

Christian Contexts and Ideas

An understanding of Christian beliefs, ideas and institutions is important for the understanding of the History of Western Art. In Level 3 Art History Christian concepts are important in several Areas of Study. Many artists studied in level 2 Art History also draw on Christian concepts.

This article is an attempt to provide a basic reference for teachers and students of art and art history who may not be familiar with Christian beliefs, practices and history.

I have included links to images which could be used in presentations using the points made in this article. I have not tried to find images from every Area of Study and would welcome the inclusion of additional links other teachers have found useful.

(a) Christian History:

Note: The following is a very brief and generalised account of church history. Understanding will be helped by the use of maps of the Mediterranean to indicate places like Rome, Constantinople and Western and Eastern Europe.

*A useful outline of Early Christianity and the Life of Christ can be found on pp6 – 7 of Laurie Schneider Adams' **Italian Renaissance Art***

<http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity> contains a comprehensive account of Christian beliefs and history.

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/why/> is a comprehensive site about Christianity. It includes the story of Jesus; Christian spirituality; key events; a dictionary of major saints etc.

Jesus Christ was born around 0 B.C.E. in Bethlehem and he was crucified in Jerusalem around 33 A.C.E. During his brief adult life he was a popular preacher in Israel where he was supported by a group of friends known as the disciples or apostles. After the death of Jesus followers travelled around the Mediterranean spreading his ideas and helping to found what came to be called the Christian church. An important disciple was St Peter who went to Rome and founded the Christian Church there. This church came to be called the Roman Catholic Church and Peter is regarded as the first head of that church, or Pope. Christians were persecuted by the early Roman Empire however in 313 the Emperor Constantine legalised the religion and it began to grow rapidly. (This was the Edict of Constantine). At the same time as the Roman Catholic Church became established in Rome and Western Europe, the Orthodox Church was established in Byzantium (later Constantinople) under the leadership of the disciple Andrew who was given the title Patriarch. For a long time there were few differences between these two Christian groups however by the fifteenth century differences in ritual and government had resulted in two quite separate religious groups. In 1439 the Council of Florence was held at Santa Maria Novella and a Decree of Union between the two churches was announced. It did not last.

By the fifteenth century Northern scholars like John Wycliffe (England) and John Hus (Germany) had begun to advocate the superiority of Biblical Scriptures over papal interpretations and decrees. Martin Luther's act of nailing his theses to the door of Wittenberg Cathedral in 1517 is the usual date given for the beginning of the **Reformation** and the emergence of Lutheran Protestant (Non-Roman Catholic) churches in Germany. The **English Reformation** which established the Anglican Church began in the reign of Henry VIII and was cemented under the leadership of his daughter, Elizabeth I.

(b) The Life of Jesus.

Until the Reformation the following stories were regarded as true histories rather than legends or allegories. During Medieval and Renaissance times these stories were major subjects for drama and morality plays. They were also conventional subjects in Christian art. The depiction of these stories followed traditional iconography.

The following books provide detailed explanations of the iconography used for each of the following events:

G.Ferguson: **Signs and Symbols in Christian Art**, Oxford University Press, New York

J.Hall: **Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art**, Harper and Row, London

<http://www.aug.edu/augusta/iconography/index.html> is a very good site about Christian iconography. It has sections on Saints which provides descriptions of attributes and symbols; the Life of Jesus; the Life of the Virgin; etc;

The following site contains excellent images from the **Arena Chapel** (1302 – 1305) which could be used to illustrate the events listed below.

<http://www.mystudios.com/gallery/giotto/preamble/html>
<http://www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?html/g/giotto/padova/index.html>

Key Events:

The Annunciation: The Archangel Gabriel tells Mary that she has miraculously conceived and will be the mother of Jesus.

<http://www.abcgallery.com/A/angelico/angelico49.html> *Annunciation* by Fra Angelico

http://www.artchive.com/leonardo/leonardo_annunc.jpg *Annunciation* by Leonardo

<http://www.artcyclopedia.com/masterscans/1201.html> *Annunciation* by Martini

<http://www.abcgallery.com/E/eyck/eyck26.html> *Annunciation* by Jan Van Eyck

<http://www.wga.hu/tours/arezzo/annunzia.html> *Annunciation* by Piero della Francesca

The Visitation: During her pregnancy Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth who is also miraculously pregnant (with John the Baptist)

The Nativity: Jesus is born in a stable in Bethlehem.

