What kind of a category is “early Christian art?” Which objects, images, monuments, or artifacts does it include? How might this nomenclature affect the study of visual and material culture in Late Antiquity? The purpose of this chapter is not to explode the category underlying this Handbook but to invite reflection on its content, contours, coherence, and historiography.

Art

“If we step outside this millennium [Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages] into the modern period, we find art in our way, a new function that fundamentally transformed the old image” (Hans Belting).

The study of early Christian monuments and artifacts used to be called “Christian antiquities” until that expression was supplanted by “early Christian art” in the first decades of the nineteenth century. Antiquities are old things; archaeology is a discipline occupied with their discovery and examination. The term “art” may import somewhat different connotations and associations. The word has long been associated with aesthetic quality and intention. Early Christian art has been challenged on both counts. Vasari opined that sculpture, painting, and architecture after Constantine went from bad to worse (di male in peggio). By the twentieth century, historians had become more willing to recognize the beauty of late antique and medieval images, at least in the eyes of their original beholders. This aesthetic quality is, however, often regarded as a means rather than an end, a technique for expressing and reinforcing Christian doctrine or polemic. Mary Carruthers questioned this “modern tendency to over-moralize the medieval arts,” proposing that inspirational impact, didactic function, and theological messaging are not inconsistent with a sensual experience of beauty. Her essentially text-based argument is corroborated by a luxury object like the ivory Resurrection plaque in Munich (Figure 23.1). While its production and reception may have been predominantly spiritual in intention and effect, the purely visual and tactile pleasure seems obvious.

But is it art? This quintessentially modern question could not have been asked in Late Antiquity, although Christian apologists and authorities did invoke both artistic agency and aesthetic autonomy to justify the preservation of the patrimony of pagan statuary. Prudentius (c. 402) called it “the work of great artists [artificium]” (perhaps less tendentiously translated...
as “craftsmen”); an imperial decree of 382 ordered a provincial temple to be kept open even though it contained statues “which must be measured by the value of their art [artis] rather than by their divinity.”

Christian images, on the other hand, could be prized and venerated for their cultic or spiritual function quite apart from any judgment concerning the excellence of their appearance. Yet, this does not mean that aesthetic pleasure was necessarily absent or suppressed. “Early Christian art” is neither an oxymoron nor even especially misleading. Referring in particular to the “high end” of the market, Anthony Cutler saw no reason to avoid the term: “Once the important point is made, as it was by Hans Belting . . . that these were not primarily gratuitous aesthetic gestures, it is not worth belaboring.” Belting’s observation is nonetheless a prudent admonition against the perils and pitfalls of trans-historical generalization and anachronism.

At a more mundane and practical level, one accepted if unexpressed distinction between the art of Late Antiquity or the Middle Ages and later periods is the breadth of material included. Standard texts on Renaissance or Baroque art are generally restricted to painting, sculpture, and architecture, but a more liberal definition is considered appropriate for early Christian art. Part I of this Handbook is indicative: it canvasses works in a gamut of media, deployed in such diverse functional contexts as funerary, liturgical, personal adornment, magic, and home decoration. The objects may be aniconic in their decoration, bearing only a cross (see Figures 4.11, 15.9), a Christogram (Figures 4.7, 9.2, 15.5), or even just the words “Jesus Christ” (Figure 9.1). The envelope might be pushed still further. Is a Corinthian capital deployed in an early Christian church
(whether reused or newly carved) Christian art? If not, is this because it is not Christian (discussed below), or not art (but compare non-figural Islamic art)? What about a staurogram (a superposed tau and rho: ρ) appearing in a written text, which could represent not only as an abbreviation of the Greek word for “cross” but also a pictogram of the Crucifixion (see Figure 18.4)?

**Early**

“Strictly speaking, there are no periods in history, only in historians” (E.R. Dodds). The two adjectives in “early Christian art” are best understood as a compound, “early-Christian,” alluding to historical notions of early Christianity, early Christians, and the early Christian centuries. It is nonetheless convenient to give separate consideration to each modifier and its implications.

