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Seeing the divine: the origin, iconography, and content of Santa Pudenziana's apse mosaic

Rebecca Franzella

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College

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SEEING THE DIVINE: THE ORIGIN, ICONOGRAPHY, AND CONTENT OF SANTA PUDENZIANA’S APSE MOSAIC

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

in

The School of Art

By

Rebecca Franzella
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ABSTRACT

When Christian artwork expanded into the grand, newly constructed Christian basilicas of the fourth century, new iconography emerged. The apse was a focal point of the basilica’s interior and provided a novel space for artistic decoration. The church of Santa Pudenziana, located in Rome, contains the earliest surviving apse decoration in a Christian basilica. Shown here is a depiction of Christ surrounded by his apostles. This figural arrangement is familiar because of previously established pagan and Christian imagery. However, at S. Pudenziana, and for the first time in Christian art, four angelic figures and the Heavenly Jerusalem appear in the background of Christ enthroned with his apostles. Therefore, a new message is being portrayed. This thesis examines the origin, iconography, and content of this complex, multi-layered composition, and places the S. Pudenziana mosaic within a wider art-historical context. Through each chapter’s discussion it will become clear that S. Pudenziana’s apsidal decoration was shaped by contemporary Christian doctrine, an understanding of Old and New Testament scriptures, and historical circumstances of the Christian church in the late fourth and early fifth century.
CHAPTER ONE: S. PUDENZIANA

During the fourth century, Christianity made the transition from an oppressed minority religion, to an active and public religion, free of persecution. The new religion triumphed over paganism, and was even patronized by the Roman emperor.¹ When Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, a new set of images emerged. The Greco-Roman ideals of portraying nudes with harmonious proportions and balance between the body and mind ceased to exist. Instead, artists were interested exclusively in the soul, and in publicizing the now official Christian creed. The visual arts were used as a form of communication, and artwork was intended to clearly instruct new believers of biblical teachings.² The new iconography eventually expanded from the Christian house churches, along with the growing church community, and into the grand, newly constructed churches in Rome, Constantinople, and the Holy Land.³

Prior to Christianity, the classical temple was the favored religious architectural structure, and these buildings were used to honor the many gods. The temple of the pagans was essentially a house for the cult statue of the god, and very few had access inside. Crowds would gather in front of the east entrance of the temple to worship the god and slaughter their sacrificial animals.⁴ Unlike the pagan temple, the Early Christian basilica was a place where crowds gathered within to sing hymns and listen to the preacher’s biblical teachings.⁵ Christian worship required a fundamentally different kind of building from the pagan temple. The Christian solution was to adapt the Roman civic basilica by turning it ninety degree on its axis, and adding

³ Jensen, Understanding Early Christian Art, pp. 8-94.
a processional tunnel of space. Uniform columns proceeded down the nave and visually led visitors to the altar space. The compelling directional sense of the basilica’s interior came to a rest in the curves of the concave apse. Because the apse provided a climax for the insistent motion of the nave, it naturally captured the viewer’s attention, and provided a novel space for artistic decoration.\(^6\)

The Early Christian basilica was rather plain on the outside, but glowed with spiritually symbolic mosaics on the interior.\(^7\) Complex, multi-layered compositions were typical of the earliest Christian mosaics.\(^8\) The church of Santa Pudenziana (S. Pudenziana) is a speaking testimony for the status and splendor of these mosaics at the beginning of Christian art. S. Pudenziana, located in Rome, contains the earliest surviving apse decoration in a basilica (Figure 1). The church was constructed during the late fourth century, and the mosaic was completed by the beginning of the fifth. In S. Pudenziana’s mosaic, Christ is seated enthroned on a grand pearl-and-gem-studded throne flanked by his apostles, who are seated lower down on either side. The first two apostles, Peter and Paul, are being crowned with wreaths by women.\(^9\) Christ holds an open book which reads: “I (am) the Lord, the preserver of the church of Pudenziana.” This scene is set in a type of portico. Above this portico appears the cityscape of Jerusalem with four angelic figures floating in the sky. The sky is presented as striated clouds rendered with remarkable naturalism, and yields a very light, soft atmosphere involving shades of blue, pink, red, brown, and gold.\(^10\) The living creatures in the sky represent the four Gospel writers, the


\(^7\) The exterior of the earliest Christian basilicas symbolically resembled the earthly, secular world through its plane surface. Believers came to appreciate divine beauty through the lavish mosaics in the interior of the basilica.


Figure 1: *Christ Enthroned with His Apostles in the Heavenly Jerusalem*, Santa Pudenziana, Rome, ca. 387-417 CE

S. Pudenziana’s mosaic is related to contemporary images of Christ teaching his apostles because of compositional similarities. The motif of Christ teaching his apostles was among the iconographic themes selected for the Roman Catacombs, sarcophagi, and Christian apses of the fourth century. However, S. Pudenziana’s apsidal imagery differs from this theme because for the first time in Christian art four angelic figures and the Heavenly Jerusalem appear in the background of Christ enthroned with his apostles. As a result of this fresh combination of iconography, S. Pudenziana communicates a new Christian message. The iconographic content of the S. Pudenziana mosaic will be reevaluated in this thesis. On the apsidal decoration, the setting for Christ and his apostles recalls scripture from the Old and New Testament, specifically from the Books of Ezekiel and Revelation. Therefore, a new message is being portrayed. The
mosaic ultimately tells the story of salvation, and shows Christ’s divine, incorporeal being at the
time of his second coming. Portraying the abstract concept of salvation and Christ’s invisible
characteristics was certainly a goal of the patron or designer when setting the Savior and his
apostles in front of a scene of iconic buildings from Jerusalem and Bethlehem, the triumphal
cross, Mount Calvary, and the four winged beasts.

The origin of the mosaic’s imagery will be discussed in Chapter Two, with the goal of
tracing the evolution of the imagery that inspired the creators of the S. Pudenziana mosaic. In
Chapter Three, the meaning of each iconographic element will be discussed individually and
then in relation to the whole composition. Chapter Four will make clear how the designer of S.
Pudenziana reinterpreted and recontextualized Old and New Testament scriptures within relevant
doctrine and Christian beliefs. Finally, Chapter Five will show how the apsidal decoration
compares to other contemporary works and how the mosaic imagery fits in its historical context
of early fifth-century Rome.

