PANEL PAINTINGS AND EARLY CHRISTIAN ICONS

Katherine Marsengill

In the early fourth century, Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea (ca. 260–339/340) wrote a letter to Emperor Constantine’s sister, Constantia, replying to her request to send her a portrait of Christ for her private devotion. The letter, which survives in fragments that were invoked by the Iconoclastic Horos in 754, though possibly manipulated by Iconoclasts in order to present how early church leaders argued against the use of icons, is generally accepted as authentic. After a lengthy explanation of why Constantia’s desire to know the face of Christ was both impossible and irresponsible, the bishop provides an anecdote from his own experience. He writes: “Once . . . a woman brought me in her hands a picture of two men in the guise of philosophers and let fall the statement that they were Paul and the Savior—I have no means of saying where she had this from or learned such a thing.” He goes on to state that he confiscated the image and kept it.

The anecdote is revealing for many reasons. The Christian woman had shown the image to Eusebius under the assumption that her possession was indeed what she had been told, suggesting that, despite Eusebius’ rhetorical question to Constantia (“Have you ever heard anything of the kind [about portraits of Christ] either yourself in church or from another person?”), it was in fact not unheard of for Christians to believe that such portraits existed. Substantiating evidence can be found, strangely enough, in Eusebius’s own Ecclesiastical History, written around 325, where Eusebius remarks upon painted portraits of Peter, Paul, and Christ that he himself had seen. Seemingly at odds with his earlier letter to Constantia, perhaps he had gained some experience in these matters, though he provides the caveat that such portraits were based in pagan practices. Additionally, Eusebius’ letter to Constantia describes the image as depicting two men guised as philosophers. That the woman may have confused philosophers with Christ and Paul is an interesting detail. Some scholarly conjecture proposes that this part of the letter might be Iconoclast invention. But the idea is actually consistent with Christian art of the time, given that some of the earliest surviving images of Christ among his disciples accord with contemporary imagery of philosophers. Misidentifying the philosophical men in the portrait was perhaps an honest mistake. Either the woman was understandably mistaken to think the philosophers represented Christ and Paul, or perhaps Eusebius was wrong to assume the painting was not, at the very least, intended to depict Christ and Paul. By contrast, Eusebius demonstrates no such concerns in his Ecclesiastical History about the identity of the figures portrayed, fully accepting the authenticity of Peter, Paul, and Christ. In both of these texts, Eusebius reveals that, most likely, portable
paintings—icons—were already in the possession of Christians by the early fourth century. As will be presented here, it is likely that such images existed as early as the second century, even if perhaps few in number, and these painted images were a natural part of contemporary Greco-Roman culture that was adopted by Christians.

The origin of Christian icons in Greco-Roman panel painting

Unfortunately, no Christian icon firmly dated earlier than the sixth century survives. Nor does much survive to provide us with a clear picture of the very rich and complex tradition of Greco-Roman panel painting from whence icons developed. Painted wooden panels, the primary medium for ancient portable images as well as Christian icons, have proven too fragile for the most part to endure to the present, leaving us with a huge lacuna in our knowledge of this ancient art. But there is enough visual and textual evidence to piece together an overview of the Greco-Roman tradition in order to understand the conceptual reasons why the painted panel became so important in Christian worship.

Roman-era painted panels are known today mostly from textual descriptions, such as Pliny the Elder’s first-century *Natural History* (Book 35), which offers us a glimpse of an ancient world covered with panel paintings by famous and celebrated artists, paintings that were hung in temples and put on display in public places; and from depictions of such paintings in more durable materials like mosaic and fresco. We see panel paintings mimicked in the wall paintings of Pompeii, for example, including illusory frames around their mural compositions, as if panel paintings were actually hung on the walls.

A large part of ancient panel painting was dedicated to portraiture, the type of painting that is also the genre of Christian icons. Indeed, the definition of icon (*eikōn*) relates most directly to portraiture, and *eikon*, along with the Latin *imago*, is repeatedly found in antique sources when referring to real portraits, usually two-dimensional or in relief as opposed to portrait statues. Evidence for how portraits were produced can be seen on a first-century sarcophagus that was discovered in Kerch, which shows a portrait painter at work in his studio (Figure 12.1). The painter is depicted heating wax over a brazier for mixing with pigments—arranged in a compartmentalized box in front of him—according to the encaustic technique of painting. On the wall behind him are both rectangular panels with what are known as eight-point frames, and *clipeatae imagines*—portraits on round panels following a tradition of painting shields with commemorative portraiture.

