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Chavannes-Mazel, C.A.

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# ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE BIBLE AND ITS RECEPTION

## 5

### Charisma – Czaczkes

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Kirill Dmitriev

## V. Visual Arts

**1. Space and Decoration in Church Buildings.** In the visual arts, as in literature, the term "church" is used in two different ways. It can either refer to the building proper, or it can personify the followers of Jesus of Nazareth as a group, be it then or now. This personification of the totality of all Christians has a long and at times complex visual history, since it depends on theological interpretations (see above "Church III. Christianity") and on the way its counterpart, the personification of synagogue, is looked upon (see "Ecclesia and Synagoga"). The spatial setting of the church building and its decoration program are the main subject of this lemma. Church vestments and objects, which are used in Christian liturgy, such as retables, choir stalls, baptismal fonts and organs, will be treated elsewhere (see "Liturgy").

**2. Church: The Exterior – Visual Arts.** Exterior church decoration was an aspect practically ignored until the 11th and 12th centuries, except for architectural features such as columns and arches. Church doors are a notable exception: the wooden doors from San Ambrogio in Milan with scenes from the life of David are as old as the late 4th century CE. The wooden doors from Santa Sabina in Rome with an extensive narrative and typological program date back to the first half of the 5th century CE. In the East, doors can be found from the 6th century CE onwards (e.g., Monastery of St. Catherine, Mount Sinai) (Jeremias 1980). The first recognizable figurative elements on the building itself are over the entrance doors of the church, either on lintels or in tympana (i.e., the wall surface above the lintel). In the Pyrenees, the small Benedictine abbey church of Saint-Genis-des-Fontaines houses

the oldest extant relief of a *Maiestas Domini*, dated by inscription to the 24th year of the reign of King Robert II of France, i.e., 1019–20, and commissioned by its abbot Guilhem (Cros 1984). In previous centuries, the visual concept of the *Maiestas* had grown out of the late ancient image of the enthroned ruler (Poilpré 2005), and therefore, since the 12th century, became the most suitable image to face the humble faithful when entering God's house. Shortly afterwards, almost every church building, be it a small parochial basilica or a magnificent cathedral, had a *Theophany* sculptured over its central doorway (Christe 1969; Kendall 1998). Cathedrals of the 12th through the 14th century expanded their iconological programs from the inside of the church to the outside, with biblical scenes, and scenes of the life of the saint to which the building was dedicated, with allegories or emblems of time and space (vices and virtues, zodiac, labors of the months etcetera). These impressive and complicated programs were to emphasize the eternal and all-encompassing value of faith. In fact, this core message has not changed over the centuries, and is being kept till today.

**3. Church: The Interior – Visual Arts.** More than the layout of the building, the interior – and so the decoration – reflects its use and function. Inside, the early churches of Rome, Milan, and Ravenna (5th and 6th cent. CE) were sumptuously adorned. Contrary to the ancient tradition with its marble mosaic floors, the Christians decorated the walls and ceilings of their churches with slabs of precious marble and mosaics of marble and glass, enhanced with gold. Decorations were far from meaningless. Narrative scenes, like those from the OT in the nave of Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome (5th cent. CE), convey the liturgical message of the Eucharist by depicting Abraham and Melchisedek offering bread and wine nearest to the altar (Deckers 1976). Ceremonial processions, like those Emperor Justinian and his wife Theodora are leading towards the altar of San Vitale showing their precious gifts, emphasize the parallel between the three magi from the East and this Eastern imperial couple (Ravenna, San Vitale, 6th cent. CE). Ostentatiously, a picture of the three magi is embroidered on the seam of the emperor's purple mantle.

As time progressed, it became clear that interior decorations were to serve two means: to teach and to dazzle the beholder. Gregory the Great answered the bishop Serenus of Marseille ca. 600 CE: "What scripture is to the educated, images are to the ignorant, who see through them what they must accept; they read in them what they cannot read in books" (*Magni Epistolarum* 11; *Epist.* 13 [PL 77:27, 1128–30]; Davies-Weyer: 47–48). Thanks to him and to predecessors like Paulinus of Nola ("He who on seeing this recognizes Truth from the idle figures, feeds his faithful spirit with a by no means idle im-

age"; *Carmina* 27.512–95), the West allowed narrative pictures even in times of destructive iconoclasm.