However, before addressing the origin, iconography, and content of S. Pudenziana’s apse
mosaic, some preliminary points should be made. We must first start with a brief historical
synopsis on the church and its apsidal program. There have been various discussions on when
the mosaic was constructed, and whether or not it can still be appreciated for its authenticity
today due to the extensive renovations carried out in the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The History of S. Pudenziana

The church of S. Pudenziana is found in Rome. It is a short distance from the church of
S. Maria Maggiore. S. Pudenziana is much smaller than S. Maria Maggiore, and possesses only
one mosaic. This mosaic located in the apse is dated around the time of the original construction
of the church in the late fourth century.\textsuperscript{11} The building seen today is positioned on the site of the ancient house of the Roman Senator Pudens. It is believed that Pudens made his home available to the Early Christian community, and because of this he is associated by tradition with both St. Peter and St. Paul.\textsuperscript{12} Senator Pudens had a daughter named Pudenziana. It was speculated in the past that she was the patron of the church because of her name.\textsuperscript{13} However, Pudenziana should be interpreted as an adjective, referring to the senator as the founder of the church.\textsuperscript{14}

The church of S. Pudenziana is attested to as early as 384 CE by the funerary inscription of lector Leopardus, who was one of the church clerics.\textsuperscript{15} A second inscription on one of the screen slabs of the presbytery also existed. This secondary inscription confirms the founding date of the church by attributing the furnishings of the altar room to the presbyters Ilicius, Maximus, and Leopardus during the pontificate of Siricius (384-99). These two inscriptions are most helpful in determining the age of the church.

The most accurately established dates regarding the creation of the mosaic can be found by examining its iconography. The mosaic illustrates St. Paul holding a book which records the dates 387-390 or 398. This book also confirms the presbyters Leopardus and Ilicius as founders of the church. Secondly, we have a copy of a lost dedicatory inscription that was once visible at the bottom of the mosaic. It was recoverable due to the recordings of Panvinio, a scholar of the sixteenth century.\textsuperscript{16} Panvinio’s recordings date the apse mosaic to the papacy of Pope Innocent I

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{11} Atherton, “The Apse Mosaic of S. Pudenziana,” p.12.
\item \textsuperscript{12} Lowrie, \textit{Art in the Early Church}, p. 144.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Atherton, “The Apse Mosaic of S. Pudenziana,” p. 12.
\item \textsuperscript{14} This confusion led to the erroneous belief that Pudenziana and her sister appear in the mosaic. The two women of mosaic will be discussed later. For more information on this topic, see Lowrie, \textit{Art in the Early Church}, pp. 147-48.
\item \textsuperscript{15} This date tells us that the church was likely established under pope Damasus (366-384) as a center of religious welfare.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Panvinio documented these dates before the 1588 restoration when the mosaic was drastically trimmed on all sides; Mathews, \textit{The Clash of Gods}, p. 98. Walter Oakshott sites the inscription that was still legible in the sixteenth century: “When Innocent (Innocent I, Pope 401-17) was bishop (of Rome) and Ilicius, Maximus, and Leopardus
\end{itemize}
(402-417). From all of these inscriptions, it appears that the project of building the church was undertaken during the time of Siricius in the early eighties of the fourth century, and that its furnishings were completed about twenty years later under Pope Innocent I, with the latter receiving the major share of the credit. Thus, the majority of scholars date the apse mosaic of S. Pudenziana to the early fifth century.

While there is general agreement that most of S. Pudenziana’s iconography can be attributed to the late fourth century, the question inevitably arises concerning the authenticity of the mosaic’s elements because of its many renovations. In 1588, Cardinal Caetani had the church remodeled in the style of the period, which involved making the apse shallower by cutting back part of the mosaic. The cardinal removed an apostle at each end, greatly reduced the scale of the heavens, and cut into the two outer winged beasts. Eventually, a cornice was built across the bottom of the mosaic that covered the lower part of the apostles’ bodies.

A 1595 drawing attributed to Ciacconio displays a compositional sketch of the S. Pudenziana mosaic (Figure 2). This sketch shows a register below Christ’s feet that one cannot see in the mosaic today. Ciacconio records the existence of a dove descended above a lamb in his sketch. There is a general consensus among art historians that the dove and lamb were part of the original fourth-century program, but that they were omitted in the sixteenth century when a baldacchino was installed. The Baroque addition hid the Agnus Dei, or Lamb of God,

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were presbyters, Leopardus the Presbyter made these decorations of marble and of pictures”; The Mosaics of Rome (Greenwich, Connecticut: New York Graphic Society Ltd., 1967): p. 65.  
19 It is notable to mention that Ciacconio did not portray the buildings in his sketch of the S. Pudenziana mosaic. Therefore, it can be argued that the cityscape of Jerusalem was not part of the original fourth-century mosaic.  
20 Schlatter notes, however, that there are no compelling prototypes for the dove and lamb ensemble in S. Pudenziana, and argues that these elements were likely introduced along with the monogram of Adrian I during his eighth-century restoration. For more on this subject, see Schlatter, “Interpreting the Mosaic of Santa Pudenziana.”
beneath Christ’s throne. Lastly, a restoration in 1831 changed the style of this Early Christian work. A “modern” character was added to some of the apostles’ faces, and from 1832-33, under the supervision of Vincenzo Camuccini, the majority of the right side of the apse was reset.\(^\text{21}\)

![Ciacconio’s sketch of S. Pudenziana’s apse mosaic, 1595](image)

Although the validity of the late fourth- and early fifth-century mosaic might be questioned due to the many renovations, the majority of scholars agree the mosaic can still be seen as authentic. Oakshott, who placed particular emphasis on the mosaic’s restorations, believes that a sufficiently large portion of the mosaic is original.\(^\text{22}\) He points out that because most of the left side is left untouched, it can serve as a basis of comparison for the other areas, which have been restored.\(^\text{23}\) Furthermore, Oakshott notes that the area of the mosaic that had been restored in 1588 was completed during a period which was generally sympathetic to the


\(^{23}\) Ibid., pp. 25-26; 66-67.
antique. The nineteenth-century restoration was done under standards of immense care by Camuccini, and it is unlikely that he would undertake any alterations of the original program. ²⁴ Generally speaking, these changes affect the style of the mosaic, but do not substantially alter the composition. ²⁵ Most of the early fifth-century iconographic features can still be clearly distinguished to this day. The chief elements pictured are Christ, the apostles, buildings, triumphal cross, and four creatures. Two of these elements, Christ and his apostles, resemble earlier motifs in the Early Christian repertoire.