Painted portraits served numerous important functions in antiquity. Portraits could be used in domestic settings, as were the painted portraits of ancestors and family members displayed in homes of the Roman elites, and about which Pliny provides information. “Framed” portraits, too, are also found in surviving wall paintings from Pompeii, like the well-known double portrait of a bakery owner, Terentius Neo, and his educated wife, painted in their home’s atrium. Portraits in other media also provide information about the appearance of actual painted panels. For example, scholars have judged a floor mosaic in Pompeii showing a bust portrait of a woman so painterly in its execution that it must have been based on an original panel portrait.

One important use for portraits was funerary, a tradition that transitioned smoothly into Christian practices. Roman tombs have been discovered that have framed portraits painted directly on walls, like the tomb of Aelia Arisuth in Tripoli from the fourth century (Figure 12.2). In this case, her portrait appears as a *clipeate*, rather than a rectangular panel. From tomb murals of framed portraits like this, one may reasonably assume that panel portraits were once placed in tombs, or that original panel portraits existed from which permanent mural portraits were copied in tombs; or possibly some tombs boasted both wall portraits and portable portraits.
Figure 12.1  Sarcophagus of a portrait painter. From Pantićapaion (Kerch), 1st century. State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg. Photograph © The State Hermitage Museum, photo by Leonard Kheifets.

Figure 12.2  Aelia Arisuth in Tripoli from the 4th century. Portrait of Aelia Arisuth, from the Tomb of Aelia Arisuth (fresco), Roman, 4th century CE, Gargaresh, Libya. Bridgeman Images.
A first-century inscription preserving the inventory of a tomb from Apateira near Epheson substantiates the use of portable portraits, describing how multiple panel portraits were part of the tomb furnishings. The list includes thirteen “painted portraits” (eikones graptai) of Nona and Paula, presumably the deceased occupants of the tomb.8

Another elucidating example concerning the integration of portable portraits in tomb murals is a ceiling painting from the fourth- or fifth-century cubiculum of Oceanus in the Christian Catacomb of San Callixtus, Rome. A portrait bust painted directly on the vault is missing its head, the intended area for which is outlined by a rectangle. Nail holes indicate that a separately executed portrait, perhaps painted on canvas or thin panel, had once been placed there (Figure 12.3). This may have been a portrait that was made earlier, before being placed in the tomb; or perhaps the tomb portrait was painted with care using another portrait as a model, before being set in the ceiling with its more formulaic bust already having been executed in situ. That Christians also relied upon such portraits to commemorate their dead is of even greater significance when one considers that such portraits served as devotional images in pagan ancestor cults. Early Christians, too, were known to celebrate with their dead, perhaps even venerating the portraits of the deceased at tombs, a practice that was chastised by Augustine of Hippo in the late 380s.9

Figure 12.3  Fresco with missing portrait, 4th or 5th century. Vault in the cubiculum of Oceanus, Catacomb of San Callixtus, Rome. Photo: Joseph Wilpert, Die römischen Mosaiken und Malereien der kirchlichen Bauten vom IV. Bis XIII Jahrhundert (Freiburg, 1916), IV, 182.1.
The bulk of what we know about ancient panel portraiture comes from mummy portraits that have survived from Egypt, mostly dating to the first through third centuries. Their preservation is a fortunate result of the desert climate, leaving many in near pristine condition. These strikingly naturalistic portraits in encaustic and others of lesser quality painted in tempera give us indication of the variety and appearances of portraits that would have been found all over the Mediterranean world. In Egypt, the painted portraits were adapted to fit over the faces of Egyptians’ mummified bodies (Figure 12.4). In this way, painted portraits served as replacements for the older tradition of using sculptural masks on mummies to portray the deceased. Many scholars still consider these Egyptian portraits to be on the fringes of ancient funerary panel portraiture because they were essentially mummy masks (i.e., substitutes for the face in the afterlife), but it is important to note that some of the portraits show evidence that they were cut down to fit the respective mummies, suggesting a previous use for them. Others appear to have been stand-alone panels. Although their discovery in the nineteenth century was often poorly documented and thus their functions in tombs unclear, one description contemporary with the discovery of a tomb in Er-Rubayat reports that the walls, not the bodies, displayed numerous portraits on panel.10 A portrait of a female now in the Getty Museum (Figure 12.5) may have come from Er-Rubayat. It is interesting to note the nail holes at the bottom of the panel and blank horizontal space at the top that may correspond to a now-missing frame. Perhaps it had hung in her tomb. Like other places in the Roman Empire, Egypt may have used funerary panels as tomb decoration rather than just mummy masks, lending the surviving panels even greater importance as objects intended for viewers’ contemplation.

