

Week 3: The Importance of Church Icons 101

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From the beginning, the act of the Church was liturgical. This is witnessed to by the earliest writers (ex. Ignatius of Antioch, Justin Martyr, Hippolytus, all before the 3rd C). Since the Church was an illegal organization in its early years, much of the worship took place in catacombs. Symbology became quite important, since you could not exactly write “Christians meet here on Sundays” on your house or meeting place. The catacombs are where we see the earliest of symbols; the fish, the loaves, the peacock, and later, the Chi-Rho. Early Christians also used iconography. Paintings exist in pretty much every early Church structure that has been found, and more are found every year. Much of this practice, you might be surprised to find out, is a carry-over from Judaism. Though the 2nd commandment states that “thou shall not make for yourself any graven image”, the Jews of the diaspora obviously interpreted this to mean “idols” - it was understood in the ancient world that the presence of an image in some sense made the reality depicted in the image truly present. Pictured on the walls was only that which had been revealed by God to His people in the scriptures. The prime example of this are the frescoes found in the 3rd C synagogue at Dura-Europos (look it up

on Wikipedia, it is quite stunning!). These frescoes, which cover floor to ceiling - as is ideal for Orthodox Church buildings today - tell the stories of the Old Testament and surround the worshippers with stories from the Bible. In contrast to these carefully crafted paintings however, the characteristic of the very early Christian paintings are that they were rushed, low quality, and pretty much purely utilitarian. The utilitarian aspect is particularly interesting, since it points to a liturgical usage or function, as opposed to purely decoration! Something that is utilitarian is by definition something that is “used” for a specific purpose. By all of these facts, we can see very early (the earliest Christian paintings are found in the 2nd C AD in the catacombs) that Christian iconography was “functional” in worship from the earliest period.

Next week will be a discussion on the historical development of iconography, including the influence of the Egyptian “Fayuum” portraiture.