“Early” can connote a condescending judgment within a narrative of artistic progress. Ernst Kitzinger objected to “early Christian” because it suggested “hesitant, tentative, perhaps even furtive beginnings,” arguably evocative of the earliest catacombs but surely not appropriate to such monuments as Hagia Sophia in Constantinople and San Vitale in Ravenna. Although these are works of the sixth century, the concern is not limited to later Late Antiquity: there is nothing hesitant, tentative or furtive about many earlier examples, like the bejeweled silver fastigium purportedly donated by Constantine to the Lateran basilica with its five-foot tall statues of Christ, apostles, and spear-bearing angels. Every object is early in relation to another produced later; this does not make it primitive or preliminary. The earliness of early Christian art is relevant to the study of its subsequent reception, influence, incorporation, emulation, and even rejection, but a poor indicator of its quality, function, or meaning.

The more usual and less value-laden sense of “early” is as shorthand for a span of years. This raises the thorny issue of periodization. Periods may have heuristic value, but rarely ontological status. The definition and denomination of a period is often used to support a position or promote an agenda, as in the invention of the “Middle Ages” to fill a supposedly blank space between the end of Antiquity and its rebirth.

Historical scholarship uses boundary events as bookends for its periods: wars, royal accessions, political, economic, or social upheavals, scientific revolutions. Most of these are of doubtful relevance or ambiguous application in art history. Nor can the chronology of images be strictly deduced from texts. The chronological markers of early Christian art are especially imprecise, notwithstanding the position of the Association of Art Editors that the initial “e” should be capitalized because the term refers to a “sharply delimited period.”

In theory, this period might begin with the career of Jesus or the dissemination of his gospels. In practice, a delay is dictated by the archaeological record. Taking Christian art to be art the content of which is explicitly and identifiably Christian (the subject of the next section), objects of this description cannot be reliably dated before the third century and they remain scarce until one approaches the fourth. This visual reticence is commonly attributed to either scriptural scruples or inferior status.

The first theory claims that the early Church, its clergy, and apologists were mainly iconoclasts, whether from strict observance of the biblical second commandment or a philosophical position that favored the spiritual, intangible, and ineffable over the merely corporeal. The coherence and consistency of the literary evidence invoked to support this interpretation has been convincingly challenged, although one does sense what Jaś Elsner called a “residual resistance.” Some patrons seemed to prefer aniconic decoration, while others were more relaxed in this regard. André Grabar called it an affair of individual conscience rather than ecclesiastical dictation.
The second conventional hypothesis to account for the tardy emergence of early Christian art cites either or both socio-economic mediocrity and political insecurity. Christians of the first centuries, it is said, were poor and of inferior rank; art was a luxury of the better-off higher orders. The great majority of Christians in the Roman Empire did live only marginally above subsistence, but so did the rest of the population. If Christians were proportionately under-represented in the higher social and economic echelons, the disparity was moderate, temporary, and insufficient to explain the absence of earlier Christian art. The other limb of this argument claims that second- and third-century Christians of means chose mainstream Roman imagery over a visual display that would reveal or parade their affiliation to a religion lacking legal recognition and exposed to periodic bouts of persecution. However, it is not easy to demonstrate a robust correlation between the production of Christian images and religious repression or emancipation. Altogether, these economic, social, legal, and political factors, like iconoclasm, may have contributed to the late arrival of early Christian art but they remain incomplete and conjectural explanations.

An alternative answer is demography (which, of course, is not a fully independent variable). Population estimates are uncertain but the basic arithmetic is clear: Christians were far more numerous in the fourth century than in the third, and their presence in the Roman Empire before then was hardly noticeable. If Christians did produce (or, more correctly, consume) a distinct and recognizable (to us) visual culture before 300, or even much before 400, it cannot have been abundant. Scholars tend to discount the hazards of survival as an explanation for the dearth of earlier Christian art, but natural losses would have eroded an already meager record.

Turning from the beginning to the end of early Christian art, the problem is how to identify an inflection point at which this period yields to the next. The transition might rely on a variety of criteria—stylistic, technical, iconographic, or functional—with potentially conflicting results. Geography is another source of dissonant chronology; early Christian art does not simultaneously become Byzantine in the East and “early medieval” in the West.