In order to decipher the meaning of the mosaic it is important to look for a prototype that may have served as inspiration, because it is possible that the designer of a decorative program might want to reproduce a traditional picture or even give new meaning to it. In the next chapter of this thesis, an outline of the evolution of the image of Christ with his apostles in the visual arts will be established. Starting with late antiquity, this progression will be discussed by citing specific works. A detailed analysis of these comparable works will provide new insight into the mosaic’s origin and its significance in a broader art-historical context.

CHAPTER TWO: THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHRIST AND HIS APOSTLES IN EARLY CHRISTIAN ART

In the earliest phase of Christian art many iconographic themes lack a clear connection with any specific biblical reference. These images are more symbolic and less illustrative than others that portray an episode from scripture. Because many Early Christian frescos and sarcophagi lack direct narrative textual reference, they invite viewers to apply their own meanings. Sometimes figures that were common in non-Christian, pagan contexts were adopted and moved into a Christian setting. Since they were not purely Christological images their signification and meaning depend on their context or juxtaposition with other recognizable Christian motifs.26

An example of this is the Good Shepherd, which appeared more than 120 times in Roman catacomb frescoes alone.27 The shepherd, usually youthful and beardless, wears a short belted tunic and boots, and usually always has an animal of the sheep family over his shoulders. The shepherd in Christian art may have been a representation of Jesus. However, scholars find it more likely that the shepherd represented the safety or caring of a Christian community in the midst of a time of danger and persecution.28 This sheep-carrying figure can be traced back to classical art, and was a visual symbol for Hermes, the guide to the underworld. Hermes was most likely found in the context of a funerary environment, because his character was associated with hopes for a blessed afterlife. By late antiquity, the image of the shepherd developed a more generic meaning of humanitarian care. With the shepherds’ roots in Classical imagery, it is not

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26 Jensen, Understanding Early Christian Art, p. 32.
27 Ibid., p. 37.
always possible to identify a single image of the shepherd definitely as pagan or Christian without taking the context and juxtaposed motifs into consideration.\textsuperscript{29}

The Philosopher Type

Another popular Early Christian motif adopted from the pagan context was the seated philosopher or teacher. In Classical art, this motif was used to portray the deceased in the flattering guise of the intellectual or scholar. In the Christian context, the philosopher figure on a sarcophagus was likely a portrait of the deceased, in reference to his learning or intellectual pursuits of reading scripture.\textsuperscript{30} The occurrence of the seated male in a philosopher’s tunic might also allude to Christianity as the true philosophy, or wisdom and reasoning in Christian teaching.\textsuperscript{31} The sarcophagus of S. Maria Antiqua is an early example of this appropriation of Classical imagery (Figure 3). Some scholars cite the seated philosopher type figure on this sarcophagus not as a specific reference to Christ, but more of a general symbol of Christianity to be openly interpreted by the early Christian community. Nothing in particular distinguishes this philosophical figure as Christian except when understood with the surrounding imagery on the

\textsuperscript{31} Jensen, \textit{Understanding Early Christian Art}, p. 45.
sarcophagus. Transferring commonly understood pagan iconography to the context of the Christian cult was the artisans’ way of communicating attributes of the new Savior in the visual language of the surrounding culture.\textsuperscript{32}

Another example of borrowing classical imagery and re-presenting it in this way is an image of the philosopher on a fourth-century sarcophagus, now located in the Musée de l’Arles Antique (Figure 4). This sculptural relief displays the philosopher figure seated in profile view. He is pictured bearded and hunched over while reading. The philosopher is set next to a smaller figure kneeling at or kissing the feet of the philosopher. Again, the seated philosopher on this sarcophagus is not a specific reference to Jesus, because nothing specific distinguishes him as Jesus.\textsuperscript{33} The seated figure may be a portrait of the deceased or at least a reference to his Christian pursuits. In a sense, the seated philosopher figure on this sarcophagus is more of a general symbol of Christianity as the true philosophy.

What scholars can unanimously agree on is that the figural relief on this fourth-century sarcophagus is almost identical to the late third-century sarcophagus of S. Maria Antiqua. It can

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., p. 42.
\textsuperscript{33} Jensen, \textit{Face to Face}, p. 155.
be asserted from interpreting these Christian sarcophagi that the older man, displayed sitting with a long beard and abundant hair, was part of pictorial language before and during this period. Both of these works exemplify the direct loan that Christian art received from a separate art, that of the idolaters. Whether pagan or Christian, the philosopher is portrayed practically the same because the Early Christian artisans imitated common classical models. The resemblance goes beyond the seated pose and extends to his physical type and his action.

This same type of motif emerged in the late third- and early fourth-century Christian catacombs; however, in this context the figure can be more assuredly identified as Jesus. In the catacombs, the philosopher figure is now posed facing front, enthroned, and making a gesture of speech. In a fresco located in the Catacomb of Domitilla, the philosopher figure dominates the pictorial space with his height and central position (Figure 5). He is surrounded by nine other men, who are clearly subordinate and appear to be receiving a lesson from the teacher. The nine men can most likely be identified as apostles and the central figure as Christ because the imagery is located in the context of the Christian Roman catacombs. Christ is displayed sitting on a giant throne. This differs from earlier depictions of the Christian philosopher, who was portrayed
sitting on a stool or bench. What is also new to this philosopher iconography is Christ’s teaching
gesture, and the apostolic group surrounding him. This fresh imagery hints at the teacher’s
authority. We can see from comparing this fresco to previous Christian imagery that the
traditional philosopher type gradually evolved into a teacher type. The philosophical figure is
now verifiably Jesus Christ and can no longer be mistaken for pagan imagery.

