EARLY CHRISTIAN AND BYZANTINE

There is no simple term which adequately covers the period of artistic development from about third to the seventh centuries in western art, the transitional period between Antiquity and the Middle Ages. It is an era which seems to confront us with an abrupt and seemingly erratic succession of diverse styles. What unites these styles, however, is the rise in importance of specifically Christian imagery.

Christian art forms and liturgical practices took shape in both eastern and western parts of Europe and the crumbling Roman Empire. The Roman Emperor Constantine was the first to legalize Christianity. He had made Constantinople, at the ancient site of Byzantium on the Black Sea, the capital of the East Roman Empire around 325 A.D. In both east and west, art became subject to a kind of "denaturing" process, produced in part by the otherworldly outlook of Christianity. Gradually, the naturalistic Classical tradition was replaced by an art intended to convey ideas about God and the afterlife, rather than to reproduce the appearances of this world. In Italy and the west, "barbarians" (the Goths, Ostrogoths, Lombards and others) and their pagan motifs influenced the depiction of Christian themes. In the Byzantine east, art influenced by Greek and Syrian forms became an integral part of the liturgy—the rituals of the church service—and changed very little over the centuries, even surviving the threat of the Iconoclastic Controversy from 730-843 A.D. (the iconoclasts wished to destroy all religious images because they believed they impeded true spiritual understanding).

Icons, meaning simply images, date to about the sixth century, and demonstrate the conservative, formal elements of the Byzantine style (see the 17th century Russian Icon). The purpose of an icon is to depict the spiritual, mystical, and cosmic significance of the subject portrayed. Figures are generally represented in stiff, frontal poses, so that symbolism is more important to the interpretation of icons than concrete, visual representation. Such icons had an important influence on Italian art of the Middle Ages (see the Student of Benozzo's Processional Cross, for example).
Amulet: St. Symeon Stylites
12th c.
Lead (64.76)

The lead amulet shows the bust of Saint Symeon emerging from the top of a column. An angel stands to left and right, one of them on a ladder. Below the angels appear the Saint’s mother and his disciple Conon. Saint Symeon was an ascetic who lived most of his life on the top of a column. After his death, the column on which he died was venerated and attracted pilgrims who came to be healed. Amulets like this one were considered to have healing properties and were made for the pilgrims who came to the sanctuary. An inscription around the edge of the amulet confirms its healing nature. It reads: “Blessed medallion of Saint Symeon Thaumatourgos (healer/performer of miracles). Praise god in his Saints. (a quote from Psalm 151) Amen.” This type of amulet, created to heal or prevent disease or illness, was very common.

Amulet: Holy Rider
Palestine
5th c.
Bronze (70.99)

The bronze amulet is one of the most popular in Late Antiquity (5th to 7th centuries). On one side it shows a mounted warrior stabbing with his spear a fallen figure, an image which is found also in both pagan and Jewish art but is assimilated into Christian beliefs. Amulets like this one were worn as a general protection against evil. A Greek inscription above reads: “One God conquering Evil.” On the other side is the figure of Christ Crucified. Some of these amulets, instead of the figure of Christ, bear on one side the Evil Eye, a specific reference to their function.
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Mold-made Lamp with Fish
Tunisia
5th c.
Terracotta (66.299)

Mold for Top of Lamp
Tunisia
5th c.
Stucco (75.54)

The lamp, which bears a fish in relief on its discus, was made in a two-part mold; the partially preserved two-part mold produced a lamp of similar shape, although the design differs, being a Chi-Rho motif, the first two letters of Christ’s name in Greek. The fish is also a Christian motif, but could also be a pagan one.

In order to produce a mold for a lamp, the lamp maker first made an archetype, which resembled the finished lamp in shape and detail, except that it was solid, not hollow. Impressed patterns were stamped into the archetype while the clay was still soft enough; relief patterns were either built up by hand, or more often mold-made patterns were attached to the archetype with a wet clay solution. A signature of the maker could be stamped or written into the base of the archetype in reverse lettering. Before use, the archetype was fired.

Once the archetype was completed a mold could be taken. Usually two-piece molds, consisting of an upper and lower part, were made by first pouring wet plaster around the archetype up to the edge of the shoulder. When the plaster had hardened, registration bosses were built up on the edge or hollows were cut into it. Then, more plaster was poured onto the top of the archetype to make the upper mold. Occasionally, the outer edges of both top and bottom molds were marked with incised lines. These, and the bosses and hollows, enabled the mold to be reassembled correctly when the lamp was being made. The museum’s mold has both systems. Lamp molds were also made from clay, fired before use. They were also sometimes carved directly from soft limestone without the use of an archetype.