Guidance in seeking the end-point of early Christian art might be sought in the burgeoning field of historical studies known as Late Antiquity (usually, and tellingly, rendered with initial capital letters). It posits a coherent period, particularly in the social and cultural dimensions, extending broadly across space (the Mediterranean world) and time (in the foundational publication by Peter Brown, from 150–750). This notion of a long Late Antiquity contrasts with a traditionally more restricted conception of the “later Roman Empire” ending, at its most generous, in the sixth century, and usually far earlier. The chapters of this Handbook generally adopt a middle ground, extending past the traditional later Roman Empire but ending before the broad claims of Late Antiquity studies.

A clue to the suitability of an art historical period is its resonance with the image-makers and original viewers. In this respect, there is an interesting counterpoint between “late antique” and “early Christian.” The former emphasizes continuity with the past; the latter conjures stirrings of the future. Producers and consumers of Christian art during this period (however circumscribed) must have experienced it as simultaneously retrospective and prospective, although not as “late” or “early.” On the one hand, they recognized a visual tradition stretching back to ancient Rome and Greece, underscored by, but not limited to, punctuated classical revivals like the so-called Theodosian renaissance. At the same time, they confronted new and sometimes puzzling forms of Christian iconography, with heightened intensity in the church or at the tomb. It is impossible to pinpoint a moment—applicable across all regions, media, and functions—when the comfort of stability was abandoned and the stimulation of novelty faded. This uncertainty is reflected in the range of individual chapters in this Handbook: Roman sarcophagus production ends earlier than its diaspora in Ravenna or Gaul; almost all gold glasses were produced before most church mosaics.
Whatever decision is made regarding the temporal boundaries of early Christian art, artifacts can be included and placed in chronological sequence only if they are dated. The difficulty of this task should not be underestimated. A review by Cyril Mango of Ernst Kitzinger’s *The Art of Byzantium and the Medieval West* in *The Times Literary Supplement* led to an illuminating (and entertaining) exchange regarding the dating of early Byzantine art. The reviewer criticized the author’s tendency “to draw sweeping conclusions from insufficient evidence,” an accusation to which Kitzinger responded with a spirited defense of stylistic dating. In a final rebuttal, Mango conceded the legitimacy of this technique “when it is based on a sufficient body of accepted facts,” that is to say, firmly dated monuments; however, the widely divergent opinions of recognized experts in many instances undermined, in Mango’s view, the construction of such a base line.

A paucity of “accepted facts” presents at least as serious a challenge in the dating of early Christian art. The substantial and well-studied corpus of Roman Christian sarcophagi is emblematic. Standard texts ascribe dates with only modest concession to uncertainty, usually expressed as a quarter century, sometimes as short as a decade. Yet, at most two dozen of these monuments bear an inscription that provides more or less precise evidence of their date. Scholars therefore expand their horizons to stylistic comparisons with public monuments, notably the Arch of Constantine, or other media, like coins, at the risk of eliding significant and consequential distinctions in function and idiom. Major ecclesiastical commissions, such as church mosaics, may be better documented through inscriptions or literary sources, although even in these cases the evidence, when it exists, is rarely conclusive. Panegyrists were often more dutiful than scrupulous in asserting a connection between church buildings and a favorite emperor or bishop; even the dating of such an iconic monument as Old St Peter’s, and *a fortiori* its late antique mosaic decoration, remains disputed.

Historical events are uneasy guides. Alaric’s sack of Rome in 410 has been accepted by some scholars as the likely cause for the end of metropolitan sarcophagi production but rejected by others. Less resistance is encountered to the magnetic attraction of Constantine’s accession, and more specifically the “Edict of Milan,” as a dating fulcrum. As a purely factual matter, it is questionable whether there was any such edict, or any necessity in 313 for a general law legalizing the practice of Christianity or the operations of its church, particularly in the West. Improvement in the status of the minority religion was gradual and uneven, advances punctuated by setbacks; one might expect a corresponding progressive if irregular increase in the quantity of overtly Christian art, reflecting especially the growing number of Christians. Dating individual objects on the premise that particular iconographical choices point to production before or after the Edict of Milan is tendentious, overly precise, and risks circularity: one cannot demonstrate the quantitative or qualitative impact of an historical event on early Christian art by citing as evidence objects that have been dated on the basis of their hypothesized relationship to this same event.