The Annunciation to the Shepherds: Angels appear to some shepherds in fields to tell them about the birth of Jesus.

The Adoration of the Magi: Three eastern leaders visit the Holy Family in the stable.

The Presentation in the Temple: Christ is presented to the High Priest, Simon in the temple.

The Flight into Egypt: The Holy Family escapes from Herod's persecution and goes to Egypt.

Christ among the Doctors: The child Jesus discusses life with elders of the church.

The Baptism: Jesus is baptised by John the Baptist.

<http://www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?html/p/piero/francesc/index.html> - *The Baptism of Jesus* by Piero della Francesca

The Marriage at Cana: Jesus goes to a wedding where they have run out of wine and he turns water into wine.

The Resurrection of Lazarus: Jesus brings a dead man back to life.

The Transfiguration: Jesus revealed his divine nature to the disciples.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transfiguration_\(Raphael\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transfiguration_(Raphael)) - *The Transfiguration* by Raphael

The Passion of Christ:

The events in the week leading up to the death of Jesus. (Easter Week)

Images of the Passion Cycle can be found on:

<http://www.mystudios.com/gallery/giott/preamble/html> (Giotto's Arena Chapel)

http://www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?html/d/duccio/buoninse/maesta/verso_1/index.html

Duccio's

Maesta.

The Entry into Jerusalem: Jesus and the disciples enter Jerusalem.

The Washing of Feet: Jesus washes the feet of the disciples to show his humility.

The Last Supper: Jesus has his final meal with the disciples.

Find 20 images of The Last Supper on:
www.paradoxplace.com/Perspectives/Italian%20Images/Montages/Firenze?Last%Suppers.htm

<http://www.abcgallery.com/L/leonardo/leonardo4.html> *Last Supper* by Leonardo da Vinci

<http://www.abcgallery.com/L/lorenzetti/plorenzetti8.html> *Last Supper* by Pietro Lorenzetti

The Agony in the Garden: Jesus prays all night in a garden.

The Betrayal: Judas agrees to betray Jesus.

The Kiss of Judas: Judas meets Jesus in the garden and kisses him to identify him to the soldiers.

Christ before Caiaphas: Jesus is tested by the High priest.

Jesus before Pontius Pilate: Jesus is tested by the Roman Governor who washes his hands of him.

The Flagellation: Jesus is tortured by whipping.

The Mocking of Christ: Jesus is mocked as the King of the Jews with a crown of thorns.

The Road to Cavalry: Jesus carries the cross to the place of execution.

The Crucifixion: Jesus is put to death on the cross.

http://wga.hu/frames-e.html?/html/d/duccio/buoninse/maesta/verso_3/verso20.html Duccio

<http://www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?/html/r/raphael/1early/03citta.html> Raphael

http://www.metmuseum.org/explore/Vaneyck/van_eyck9.htm Jan Van Eyck

The Deposition: Jesus is taken down from the cross.

The Entombment: Jesus is put in the tomb.

The Resurrection: Jesus rises from the dead after three days.

<http://www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?html/p/piero/frances/resurrex.html> Piero della Francesca's

Resurrection

Noli me Tangere: The risen Christ tells Mary Magdalen not to touch him.

The Supper at Emmaus: The risen Christ dines with two of the apostles.

The Ascension: Christ rises up to Heaven.

The Last Judgement: A vision of the future when Christ will return to earth to judge human souls.

<http://www.abcgallery.com/W/weyden/weyden27.html> *Last Judgement* – Rogier Van der Weyden

<http://www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/bosch/judge/judge-c.jpg> *Last Judgement* - Hieronymous Bosch

(c) The Seven Sacraments:

Note: The following is a simplified account of the main church rituals in the Medieval and Renaissance Catholic Church.

Understanding will be improved by a field trip to a local church or chapel or the use of images of the exterior and interior of a church like Sta Maria Novella or Sta Maria della Carmine which can be found by using Google/images or on www.paradoxplace.com

<http://www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?/html/w/weyden/rogier/05sevens/index.html> - good images of the seven sacraments as depicted in Rogier Van der Weyden's *Seven Sacraments Altarpiece* of 1445-50

The most important ritual is the church service. In fifteenth century Italy Catholics were expected to attend **mass**, as the service was called, several times a week and compulsorily on Sundays and feast days. Mass was held in a **church or chapel** – a simple rectangular building with an altar at one end. The altar was set on a raised dais and usually enclosed by an arch. People attending the service stood or sat facing the altar where the priest performed the service. Rich people usually sat in comfort in a side chapel which opened off the main body of the church (the nave). Side chapels took on the name of the family which patronised it e.g. *The Brancacci Chapel*.

