God face to face (Exod 33:11) sits in tension with the account of how Moses hid his face because he was afraid to see God (Exod 3:6), and the implication that anyone else would die in the same circumstances (Exod 33:20). The fear of idolatry – or other kinds of error, fantasy, or self-indulgence – is one of the recurring themes in both Judaism and Christianity, as too (from the seventh century CE) in Islam.

Despite any such strictures, it is undeniable that the texts of both testaments have, over centuries, not merely recorded but also elicited a plethora of responses in distinctively visual mode, and the history of art is profoundly and inescapably marked by its relationship to the Bible. Martin O'Kane observes that there is something paradoxical about the fact that the Bible's authors 'create stories evidently intended to stimulate and exercise the reader's visual imagination' even while they 'appear so suspicious of the consequences' (O'Kane 2007: 6). Seeing is indisputably a complex matter in the Bible. Yet overwhelmingly the Bible's texts, as O'Kane notes, encourage visualization, both through the vividness of their narratives and their own direct appeal to visual experience. Many of the prophetic books record visions, as does the 'seer' of the Book of Revelation, and their readers (or hearers) are invited to use their minds' eyes to share these moments of apocalypse, or unveiling. It may be noted that revelation is, etymologically, a visual term.

Moreover, theological engagement with the visual arts has to navigate biblical passages such as the creation of humans in God's image (Gen 1:26–27), and Jesus' statement that whoever has seen him has seen the Father (John 14:9). Mainstream theological traditions have denied that the divine nature is literally 'seeable' with the physical senses. 'Seeing the Father' by way of seeing Jesus Christ is a revelatory participation in the divine life made possible by the incarnation rather than an additional event – related to an additional object – of physical sight (just as 'tasting' God's goodness [Ps 34:8] is not literal gustation of the divine nature, even when it takes place via physical acts of eucharistic communion). 'Seeing the Father' is the *insight* (in the context of transformed relationship) that is *precipitated by sight*; there is no more to see (physically) than what is seen in Jesus. It is his performance of the works of the Father that tell us how the works of the Father are

to be characterized and identified (John 10:37–38; 14:10). We are not to look for some extra works behind and beyond them.

Likewise, the way in which humanity is in the image of God (*imago Dei*) is rarely conceived literally in Christian theological tradition, as though God had a body distinct from the human body assumed – along with our full human nature – in the incarnation. In Orthodox tradition, the *imago* is ‘a divine disposition in men and women’ by which they seek to ‘correspond’ to the prospect of their eventual divinization (Bengard 2021: 39). Freedom and creativity are often highlighted as central aspects of this disposition. Various Western theories of the *imago Dei* have included the idea that our minds reflect God’s triune nature (*Trinity* 10.11–12; Augustine of Hippo 2002: 57–59) in the interaction of memory, reason, and will, for example; or that relationality itself – e.g. the fact that we can flourish as individuals only because we are persons-in-communion (Zizioulas 2004); or, more narrowly, the fact that we are created in a sexually differentiated way (*Church Dogmatics [CD]* III/1; Barth 1936: 186) – is the image of God in us. Nevertheless, although the *imago* in each of these examples is not strictly a visual phenomenon, our bodily experience is essential to it: both our mental operations and our human relationships depend upon our bodies, and so the role of the physical senses cannot be excised from the ways in which the image of God is (despite the disfigurements of sin) traceable in us.

The indexing of physical sensory experience to ‘higher’ forms of spiritual experience came to be expressed by various thinkers in terms of the ‘spiritual senses’ (Gavrilyuk and Coakley 2012; see also McInroy 2014: 2–4). In such accounts, as in discussions of how the human life of Jesus can allow us to ‘see the Father’, and the embodied human can ‘image’ God, the physical is not set up in dialectical opposition to the spiritual, but is seen as providing some of the necessary conditions for graced perception. Thus, Augustine speaks of a hierarchy of seeing, in which physical or bodily vision can ascend first to spiritual (we might today call this ‘imaginative’) vision, and thence to intellectual vision, which is akin to that of the angels and enables us to ‘see’ non-corporeal realities like the virtues, heaven, love, truth, and to a degree the divine nature (*The Literal Meaning of Genesis* 12.24.50, 12.26.54, 12.28.56, 12.31.59; Augustine of Hippo 1982: 213–222). Elsewhere, in Augustine’s *On the Freedom of the Will*, sight is held up along with hearing by Augustine as the highest of the senses because it is communal in character (i.e. many people can participate in the same events of seeing and hearing at the same time; perhaps arguably, Augustine claims that the other senses are more individualistically appropriative in that no two people can eat the same morsel, touch the same precise spot, or inhale the same particles). This makes vision a more complete analogue of, and portal to, ‘wisdom’ (which is communal participation in divine truth) than taste, touch, or smell can be (Augustine of Hippo 1993: 57).

The specific occurrences of the language of beauty in the Bible deserve attention, given the prominence of beauty in theological discussions of the transcendental properties of being, and (more specifically) of the arts. The presence of ‘beauty’ language is notable for its scarcity in the New Testament. It is also notable for its large lexicon (and variable applications) in the Old (though, that said, detailed physical descriptions of the appearance of individual characters in the Old Testament are relatively rare).

Two of the Hebrew roots most often associated with human beauty are *yph* (*yaḥseh*) and *tov* (*ṭōv*, which can also simply mean ‘good’). Sarah (Gen 12:11), the young David (1 Sam 16:12), Abigail (1 Sam 25:3), Absalom (2 Sam 14:25), Tamar (his sister; 2 Sam 13:1), Job’s second set of daughters (Job 42:15) and the lovers in the Song of Songs (Song 1:8, 15; 2:10, 13; 4:1, 7, 10; 5:9; 6:1, 4; 7:2, 7) are all described as beautiful (*yaḥseh*). Rebekah (Gen 24:16), Vashti (Esth 1:11), the virgins collected for Ahasuerus (Esth 2:2, 3), and Daniel and his friends (Dan 1:4) are all described as good-looking (*ṭōv*). Bathsheba (2 Sam 11:2), Adonijah (1 Kgs 1:6), Rachel (Gen 29:27), Joseph (Gen 39:6), and Esther (Esth 2:7) are all described as having superlative beauty (Brenner 1997: 44–45). But if one were to remove Genesis, the history books of 1 Samuel–2 Kings, and the Song of Songs, there would be virtually no reference left to beautiful people. Perhaps it suits the literary ends of the ‘dynastic soap opera’ of the early biblical histories to have good-looking characters, but that quality is deemed of relatively little consequence aside from these texts.

The adjectival form of *yph* (*yaḥseh*) is frequently used with *to’âr* (form) and *mar’eh* (appearance), which suggests that the beauty being attested to is one delivered by physical sensory perception. (There is no hint here of anything like ‘inner beauty’, as William Williams [1997] notes.) The term can be used to describe men and women, but just as easily the attractive qualities of trees, cows, a voice, or a city (like Zion in Ps 48:2). Meanwhile, there is no specific term for ‘ugly’; a lack of ugliness is described as an absence of ‘blemish’, and is often equated with wholesomeness and health. On these grounds, it is made a criterion for an acceptable sacrificial offering: no animal with a blemish may be sacrificed.

Some later Christian traditions have made a link between the idea of beauty and the idea of holiness, inspired by texts like Ps 29:2(‘O worship the LORD in the beauty [yet another word here: *hadarah* = ‘splendour’] of holiness’). This phrase can, however, be translated ‘holy attire’, and may refer once again to quite specific objects such as liturgical vestments. Here, too, the language of beauty in the Hebrew Bible is concerned with external, physical properties (as in the equation of beauty with wholeness of body), even when linked with what may sound to Christian ears like moral or spiritual qualities such as sanctity. Like unblemished and thus ‘beautiful’ bodies, holiness in the Old Testament is exemplified by *completeness*. So holiness, for Israel, is expressed in a physical way, as is beauty.

