

# Why We Study European Christian Art

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## WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will explore some reasons why we study European Christian art. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. [Historical Jesus and Evaluating Sources](#)
2. [Images of Christ, Syncretism, and the Relationship of Christianity to Roman Religion](#)
3. [Evolution of Form and the Relationship Between Style and Values](#)
4. [The Use of Imagery in Religious Worship](#)
5. [Structural Innovation in Christian and World Architecture](#)



## BEFORE YOU START

As discussed in Unit 1 of this class, art history as a field of study developed in Europe and has had a bias toward European subject matter that extends back to its origins. In the present, scholars have pushed to decolonize and diversify art history, including the survey. Some versions of the survey now treat all geographic regions of the world with the same level of emphasis. European art receives no more attention than African, Latin American, Asian, or Oceanic art. In this context, we might seriously ask, what is the point of studying European Christian art, particularly if one is not Christian?

## 1. Historical Jesus and Evaluating Sources

Studying European Christian art, and in particular, early Christian art, allows us to investigate our assumptions regarding Christianity and whether or not the Bible and other sources that mention Jesus can be considered **primary sources**. For instance, there is some debate regarding the question of whether Jesus was an actual historical figure or more of a concept that Christians have invented and embellished over the years. One of the main problems is that very little is known about the lives of lower-class people in the Roman Empire during the first century in general. Much of what we might know about Jesus would also have been true of his people in a broader sense.

We might also question whether the New Testament is a valid primary source. As religious texts, it is not entirely clear whether the gospels accurately document the life of Jesus or function more as allegories or instructions for living. Furthermore, while the historians Josephus and Tacitus, as well as Pliny the Younger, all mention

Jesus, their accounts of his life were written decades after the approximate date of his death. It is not entirely clear whether they were based on factual events or rather consist of ideas regarding Jesus that circulated at that time.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### Primary Sources

An account or evidence of a historical event that was produced at the same time as the event.

## 2. Images of Christ, Syncretism, and the Relationship of Christianity to Roman Religion

Perhaps it is not important to know conclusively whether there was a historical Jesus. Christianity exists as a major world religion with millions of followers who believe that Jesus is the Son of God whether or not we can confirm that he actually lived. We might then be surprised to discover that early Christian images of Jesus do not fit our expectations. Some illustrated bibles depict Jesus as a bearded European man, often with blond hair and blue eyes. Given the fact that Jesus was thought to have been from the Middle East, this seems a bit far-fetched. We find, though, that early Christian images of Jesus depict him with no beard at all, looking like a Greco-Roman god, like Apollo.

This raises the issue of **syncretism**, or using the concepts and ideas from one religion to discuss another, as well as many other questions. What does an image of Christ represent, exactly? Is it an accurate likeness, or does it say more about the people who made the image? Does the early Christianity general use of images of Greco-Roman deities indicate a desire to stay hidden from Roman authorities? Or was early Christianity more influenced by other religions than we care to admit?



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### Syncretism

Attempt at uniting differing or opposing practices in religion or philosophy.

## 3. Evolution of Form and the Relationship Between Style and Values

More generally, the study of European Christian art explores the evolution of form in European art and architecture. Some art historians see the decline of the Roman Empire and the interest in humanism that developed in ancient Greece in the slow rise of Christianity and the increasing interest in depicting the human figure in a way that is flat, stiff, and devoid of the naturalism that we associate with Byzantine art. Is this evidence of cultural decline? Rather than interpreting the movement away from humanism as a lesser form of art and entrance into the so-called “Dark Ages,” we can view it as evidence of changing values. Artists who did not value naturalism and humanism did not explore these qualities in their work.

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## 4. The Use of Imagery in Religious Worship

The study of European Christianity also helps us learn about other religions. The question of the use of imagery in religious devotion is in one way or another at the heart of most, if not all, religions. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all oppose idolatry to varying degrees.

Christian approaches to the use of imagery as aids to worship can function as a point of departure for understanding other religions. For instance, Islam was heavily influenced by iconoclasm in its practice of making images of human beings and animals forbidden. At the same time, many mosques are decorated with elaborate geometric and floral patterns that repeat themselves with overwhelming complexity, reflecting the beauty of God's creation. Hinduism (covered in Unit 4) involves the extensive use of religious imagery, including the idea of bhakti, or devotion to a god, often in the form of a cult statue.

Is this really different from venerating saints? Where do we draw the line between using imagery as an aid to religious worship and actually worshipping the image?

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## 5. Structural Innovation in Christian and World Architecture

Lastly, studying European Christian architecture helps us learn about structural innovation. The earliest neolithic structures bridged space using post and lintel, which was inefficient in transferring thrust, or the force of gravity. While the Pantheon was not a Christian building, its dome inspired a great deal of structural innovation, from Hagia Sophia to smaller domes in Greek Orthodox churches. The history of European Christian architecture involves the creation of many different forms evolved from the rounded arch to the pointed arch, allowing ancient builders to construct Gothic cathedrals that soared to ever-increasing heights. In the eastern Orthodox tradition, various architectural forms developed to absorb the weight of hemispherical domes. In both examples, spirituality and religious ideas inspired innovation in form. Appreciating and understanding this does not require any form of religious belief.

These are not the only reasons why it is valuable to study European Christian art. What other reasons can you think of? The important idea to remember here is that studying Christian art and architecture is not the same thing as proselytizing, or attempting to persuade other people of one's religious beliefs. It is possible to consider Christian art and architecture in relation to the larger global history of art without privileging it or any other religion as the best, or most civilized, as we did in the past.

Please note that moving forward, dates for works of art and architecture in Unit 3 will not have "BCE" or "CE" next to them. Early Christian art starts during the third century CE, and after that, there is little question that we have entered the Common Era, so you will see the date by itself. This is also a reminder that we use these initials as a way of being equitable to other religions and modes of thought.



### SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about reasons why we should study European Christian art and architecture. First, we considered the issue of whether we can confirm through **primary sources that Jesus existed as a historical figure** and how much we can really know about him, given the lack of information on people living in present-day Israel in the first century CE. We also explored **syncretism and the degree to which early Christians used Greco-Roman source material** in creating early images of Jesus. We then focused on the idea of **evolution of form** in the depiction of Jesus and other religious figures. The stiffness and seriousness of figures in Byzantine art suggest a change in values from the humanism of Greco-Roman culture to a belief in the power of Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and saints in the form of icons. We then looked at **the use of imagery within Christianity as an aid to worship** in comparison to other religions, such as Islam and Hinduism. Finally, we considered **structural innovation in monumental European architecture**. Analyzing different forms of support, from post and lintel, rounded arch, and dome to the pointed arch, we can see how religious concepts inspired and motivated adaptations in form. All of these are reasons to study European Christian art and architecture, even if one is not Christian.

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#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### Primary Sources

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##### Syncretism

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