Figure 12.4 Mummy portrait of a woman. Attributed to the Isidora Master (Romano-Egyptian, active 100–125), ca. 100–110. From Er-Rubayat (?), Egypt. Digital image courtesy of the Getty’s Open Content Program.
Very often these portraits were painted from life or copied from life portraits, and they went on to serve as commemorative images at tombs after death. Our best evidence for this comes from the only framed panel portrait that has survived from this early period. The portrait, dated to the second century, was found in a tomb near Hawara in Egypt (Figure 12.6). Though badly damaged, the panel clearly depicts a woman. It also preserves a rope attached to the corners of the frame that was used for hanging it on a wall. This, along with the size of the portrait—the painted face is much too small to have ever been intended for a mummy—makes it almost certainly an object that had originally been in a home. This practice was important to the development of the kinds of icons that were placed in saints’ tomb-shrines, which relied upon many of the same conceptual aspects of the funerary portrait. Many accounts of icons follow similar patterns of being painted from life or copied from an original, and displayed in private contexts. In Late Antiquity, in the shrines of Christian saints and martyrs, portraits that claimed original likenesses would invariably adorn their tombs. However, it is important to note that funerary images could be typified, as well, relying not upon a portrait but upon an avatar-like idealized image as substitute for the deceased. For many early icons of saints there is no doubt that the legend of an accurate portrait icon arose well after an initial typified “holy” appearance had been accepted as the real image.
Panel portraits set up in public or sacred spaces represent another antique tradition relevant to the origins of Christian icons. Analogous to the public statues set up in fora and temples throughout the Empire, portrait panels were frequently of ruling emperors. We know about these primarily from texts, as only one imperial panel survives from the second century (Figure 12.7). It features Emperor Septimius Severus, his wife, Julia Domna, and his sons Caracalla and Geta (the latter’s image having been defaced on the order of his brother). Likewise, late antique Christian emperors had portrait panels, unsurprisingly referred to in texts as icons, which were copied and sent out to officials across the Empire, as well as displayed in public spaces and churches. This practice ran parallel to other kinds of Christian portraiture, where authoritative panel portraits of bishops occupied civic and ecclesiastical spaces. How and when holy icons became accepted parts of public display is not yet fully understood, though the sixth century presents itself in texts as a watershed moment for civic icons.

Panel portraits for spiritual access, veneration, and supplication

One of the most ubiquitous claims of portraiture for pagan and Christian alike was the ability to provide a means to see the features of someone who was not immediately available to sight. Thus, the psychological motivations for the production and acquiring of portraiture in the first few centuries CE were very much akin to our own. There was the desire to know the appearances of certain well-known people universally held in high regard. Pliny the Elder writes, “And indeed, it is my opinion, that nothing can be a greater proof of having achieved success in
Figure 12.7  Severan Imperial portrait, ca. 200. From Djemila (Algeria). Antikensammlung der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin. Photo: Carol Raddato, Wikimedia Commons.

life, than a lasting desire on the part of one’s fellow men, to know what one’s features were.” Among the most common reasons was the desire to look intimately upon images of familiar loved ones and esteemed mentors, as is beautifully illustrated in the portrait painter’s sarcophagus (Figure 12.1), which has, on the far right, a figure reverently carrying away a small portrait. In the life of Saint Pancratius, though written centuries after the martyr’s death, a disciple emotes over a portrait of the saint: “When I see him in the image, I think that he is alive and that I am in his company.” The sentiment lets us know that the portrait bridged the separation of the disciple from his deceased mentor in a way that was likely perceived not merely metaphorically; it is quite reasonable to assume that the viewer believed Saint Pancratius to be spiritually accessible through his portrait and the perceived intimacy that it imparted.