However, there are other traditions at work in the Old Testament canon that critique external, physical beauty as also dangerous. Although Saul is described as being of good physical presence (1 Sam 9:2), David as being ruddy with beautiful eyes (1 Sam 16:12), and Absalom as being an almost perfect physical specimen (2 Sam 14:25), Solomon, by contrast, is not described at all in terms of his appearance – and he is arguably the greatest of all the kings of Israel, and certainly the wisest. The fact that Absalom ‘stole the hearts of the men of Israel’ (2 Sam 15:6) seems to imply that there is a danger to the community when they judge on the basis of outward appearance alone, and his beauty in the end is his downfall, as his hair – once the occasion of celebration – becomes the means whereby he is caught and killed. The later Wisdom tradition develops this theme, coming nearer to a full ethical critique of the perils of superficial attachment to exterior adornments (Prov 11:22). A further Hebrew word, *tip'ārâ*, is often used to denote such ‘finery’; and while it does not always have negative connotations, it does on occasions when that finery is associated with pride (Isa 3:18) or used in service of ‘harlotry’ (Ezek 16:17; 23:26).

In the world of the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible, argues William Dyrness (1985: 422), beauty was simply an aspect of ‘the ordered meaning of God’s creation’. The danger was to desire it in a way that was at odds with this more general order, and thus to give it a misconceived ‘specialness’. Dyrness continues:

[T]he loveliness of an object (or event) was simply its being what it was meant to be. The beautiful was often what we might call merely the ‘fitting’ [...] This is because beauty is only the splendour of a system of relationships; it is an aspect of the totality of meaning of the created order [...]. (Dyrness 1985: 422)

God approves of things when they are ‘clean’, i.e. being used in line with his creative purpose, and are themselves ‘fit for purpose’. For instance, it might be better (that is, more fitting) that the place of God’s dwelling should be beautiful, but ultimately God’s presence resides in a place due to his covenant with his people and his people’s dedication to keeping the land ritually pure, and this is not dependent on that place’s attractiveness per se.

The Bible has no conception of fine art ‘or a class of works whose end is the pleasure they arouse in those who perceive them’. Instead, it uses ‘terms whose basic sense is that of work or craft to describe all the kinds of cultural production with which it is concerned’ (Ferretter 2004: 130).

The decorated band of the High Priest’s ephod is described as ‘ingenious work’ (Exod 28:8), so the narrator here is extolling creative skill and ingenuity – something more like a modern Western understanding of craft than of ‘high art’. In the Old Testament, God’s own

creative acts in forming human beings are celebrated in terms of craftsmanship (Isa 64:8), and where the creative powers of human beings are described as operating under divine inspiration (Exod 25; 31:1–6), the people in question are artisans and decorative artists.

God's own beauty is acknowledged with a special vocabulary in the Old Testament, which nowhere uses words with the *yph* root when describing God. The notion of God as pleasing and enticing is one that the Old Testament ultimately had in common with later Hellenistically-influenced Christian theology: 'One thing have I asked of the *Lord*, that I will seek after [...] to behold the beauty [*nô'am*] of the *Lord*, and to enquire in his temple' (Ps 27:4). God's presence is most typically associated with the language of 'glory' (*kâbôd*), which also has implications of weight or density (perhaps a little like when we describe a person of admirable character as someone 'of moral substance'), so that once again a very physical language does the (perhaps metaphorical) job of gesturing aesthetically towards God's otherness and dignity. Hans Urs von Balthasar has written that 'the word has its origin ("heaviness", "ponderousness", "imposingness") in a sphere where the "sensory" and the "spiritual" are indivisibly fused' (Balthasar 1991: 52–53):

[T]he mightiness of this 'I', which is the Absolute, [assumes] the character of majesty, and its spellbinding power (which holds others simultaneously at a distance from and in close proximity to itself) [assumes] the character of lordliness and – to the extent that God's absoluteness is here made present – also the character of sublime glory. (Balthasar 1991: 34)

The New Testament (especially in the epistles) has its own ethical critiques of the love of outward display as morally corrupt. This can be read as in continuity with the Wisdom tradition. Matthew 23:27 quotes Jesus' critique of the scribes and Pharisees as 'whitewashed tombs' which outwardly appear beautiful (*hōraios*) but are corrupt within. However, as indicated earlier, there are very few explicit references to beauty in the New Testament. Jesus says of the woman who anoints his feet in Mark 14:6 that '[s]he has done a beautiful thing to me' (*kalos*; literally, good work – *kalon ergon*). The elision of the language of (moral or spiritual) 'goodness' with that of beauty is a precursor of what would repeatedly in Christian tradition be a spiritualized use of the language of beauty, rather than one focused on the physical properties of things or people. In line with this, the letter to the Philippians invites its hearers to contemplate 'whatever is lovely' (*prophilē*; literally, loveable) alongside whatever is honourable, just, pure, and gracious (Phil 4:8).

As we note in section 4.1 below, the reasons for Christianity's distinctiveness in its embrace of figurative art from its main 'Abrahamic' neighbours (not only Judaism but Islam too) have at their heart the assumption of full humanity by the second person of the Trinity, the Logos. Jesus Christ was seen on earth ('we have beheld his glory') and 'dwelt among us' (John 1:14). As the 'image' (*eikon*) of the invisible God (Col 1:15), to whose likeness

Christians are in turn being conformed, Christ's own work of representation has been seen as hallowing and validating the representational activities of his followers.

2 Purposes of Christian art

Burne-Jones recalled

an awful thought of Ruskin's, that artists paint God for the world. There's a lump of greasy pigment at the end of Michael Angelo's hog-bristle brush, and by the time it has been laid on the stucco, there is something there that all men with eyes recognize as divine. Think of what it means. It is the power of bringing God into the world – making God manifest. It is giving back her Child that was crucified to Our Lady of Sorrows. (Burne-Jones 2012: 257)

Artworks created for Christian use have made God manifest in the world in myriad ways. How they have been understood and their role in faith and worship has varied according to denomination, time, place, and the people involved. Why artworks look the way they do, and what effect this has on viewers, depends on an inseparable combination of scriptural or religious interpretation, artistic elements (form, style, technique, materials, etc.), intention, location, use, and reception. Broadly, however, one may say that the purposes of Christian art have traditionally (and repeatedly) been affirmed as communicative and contemplative, with the Western Church focusing on didactic, inspirational, and commemorative functions, and the Eastern on a more relational encounter between the viewer and the holy person depicted. After intense debate, the Orthodox Church settled on framing the role of the icon in terms of direct and revelatory communion between God and human beings. The Roman Catholic Church, while espousing a less exalted theology of the sacred image as a locus of revelation, has defended its educational, devotional, liturgical, and sacramental roles. Protestant attitudes have included a tendency to iconophobia, sometimes leading to iconoclasm (notably during the Reformation), but also the recognition of a didactic and sometimes decorative role for images. The Church of England's approach to art has been especially varied and it does not have a single, identifiable, theology of the image but encompasses aesthetic approaches ranging from the sparse and ascetic to lavishly decorated buildings, which often stand in a 'high-church', Anglo-Catholic tradition.