In casting a lamp from a mold, the lamp maker pressed a thin sheet of clay into both parts of the mold, dampened the edges slightly, and then joined the two halves of the lamp, while still in the molds, using the registration bosses and/or the marks on the outside of the molds. Once the lamp had dried so that it could be handled without damaging it, the molds were removed. The lamp was left to dry further to leather-hard
condition. Then the join between top and bottom part was smoothed or pared, and filling and wick holes were cut into the top of the lamp. If it had not already been stamped into the archetype, a maker’s name could be incised into the bottom of the lamp at that time. When the lamp was completely dry, a coating of slip was normally applied, and then the lamp was fired in a kiln at a temperature probably between 800 and 1000 degrees C.
Two Bracelets and a Medallion
Palestine, tomb in Hebron?
5th to 6th c.
Silver and gold (68.175a, b, c)
Chorn Memorial Fund
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The two bracelets illustrate three metalworking techniques. Each consists of a broad flat hoop bearing a circular medallion, or rounded, but one bracelet illustrates filigree work, the other openwork. The filigree bracelet is formed from silver wires: two, circular in section, forming a framework; two rows of flat wire shaped to form heart-shaped double C-volutes; and a row of twisted wires separating the volutes. The second bracelet was made from a strip of silver sheet which was cut out in the form of a vegetal scroll, “inhabited” or “peopled” by little figures of animals and humans. Engraving was used to add details. The roundels on both bracelets illustrate repoussé technique. On the filigree bracelet an eagle, turned to the left, holds a leafy branch; on the openwork one, a second eagle is shown, but facing to the front. Around the eagles are decorative borders in filigree work.

Bracelets like these — flat hoops with separately made medallions — are the principal type of bracelet in the Late Antique and Early Byzantine periods, although usually the plaques are set between the ends of the hoops and hinged, allowing the bracelets to be opened. The decorative elements are also typical of this period. The double C-volutes were a popular motif, introduced in the early 3rd century and used throughout the 4th and 5th centuries. The “inhabited” or “peopled” scroll of the second bracelet is a decorative device that appears first in the Hellenistic period but gains its greatest popularity in Roman art. It continued to be popular in the Early Byzantine period. (See lintel block in the gallery.)

The scrolls on the openwork bracelet enclose a number of motifs. In the central scroll, a human figure holds a large bird and perhaps forms a group with the figure in the scroll to the right who holds an unidentifiable object in his hands. To the left of the central scene are a bear, a vine leaf, a bird, and a dog, ending with a second vine leaf. To the right of the central scene are a vine leaf, a bird, a dog in front of an apple tree, a bird, and a final vine leaf. The vine leaves, birds and animals perhaps indicate that the central scene with the two human figures is taking place in the country, but the significance of this scene is unknown.

The gold medallion consists of a circular plaque with a beaded border around the edge and a ring soldered to each side. A male bust in repoussé in the center wears a diadem and large fibula on the right shoulder, indicating that an emperor is depicted. He cannot, however, be identified; the inscription impressed to left and right is a mock one. Use of coins for jewelry (this was probably part of a necklace or belt) began in the
late 2nd and early 3rd century. In Early Byzantine jewelry, coins were sometimes used to stamp impressions onto gold sheet. Also common, was the imitation of a coin impression, as here.
Plaque with Military Saint
11th or 12th c.
Bronze (70.14)

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The repoussé decoration on this fragmentary plaque shows a military saint facing front and holding his drawn sword over his shoulder. He wears a cloak over his shoulders fastened at the front. Under this is a protective armor of leather straps with elbow length sleeves, and below this a long-sleeved shirt. A halo surrounds the head which is in slightly higher relief than the rest of the figure. In the upper left corner is the Greek letter A within a circle, the abbreviation of “agios” or saint. An incised inscription on the right gives the name of Saint Demetrios, but it names a missing figure on the right whose upper right arm only is preserved. The identification of the preserved saint on this plaque can only be suggested, since there are numerous military saints in the Eastern Church. Only two saints are, however, regularly shown with drawn sword, St. Michael and St. George. Since St. Demetrios is often shown with St. George, perhaps this saint should be identified as the latter.

The plaque probably adorned a box. Stylistically the work belongs to the 11th or 12th century.

Depictions of military or warrior saints became more popular during the 10th century, after iconoclastic restrictions had been lifted by the Empress Theodora in 843. The standing military saint is one of two main types, the other being the saint on horseback. The standing figure in full military dress derives from Roman traditions.
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Ampulla (Pilgrim Flask)
Egypt
Ca. 450-550
Pottery (70.140)

The Edict of Milan, issued by the Roman Emperor Constantine in 313, gave legitimacy to the Christian Church. After this acceptance many Christians desired to commemorate the early martyrs by locating their remains and/or the sites associated with their martyrdom. Beginning as early as 333 (the earliest record of a pilgrimage from Bordeaux) large numbers of devout pilgrims traveled to renowned Christian sites in the lands around the east Mediterranean. Priests at the various holy sites gave, or sold, to the pilgrims ampullae like this one, although they were sometimes of more costly materials, such as lead and silver. They contained consecrated oil usually obtained from the lamps that burned at the sacred sites. Such vessels could also have contained water from nearby oases which was thought to have curing qualities, or earth that was considered blessed by being in the vicinity of a holy shrine. A journal of a 6th-century pilgrim to Jerusalem recounts that:

“The tomb proper, in which was laid the body of our Lord, is hewn from the living rock; a bronze lamp, which at that time was placed at His head, glows there day and night; from which lamp we receive a blessing (that is, a sample of oil),...Earth is carried into the tomb from without, and those who come in take a portion with them when they leave...” (Lesley, 225).