Where such private portrait panels were kept is not entirely known: most likely in atria, perhaps in home libraries, workspaces, or bedrooms. In some cases, it appears that home shrines may have been set up for deceased family members or loved ones where painted portraits were displayed, like the tiny columned aedicule from Egypt with a child’s portrait placed within (Figure 12.8). Objects like this may have joined images of gods on pagan domestic altars. Indeed, the portrait shrine from Egypt suggests a larger spectrum of representations were perceived as venerable than just the images of gods.

In the ancient world, loved ones who had passed on to the afterlife were believed to have sway over forces that were otherwise beyond the control of the living. Family members and ancestors would, theoretically, be invested in their own relatives, and therefore might be more responsive to evocations and placations by particular households. Portraits, whether in homes or in tombs, would have been useful to help focus prayers, but also would have been perceived as having a real and powerful connection to the portrayed. Augustine of Hippo’s chastisement
mentioned above describes how his congregation gathered at the tombs to feast and drink and to adore the images there, which we can infer were most likely portraits of their deceased loved ones. However, if one’s power had been strong in this world, and one’s status had been high in the eyes of the gods, the potential to have influence in the supernatural realm was augmented and more widespread. Godly and spiritual men of great renown were considered especially efficacious. Indeed, it was believed that the venerable deceased offered better mediation on behalf of the living than the gods, a phenomenon that gained significant foothold in the religions of Late Antiquity, including Christianity.

The gods did not disappear from pagan religious life, though. A handful of panel paintings of pagan gods and goddesses has survived, mostly full length, but often rendered in bust, as if portraits, perhaps suggesting a merging of the intimacy offered by portraiture while retaining also the iconography of divine majesty. These kinds of panel paintings were almost certainly widely produced. Their precise function is debated. It is possible that they, too, were placed in homes for veneration, alongside or in place of statuettes that featured in private shrines called lararia. From texts we learn that pinakes, painted images of the gods, were also offered as votive gifts to temples and public shrines. A few surviving “pagan icons” include smaller images of devotees that are presumed to be the donors of panels gifted to temples, though perhaps such portraits could be found in home shrines, too, as evidence for a supplicant’s eternal devotion.
Christians donating images of Christ, saints, and angels hark back to this practice. Donor portraits only appear later in surviving Christian panel paintings, like the famous icon known as the Madonna della Clemenza in Santa Maria in Trastevere, Rome, which has been dated to either the late sixth or early seventh century. Yet texts provide more evidence for donor portraits on icons and suggest that the motivations for giving icons to churches were similar to the pagans who had in earlier times offered panels to temples. Thankful supplicants of Saint Daniel the Stylite, a pillar saint who lived in the fifth century and whose vita was likely written by a contemporary, donated a silver plaque with the saint’s image (probably a relief panel rather than a painted icon) that included their own portraits on it.\textsuperscript{15} Two epigrams from icons recorded in the sixth century by Agathias Scholasticus clearly denote paintings as thanks offerings.\textsuperscript{16} One of the earliest icons of Christ, of which only the top half remains, preserves a votive inscription in Coptic identifying a supplicant named Timotheos (Figure 12.9). It is not impossible that Timotheos was once depicted on the now-missing lower half of icon.

\textbf{Portraits of philosophers and early icons of holy men}

While respect for the ancient gods remained, the early centuries CE saw another type of person added to the antique pantheon of venerable beings. Elites of the Roman Empire regarded important philosophers like Plato, Pythagoras, and Socrates, as spiritual masters and exemplars.\textsuperscript{17} Textual sources reveal the existence of not only statues and statuettes of philosophers (of which there are numerous surviving examples, as well), but also painted panels (of which none survives). An epigram from one such panel, for example, addresses the painter of Socrates’ encaustic portrait: “Painter, who has reproduced the form of Socrates, would that you could have put his soul into the wax!”\textsuperscript{18}

Venerating these portraits appears to have occurred very early. According to Pliny, a group dedicated to Epicurus carried around his portrait, likely as a way to demonstrate their devotion.\textsuperscript{19} In the following centuries, veneration of philosophers’ portraits became more commonplace.