The function of art as a didactic tool for the church is perhaps the most straightforward and least controversial of its possible functions. The idea of pictures as the Bible of the illiterate dates back at least to the sixth century, when Pope Gregory the Great rebuked the Bishop of Marseilles for iconoclasm on the grounds that 'what writing presents to readers, this a picture presents to the unlearned who behold, since in it even the ignorant see what they ought to follow; in it the illiterate read' (Letter 3; Gregory the Great 1898).

That people learned from the pictures on the walls, doors, and windows of their churches is undisputed, but Gregory's statement of their illustrative function seems arid compared with the anagogic riches of sacred art as described by Abbot Suger, writing about the rebuilding and adornment of the Abbey Church at St Denis:

'[...] when – out of my delight in the beauty of the house of God – the loveliness of the many-coloured gems has called me away from external cares, and worthy meditation has induced me to reflect, transferring that which is material to that which is immaterial, on the diversity of sacred virtues: then it seems to me that [...] by the grace of God, I can be transported from this inferior to that higher world in an anagogical manner'. (Quoted in Panofsky and Panofsky-Soergel 1979: 21)

And on the doors of the abbey itself was written:

'Bright is the noble work; but, being nobly bright, the work should brighten the minds, so that they may travel, through the true lights, to the True Light where Christ is the true door. [...] The dull mind rises to truth through that which is material and, in seeing this light, is resurrected from its former submersion'. (Quoted in Panofsky and Panofsky-Soergel 1979: 23)

For Suger, the human creation of beauty through skill was both a form of praise and a means of spiritual ascent.



Figure 1. Windows of the Visitation and Annunciation with Abbot Suger prostrate before the Virgin, twelfth century, from a window showing scenes from the infancy of Christ in the Lady Chapel of St Denis. Image source: Vassil via [Wikimedia Commons](#). Public domain.

Though presented in more prosaic language, the idea that art directs worship was reaffirmed by the Council of Trent (1545–1563) which was itself affirming the Second Council of Nicaea against iconoclasm: '[...] through these images which we kiss and before which we kneel and uncover our heads, we are adoring Christ and venerating the saints whose likeness these images bear' (Neuner and J. Dupuis 2001: 362). This devotional use of art incorporates its commemorative and inspirational functions, by which scripture and the lives of the saints are brought before viewers to remind them of their

faith and the lives of exemplary Christians, inspire their prayer, and encourage them in the Christian life.

In all these things, art has an interpretative responsibility, mediating scripture, tradition, and doctrine, encouraging or judging certain forms of faith and practice, and contributing significantly to the spiritual formation of individuals and communities. This gives art considerable power and, like most interpretative authority, its power is attested by the controversy to which it has, at times, given rise.

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, artists have often engaged with scripture in ways that appear to criticize or reject the Christian faith, or which simply ignore it. Others continued to use Christian motifs and frameworks even in ambiguous contexts, although this was often overlooked by art historians and critics whose analysis of the 'secular turn' in art excluded these religious elements. Recent theological scholarship (e.g. Anderson and Dyrness 2016; Crow 2017; Elkins 2004; Rosen 2015; Siedell 2008) has questioned the assumption that religion has no place in contemporary art, arguing that it is often critics and curators, rather than artists, who have overlooked or rejected Christian or 'spiritual' elements in contemporary art.

3 Early Christian art

The earliest surviving Christian art dates from the third century, in the form of wall paintings in the Christian building in Dura Europos and the catacombs in Rome, stone carvings, and signet rings (Finney 1987: 181–186). Both symbolic and narrative, early Christian art adapted Graeco-Roman artistic styles and forms to Christian purposes. Often created in a context of persecution, and hidden underground, symbolic imagery was used as coded communication under persecution and as a response to the difficulty of directly representing some aspects of Christian belief.



Figure 2. Intaglio ring with the Good Shepherd, fourth century, red carnelian with intaglio carving. 1.3 x 2.2 x 2.4cm, Eastern Mediterranean, Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, 42.1343. Gift of Mrs Saidie A. May, 1942. Courtesy [Walters Art Museum](#), Creative Commons (CC0 1.0).

Symbols served a triple purpose: through art, they enabled the communication of subjects which could not be directly represented (a problem common to Christian art throughout the centuries); they assisted with the gradual revelation of the mysteries of Christianity to catechumens, beginning with parables and symbols which allowed partial understanding leading up to deeper initiation; and they provided a coded language which Christians could use to communicate with each other without revealing themselves to an often hostile pagan world. The first Christian symbols were pagan symbols which Christians adapted to suit their own purposes, such as vine leaves, which were associated with Bacchus/Dionysius, and which could symbolize Christ (the true vine, John 15:1) and the wine of the Eucharist. Another popular symbol was the fish, which is probably explained by the initials of the Greek word for fish – *ICHTHUS* – matching the first letters of the words ‘Jesus Christ, Son of God, the Saviour’ (*Iesus Christos Theou Uios Soter*).

The catacomb paintings include figures of the Good Shepherd (which draws on the classical Hermes) and Orpheus (who descended into the underworld and returned to earth), as well as episodes from the Old and New Testaments. Precisely what early Christians thought about their art can only be surmised, but the choice of subjects includes examples of fortitude amongst the faithful, healing miracles, and stories from the life of Jesus, suggesting that the images had didactic, commemorative, and inspirational purposes, as has been the case for Christian art since.

Despite the absence of theological commentary on art written during this period, elements of theological aesthetics appear in the patristic authors in relation to the nature of God, Christology, or Creation. These are often presented within commentary on the ‘transcendentals’ of goodness, beauty, and truth, or reflections on divine and human creativity. (For a selection of sources, see Thiessen 2005: 15–48.) Theological discussions which were not directly concerned with art or aesthetics (in this and later periods) also influenced Christian art, notably in the changing emphases of the doctrine of salvation and the purpose of the crucifixion. These are reflected in an initial absence of depictions of the Crucified Christ, the introduction of such images showing Christ as vigorously and victoriously alive on the cross (in line with an emphasis on salvation as victory), and the gradual shift towards the iconography of his suffering and death as the price paid for sin (in line with an emphasis on salvation as involving substitutionary punishment).

4 Byzantine art

With Constantine’s edict of religious freedom (known as the Edict of Milan) in 313CE, and the later adoption of Christianity as the state religion of the Roman Empire with

Byzantium/Constantinople as its capital, Christian worship moved from private, hidden, spaces to public and prominent buildings. Christian art followed suit, increasing in scale and skill (and cost), and developing into the style known as Byzantine, epitomized by the great mosaics of the sixth-century churches of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople and Sant'Apollinare and San Vitale in Ravenna, which was briefly capital of the Byzantine Empire.



Figure 3. Apse Mosaic, San Vitale, Ravenna. Photographer: Petar Milošević. Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#). Creative Commons (CC BY-SA 4.0).

Such artworks often incorporated imperial imagery (including representations of imperial patrons), and their tone was largely one of confidence, even victory. As in the earliest centuries of Christian art, images of Christ Crucified from this period are rare – their relative scarcity is in dramatic contrast to the ubiquity of such images in later Western art. Alongside the mosaics and wall paintings in churches were panel paintings known as icons (although the term can apply more widely to depictions of holy persons or biblical episodes in a variety of media), portraying Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the saints. Icons are believed to date from around 200 CE, with survivals from the sixth century, and were a Christian adaptation of Roman portrait painting. Many legends were associated with icons of Christ and the Virgin, claiming ‘authenticity’ for these portraits, sometimes based on their supposedly miraculous creation (*acheiropoieta* – images not made by human hands), including the Mandylion of Edessa.