In the Catacomb of Commodilla, *Christ with Halo* is a late fourth-century bust image of a
fully bearded and mature Christ (Figure 6). Historians label this fresco as the first to represent
Christ with a full beard. The Christian image-makers used the facial features of the pagan deities
to signify the all-powerful sovereignty of Christ. The similarity between Christ and the
traditional images of the sovereign gods of Antiquity is clearly recognizable.  

![Figure 6: Christ with Halo, Catacomb of Commodilla, late fourth century](image)

34 This similarity between Christ and the gods of late Antiquity may be indirect or unintentional. Either way, the
direct parallel to the Jupiter-type gives this Christological image powerful symbolism. This traditional bearded
iconography parallels portraits of the senior male deities of the Roman pantheon, though it may be noted that images
of Jesus in Early Christian art vary tremendously. For example, artisans chose the clean-shaven, youthful image of
Christ to recall divine attributes of Apollo, the youthful Dionysus, and semi-divine or human heroes such as Orpheus
and Hercules. The youthful, beardless Jesus type most commonly occurs in scenes of his heroic acts of healing,
images that may associate him with the suffering and tested heroes of pagan mythology who achieved immortality;
suggests Christ’s supreme, independent power over the cosmos. Much like the pagans displayed their gods of the Roman pantheon, Christ too is displayed in this mature light. Because of this, He becomes both Judge and Savior. Christ’s identity as Savior can also be confirmed in this image because of the addition of the halo. The halo was a new symbolic design element employed in the fourth century to signify the divine aspect of Christ’s character. The Greek letters alpha and omega are also displayed beside the bust image of Christ. This composition functions more like a portrait than images previously discussed. This fresco places more emphasis on Christ as God than on his person during his earthly ministry.

Another work which displays the evolution of Christ in Early Christian art is located in the catacomb of Domitilla. Christ Enthroned with Peter and Paul is a mosaic dated around 366-384 CE (Figure 7). Some features of this mosaic match previous representations of Christ teaching his apostles, but other features announce developments to come. The emphasis on the presence of only two apostles is one, and Christ’s isolation in a mandorla is the second. By

![Image of Christ Enthroned with Peter and Paul]

Figure 7: Christ Enthroned with Peter and Paul, Catacomb of Domitilla, ca. 366-384

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35 The location of the picture in the catacomb suggests that it was most likely created in the time of Pope Damasus (366-384); Spieser, “The Representation of Christ in the Apses of Early Christian Churches,” Gesta 37, no. 1 (1998): p. 69.
including a mandorla, the artist is trying to delineate a new abstract concept. Inside the mandorla, Christ transcends time and space, and is portrayed as equal to God the Father. There is a new emphasis on appropriating the philosopher or teacher type into an image that shows Christ’s divine power and authority. This can be further explained by an inscription which encircles the mosaic: “You are said to be the Son and are found to be the Father.”

Another fourth-century example of Christ teaching his apostles is found in the Chapel of Sant’Aquilino in Milan (Figure 8). Here a youthful, beardless Christ is seated centrally among his apostles. All the figures are draped in tunics, much like the earlier examples of the philosopher type in Christian art. Christ, presented on a throne with a golden halo, is making a gesture of speech with his right hand. A basket of scrolls is displayed at his feet. With the presence of the throne and halo, this mosaic places emphasis on Christ’s divinity and authority.

![Figure 8: Apse mosaic in the Chapel of Sant’Aquilino, San Lorenzo, Milan, late fourth century](image)

The Christ figure in the S. Pudenziana mosaic is comparable to the representation of Christ in the Catacomb of Domitilla and in the Chapel of Sant’Aquilino because of the emphasis

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37 Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art.*
38 For a discussion on this mosaic, see ibid.
placed on his divinity.\textsuperscript{39} The apse mosaic does not display a generic philosopher figure who represents Christianity as the true philosophy, as was seen on the earlier sarcophagi examples, but rather, Christ is represented after his heavenly resurrection. S. Pudenziana’s apse mosaic also has many similarities to the motif of Christ teaching his apostles. Christ is presented seated on his throne, dressed in gold imperial garb, and flanked by Peter and Paul. Christ’s right hand is raised and extended in gesture towards the apostles. Furthermore, the arrangement of the apostles in the image is similar to earlier examples of Christ amongst his apostles (see Figure 5). All the apostles are arranged in a semi-circular format and are clearly subordinate to the master. This similarity in apostolic grouping informs historians that there was a known pictorial tradition among Christian artists in the fourth century, and that this motif was a part of the Early Christian repertoire that affected the composition of the mosaic. As many Christians at the time were illiterate, the reproduction of these forms helped articulate distinct messages to the entire church community.\textsuperscript{40}

Images found in the apses of Early Christian churches are complex in meaning because their imagery is symbolic of biblical concepts rather than narrative. Therefore, a particular work’s significance is hard to trace and the artwork may not be immediately understood. Understanding apsidal imagery requires much more than the superficial observation of similarity and dissimilarity.\textsuperscript{41} If there are similarities, is it important to determine if the image-maker adopted the prototype in order to reproduce a traditional picture, or if the designer wanted to give new meaning to it.\textsuperscript{42} Also, if new iconography is present, it is necessary to determine what importance it serves in the composition.