\textbf{Figure 12.9} Part of an icon of Christ, 6th–7th century. From Egypt. Benaki Museum, Athens. Photo © Benaki Museum.
Bishop John Chrysostom’s teacher, the pagan Sophist Libanius (313–394 CE), possessed two bust-length portraits of his favorite philosopher, the second-century Aristides. Libanius further desired to acquire a full-length portrait of Aristides so that he could gaze upon the philosopher’s hands and feet. These are clearly paintings, since Libanius describes having at first mistaken one of his portraits for a painting of a god, and so dedicated it to a temple of Zeus Olympius, where it was to be placed near a painting of Apollo with Asclepius and Hygea. In his mistake, we see how the appearance of philosophers’ portraits was such that they came to occupy an ambiguous place between the portrait and cult image. The likenesses of ancient philosophers were frequently unknown and images had to be fabricated, circulated, and accepted as authentic portraits. More often than not, these “portraits” conformed to an expected and idealized type, usually an older bearded man with a high forehead or balding, while still maintaining certain traits or relying upon inscriptions to identify them. Viewers were ready to believe, even though Dio Chrysostom remarked upon this phenomenon, saying that the appearances of bearded, mature philosophers were actually based on Greco-Roman male divinities. Libanius certainly invested in the belief that portraits of Aristides could accurately convey not just the appearance of his face, but also the particulars of his hands and feet, a sentiment echoed in John Chrysostom’s devotion to the apostle Paul, including in his esteem the virtuous attributes of the saint’s various body parts.

One of the reasons for the popularity of philosopher cults was philosophy’s gradual elision with theurgy and mysticism in the first few centuries CE. This led to greater veneration of ancient philosophers, who were attributed god-like qualities. It also produced new spiritual exemplars and purported miracle workers who became regarded as holy men. Portraits were an important part of this phenomenon. In his lararium, Marcus Aurelius (r. 161–180 CE) venerated images of his own philosophy teachers alongside the images of gods, essentially deifying them. According to Bishop Eusebius’ letter to Constantia discussed at the beginning of this chapter, followers of Simon Magus possessed a painted portrait of the first-century mage, just as followers of the third-century Mani carried around a portrait of him. Apollonius of Tyana (ca. 15–100 CE), “a wise man of most celebrated fame, an ancient philosopher, the true friend of the gods, who himself deserves to be worshiped as a higher power,” gained substantial status and had numerous images across the Empire. For example, the lararium of Alexander Severus (r. 222–235 CE) held a portrait of Apollonius. He also supposedly had images of Christ and Abraham. The emperor Aurelian (r. 270–275 CE) beheld a vision of Apollonius, who was recognizable to the emperor because the emperor had seen images of Apollonius in temples. The emperor, now a believer, immediately promised to dedicate “an image, statues, and a temple” to the holy man.

This widespread belief in holy men as capable of working miracles transitioned quite well into Christianity, as did the habit of keeping portraits of them. John Chrysostom describes how the congregation in Antioch had adorned all kinds of objects and places with the likeness of their bishop Meletius (d. 381 CE), including rings, bedroom walls, and cups. This may have been for comfort while grieving, as Chrysostom claims. However, Gregory of Nyssa’s funerary oration for Meletius, given at the time of Meletius’ death five years before Chrysostom’s oration, evinces the common belief that spiritual exemplars could help the living deployed within a purely Christian understanding of the cult of saints. On that day, Gregory told the congregation that Meletius, now residing in heaven, was able to intercede directly with God on behalf of the Antiochenes. It is reasonable to suggest that Meletius’ images proliferated, in part, because
of Gregory’s reassurance of his intercession. Thus, the portraits described by Chrysostom could have functioned not only in the commemoration of Meletius, but also as visual foci for prayer to him and as objects made for his continued veneration. The incipience of Meletius’ cult resembles how pagan men viewed spiritual teachers and also demonstrates aspects of the Roman ancestor cult, where deceased loved ones were believed to act on behalf of the living.

The earliest Christian icons and subsequent developments

Yet it was earlier than the late fourth century—indeed, as early as the second century—when the first portraits of Christian holy persons were made and venerated. Two texts provide evidence. The first was written by Irenaeus of Lyons, wherein he criticizes followers of Carpocrates—a heretical Christian sect—for keeping a portrait of Christ they believed was made by Pontius Pilate upon which they placed crowns.29 It is interesting to note that Christ’s portrait was venerated along with many images of philosophers, including Pythagoras, Plato, and Aristotle. The second text is found in the apocryphal Acts of John,30 which has been dated to the early second century. It tells of a man named Lycomedes who was miraculously healed by Saint John. In his gratitude, Lycomedes hired an artist to paint John’s portrait in secret so that he might have an image of the saint. The artist gave the portrait to Lycomedes, who took it into his bedroom where he set it up, hung garlands on it, and lit lamps on an altar before it.