Their authenticity – whether through a direct relation to their subjects or by extension, through copies – lent weight to the idea that, in venerating a holy icon, the believer was in

direct communication with its holy subject, the copy being related in a participatory manner to its prototype, as the impression of a seal (e.g. in wax) is related to the seal which made it. As such, icons could not only receive veneration but channel divine grace and favour, answering prayers, offering protection, and even working miracles.

Icons were the focus of personal devotion in domestic contexts, as well as in churches where they increasingly had a liturgical function. Others had a public presence (beyond their visibility in churches), often associated with imperial power, such as the icon of Christ at the Chalke (bronze) Gate to the palace of Constantinople, which was repeatedly removed and restored during debates about the legitimacy of images. Certain icons had a particularly apotropaic role in defending cities, and were carried in processions and into battle to ensure victory.

4.1 Byzantine image debates and developments

A full theological defence of images appeared in the eighth century, during the controversy in the Eastern Church, which began c. 730 under the iconoclast emperor Leo III. An iconophile/iconodule position was adopted in 787 by the Second Council of Nicaea but iconoclasm resumed from 814 to 842 – until the regent empress, Theodora, restored icons in 843 (the ‘Triumph of Orthodoxy’). The legitimacy of images was further confirmed by the Fourth General Council of Constantinople (869–870), which pronounced the veneration of images of Christ on a par with the honour due to the Gospels and the image of the cross. (For summaries of the Byzantine image debates see, for example, Belting 1994: 102–208, 491–508).



Figure 4. Icon with the Triumph of Orthodoxy, c. 1400. Constantinople. British Museum 1988, 0411.1. Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#). Public domain.

Iconophobic arguments were based on the dangers of idolatry, while iconophiles appealed to the tradition of using images to venerate the holy person represented. Theologians including John of Damascus and Theodore the Studite were instrumental in articulating

the theological nature of such images (e.g. John of Damascus 1980; 2003; Theodore the Studite 1981). John of Damascus (c. 675–c.749) argued in *Three Treatises on the Divine Images* that icons are beneficial because they reveal the invisible and manifest the divine presence. He made three key points.

First, he emphasized the authority of the Church's tradition of venerating icons, likening this to the tradition of bowing to the cross. Second, he employed the Platonic idea that every image originates in the essence of its prototype and is related to it like a shadow to a body, or an impression to a seal. Here he drew on the writings of the fourth-century St Basil the Great, who argued that image and model are unified without being identical, distinguishable without being separate (Basil of Caesarea 2011: ch. 18, section 45). Their relation is like that between the Son and the Father, and therefore divinely sanctioned. The correct attitude to the images is veneration (a kind of submission), not of the material representation, but of the person. Veneration takes the form of adoration when directed to God, and reverence when directed to saints.

John's third and most important argument derives directly from the incarnation. While the uncircumscribable nature of the invisible God cannot be portrayed, the Old Testament prohibition of images was, in his view, partly due to the idolatrous behaviour of the Israelites and partly to the impossibility of depicting God. However, since Christ became incarnate, Christians could portray the incarnate Christ who is the image of God the Father. These images represent Christ to the viewer in a personal (hypostatic) encounter, and in Christ we see God – albeit, according to John through the 'dark glass' of our human limitations (*On the Divine Images*, Part 2; see John of Damascus 1980).

The iconoclastic debates of the eighth and ninth centuries were both a destructive process in terms of physical artworks and a process of refining the theological understanding of art in faith and worship, defining its acceptable forms and uses. This was as much a struggle to define Christology (and Mariology) as it was about art, and the Triumph of Orthodoxy in 843 CE established finally not only the permitted uses of devotional and liturgical art but a renewed understanding of Christ as fully human and fully divine, born of the God-bearer (*theotokos*) Mary.

Although often (wrongly) considered to be a 'static' style, Byzantine art continued to develop after the ninth century and was hugely influential for Western art (see Demus 1970). During the fourteenth century 'Paleologan Renaissance' in Byzantine culture, art was affected both by the spiritual movement known as hesychasm (with its focus on the deification of human beings and the indivisibility of matter and spirit, epitomized in the theology of St Gregory Palamas), and by the influence of Western humanism (largely identified with the 'rediscovery' of classical – Greek – metaphysics).



Figure 5. Deësis mosaic, c. 1261. South gallery of Hagia Sophia. Source: Myrabella via [Wikimedia Commons](#) (CC BY-SA 3.0).

While these movements did not specifically advocate particular forms or uses of sacred art, artists drew on the spiritual and intellectual currents of the time, with the complex result that contemporary icons show both a greater propensity to symbolism (in the sense, for instance, of a personification of Wisdom as an angel) and to naturalism (for example, in the handling of volume, depth, the human body, emotional expression, and the interaction between figures). Both symbolism and naturalism might appeal to hesychasts and humanists alike and, arguably, both may be seen as moving away from the deeply personal, relational, and revelatory form of communion with God which icons were traditionally intended to enable (Ouspensky 1992: 249–251 [vol. 2]).

During the sixteenth century, questions continued to arise regarding the proper subjects of icons and how they were correctly to be depicted, and support for a traditional understanding of icons remained a touchstone for broader efforts to combat heresy. By the seventeenth century, however, icon writers (especially in Russia) were using Western art as models, prompting yet more discussions of legitimate forms and styles for icons. The arguments were complicated by new aesthetic criteria, imported from the West, even as attempts were made to introduce quality control and combat increased commercialism. At the same time, Orthodox theologians writing defences of images against Protestant iconophobia were, arguably, employing principles belonging more to Western interests than Orthodox tradition, bringing it closer to Tridentine terms, focusing on correct usage rather than the theological justification and requirement for icons or their revelatory function. The eighteenth century saw a decline in traditional icon painting and a desire for

'original' artistic creation at odds with the orthodox function of icons, and in the nineteenth century, interest in icons was more historic than theological.

If this somewhat incoherent series of artistic events may be interpreted as an outworking of a church struggling to define its relationship with imported Western thought and culture, the twentieth century saw a renewed excitement about icons in the West, as well as in the Orthodox church. Modern painters, such as Kasimir Malevich and Wassily Kandinsky found inspiration in traditional icons, while amidst the religious decline of the West the icon was often received as reassuringly 'spiritual' and contemplative. The Orthodox theologian and icon-writer, Leonid Ouspensky, expresses this concisely:

The church sees in its holy image not simply one of the aspects of Orthodox teaching, but the expression of Orthodoxy in its totality [...] one of the manifestations of the holy Tradition of the Church, similar to the written and oral traditions. (Ouspensky 1992: 8)

5 Images in the Western Church

The Western Church also encountered differences of opinion regarding images but in general had a less complex approach to them, and they caused fewer problems until the Reformation. The different attitudes of the Eastern and Western churches eventually became embroiled in larger issues which led to the great schism of 1054.

In the late sixth century, Pope Gregory the Great argued that although adoration of images is indeed wrong, images enable the ignorant to learn by allowing the illiterate to see what they cannot read, and that their use was a tradition sanctioned by the Church Fathers (see Chazelle 1990: 138–153). Following the iconoclastic council of 754 and iconophile council of 787, the Emperor Charlemagne commissioned a report on decisions about images taken by the Eastern Church. This criticized both councils, partly due to a poor translation of the original Greek into Latin, but also for political reasons. Known as the *Libri Carolini*, it stated that images were suitable for decoration, instruction, and the commemoration of past events, but emphasized that they were not to be adored (which was, in fact, the Eastern position too). Discussions continued into the ninth century but iconophilia predominated in the West (Belting 1994: 533–535).