The service of **Mass (also referred to as the Eucharist)** was based on one of the last events in the Life of Jesus – *The Last Supper* – where Jesus ate bread and wine with the disciples. In the Mass the bread and wine have taken on the substance of the body and blood of Jesus. Bread and wine is consecrated (made holy) by the priest, and then each confirmed member of the congregation is given a wafer of bread to eat. Often this is accompanied by a sip of wine from a chalice. (The consecrated bread is called the Host because Catholic doctrine teaches that it has become the body of Jesus)

The other sacraments include:

Baptism – This is the cleansing ritual used to initiate new Christians. The most important aspect is the pouring of water onto the new convert's head or the full immersion of the new convert.

See Masaccio's Baptism of the Neophytes:

www.paradoxplace.com/Perspectives/Italian%20Images/Montages/Firenze/Brancacci%20Chapel.htm)

Confirmation: At puberty the baptised Christian affirmed the vows made on their behalf at baptism

Marriage: The uniting of a Christian man and wife before God.

Holy Orders: If the Christian chose to become a priest or Nun he took Holy orders.

Penance: This sacrament gave forgiveness for the repentance of sin. (Associated with confession)

Extreme Unction: Sometimes referred to as the Last Rites, a sacrament for the ill and dying to prepare the soul for the next life.

The Cult of the Virgin Mary (Mariolatry)

Since the founding of Christianity the Virgin Mary had been revered as the Mother of God. In the Orthodox Byzantine Church her image had been developed into the awe inspiring **theotokos**. This is the role of the Enthroned Madonna Mary found on the huge altar panels of the thirteenth century. The **Maesta** was a similarly hieratic motif.

www.abcgallery.com has an image of a theotokos by Cimabue

In the late thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries new interpretations were applied to the Virgin Mary. Mary's role as the one who redeemed the sin of Eve was reemphasised. She became the compassionate intercessor for lost souls, an embodiment of faith, love and compassion. She also became the ideal of faith, piety and motherly love to which Christian women could aspire. This revision leads to a new theme in Christian narrative art in the fourteenth century – the Life of Mary with an emphasis on her human experiences. The Life of Mary includes many of the events in the Life of Jesus with the addition of key events such as The Birth of the Virgin Mary; The Marriage of the Virgin Mary. The theotokos which had dominated altar panels of the Virgin Mary was replaced by a number of new types:

An intriguing ebook called *The Madonna in Art*, written by Estelle M.Hurl, in 1898 can be read at:

www.gutenberg.org/files/17373/17373-h.htm It has black and white illustrations.

Madonna Annunciate – The Annunciation

www.domestic-church.com/CONTENT.DCC/19980301 has an image by Fra Angelico (and text explaining life of Mary from a Christian perspective)

Madonna of Humility: Madonna seated on the ground.

www.artnet.com/Artists/LotDetailPage.aspx?lot... Has a Madonna of Humility by Taddeo Gaddi

Mater Amabilis: The loving maternal woman, shown looking fondly at her baby Jesus

www.gutenberg.org/.../images/image_151_1.jpg has a Madonna Amabilis by Ruder.

Virgin of Mercy: Shelters the penitent and intercedes with Jesus.

www.abcgallery.com/P/piero/francesca11.JPG has Piero della Francesca's Madonna of Mercy

Mater Dolorosa: Depicted at the cross or with the dead body of Jesus showing grief for Jesus.

www.abcgallery.com/W/weyden/wetden61.JPG Image by Van der Weyden in a Crucifixion Diptych

The Last Judgement: Mary is shown on the right hand of Jesus, ready to intercede for the penitent soul.

Employees.oneonta.edu/.../god_perspective.html

has an image of Raphael's *Disputa* (and some notes on perspective)

(d) Church Organisation

By the fifteenth century the Catholic Church had evolved into a very bureaucratic organisation headed by the Pope. All governing and administering roles were confined to men because the church was a very patriarchal institution.