Key points emerge from these texts. It is clear that the second century saw the use of Christian portraits—perhaps only a few—and that these could be venerated in the privacy of a bedroom, or in a more ritualized way in conjunction with other important figures, though these behaviors might not yet be within the bounds of official Christianity. Additionally, whether or not the portraits were authentic, the perception that life portraits of Christ and his apostles could exist was already in place well before Eusebius’ time, an idea that became more prominent in later centuries with the advent of icon legends, especially of the Virgin and Christ. The textual evidence presented above also suggests that, at least in the beginning, it is possible that Christ’s was not the most important portrait among Christian venerable images, that perhaps his image was one among a number of portraits of potential spiritual teachers that could be revered. This was certainly true for those outside of Christianity, like the Emperor Alexander Severus and his numerous images, including Christ, mentioned previously. Similarly, as stated above, Ireneaeus describes Christ’s image as one among many philosophers’ images that the Carpocratians worshipped. Ireneaeus also describes the heretical sect’s view of Christ in such a way to suggest they believed Christ to have been, like the others whose images they venerated, a spiritual man who ascended to the highest realm of existence to become divinized.31 Lycomedes, presumably a Christian convert, chose a portrait of John to keep as an image of his personal savior, saying, “but if, next to that God it be right that the men who have benefited us should be called gods, it is thou, father, whom I have had painted in that portrait, whom I crown and love and reverence as having become my good guide.”32 It was not Christ, but John, who was next to God in Lycomedes’ esteem.

In a religious climate that aspired to direct knowledge of the divine realm and prized intimate contact with those spiritual men who had achieved such a state, so that personal saviors and teachers, venerated philosophers, and holy men were preferred to the ancient gods, Christ’s vague status is perhaps not surprising, especially considering the debates about His human and divine natures that persisted for centuries. This may explain why the images of certain saints, such as Peter and Paul in Rome, and of martyrs and Christian holy men in their various churches
Panel paintings and early Christian icons

across the Latin West and Greek East, proliferated and developed specific, recognizable portraits when compared with the various unspecified images of Christ. While there are no panel paintings of saints that have survived from the fourth and fifth centuries, there are images—often in bust—in other media where, even if abstracted, particular saints are yet recognizable either by inscriptions or characteristic traits. By contrast, Christ appears differently in his images from Late Antiquity: sometimes youthful, sometimes bearded; sometimes a philosopher and theurgic wonder-worker, sometimes a ruler, and sometimes a god. But, contrary to what one might expect, Christ rarely features in a “portrait.”

To provide one example, a fifth-century text describes how portraits (“small icons”) of Symeon Stylites the Elder (d. 459 ce) hung in every shop in Rome, yet there is nothing similar in sources about Christ’s image hanging throughout the private spaces of cities. Negative evidence certainly does not rule out the existence of large numbers of portable portraits of Christ. The first few icon-like portraits of Christ in wall paintings, floor mosaics, and gold glass appear in the late fourth century, and even if not always consistent in his appearance, the images demonstrate the spread of Christ’s portrait in different media. An example such as the painted ceiling from the Catacomb of Commodilla, Rome (Figure 12.10), with its “framed” bust and recognizable (if not yet universally accepted) bearded face, makes it likely that there were portrait panels of Christ that looked like this in circulation and used as models for larger works.

Yet, as suggested above, it was perhaps the immediate contact with the divine offered by a particular saint, either via a living holy man or via the relics of a deceased saint in his tomb, that was more crucial to the precipitate growth and spread of icons in the fourth and fifth centuries than the exultation of images of Christ. Again, we hear about such icons only from

Figure 12.10 Cubiculum with image of Christ, 4th or 5th century. Catacomb of Commodilla, Rome. Photo: De Agostini Picture Library/Bridgeman Images.
texts. But within these texts, we may infer that the use of icons at martyrria and shrines gave visibility to the present saint and allowed Christians greater intimacy in their experiences of the saint. And, just as the popular practice of burial *ad sanctos* augmented the cult of martyrs, a perceived closeness to local saints might have resulted in a greater investment in personal icons of them, which also boosted their cults and increased icon production. Local saints provided greater hagiographical possibilities about how their appearances were witnessed and documented in portraits, which let Christians more easily believe that they could actually view saints in their images, whether or not these images were clear and lifelike or sketched with the barest of lines. By means of portable icons, such as those of Saint Symeon described above, and *eulogia* (clay or lead impressed with the saint’s image), visual contact with and perceived blessings from the saint were ongoing even after physical departure from the living holy person or his enshrined relics.