The Western Church assumed a lesser degree of identification between the image and its model than the Eastern. While relics and miracle working images abounded within Western Christianity, the primary purpose and justification of most images (unlike relics) was didactic, although they also had inspirational and commemorative purposes. Nevertheless, religious art caused controversy in medieval monastic circles, in part over the appropriateness of materials, amidst concerns about luxury versus asceticism, but also over fears of spiritual distraction (Rudolph 1990: 48–63).

Against the restrained aesthetic preferred by St Bernard and the Cistercians, the Benedictine Abbot Suger (c. 1081–1151) saw the creation of beautiful art and architecture as a form of worship. He oversaw the creation of the Gothic cathedral of St Denis in Paris, describing its interior as somewhere between earth and heaven and capable of transporting him, anagogically, from the one to the other. His delight in stained glass and jewels was framed in terms which bear an interesting similarity to a Pseudo-Dionysian, neo-Platonic, metaphysics of light in which mundane, earthly light can lead the mind to divine light which illuminates it, although whether Suger was directly influenced by Pseudo-Dionysius is debated (Panofsky and Panofsky-Soergel 1979: 18–26, 64–65; Rudolph 1990: 48–63).

Throughout medieval times and into the Renaissance, Church patronage of the visual arts proliferated. Monasteries had long been centres of artistic production – primarily of illuminated manuscripts destined for royalty and the aristocracy – and increasingly became patrons, providing employment for stone carvers, stained-glass makers, metal workers and jewellers, embroiderers, and painters. The rise of publicly accessible cathedrals made such artworks visible to a wider audience and, as the mendicant and preaching orders grew in popularity, their vast churches offered a new environment for a theological partnership between word and image.

Franciscan interest in Christ's humanity and in the natural world was instrumental in spreading iconographies that revered Christ's tender infancy as well as the extremity of his suffering on the cross, which was presented on huge painted panel-crucifixes suspended above the rood screens of churches designed to accommodate the growing crowds drawn by the friars. The Franciscans also disseminated images of their founder (and his Christ-like stigmata) to an unprecedented degree. The influence on Franciscan spirituality of theologians such as Bonaventure and the author of the *Meditations on the Life of Christ* was also significant in developing models of prayer and meditation which focused on aesthetic and imaginative perception and affective reading and viewing. It is noteworthy that interest in the *Meditations* went hand in hand with early Renaissance developments in the depiction of coherent illusionistic spaces inhabited by volumetrically credible figures (Mulvaney 2005: 171).

The Franciscans were not alone, however, in supporting and influencing artistic production through artworks created for their churches and religious houses, which could play an important role in the spiritual formation of their members (see, for example, Hood 1993 on Fra Angelico's paintings for the Dominicans) and those they served. With the growing wealth of the merchant and professional classes, artistic commissions also came increasingly from private patrons, donating artworks to churches to which they

had a personal affiliation. Often these were posthumous bequests and many patrons simultaneously paid for masses to be said for their souls.

This wave of artistic patronage encouraged the flourishing of specific artistic forms, notably the altarpiece, which developed from a simple panel in front of the altar to a reredos format behind the altar, and then increased in size, achieving vast proportions in some instances. Single panels expanded into multi-panel polyptychs, with a central section depicting the main subject of the altarpiece (usually the saint, event, or theological subject of the dedication of the church or chapel in question) and surrounding panels containing related subject matter.



Figure 6. Hubert Van Eyck and Jan Van Eyck, Ghent Altarpiece, 1430–1432. *The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb*. St Bavo's Cathedral, Ghent. Detail showing outer wings, closed, depicting prophets and sibyls, the Annunciation to the Virgin, Saints John the Baptist and John the Evangelist, and the donors. Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#). Public domain.

Although the Renaissance is commonly associated with the rise of the 'artist' as a figure of individual genius, in contrast to the – often unnamed – craftsmen and artisans of earlier generations, artistic production often involved workshops and the combining of various skills. Artists frequently worked to specific requirements, and sometimes with theological advisors, especially for church commissions.

The economic growth which enabled so many private donations of art to churches also resulted in the increased production of devotional artworks for domestic use. As well as costly pieces accessible only to a few, cheap woodcut images of Christ and the saints became widely affordable by the early fifteenth century. This nascent market for religious art outside court and church circles was to develop further with the Reformation, which upended the status quo for religious art in the West – destroying many existing artworks, while also stimulating new forms of religious art.

Fuelled by arguments about image misuse and idolatry, and bound up with attitudes to relics and the saints, the Reformation brought a period of dramatic iconoclasm. There was not, however, a single 'Reform' position regarding art (see Heal and Koerner 2018). Among the reformers, Luther stands out for his moderation and tolerance regarding images. Initially opposed to images as useless and encouraging of idolatry, he nevertheless argued that, rather than destroying them, people should be persuaded of their inefficacy. Later he came to see images as neutral: neither sacred and efficacious nor prohibited. This was based on his interpretation of the Old Testament prohibition as applying only to idols, made and used as such, rather than to images per se: what mattered was how people *used* images. As ever, Luther emphasized the primacy of the Word of God in scripture and saw a role for images in the illustrated Bibles used even by some iconoclast reformers. He expressed the desire to paint the Bible narrative 'word for word on houses' so that everyone might see it and learn about Christ, and carry his image in their hearts. He approved of adding scriptural quotations to images and advocated painting the Last Supper above altars, along with inscriptions from the psalms (Belting 1994: 545–550).

In contrast, Karlstadt and Zwingli were iconoclasts, while Calvin later extended arguments against images, criticizing the Byzantine iconophile position and blaming the church for failing properly to educate ignorant people who desire images. He allowed that artistic skill could be a God-given gift, but only when used to portray things which human eyes are able to see. In this he articulated the movement in the Low Countries away from religious

subjects and towards genre scenes, still life paintings, historical subjects, and portraits, although some of these still contained moral commentary.

Responding to the Reformers, the Roman Catholic Council of Trent (1545–1563) reaffirmed the veneration of legitimate images. It decreed that these should be displayed in churches not because they are efficacious (in the sense of having some spiritual agency of their own), but because (as the Eastern Church had argued) the reverence shown to them transfers to the holy persons represented. The Council decreed that the faithful should be instructed and strengthened by images reminding them of divine providence and encouraging gratitude for the miracles of the saints, whom they would be inspired to emulate.

Following Trent, various authors provided further guidance for ecclesiastical authorities on how to conform to Tridentine ideals. Among them, Cardinal Paleotti, writing in 1582, wrote a treatise defending the Council's pronouncements and advocating images based on traditional models, although he accepted that even legitimate sacred images could be treated as profane. He listed specific conditions for calling an image 'sacred' and appears to draw on St Bonaventure's understanding of the way in which 'sensible images' aid the intellect and memory (Belting 1994: 554–556; Bonaventure 1978).



Figure 7. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Calling of St Matthew*, 1599–1600. San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome. Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#). Public domain.

Catholic Reformation strictures on (for example) nudity, superstition, and extravagance in art led to a movement away from the High Renaissance interest in the nude human form, and the sophistication and exaggeration of late Renaissance works. The heightened drama of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Baroque art had its own extravagance, but frequently directed its effects to explicitly devotional ends, to new subjects in the lives of the saints, and to new iconographies, including that of the Immaculate Conception. Baroque art was also exported to Asia and the Americas through missionary activity and adapted by local artists. The eighteenth century saw a reduction in Church patronage, the looting of art from churches by French armies after the Revolution, and the sale of art from suppressed religious institutions. Many artworks were placed in museum collections and thus moved into the preserve of art history and curatorship.