Teaching through narratives was to have a long and fruitful future. Old Testament and New Testament scenes conveyed typological structures, like the story of Jonah compared to the resurrection of Jesus (Matt 12:40). The south church of Aquileia contains one of the earliest surviving Christian floor mosaics with scenes from the life of Jonah, set into an earlier maritime scene (ca. 314 CE). As early as ca. 400 CE, explicit didactic representations occur (*Christ Teaching the Apostles*, a mosaic in the chapel of San Aquilino in San Lorenzo at Milan). Figurative cycles appear at Cimitile-Nola (ca. 400–403 CE) and at Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome (ca. 432–40 CE). From these and other examples it becomes clear that, from the 5th century CE onwards, the principal apse and the triumphal arch are the most important areas of decoration in the West. The East, more accustomed to the ground plan of a Greek cross, imposed a different scheme by reserving the main cupola for an image of Christ Pantokrator, with the Virgin Mary figuring in the apse (Lehmann 1945).

The greatest aesthetic change to the Western medieval church occurred with the exploitation of stained glass as a major medium of expression from ca. 1100 onwards. The didactic effect is debatable, as details are often difficult to see, however, their subjects – anagogical as in Saint Denis and Chartres, the lives of saints, the honouring of patrons, or biblical – were similar to those in wall painting (Cook: 274–75). The best-preserved medieval windows with their deep saturated blues and reds still impressing the beholder are in Chartres and Canterbury (12th cent.). The tradition of stained glass has been kept still today, with the atelier in Chartres, set up in the 16th century, still producing windows. The best known modern examples are those by Marc Chagall in Reims (1968–74), and the glass decoration in the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedächtniskirche in Berlin with over 20,000 pieces of glass inlays divided over eight walls (designed by Gabriel Loire, 1961).

The dazzling part is best expressed in Abbot Suger's little notebook when, during the rebuilding of the church of the royal Abbey of Saint-Denis in the early 12th century, he recounts beholding the beauty of the building with its stained glass and reflects: "I see myself dwelling as it were, in some strange region of the universe which neither exists entirely in the slime of the earth nor entirely in the purity of heaven, and that, by the Grace of God, I can be transported from this inferior to that higher world in an anagogical manner" (*Abbot Suger* [ed. Panofsky 1979: 63–65]). Art is the bridge between the tangible mundane and the intangible realm of the spiritual (Mauck 2006: 817).

Some centuries later, next to heavenly atmospheres, the desire for commemoration and the needs of salvation were increasingly met in visual terms: memorials, tombs, private chapels, and their furnishings proliferated in ecclesiastical interiors, which were much more densely adorned with images ca. 1500 than they would have been in ca. 1350, and indeed at any point in their later history given the tumultuous events of the following centuries (Nash 2008: 1) (see → plate 5). The predilection for exuberance continued in the 16th century, until the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation reshaped visual veneration, sometimes with disastrous results: the long process of tradition and interpretation came to a sudden halt. Nakedness could no longer please the eye, so many a saint in Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* in the Sistine Chapel, just completed, had to be painted over and wrapped in cloths (Hall 2005). Next to prudery, because of the Council of Trent, the Roman Catholic regions discarded all stories from the *Legenda aurea* and other non-biblical literary sources (but kept their saints) (Mâle 1932). Between 1522 (Wittenberg) and 1566 (the Low Countries), the Reformed rebels in the North demolished statues, altars, and other works of art they saw as idolatrous and defacing God's word, but they kept the building for their own services. It is not true, however, that Reformed churches were bare or completely whitewashed. The 17th century brought them outsized tablets with the Ten Commandments, mourning hatchments and heraldic devices of guilds and important families. Even more impressive are the larger-than-life-size tomb sculptures, erected in churches until the 19th century (Panofsky 1964). When Napoleon forbade the burying of the dead inside the church, commemoration plaques were placed on walls and pillars instead. In modern churches, the tendency is more to honor heroes and war victims than to make room for the rich.