\textsuperscript{39} Atherton, “The Apse Mosaic of S. Pudenziana,” p. 56.
\textsuperscript{40} Jensen, \textit{Face to Face}, p. 156.
\textsuperscript{41} Spieser, “The Representation of Christ,” p. 64
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
By comparing the mosaic to previous works, it seems that the design of S. Pudenziana was inspired by traditional images of the Teacher with his apostles. It is likely that the image-maker employed iconographic conventions, as many early Christians did with pagan imagery in order to clearly express the new truths of their faith to the growing Christian community. By adapting common visual motifs as a framework for the mosaic, the artisan was able to communicate a new biblical message, one that had not yet been interpreted in the Christian art world. In the next chapter, we will take a closer look at S. Pudenziana’s individual iconography and attempt to determine each element's symbolic meaning and what significance it might have in relation to the whole composition.
CHAPTER THREE: AN ANALYSIS OF S. PUDENZIANA’S ICONOGRAPHY

The iconography discussed first in this chapter concerns the group that includes the apostles and the two women presenting wreaths. These figures are located in the foreground of the mosaic’s composition. This section will exclude the figure of Christ (also positioned in the foreground) because a complete analysis of the surrounding iconography is helpful toward determining the meaning of Christ’s portrayal in S. Pudenziana. Following the figural group analysis, the imagery outside the temple area will be discussed. This area includes the architectural setting, Mount Golgotha, the triumphal cross, and the winged beasts. Christ’s iconography and the iconographical program as a whole will be discussed last in this chapter.

The Apostolic Grouping and Women with Wreaths

In the S. Pudenziana mosaic, the Twelve Apostles are seated around the Master’s throne in a semicircle, and they appear to be arguing or conversing with one another. They are each dressed in variable, colorful tunics, and are subordinate to Christ, who is dressed in majestic gold. The mosaic today displays only nine apostles, but the fourth-century mosaic included all twelve. Iconography that inspired the apostle imagery in S. Pudenziana goes back to pagan depictions of philosophers in academic lectures. The oldest example known of the pagan philosopher group portrait is that found during an excavation of Memphis, Egypt. In an exedra in the Hellenistic Temple of Serapis, freestanding sculptures of sages and poets are shown seated along the wall (Figure 9). Another philosopher grouping from Classical antiquity that compares

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43 The outermost apostles on each side were removed during one of the many renovations. Furthermore, the apostles on the right side have been restored and reworked in the style of the Baroque period, but their positioning in the composition and clothing is still true to the late fourth century; Oakshott, The Mosaics of Rome, p. 65.
to the S. Pudenziana apostolic group is found in an apse mosaic of a villa at Apamea in Syria. This Syrian mosaic displays a similar figural arrangement, but with the philosopher Socrates presiding over the group of men (Figure 10). Figures 9 and 10 show how the semi-circular arrangement of the co-philosophers places emphasis on the central figure’s authority in the group. Therefore, it is not unusual that the Classical philosopher grouping inspired the portrayal of Christ and the disciples in S. Pudenziana. The image-makers of the Christian apse mosaic displayed the Twelve Apostles arranged around the chief of the group, Christ, and conversing in the manner of the co-philosophers in an academic lecture.

Figure 9: Remains of a Hellenistic exedra with statues of sages and poets in the Temple of Serapis, Memphis, Egypt, fourth century BCE

Figure 10: *Socrates with Six Wise Men*, mosaic in the villa at Apamea, Syria, fourth century

45 Grabar notes that Christ and his apostles were assigned the philosopher’s garb as a kind of uniform that distinguished them from all other figures in Christian art; ibid., p. 33.
In the previous chapter, we saw that philosopher imagery was first adopted in the Christian context to symbolically display Christianity as the true philosophy. Over time, the imagery developed to show Christ teaching his apostles. In S. Pudenziana, artisans once again gave new Christian meaning to the familiar figural grouping by positioning Christ and his apostolic group juxtaposed to a scene of the Heavenly Jerusalem. The meaning of this figural grouping in the context of the New Jerusalem will be discussed in the latter part of this chapter. First, we must establish the significance of the rest of the mosaic’s iconography.

Also relevant to the discussion of S. Pudenziana’s apostolic group are the facial features and the placement of the two chief apostles, Peter and Paul. In the fourth century, new iconography emerged that set Peter and Paul apart from the other apostles. The two apostles became distinguishable due to individualized facial features. In the S. Pudenziana mosaic, Peter is portrayed with thick hair and a squarish jawline. Paul, portrayed on Christ’s right, has a receding hairline, prominent forehead, and slightly longer beard that gives him the appearance of having a narrower face. This was more or less the standard physiognomy of the two apostles at that time. Also in S. Pudenziana, Peter and Paul were given precedence over the other ten apostles. Historians offer two explanations for the favoring of these two apostles in Early Christian art. First, the city of Rome associated its Christian identity with these two figures. The churches of Rome have a double apostolic foundation and claim to be the site of the martyrdom and burial of both saints. Consequently, Peter and Paul are very common among figures in Roman and Christian art. Second, the chief apostles were perceived as leaders of the two

46 Grabar, Christian Iconography, p. 33.
47 Jensen, Face to Face, p. 188.
49 Ibid., p. 412.
50 Jensen, Face to Face, pp. 186-87.
“branches” of the church because of New Testament scripture. Galatians 2:7-9 recognizes that Paul had been “entrusted with the gospel for the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel for the circumcised.”

Reidar Hvalvik studied the role of Peter and Paul in Early Christian art, and notes that New Testament scripture asserting Peter and Paul’s authority over the church was commonly reflected in literary sources and monuments. He also notes that it is hardly accidental that monuments depicting Peter and Paul together are found in Rome. Due to Peter and Paul’s honorary status in Rome, and their position as symbolic leaders of the church, it is clearly understood why they are emphasized in S. Pudenziana’s apsidal imagery.

Positioned next to the apostles in S. Pudenziana are two veiled female figures portrayed in gold and blue garments. They are shown holding out their golden martyrs’ crowns above the heads of Peter and Paul. It has been supposed that these figures represent St. Pudenziana and St. Prassede, the daughters of Senator Pudens. However, scholars find it unlikely that the daughters of Pudens would be pictured presenting crowns to the apostles. If they were to be represented in the composition at all, it would have been as suppliants. A more plausible explanation for the inclusion of these two figures is that they serve as symbols for the entire Christian community. They should be understood as personifications of the Jews and Gentiles.