Figure 8. Unknown Cuzco Artist (Peru), Christ Carrying the Cross, called 'The Lord of the Fall', c.1770–1775. Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY. Gift of James Kung Wei Li, in memory of Ambassador and Mme Ti-Tsun Li, Republic of China, 2018. 2018.652.5. [The Met Open Access](#), public domain.

6 Modern and contemporary art and aesthetics

Between Protestant zeal for the word rather than the image, and the development of an Enlightenment rationalism that made freedom from religious norms a central principle, art in the West during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries shifted much of its interest towards 'secular' subjects such as landscapes, portraiture, and genre scenes. Leading artists could work independently of the Church in an expanding art market, driven by demand from the prosperous middle-classes. Meanwhile, the style and content of (mainly Catholic) Church commissions was distinct, and increasingly divergent, from the work that was critically celebrated in the mainstream art establishment.

From the mid-eighteenth century, the philosophy of aesthetics dominated discussions of the visual arts, with beauty – rather than legitimate forms and uses of art in Christianity – as a central concept. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) attempted, in his *Critique of Judgement* (1790; see Kant 2007), to consider 'beauty' as something to which human beings should relate disinterestedly. In essence, observers must find pleasure in an object for its own sake, not because of any benefit it brings them. Kant valued such judgements because of their freedom: they seemed to him to be uninhibited by personal ambitions or individual desires, and as a result they allowed objects to be contemplated and appreciated as beautiful without egotism. There is an ethical dimension to this cultivation of disinterestedness, but the convertibility of beauty with goodness and truth (in which all were considered together to be divinely-imparted qualities of being) – an idea that had characterized so much premodern thought – was definitively set aside in Kant's new approach, with its focus on the human subject and that subject's judgements. His emphasis on the disinterested appreciation of beauty played a key role in preparing the

way for the idea of 'art for art's sake' that would gain momentum in the nineteenth century, and had a crucial influence on numerous later philosophers.

Among them, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) diagnosed both art and religion as precursors of a purer philosophical stage in world history. This new stage, unencumbered by the 'picture thinking' in which absolute reality had previously been intuited, would provide the conditions for authentic freedom. His theory of 'symbolic art' stretched far beyond Christian forms (though it favoured them), yet in significant ways Hegel was an inheritor of the Lutheran prioritization of word over image. He saw the high-point of art's vocation as a thing of the past, while acknowledging that it remained important for human self-understanding. (The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* has useful entries on Kant, Hegel, Schleiermacher, and others; see also Adams, Pattison and Ward 2013: esp. 1–14, 419–433.)

German Romanticism reacted to Enlightenment rationalism and materialism with a commitment to both beauty and the 'sublime' (in nature and art) as fundamental to human existence and shaping it in all areas. As well as inspiring new art, the advocates of Romanticism often approached medieval and renaissance artworks with an awe for their artistry and expression of religious feeling.

Although Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) argued that the 'feeling' or intuition by which people are oriented towards God was overlooked in Kantian philosophy, with its emphasis on reason and will, he also questioned whether the non-verbal arts could express actual ideas and meanings. Schleiermacher's aesthetics engaged particularly with hermeneutics, which remains an underexplored aspect of theological approaches to the visual arts.

Romantic attitudes were critiqued – even parodied – by Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) as irresponsible and self-deceiving. Kierkegaard argued that Romanticism reduced religion to aesthetics and replaced God with human creativity. Arguably, Kierkegaard's assertion of the inability of art to take full account of reality, including suffering, has echoes in the modern and contemporary art which rejects the idea that art should offer comfort or consolation. (On Kierkegaard and Romanticism, see Pattison 1998: 21–29.)

In the eighteenth century, despite Romanticism's critics, the Gothic revival movement sought a return to medieval artistic forms and values. By the nineteenth century there was a plethora of highly decorated neo-Gothic churches, particularly in England, France, and the USA. Interlinked with the neo-Gothic aesthetic was an espousal of symbolism and sacramentalism in which the material and circumscribed could be a medium for the immaterial and infinite, and in which art might mediate grace and revelation. In various forms, these ideas can be traced in the writings of the poet and thinker Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834) – himself influenced by German Romanticism – by his fellow poet

William Wordsworth (1770–1850), and by the art critic and theorist, John Ruskin (1819–1900), who argued that human artistic creativity imitated divine creativity (see Brown 2013).

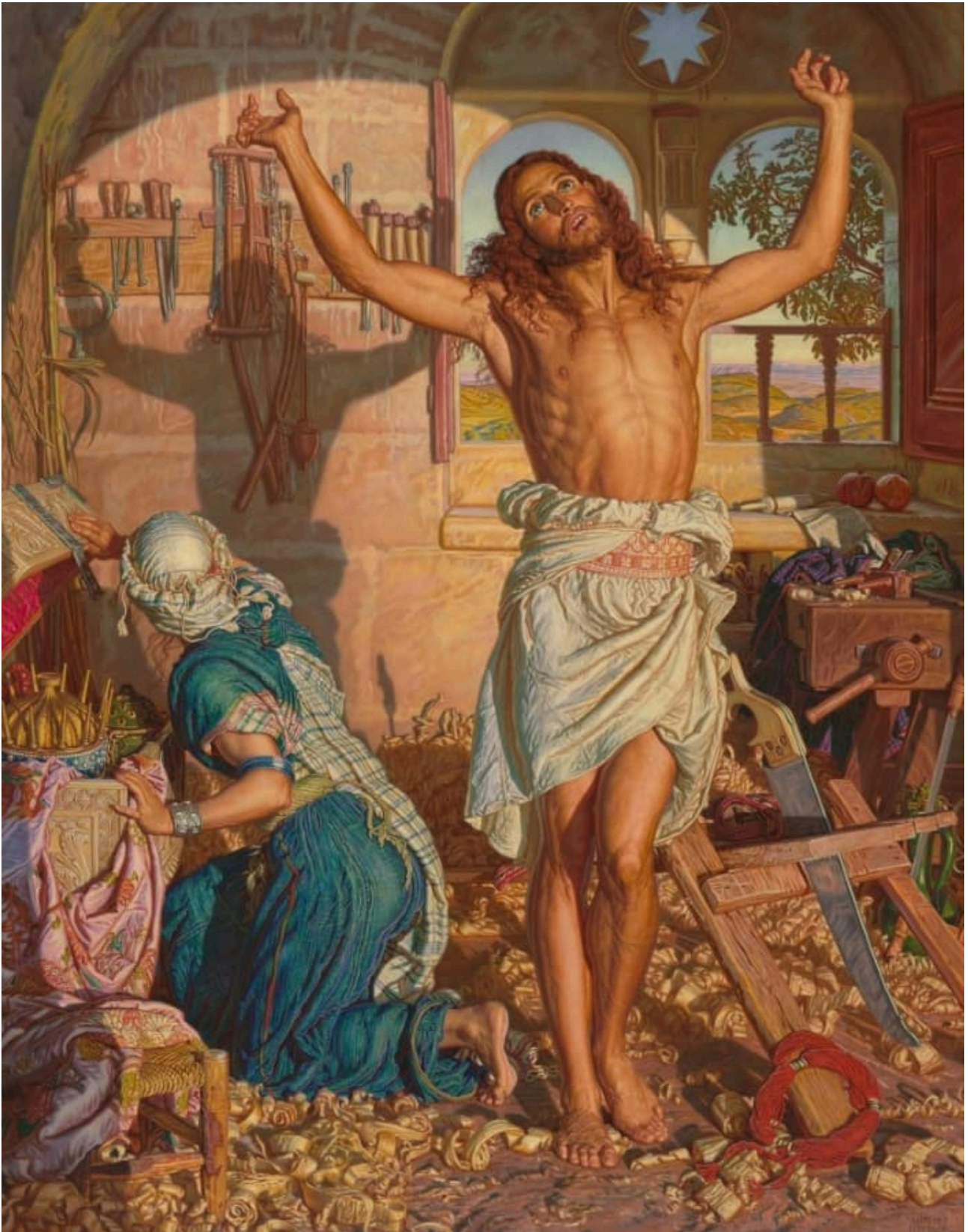


Figure 9. William Holman Hunt, *The Shadow of Death*, 1873–1874. Joseph Winterbotham Collection, Art Institute Chicago, 2021.54. Creative Commons (CC0 1.0).