This ampulla depicts, on both sides, the figure of St. Menas in the act of prayer, with arms upraised. To left and right is a camel. Although there are many versions of his legend, one that is generally accepted recounts that he was Egyptian, a soldier in the Roman army, and a Christian. When the persecutions of Christians under Diocletian began in the late 3rd century, Menas confessed his faith, was immediately tortured, and beheaded. His body was returned to Egypt. According to tradition, the two camels carried his body into the desert, not stopping until they reached the spot God had designated for Menas’ grave.

The cult of this saint flourished most vigorously in Egypt where in 375 A.D. a shrine was built over his grave in the desert southwest of Alexandria. An important sanctuary developed that was the object of frequent pilgrimages during the 5th to 7th centuries. Two basilicas were built, a church protecting the tomb of the saint, a baptistery, hospices for the pilgrims, and a bath building.
Pair of Fibulae
Migration period, 550-600
Gilded bronze, glass (70.30a and b)

Between the 4th and 7th centuries various Germanic tribes invaded areas of the western Roman Empire, eventually settling in parts of it. This time period is referred to as the migration period, because the movements of these tribes are characteristic of the period. The art produced by these Germanic peoples was small and portable, consisting largely of ornamented weapons and jewelry.

The pair of fibulae are typical migration period jewelry. Fibulae or “safety pins” were generally made in pairs and were used to fasten cloaks or other parts of clothing. The elaborate form of this pair is common by the 5th and 6th centuries. The head plate, the semicircular section, covers the spring of the catch and is joined to the foot plate by an arched bow. The catch is concealed beneath the foot plate. Although often illustrated with the head plate at the top, contemporary illustrations show that these fibulae were worn with the head plate at the bottom, as they are displayed in the exhibit.

This pair of fibulae are considered to be Gothic, that is to have been made by the Goths, a Germanic tribe who came southward from southern Scandinavia, reaching the Black Sea area ca. A.D. 235. Eventually, the Goths moved westward, the Visigoths ending up in Spain and southern France by the early 5th century, the Ostrogoths invading as far as Ravenna at the end of the 5th century. The tradition of using decoration with colored stones seems to be an influence from the Black Sea area. On this pair of fibulae the inlay is in red glass, perhaps imitating garnets.
Two Carvings: Dancing Maenad and a Victory
 Probably Egypt, found in Israel
 Byzantine, 4th - 5th century
 Bone (68.164a and b)

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Bone and ivory working are an important art form in the Late Roman and Early Byzantine periods, when carved ivory plaques for diptychs were commissioned to commemorate special events. Bone and ivory were also used for other purposes, both in the Roman Imperial period, and in Late Antiquity. Furniture, box and casket inlays, small boxes, hair pins, and figurines or dolls, were all sometimes manufactured out of bone or ivory. Both are easy to carve using a knife or flat chisel.

The carved maenad and Victory were probably inlays for a box. The maenad is identified by her dancing pose and the cymbals she holds. The Victory holds a wreath above her head and part of her left wing is visible. Both subjects were popular ones in this time period.

Figurine, a Portrait of Julian the Apostate
 North Syria
 Late 4th - 5th century
 Bone (74.135)
 Gift of Ancell Enterprises, Inc.


The figure of the emperor Julian is an example of a bone figure. Caesar in 359-361 and Augustus in 361-363, Julian was called the Apostate because of his rebellion against Christianity and his active fostering of paganism. Reinstating the old pagan cults of the empire, he chose a new official portrait type, which this small bone figure reflects. This portrait presents him as a Greek philosopher, wearing a priestly diadem and the philosopher’s mantle, and holding a scroll in his hand. The image is strongly reminiscent of 4th c. B.C. and Hellenistic portraits of Socrates, Demosthenes, and Aristotle.
**Finger Ring**
423-460  
Gold, niello (77.239)


The ring bears a nielloed cross on the bezel and on its hoop an inscription AEL EVDOCIA AVG, the abbreviation for Aelia Eudocia Augusta, wife of the emperor Theodosius II, A.D. 408-450.

Eudocia was a Greek by birth, daughter of a Greek sophist. Her Greek name was Athenaïs, and she was reputed to be a very beautiful woman. She was married to Theodosius in 421, when she was probably about twenty-one years old and was given the title of Augusta in 423. She was a learned woman and also very religious, spending the last years of her life in Jerusalem, of which city she was a considerable benefactress. The ring must be dated to between the year 423, when she was given her title and the year of her death, reputed to be 460. The ring could have belonged to Eudocia herself and been worn by her, but more likely, it was made to be given away as a gift. Other imperial gold rings with inscriptions are thought to have been used as gifts.