Scholars make this assumption based on a contemporary mosaic on the west wall of the church of Santa Sabina, where two female figures are pictured (Figure 11). In Santa Sabina, the female figures are marked by inscriptions as ecclesia ex circumcision (the Jewish church) and ecclesia

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51 Hvalvik, “Christ Proclaiming His Law to the Apostles,” p. 409
52 For a review of these literary sources and monuments, see ibid., pp. 409-412.
53 Ibid., p. 409.
55 For reading material supporting this notion, see Oakshott, The Mosaics of Rome, pp. 65-66.
56 Lowrie, Art in the Early Church, p. 146.
57 Brandenburg, Ancient Churches of Rome, pp. 138-139,
ex gentibus (the church of the pagans). Additionally, the books the women hold have markings resembling Hebrew or Greek lettering representing the Old and New Testaments. If the female figures in S. Pudenziana are interpreted as personifications of the Jews and Gentiles, as they are in Santa Sabina’s imagery, then it is clear why they are pictured offering golden martyrs’ wreathes to Peter and Paul, the apostles who also represent divergent tendencies.

Figure 11: Dedicatory mosaic on the west wall of the Church of Santa Sabina, Rome, fifth century

Iconography Outside the Portico

Positioned outside the tile-roofed portico are a variety of gold-colored buildings on the horizon. Scholars have identified some of the buildings as actual structures that were present in Jerusalem and Bethlehem at the time this mosaic was installed. One of the buildings included in this grouping is the Church of the Nativity. The original fourth-century Church of the Nativity consisted of an octagonal structure connected to a nearly square basilica, and an atrium

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58 Lowrie, Art in the Early Church, p. 146; Brandenburg, Ancient Churches of Rome, pp. 174-175.
59 Ibid., p. 146.
60 Oakshott, The Mosaics of Rome, p. 166.
61 This church was built during the reign of Constantine in the earlier part of the fourth century and destroyed two hundred years later when Emperor Justinian constructed a larger church in its place.
on the western end with colonnades on all four sides (Figure 12). The octagonal structure surrounded the cave of the Nativity, where it is believed that Christ was born. In the S. Pudenziana mosaic, the building pictured on the right of Christ’s throne is modeled after the fourth-century Church of the Nativity.\(^6\) Directly above Peter’s head is the octagonal end of the Church, and connected to it is the Nativity’s square basilica.\(^6\)

![Figure 12: Model of the fourth-century Church of the Nativity](image)

Represented on the left side of Christ’s throne is the original fourth-century Church of the Holy Sepulcher from Jerusalem. This church contains the traditional site of Golgotha and burial place of Christ; thus, it is also the venerated site of Christ’s resurrection.\(^6\) Constantine’s Church of the Holy Sepulcher was destroyed in the seventh century, but the remains of the church’s foundation and the sixth-century Madaba mosaic map (Figure 13) give scholars a good

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impression of the original church’s appearance. The Madaba map displays a nearly bird’s-eye view of the basilica and a centralized structure directly behind it (Figure 14). The circular building of the Holy Sepulcher, also called the Anastasis, covered and contained the sepulcher rock. The Anastasis connected to a paved, colonnaded court where Calvary was marked by a monumental cross. On the eastern end of the church was a great basilica, known as the Martyrion (Figure 15). In the S. Pudenzaiana mosaic, the designer illustrated the Anastasis to the left of Christ’s throne and positioned it just above the Apostle Paul. Contiguous with the Anastasis is the rectangular Martyrion, part of which is obscured by Calvary.

Figure 13: Illustration of the Madaba Map, Madaba, Jordan, sixth century

Figure 14: Illustration of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, the Madaba Map, sixth century

Figure 15: Plan of the fourth-century Church of the Holy Sepulcher showing the Anastasis, courtyard and the Martyrion

The two churches portrayed in the S. Pudenziana mosaic, the Church of the Nativity and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, are rich in biblical symbolism. The designers of S. Pudenziana portrayed these fourth-century iconic churches in gold to symbolize the New Jerusalem.69 Gold, a strong, spiritual color, successfully separates the buildings from the earthly world of time and matter. Also significant for the buildings’ iconography is that these two

69 Ibid., p. 146.
churches represent the beginning and end of Christ’s work of redemption.\textsuperscript{70} The Church of the
Nativity signifies Christ’s birthplace here on earth, and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher alludes
to his death and, more importantly, his resurrection. Figure 16 is an example of this
iconographical use in a nearly contemporary Christian mosaic. Jerusalem and Bethlehem are
represented on the left or right of the S. Maria Maggiore triumphal arch.\textsuperscript{71}

![Figure 16: Jerusalem and Bethlehem displayed on the triumphal arch of S. Maria Maggiore, Rome, 432-440 CE](image)

In between the two churches in S. Pudenziana is Mount Calvary, or “Golgotha.” This
rocky mound is surmounted by a large gold-and-jeweled cross. The Golgotha iconography
symbolizes Jesus’ crucifixion. The cross iconography refers not only to Jesus’ crucifixion, but to
his victory over death, transfiguration, heavenly reign, and second coming.\textsuperscript{72} The cross
iconography allowed the artist to avoid the graphic realism of Jesus’ suffering and instead

\textsuperscript{70} Brandenburg, \textit{Ancient Churches of Rome}, p. 188. Walter Lowrie argues that the sacred cities of Bethlehem and
Jerusalem were often introduced into Christian imagery to indicate an Old Testament and New Testament division.
With this interpretation the two churches convey similar meaning as the chief apostles and female figures in the
foreground of the mosaic; Lowrie, \textit{Art in the Early Church}, p. 146.
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., p. 146.
\textsuperscript{72} Jensen, \textit{Understanding Early Christian Art}, pp. 150-151.
emphasize the life and victory that was a result of it.\textsuperscript{73} Despite the cross’s centrality in later visual art, the symbol of the cross was not frequently portrayed until the fourth and fifth centuries.\textsuperscript{74} As mentioned previously in Chapter Two, the fourth century witnessed a gradual shift in the content of Early Christian art. Artists shifted away from narrative scenes of Jesus performing miracles and teaching, and moved towards more dogmatic images that affirmed his divinity and authority. The cross depicted in S. Pudenziana can be appropriately categorized with the new fourth-century iconography that assisted in portraying Christological doctrine.\textsuperscript{75}