A sacramental outlook was also influential in the development of groups of nineteenth-century painters, including the German Nazarenes and the English Pre-Raphaelites. The new Catholic sensibilities (both theological and aesthetic) embodied in the Oxford Movement and the Cambridge Camden Society accompanied the renewal of appreciation of Britain's medieval roots (in the Arts and Crafts movement and elsewhere) and the desire to mirror their glories in the face of an industrialized, urban, and already secularizing Britain. These revivals were in the vanguard of the triumphant return of the figurative visual arts to Anglican churches in Britain and across the then British Empire in the nineteenth century, with carving, mosaic, fresco, and in some cases painted altarpieces all experiencing a renaissance. A sacramental approach to art continued in other forms in the twentieth century, including in the writings of Jacques Maritain, the artistic approaches of (for example) Eric Gill, David Jones, and Georges Rouault, and the commissioning work of Marie-Alain Couturier (himself a stained-glass designer) and Pie-Raymond Régamey.

A wave of post-Second World War church commissions raised questions about the interaction of churches and contemporary artists. The French Dominican priests Pie-Raymond Régamey (1900–1996) and Marie-Alain Couturier (1907–1954), co-editors of the review *L'Art Sacré*, promoted numerous modern church commissions, including by non-Christian artists. Régamey believed that artworks could 'speak for themselves' (Régamey 1963: 178) and that self-professedly Christian artists often produced sentimental art of no real value. Indeed, it might fail because it is 'artificially manipulated for the good of the cause' and betrays what it intended to serve (Régamey 1963: 184). Régamey concludes that 'sacred art only requires a sacred character of the actual artistic creation, of the artist's exercise of his art' and not of his faith (Régamey 1963: 189). In the UK, similarly pioneering work was undertaken by George Bell and Walter Hussey, who commissioned artists including Henry Moore and Hans Feibusch.

Some artists continued to engage directly with the long heritage of Christian art in a broad sense through its subjects, themes, concerns, and iconography and, at times, with reference to specific works within that tradition. Thus, Ceri Richards' *Supper at Emmaus* (1958) for St Edmund Hall, Oxford, draws on Caravaggio's *Supper at Emmaus* (1601) in the National Gallery, London, while Graham Sutherland's *Noli me tangere* (1960) for Chichester Cathedral looks to Titian's version (c. 1514), also in the National Gallery. Ceri Richards' piece can be viewed online as part of the [Methodist Modern Art Collection](#).

The standard secular narrative that modern art outside Christian contexts is either uninterested in religion or opposed to it is challenged by twentieth-century artists from Cecil Collins and Stanley Spencer to Francis Bacon and Paula Rego, and by contemporary artists such as Tracey Emin, Chris Ofili, and Cornelia Parker. The presence of Christian themes and motifs is not, however, always apparent to viewers. Andy Warhol's *Death and Disaster* series, for example, may be ironic, but its very irony can be seen as a

cutting moral commentary on the dark side of capitalism which says much about biblical themes of vanitas and human frailty (see Reddaway 2019); while the degree to which viewers of Cornelia Parker's *Thirty Pieces of Silver* (1988–1989) appreciate its potential Christian resonance may vary, despite its overtly biblical title (Joynes 2024: 165–172). Even contemporary artworks which are antagonistic towards Christianity often explore themes of Christian concern. The lack of connection between contemporary art and Christianity is aggravated by each party's limited understanding of the other. The task of bridging it is partly in the hands of theologians, who are now more willing to engage with art which – while not necessarily explicitly religious – speaks to matters central to Christian faith; and there is an increasing openness to seeing and reflecting on such resonance in theological ways (the *Visual Commentary on Scripture* provides many examples of this sort of engagement: e.g. Waller 2018; Lewer 2020).

7 Global perspectives

Christians have always adapted to their own purposes the artforms of the cultures in which their faith has established itself. From the earliest use of Graeco-Roman motifs to medieval Coptic and Ethiopic textiles to Indo-Portuguese ivories from Goa, and from Japanese woodblock techniques to contemporary Australian art influenced by Aborigine culture, Christians have drawn on local artistic styles. Nevertheless, European art played a dominating role in some missionary activity, and both antisemitism in Christian art and the predominance of a White Jesus are increasingly recognized as problematic (see Eklund 2024: 149–163).

European art has also dominated the study of theology and the visual arts in European and North American academia, reflecting attitudes towards the Global South more generally, and perhaps exacerbated by the relative difficulty for scholars from the Global North of gaining access to artworks which are not in European or North American collections, and which are less likely to be available digitally. It is possible that a degree of prejudice against religion has also restricted interest in these artforms from art historians and critics. This article has itself been written from a predominantly Western perspective, in large part because summative, encyclopaedic, introductory, and handbook-style studies of non-Western works are scarce, and more likely to focus on art history or material culture than theology. The visual arts of Christianity in the Global South and Australia remain an underexplored area, despite growing interest (e.g. Amaladass and Löwner 2012; Bridger and Picton 2021; Gabra 2014; Nersessian 2001; Takenaka 1975).

8 An emerging discipline

The twentieth century saw a gradual growth in theological interest in the visual arts. To some extent, this was a consequence of theologians entering into dialogue with

philosophers for whom art has continued to be a significant theme, and whose outlooks theology has found it fruitful to think with: Martin Heidegger, Simone Weil, Iris Murdoch, and Hans-Georg Gadamer are all important examples of those whose ideas on art and on the idea of beauty are frequently discussed in twentieth century theological writing.

Roman Catholic theology in the twentieth century saw some concerted efforts to resource the Church once again from its patristic and medieval traditions of thought (*ressourcement*) in the service of opening it more fully to an engagement with modernity (*aggiornamento*), including with modern artistic developments. This led Hans Urs von Balthasar to undertake his ambitious project to restore the transcendental properties of being (truth, goodness, and beauty) to the centre of theological concern, with beauty as the essential 'first word' (Balthasar 2009: 18) without which being can only be experienced as incoherent and lifeless. In doing this, his trilogy (*The Glory of the Lord*, *Theo-Drama*, and *Theo-Logic*) also reversed the order of Kant's three Critiques (*Pure Reason*, *Practical Reason*, and [aesthetic] *Judgement*), arguing that we must be enraptured by beauty before we can respond to the call of goodness and embrace divine truth.