While Christians in the fourth and fifth centuries valued seeing holy persons in images, likely using them to channel their intercession in earthly matters and for veneration in preparation for their eternal life in heaven, at some point viewing icons also became spiritually charged and potentially transformative. Not just commemorative images, icons of virtuous, spiritual men and women, martyrs, and other godly persons were believed to convey their spiritual nature. The faces presented in icons were understood as the visible aspects of perfected souls. This perception was founded in antiquity, in the belief that virtue was apparent in one’s face, and reinforced by the divinized philosophers who were said to radiate outwardly the beauty and serenity of their souls. The cultural phenomenon affected the development of Christian images. Icons were perceived to have power. Bishop Gregory of Nazianzus (*ca.* 329–390 CE), for example, tells of a portrait of a man named Polemon, who was a reformed profligate, though he was not a Christian saint. His portrait, however, inspired a prostitute who saw it hanging in the home of a man she was visiting. Though she did not recognize him, his portrait transformed her and she forswore her occupation and returned to a virtuous life.

With powerful icons eventually came miraculous icons, which also provided definitive origin stories for what were believed to be authentic portraits of Christ. Of these, perhaps the most informative is the legend of the Mandylion. The early version of the story tells of the ill King Abgar of Edessa, who lived at the time of Christ and who sent a messenger to bring Christ to Edessa to heal him. Christ, unable to go in person, sent a letter to the king, which was kept as a relic. By the beginning of the fifth century, however, the story had grown to include a portrait of Christ by Abgar’s court painter, Hannan, which was also sent back to Edessa. This already evinces the possible existence of an avowed, if jealously guarded, original court painting of Christ in the fifth century. Yet, by the next century, the painted portrait of Christ was no longer featured. The story instead told how Christ wiped his face with a cloth—the Mandylion—leaving a miraculous imprint of his face upon it, a perfect portrait without variation from the original that was sanctioned by Christ Himself. The account also saw the cloth re-imprinting itself on a ceramic tile. Later accretions to the story told how the Mandylion miraculously saved the city from invasion.

In this way, icons of miraculous origins, called *acheiropoietic* icons (literally “not made by the hand [of man]”), and having miraculous powers, provided justification for all icons. Icons offered the opportunity to see what were believed to be true likenesses of the portrayed. For Christ, his true icon meant nothing less than the chance to see the face of God, an intimate engagement with the divine perhaps nowhere clearer than in the beautifully preserved, sixth-century encaustic icon of Christ from the Monastery of Saint Catherine, Mount Sinai (Figure 12.11).
Panel paintings and early Christian icons

Figure 12.11  Icon of Christ Pantokrator, 6th century. Monastery of St Catherine, Mt Sinai. Photo courtesy of the Michigan–Princeton–Alexandria Expedition to Mount Sinai.

Notes

5 Pliny, *Natural History*, 35.4–6.
7 Bragatini and Sampaolo, *La pittura pompeiana*, 516, no. VI.1.
9 Augustine, *On the Monas of the Catholic Church and the Manicheans*, 1.34.75, CSEL 90:80.
Katherine Marsengill

11 Pliny, Natural History, 35.15.
13 Fejfer, Roman Portraits in Context.
19 Pliny, Natural History, 35.3–8.
22 John Chrysostom, Homily XIII; PG 61, 110.
28 John Chrysostom, On Saint Meletius, 3.
29 Irenaeus, Against Heresies, 1.25.6.
31 Irenaeus, Against Heresies, 1.25.1.
32 Acts of John, 27.
33 Theodoret of Cyrus, Ecclesiastical History, 26.11.
34 Gregory of Nazianzus, Carmina, 1.2.10, “On Virtue”; PG 37, 737–738.

Further reading