Surrounding the gem-studded cross in S. Pudenziana are four winged creatures. They are positioned against a sky filled with golden clouds. S. Pudenziana’s mosaic is one of the earliest works to show this iconography. As mentioned previously, the heavenly creatures represent the writers of the Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. From left to right in the mosaic are the angel of St. Matthew, the winged lion of St. Mark, the winged bull of St. Luke, and the eagle of St. John. Descriptions of “living beings” are found throughout the Old Testament Book of Ezekiel (Ezekiel 1:1-14, 10:1-22). Also, four very similar “living creatures” are described surrounding God’s throne in St. John’s Revelation (Rev. 4:5-11) in the New Testament. These biblical scriptures, however, do not make any connections between the four creatures and the four writers of the Gospels. The emblems of the Evangelists are actually dated to the fourth century and are of western origin.\textsuperscript{76} The beasts as symbols of the four Evangelists were

\textsuperscript{73}Ibid., pp. 149-154.
\textsuperscript{74} The emergence of the cross as a symbol should be partially credited to Constantine’s mother Helena, who discovered Christ’s actual cross in 326 CE. Her discovery led to the honoring of the cross itself, the building of the pilgrimage shrine at Golgotha, and the addition of new liturgical feasts. For more information on the symbol of the cross, see Jensen, \textit{Understanding Early Christian Art}, pp. 130-155.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., p. 130.
established by St. Jerome in his Commentaries on Ezekiel. Early Christian writers were eager to make connections between the Old and New Testament to affirm Christianity’s validity. In S. Pudenziana, the winged beast iconography communicates to the viewer the supreme importance of the four canonical Gospels. Secondly, these iconographic elements visually interpret the heavenly revelation of Ezekiel and John in the Old and New Testament. The winged beasts will be discussed more thoroughly in reference to biblical scripture in the following chapter.

The Figure on the Throne

In the center of S. Pudenziana’s mosaic, Christ is seated on a gem-studded and high-backed throne. Bearded and haloed, he is pictured gesturing toward Paul with his right hand, and with his left hand he holds an open book (Figure 17). Christ is dressed in a pallium over a tunic decorated with a pair of light blue vertical stripes. This was standard civilian attire in fourth-century Rome. The luminous gold of Christ’s garments, however, clearly sets him apart from Roman citizens who traditionally dressed in white.

Christ’s garments should be considered along with his beard and halo iconography. In the previous chapter we saw how attributes of the pagan deities were adopted in the fourth century to suggest symbolic aspects of Christ’s character. When acquiring the iconography of the “senior” pagan gods such as the mature, full-bearded face and halo, Christ was effectively supplanting them. Thomas Mathews argues that the designers of S. Pudenziana turned to Jupiter, the father of the Roman gods, in trying to give Christ a status equal to his Heavenly

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79 Mathews, The Clash of Gods, p. 101. It is notable to mention that Christ’s gold garments have been compared to Roman imperial dress. Furthermore, there is a general consensus among historians in interpreting the mosaic as imperial; for more on this imperial analogy, see ibid., pp. 100-114.
80 Ibid., p. 108.
Mathews meticulously compares Christ’s gold garments, halo, high-backed throne, and face to the divine attributes commonly associated with Jupiter. There is a general consensus among scholars that Christ’s iconography in S. Pudenziana was intended to signify his authority over the Roman pagan deities even if the parallels to Jupiter were indirect or unintentional. Moreover, scholars unanimously agree that these iconographical elements were displayed to express, above all, Christ’s divinity. The development of Jesus’ iconography in Early Christian art, previously discussed in Chapter Two, shows that a new message was emerging in the visual vocabulary of the fourth century.

Figure 17: The figure of Christ in S. Pudenziana’s mosaic, Rome, late fourth and early fifth century

The Arian controversy that dominated fourth-century theological debate made it necessary to define more precisely the relationship between man and God. The church was

81 Ibid., pp. 101-114.
82 Ibid., p. 109. For more on Thomas Mathews’ iconographical analysis of Jupiter and Christ’s iconography, see ibid., pp. 92-114.
83 Jensen, Understanding Early Christian Art, p. 120.
struggling to affirm the full divinity of its Savior, and no longer needed an image of an exalted earthly man. The goal of the artist at this time was to display the transcendent and reigning Savior of the Church’s creeds, a Savior who possessed both human and divine essences, and this is clearly reflected in S. Pudenziana’s imagery.\(^8^6\)

In S. Pudenziana, Christ’s commanding gesture aids in communicating contemporary Christian doctrines and his authority over the church. With his right arm he gestures to the heavenly apostles. Furthermore, in the context of S. Pudenziana, Christ can be interpreted as gesturing to the entire church congregation. The iconography reinforces his heavenly and terrestrial authority. The gesture Christ displays is widely interpreted as one that may be used to bless, command, teach, or even condemn.\(^8^7\) The gesture in the S. Pudenziana mosaic, however, can be explained as one of blessing, since Christ is surrounded by his disciples in the Heavenly Jerusalem. The apostles have already received their final judgment and are now blessed with an eternal position at the left and right side of Christ’s throne. Christ’s gesture, considered together with the inscription found on his open book, is not menacing but comforting.\(^8^8\) Here, Christ personally claims to be the “Protector of the church of Pudenziana.”\(^8^9\)

The conclusion one may draw from Christ’s iconography in S. Pudenziana is that his portrayal is overall dogmatically oriented and detached from specific scriptural narratives. Even though Christ is pictured with his Twelve Apostles, the mosaic does not display an image of the Savior as he lived and worked amongst his disciples. No earthly teacher is pictured seated upon

\(^8^7\) Atherton interprets the gesture as one used by secular orators and frequently found in antique art; Atherton, “The Apse Mosaic of S. Pudenziana,” p. 58.
\(^8^8\) Mathews, *The Clash of Gods*, p. 114. Robin Jensen offers a contrasting opinion, however, concerning Christ’s gesture. She notes that Christ’s gesture at S. Pudenziana insures he is displayed judging the living and the dead; Jensen, *Face to Face*, pp. 157-158.
\(^8^9\) Ibid.
a golden throne, clothed in gold, and wearing a radiant halo.\textsuperscript{90} Christ is portrayed as the eternal ruler of heaven and earth. His attributes communicate to the viewer that he is the risen and all-powerful Christ, who is fully divine and equal to God the Father.