There is no evident solution to the dating conundrum, although broader ranges can help and assigning a probability rather than estimating the date of individual objects may be more realistic. Imprecise and unreliable dates do not prevent the study of early Christian art but should instill prudence and humility in claims of chronological priority or identification of temporal turning points.

**Christian**

“I humbly offer this book to Christ the Redeemer. May my work, blessed by Him, contribute to the spread of archaeological knowledge, defense of the Holy Church, and expansion of the cult of the martyrs!” (Orazio Marucchi).
The invention of early Christian art as a historical category is not shrouded in a secret agenda. It was a conscious and explicit project to discover, interpret, and valorize material and visual evidence of Christianity in the early centuries of its era. A foundational event was Antonio Bosio’s seventeenth-century study of the Roman catacombs. After a period of consolidation in catalogs of Christian antiquities, the field blossomed in the second half of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth through the “scientific,” but still church-friendly, investigations by such prominent figures as Giovanni Battista de Rossi, Edmond-Frédéric Le Blant and Joseph Wilpert. The Vatican hierarchy has always been, and still is, a key participant through funding, sponsorship, publications, curatorial activity, control of access, and contributions by clerical scholars. The range of backgrounds and intentions among practitioners of early Christian art history has broadened considerably but echoes of its origins can still be heard, not least in its name.

Artifacts of visual culture are usually grouped by time or place of production (Medieval art, African art), shared qualities (Impressionism, Neoclassicism), or a combination of the two approaches (German Expressionism). The nomenclature of categorization can be used to promote an intellectual, academic, political, colonial, historical, or religious position. National designations, for example, sometimes harbor dubious claims regarding the ethnicity of the producers. Such specific concerns aside, it is important to consider the implications of the qualification “Christian” art, however apparently neutral or anodyne, on academic research.

This terminology differs both conceptually and practically from a national category. A painting or sculpture is English because of its production or provenance; “Englishness” is a postulation of common characteristics in a pre-established corpus. In contrast, a late antique sarcophagus, or even a church mosaic, is not Christian because of the confession of the artisan or the religious demographic of the region where it was made. The Christianity of early Christian art is not a derivative inference from a generally agreed body of material but rather the very criterion for classification.

This criterion is not style. The earliest Christian art adopted and adapted prevailing visual conventions. It has been argued that the theological, doctrinal, and spiritual requirements of Christianity confronted and eventually transformed the classical aesthetic through abstraction or “dematerialization;” alternatively, this characteristic of Christian imagery may be situated within a trend already in Roman art. In either case, style provides no basis for classification.

Instead, an object is conventionally called Christian by reason of its iconography. Early Christian art is art that depicts events recounted in the Gospels and popular Christian literature and legend, or images evocative of Christian dogma, teachings, or theology. Narratives from the Hebrew Bible are also accepted as signals of Christian art because of their appropriation through typological or other interpretive strategies. The Old Testament, called by that name, had been accepted into the Christian canon. The range of Christian source material may even extend to classical Greco–Roman figures or motifs through an iconographical metamorphosis somewhat inaptly called interpretatio christiana. If Orpheus underwent what Mary Charles-Murray called a “Christian annexation,” then his image, in the appropriate context, was no less Christian than Daniel or Jonah (See Figure 2.10).

A critical but generally unspoken assumption is that an early Christian artifact, as defined by its visual content, is also an artifact of (commissioned, owned, used and seen by) an early Christian. Indexation of the patron, consumer, or viewer is central to the project’s goal of using art to elucidate the early Christian story. This assumption becomes progressively more robust with the demographic tide of Christianity, although the character of the relationship
between Christian subjects and objects remains a matter for study and reflection. In the early period, the situation is still more complex.