A Pope was elected by the **Curia** or **College of Cardinals**, usually from among themselves, in a secret ballot after the death of a pope. Once elected, a Pope held the office for life. The Pope was regarded as God's representative on earth and had autocratic power over the church.

Cardinals were senior priests who formed an advisory group called **The Curia** which was meant to support and advise the Pope. Cardinals were appointed by a Pope. They held their position for life. Cardinals were responsible to the Pope and held near-autocratic power over their subordinates.

Bishops were senior priests who had risen to control a region called a **diocese or see**. They served a major church called a **cathedral** and held great power over the priests, monks, nuns and lay people in their diocese.

Priests were men who dedicated their life to the service of God. They swore an oath of celibacy and lived in a presbytery near the church in which they led religious services. They were also expected to act as advisors to their congregations.

By the fifteenth century church government was influenced by the powerful families of Europe, especially Italy. The church was a respected career for the sons of the nobility and important families were represented in all the high ranks of the church. The purchase of indulgences and other monetary rewards were used to ensure that the sons of wealthy families were quickly promoted to the Cardinal's hat (position). This gave a family influence within the Curia which could ultimately result in the election of a member of a powerful family as pope.

Membership of the Catholic Church provided Western Europe with a form of unity. Feudal allegiances to the pope were sworn by rulers at ceremonies to mark their assumption of power. The bishoprics and monasteries of Europe provided the apparatus by which the papacy extracted the tithes due to it. This network also enabled the Popes to exert influence on the national governments of all Christian states.

Excommunication: The Pope had the power to excommunicate those who offended the Church. An excommunicated person could not take part in any of the Seven Sacraments which meant that their soul would not be allowed to enter Heaven.

(e) **Monasticism:**

Monks were men who chose to live in communities called monasteries where they served God and their community. Monks were celibate and women did not live in a monastery. Women had their own devotional communities called convents or nunneries where they lived as celibate nuns.

One of the oldest monastic orders was the **Benedictines** which had existed since the eighth century. By the thirteenth century this order was well-established throughout Europe, owning huge estates and accumulating wealth through their agricultural produce (they were one of the biggest wool producers in Europe). The other major wool producer was the Cistercian order. The Benedictines had had a monopoly on education which had seen their schools and universities produce generations of public servants for the rulers of Europe as well as the Church. During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries independent cathedral schools and universities began to challenge the Benedictine monopoly and open up education.

The **Cistercians** developed out of the Benedictines. This was a centralised order which gained great power throughout Europe and became very wealthy through its wool and other agricultural produce. In the twelfth century a charismatic Cistercian, **St Bernard** became Abbott of the major abbey of Clairvaux. His enthusiasm helped start the Second Crusade and his preaching and devotion to the Virgin Mary were an important stimulus to the development of Mariolatry.

The **Dominican Order** was founded in the thirteenth century by **St Dominic**. It is also known as the Order of Friars Preachers. St Dominic advocated a simple, frugal life with no possessions in which monks would survive by begging and receiving donations. Devotion to the Virgin Mary was an important part of their beliefs and they instituted the Rosary, a special sequence of prayers to the Virgin Mary. The Dominicans played a key role in the development of Mariolatry. The word for this type of monastic life is mendicant. Preaching was an important part of their work and most of the travelling preachers in Europe were Dominicans by the fifteenth century. In this century the Dominican rule of poverty was relaxed and the order began to build themselves large churches and monasteries such as **Sta Maria Novella in Florence**.

Dominicans wear a white tunic and scapular under a black hooded cloak.

Dominican nuns were established by St Dominic to help in the teaching and welfare work of the Dominican order.

The **Franciscan Order** was founded in the thirteenth century by **St Francis**. It is also known as the Order of Friars Minor. The Franciscans were wandering mendicants who travelled about Italy in pairs, dressed in peasants' clothes, preaching and caring for the sick and dying. The fact that their preaching focused on the love of God and the joyful life of the Christian contributed to their popularity. Their numbers increased rapidly and eventually led to the split between the Spirituals who advocated a life of poverty and the Conventuals who favoured the development of an institutional organisation. Eventually the Conventuals, managed by a superb theologian and administrator called St Bonaventura became dominant and the Franciscans became one of the biggest builders of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries – see the churches in Assisi; Sta Croce in Florence.

Franciscans wear brown or grey robes (habits) tied with a girdle tied with three knots to symbolise the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience.

Poor Clares are the order of nuns founded by St Clare of Assisi in support of St Francis