**4. The Church Building as Model.** The practice of dedicating a church to Christ, Mary or a saint, by presenting a model of that specific church to the patron saint, is as old as the presentation of other objects such as books in classical antiquity. Many examples of donors with a model of the building in their hands, which they are going to donate, do survive, in sculpture, mosaics, and wall paintings. It is an iconography well known both in East and in West. Bishop Ecclesius offers the model of his round church of San Vitale to Christ in the apse mosaic of the same church in Ravenna (526–47 CE); Constantine offers his model of the city of Constantinople to the Virgin in the mosaic above one of the side doors of the Hagia Sofia, while Justinian offers his model of the church (11th cent.). Charlemagne is represented on the roof relief of the golden *Karlschrein*, Aachen (1215) donating the Chapel at Aachen to the Virgin (Grimme 2002), and so on.

The models the patrons hold in their hands are not as accurate as we would hope for, but at times they give a surprisingly recognizable impression.

**5. The Church as a Stage: The Spatial Setting for Mystery Plays and Theater.** Since the early Middle Ages, churches were used to stage liturgical dramas, which could go on for weeks. The building was adjusted accordingly. The three magi will bring their gifts to the high altar on January 6, Christ will ascend to heaven through a hole in the vault of the nave ("Himmelsloch"), and soldiers will fall asleep while guarding Christ's tomb set up in the church interior during Lent (cf. Mâle; Tripps; Kroesen). After the Reformation, most of these popular plays were longer performed.

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Claudine A. Chavannes-Mazel

## VI. Music

The idea that music has an important place in Christian church services is based on OT statements on music, not least in the book of Psalms. Not only songs but also musical instruments were clearly assumed to be part of the worship, as seen in Ps 98:5–6; Num 10:10; 1 Chr 13:8; 15:16–24; 16:4–9; 2 Chr 5:11–13 and 7:6. In the NT, singing is prominently mentioned for instance in Acts 16:25; 1 Cor 14:26; Eph 5:19; and Col 3:16, but no reference to the use of instruments in Christian congregations can be found.

In the early church, the use of instruments seems to have been consistently banned in order to distance the Christian cult from the heathen cultic use of instruments (McKinnon; Wellesz). Instruments only gradually came into church use at a much later point, first by way of the organ (at least since the 10th cent.), and only even later other instruments (first as *colla parte* accompaniment, doubling the voices of the choir). In the 16th–17th centuries the practice of sometimes performing some church services with soloists, choir, and orchestral accompaniment gradually developed in large ecclesiastical centers, especially in the later 17th and the 18th century. This was a continuation of the grand polyphonic practices, which increasingly developed from simple polyphony in the 9th century CE to the complex polyphony of ca. 1200 and the polyphonic cycles of the ordinary of the Mass (from the 14th cent. onwards).

St. Augustine (354–430 CE) had expressed worries about the temptation to listen more to the beautiful song in church than to the biblical words being sung, but ultimately he did not want to abolish music since it had the ability to open the believer's heart to God's word (*Conf.* 10.49–50). In his Psalm exhortations, most of them held as sermons, Augustine commented on the Latin biblical words *iubilus* and *iubilare*, "jubilation" and "to jubilate." Especially in his comments on Pss 32 and 99 (33 and 100 in the English Bible), the contemporary understanding of these words as referring to the singing without words was used to characterize the musical medium as a way for humanity to express its praise of "the ineffable God," something that could not be done adequately in words (McKinnon: 153–68; Østrem: 277–81; Petersen: 15–16).

Throughout the Middle Ages and beyond, Augustine's concern, as well as his emphasis on the potential of music to praise God, had an important impact (Østrem/Petersen). The singing, especially from the book of Psalms, had become foundational in all medieval liturgy, also through the impact of the Rule of Benedict (6th cent. CE). Medieval treat-



*The Mass of Saint Gregory the Great* (Northern Netherlands, ca. 1500)