Echoing and reifying an old classification (e.g., Acts 18:4, Rom 3:9, 1 Cor 1:22), fourth-century legislators and Church Fathers divided the population into Jews, Christians, and pagans. The neat segmentation was polemical, apologetic, and less than completely accurate; indeed, these same sources repeatedly condemn, and thereby confirm, backsliding, “Judaizing,” and idolatry among professed Christians. Historians have documented and analyzed the evidence for religious compromise, accommodation, and shared practices in the polyethnic and pluralist later Roman Empire. An oft-cited anecdote from the Historia Augusta describes how the Emperor Alexander Severus (r. 222–235) celebrated his morning ritual sacrifice in the presence of statues or pictures of divinized emperors and “certain holy souls, among them Apollonius . . . Christ, Abraham, Orpheus and others of this same character.” The story is likely apocryphal and anachronistic but nonetheless suggestive of attitudes still popular in some quarters late in the fourth century when this collection was written.

In such a milieu, one might anticipate a degree of ambiguity or inconsistency in the visual expression of religious motifs. Is it self-evident that a gold glass medallion picturing Hercules must have been made for a pagan, another with the Menorah for a Jew, and a third with Peter (or Jonah) for a Christian? Are sarcophagi with orants and shepherds Christian? One group may have had first claim to a motif, but the image could easily have been shared, and therefore
an equivocal marker of religious affiliation. Yet, notwithstanding these valid and important objections, the practical impact of this source of uncertainty on the study of early Christian art, even in the third or fourth centuries, should not be exaggerated.

First, accepting the phenomenon of fuzzy religious boundaries, the size and significance of the group that modern pollsters would call “undecided” is probably not destabilizing. Most individuals must have regarded themselves (however we might regard them) as falling within one of the socially, legally, and clerically designated religious groupings. Second, the confidence with which one can ascribe a given object to a self-identified Christian user is directly proportional to the complexity of its iconography. Perhaps some pagans might have accepted the inclusion of such a popular figure as Jonah on their funerary monuments, but sarcophagi with dense and sophisticated biblical programs—as on the “Trinity” sarcophagus in Arles (Figure 23.3) or the sarcophagus of Junius Bassus in St Peter’s (see Figure 18.5)—were presumably commissioned by serious Christians, albeit not necessarily mindful of the intricate interpretations sometimes proposed by modern scholars. It may also be noteworthy that the juxtaposition of Christian and non-Christian imagery on a single artifact or within a coherent pictorial space is quite rare.

Of course attributing a visually Christian object to an ostensibly Christian subject is not the end of the matter. The sophistication and intensity of Christian expression displayed on the former may not be commensurate with the depth and consistency of religious commitment of the latter. According to an inscription on the aforementioned sarcophagus of Junius Bassus, the deceased “went to God newly baptised” (neofitus iit ad deum) at age 42 while still in office as urban prefect. This could indicate a deathbed conversion before his presumably unexpected demise; alternatively it might just be the wishful thinking of a devout widow concerned with the post mortem well-being of a husband whose commitment was unconsummated.

Figure 23.3 “Trinity” sarcophagus, Arles, France. Photo: Robert Couzin, with kind permission of Musée départemental Arles Antique.
Along with variations in individual religious engagement, late antique Christianity was also subject to serious collective divisions. A proliferation of sects, schisms, and heresies was met by anathemas, repressions, deportations, and contentious, even violent, synods and councils. According to Ammianus Marcellinus, the Emperor Julian (r. 361–363), the only pagan emperor after Constantine, relied on the inability of these supposed co-religionists to present a united front, “knowing as he did from experience that no wild beasts are such enemies to mankind as are most of the Christians in their deadly hatred of one another.”44 Over the succeeding centuries the theological conflicts were repeatedly redefined but not resolved. In other historical periods, such ruptures manifest themselves in the visual culture, like the contrasting artistic tendencies of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. Might the deep, numerous, and persistent rifts in early Christendom permit or require subdivisions within early Christian art?