Other significant Catholic revivalists of the centrality of aesthetics to theology include Dietrich von Hildebrand (1889–1977), and the French Roman Catholic convert and neo-Thomist philosopher Jacques Maritain (1882–1973), previously mentioned. Maritain discussed the relationship between art and beauty, purity, morality, and gratuity; his descriptions of the nature and purpose of religious art are full of references to grace, delight, and the integrity of the artist. Although he explicitly condemned the elevation of art to the status of eucharistic bread and wine (Maritain and Scanlon 1946: 29), he described a sacramentality in the gratuitous overflowing of grace in art: 'Things are not only what they are; they constantly pass beyond themselves, and give more than they have' (Maritain 1944: 397). He argued for the value of the work itself and claimed that religious art has neither a particular style nor prescribed content. The value of Maritain's writings for theology and the visual arts today may well lie in his vocabulary of grace and gratuity, in his articulation of the value of artistic *making* and the dignity of the *object*, as well as in his influence on artists such as David Jones. Rowan Williams' sympathetic and expansive reading of Maritain introduced him to a wider audience and revived interest in his work, and may serve both to rehabilitate it and stimulate further critical discussion (Williams 2005).

More recently, the philosopher Jean-Luc Marion, working in the French phenomenological tradition, has used quasi-sacramental language to describe art's power to communicate the gift-quality of being, and highlighted it as one example of what he calls the 'saturation' of certain phenomena which exceed our ability to grasp and control them conceptually (Marion 2012). Other French phenomenologists and philosophers, including most notably Maurice Merleau-Ponty, have also stimulated the theological discourse about art.

Protestant theology's equivocal relation to visual art (and the idea of beauty) can seem to find new twentieth-century embodiment in the Reformed theologian Karl Barth's (1886–1968) strenuous denial of the possibility of knowing God other than through God's own revelation in Christ. This seems to entail the further denial that art can be in any way revelatory, though in later life Barth accepted that Christ's humanity had brought human culture into the context of the revelation of God. He never found a place in this theology for the visual arts in the way that he did for music (especially Mozart's), claiming that the humanity of God, being an 'event', could never be 'fixed' in an image (Barth 1960: 57).

However, Barth's contemporary, the Lutheran Paul Tillich (1886–1965), wrote some of the most influential works on theology and visual art in the twentieth century. He approached artworks which were not specifically or overtly 'religious' in a spirit of theological enquiry, seeking to overcome the gap he saw between theology and culture and to establish a theology of culture. By 'normalizing' art and theology as dialogue partners, his lectures and essays contributed to the development of theology and the visual arts as a discipline. Having experienced intense joy and spiritual understanding looking at Botticelli's *Raczinski Tondo* (1477) in Berlin in 1918, Tillich later focused on modern and contemporary art as he sought bridges between the religious and secular spheres. He characterized 'religious' art as that which speaks about the contemporary context to contemporary people, and expresses fundamental meaning or the ground of reality, which he called 'ultimate concern'. Without suggesting that art could reveal more than scripture, he proposed that art could bring revelation to the viewer's attention and evoke a response to it.

Tillich was, unusually, a theologian with credibility in the artistic and cultural world. He gave influential lectures at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and was closely involved in the 1954 exhibition, *Masterpieces of Religious Art*, at the Art Institute of Chicago. The theologian John Dillenberger and art historian Jane Dillenberger edited a collected volume of his writings on art and architecture.

Historically, the main debates in theology and the visual arts have been about legitimacy and usage. With distinguished exceptions (like Tillich), many twentieth-century theologians' work in the domain of the visual arts has primarily concerned itself with a form of apologetics in which the value of the visual arts for theology and the church is analysed and promoted (often in largely theoretical terms and with minimal comment on specific artworks, e.g. Dixon 1978; Walker 1996; Viladesau 2000). It has occasionally addressed distinctions between 'high' and 'low' art and matters of taste (e.g. Burch Brown 2000) or discussed particular themes in art (in books usually aimed at a wide audience, e.g. Harries 2004; Viladesau 2006), and issues in church patronage of the arts (e.g. Régamey 1963). But taken together with the magisterial work of Maritain, Balthasar, and (more recently) David Bentley Hart, these interests and foci have played a significant part in the development of the discipline known as 'theology and the visual arts', or 'theological

aesthetics', which is often particularly concerned with discussions of beauty (Bentley Hart 2003; Nichols 2007). Over several decades, and in a series of publications, David Brown has argued for the importance of attending to human culture (including the visual arts) as a primary but often neglected site of religious experience (Brown 1999; 2000; 2004; 2007; 2008; 2024). Recently the term 'visual theology' has emphasized the visual material itself, treating certain artworks as theology in visual form, and theological engagement with them as a form of theology in its own right (Reddaway 2016; 2019).

By definition, the subject is interdisciplinary, requiring scholarly flexibility and drawing on both theological and artistic sources, often opening into even wider disciplinary groups. This can be challenging within existing institutional structures; the acceptance of theology and the visual arts as a valid subject within academic theology (albeit with a foothold in relatively few university departments) is an important achievement, confirmed by growth in publications and conferences, student numbers, and interdisciplinary collaboration.

Certain scholars have contributed greatly to the positive elements of this situation. Paul Tillich's lectures (Tillich 1987), and the Dillenbergers' books (Dillenberger 1965; 1986), along with their directorship of the Society for the Arts, Religion, and Contemporary Culture, helped to put theology and the visual arts on the twentieth-century academic map in the US while, in the UK, Rowan Williams has both deepened and popularized theological engagement with the visual arts from the Western and Eastern traditions. The establishment of higher education courses in theology and the arts in some prestigious universities – notably the Institute for Theology, Imagination and the Arts at the University of St Andrews, where David Brown's work on sacramental theology with the arts has been formative; Duke Initiatives in Theology and the Arts in the Divinity School at Duke University, NC, established by Jeremy Begbie; and the Centre for Arts and the Sacred at King's College London, founded by Ben Quash and home to the *Visual Commentary on Scripture* – and a growing number of theological colleges indicates progress. Research and teaching in theology and the visual arts has been extended to a wider audience by networks such as the Association of Scholars of Christianity in the History of Art as well as Art + Christianity, established in the 1990s by Tom Devonshire Jones, which furthered interest in church commissions and created a space for interaction between theology and the visual arts before this was readily available within universities.

Recently, and in line with rapidly growing concerns about diversity within the arts and humanities, scholars have begun to take a greater interest in the relationship of theology to visual art from parts of the world other than Western Europe or the Global North, and by artists of diverse origins, as well as looking for a greater diversity of scholarly voices. To a lesser extent, theology and the visual arts is beginning to engage with theologies related to contemporary questions about race, gender, sexuality, social justice, and environmental

crisis. To date these areas have been insufficiently explored, but all are increasingly pressing issues.

Nevertheless, many books which should form part of the 'canon' of theology and the visual arts have yet to be written. There is particular scope for defining the foundations of theology and the visual arts, as well as expanding its reach and exploring its horizons. Publishers and dedicated journals are increasingly open to proposals from this field, although very few can include high-quality images without significant cost to the authors. With this established, if small, presence, theology and the visual arts needs to continue to move beyond apologetics. In addition to the issues of diversity already mentioned, two areas of study particularly require further attention. First is the question of methodology or hermeneutics: what does a theological approach to the visual arts – and particularly to their interpretation – look like; how can it avoid both a naivety which unquestioningly accepts religious 'content' in art, and the cynicism of some art historical and art critical approaches; how can it assert the inspirational and transformative nature of Christian art within a constructive, imaginative, and critical assessment of art (Reddaway 2016; Quash 2021; Quash 2022)? Further work in this area is urgently needed (see www.kcl.ac.uk/research/theology-and-the-visual-arts). Furthermore, how might this field engage with art which is not explicitly Christian, particularly modern and contemporary works which may be seen as divorced from, or even hostile to, Christianity (Joynes 2024)? Second is the issue of engaging directly with particular artworks, artists, schools, periods, and themes: a delightfully broad field of potential discovery with almost limitless possibilities for future scholarship.

Attributions

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