Some doctrinal positions seem to call for special constraints on imagery. Marcionites, who rejected the canonical status of the Hebrew Bible, should have shunned Old Testament scenes; Donatist rigor might suggest avoidance of even the most innocent of classical motifs. Unfortunately, predictions of an absence rather than a presence of iconography are effectively unverifiable. More promising, by reason of numbers, longevity, and iconographical implications, are the successive waves of opposing Trinitarian doctrines. The Arian controversy, in particular, has evoked art historical claims of identifiably partisan imagery. Thomas Mathews perceived a Nicene condemnation of this heresy in the depiction of Christ’s golden garments and massive throne in the apse mosaic of Santa Pudenziana, elements underscoring his divinity (see Figure 6.5);45 Clementina Rizzardi saw in the mosaic of the “Arian” baptistery in Ravenna a response to its Orthodox predecessor and model, through a new emphasis on Christ’s humanity and subordination to the Father (see Figure 21.2).46 Some forms of representation attract multiple sectarian explanations: Christ in a mandorla is anti-Arian (Mathews) and anti-Monophysite (Mango).47 Many scholars are skeptical of such interpretation, seeing few, if any, secure instances of the visual expression of internecine competition in early Christian art.48 The search is nonetheless tempting. Picayune and obscure as these theological distinctions may appear now, they were matters of existential and eschatological importance with significant socio-political—and potentially visual—implications to many patrons and viewers.

The foregoing discussion of boundaries, commitments, and internal conflicts does not directly address the phenomenon of Christian objects—things owned and used by Christians—that are not, applying a strictly iconographical criterion, Christian art. Beyond hypothetical occurrences, like a decontextualized Hercules gold glass, there are also reasonably secure examples. Often cited in this regard is the Projecta Casket (see Figure 15.6), a silver box bearing both the representation of Venus and an explicitly Christian hortatory inscription. It is usually discussed in a category separate from Christian art, as evidence for the Christian assimilation (appropriation, borrowing, revival) of pagan imagery. To similar effect, sarcophagi that couple mythological, or more often classical, motifs with Christian epitaphs or signs are commonly labeled as instances of “reuse.”49 That term is not always literally accurate—the Christian marking may or may not have been added to a pre-owned coffin; nor does it address the significance of what has occurred, an inquiry that could be advanced by a contextual application of the rich theoretical literature on spolia.50

The potential advantages of integrating such Christian objects as these into the study of Christian art may be illustrated by recalling the sharp debates about the role of imperial forms of representation in the construction of early Christian iconography; for some, they were adapted and absorbed, for others, rejected and contested. In a retrospective review article, Anne-Orange Poilpré proposed a synthetic approach, on the premise that the cleavage between political and
It is interesting from this perspective to reimagine the relationship between certain secular and religious images. The silver Missorium of Theodosius I (dated 388, Figure 23.4) depicts this emperor enthroned between his co-Augustus and predecessor Valentinian II and his son and successor Arcadius, all three Christians. The formal similarity with images of Christ between Peter and Paul is apparent and not likely coincidental (as in the apse mosaic of Santa Pudenziana, see Figure 6.5). The interesting questions posed by this comparison extend beyond binaries of appropriation or repudiation to include reciprocity, hybridity, accommodation, and renegotiation.

Notes


“Early” “Christian” “art”


28 Examples: competing views regarding the priority of city-gate sarcophagi in Milan and Paris are remarked by Koch, Frühchristliche Sarkophage, 362; uncertainty concerning when a new figural type for Christ was adopted in the fourth century is underscored by Jean-Michel Spiess, Images du Christ: des catacombes aux lendemains de l'iconoclase (Geneva: Droz, 2015), 183–4.


37 Charles-Murray, Rebirth and Afterlife, 46.


50 See the essays and references in Richard Brilliant and Dale Kinney, eds, *Reuse Value: Spoiliation and Appropriation in Art and Architecture from Constantine to Sherrie Levine* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011).


52 On the Missorium, see José Maria Blázquez, “El Missorium de Teodosio,” in *El Gabinete de Antigüedades de la Real Academia* de la Historia, ed. Martín Almagro Gorbea (Madrid: Real Academia de la Historia, 1999), 175–200. Both the date and the identifications are contested by some scholars.


**Further reading**