Finally, scholars commonly identify two elements that appeared in the original fourth-century mosaic from Cicconio’s sketch of S. Pudenziana’s mosaic. First, the \textit{Agnus Dei}, destroyed in the sixteenth-century renovation, was once displayed below Christ’s feet. The \textit{Agnus Dei} represents Christ as the sacrificial lamb.\textsuperscript{91} This iconography appeared on the same vertical axis as the triumphal cross and the risen Christ. Therefore, down the central vertical axis of the mosaic were three elements asserting Christ’s importance. Second, Ciacconio’s sketch displays a dove that once existed prior to the sixteenth century (see Figure 2). The dove was positioned directly above the Lamb of God. This Christian symbol represents the Holy Spirit, the third Person of the Trinity.\textsuperscript{92} Some historians even propose that the Hand of God appeared in the sky of the original mosaic, which consequently would have completed the representation of the Trinity.\textsuperscript{93}

This chapter has shown that S. Pudenziana’s apse mosaic is complex and multi-layered in meaning. The golden and symbolic architecture, Mount Calvary, the triumphal cross, and winged beasts create a setting that can only be interpreted as timeless and eternal. Each apostle in this heavenly realm can be understood as the prototypical follower of Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, the apostles as a whole represent all of Christ’s followers who will be saved on

\textsuperscript{90} Ibid., p. 145.
\textsuperscript{91} This symbolism may have derived from John’s reference to Christ as the Lamb of God in the New Testament (John 1:36); Jensen, \textit{Face to Face}, pp. 115-130.
\textsuperscript{92} Doctrine in the latter part of the fourth century declared the Holy Spirit as an equal part of the Godhead. This new doctrine may have influenced the designers of S. Pudenziana to include this iconography; Joseph Alchermes et al., \textit{Heaven on Earth: Art and the Church in Byzantium} (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania University Press, 1998): p. 41.
\textsuperscript{93} Atherton, “The Apse Mosaic of S. Pudenziana,” p. 23. There is little evidence to support the portrayal of the Hand of God in the original fourth-century mosaic. Unlike the \textit{Agnus Dei} and dove, this iconography does not appear in Ciacconio’s sketch from the sixteenth century. For more information on the Hand of God in Christian art, see Grabar, \textit{Christian Iconography}. 
Judgment Day. Overall, the image-makers emphasized the concept of salvation and the heavenly reward that awaits those who obey Christ’s commands and follow his will on earth. The mosaic also teaches of Christ’s sacrifice, victorious resurrection, establishment of the universal church, judgment at the end of time, and second coming with the New Jerusalem. In the following chapter, the mosaic’s imagery will be discussed in light of specific biblical scripture and its contemporary understanding. This chapter will show how the artists visually recontextualized Old and New Testament scriptures in the S. Pudenziana mosaic to deliver a Christological message to the people of Rome.

94 Jensen, Understanding Early Christian Art, p. 108.
CHAPTER FOUR: OLD AND NEW TESTAMENT SCRIPTURE REVEALED THROUGH PICTURES

This chapter discusses Ezekiel’s heavenly ascent narrative as a catalyst for the image-maker’s visionary imagination. S. Pudenziana invigorates this Old Testament prophecy with new Christian meaning by portraying the winged beasts next to Christ enthroned. The winged beast iconography also references New Testament scripture from the Book of Revelations. Finally, the arrangement of images surrounding Christ shows iconography symbolic of the church of the Jews and Gentiles, a theme inspired by New Testament scripture.

The Winged Beasts and Christ

In the Old Testament Book of Ezekiel, the prophet Ezekiel records vivid images of a heavenly ascent. In this heavenly realm, he describes four winged beasts surrounding the throne of God: “Each had a human face in the front, the face of a lion on the right side, the face of an ox on the left side, and the face of an eagle at the back. Each had two pairs of outstretched wings – one pair stretched out to touch the wings of the living beings on either side of it, and the other pair covered its body.” The prophet goes on to emphasize these winged beasts as moving in unison and with the ability to move in all four directions without turning as they moved (Ezekiel 1:12). It is clear from his descriptions that these are no earthly beings, but spectacular angelic beings that occupy an eternal realm. Also in Ezekiel’s heavenly ascent is a vision of God’s throne made of sapphire (Ezekiel 1:26). The vision reaches its climax with Ezekiel’s description of the appearance of the glory of the Lord: “From what appeared to be his waist up, he looked like gleaming amber, flickering like a fire. And from his waist down, he looked like a burning

95 Ezekiel was an Old Testament prophet to the Jewish exiles in Babylon.
96 New Living Translation, Ezekiel 1:10-11.
flame, shining with splendor. All around him was a flowing halo, like a rainbow shining in clouds on a rainy day. This is what the glory of the Lord looked like to me.”

In S. Pudenziana, we can see that the designer of the apse iconography was inspired by Ezekiel’s vision for the depiction of the winged beasts. The artist isolated the four faces of the living beings and rendered them in the same order described in the Book of Ezekiel. Shown from left to right in the mosaic are the human, lion, ox, and eagle. Furthermore, the artist’s inspiration from Ezekiel’s vision is made evident by the use of blue in the throne, resembling sapphire. However, from what has been established with the iconographical analysis in Chapter Three, the One seated upon the throne in S. Pudenziana is clearly Christ. This portrayal contradicts Ezekiel’s prophecy in the Old Testament in which the appearance described is God the Father, not Jesus Christ. The reasoning behind the artist’s portrayal of Christ enthroned is made clear in light of contemporary Christian beliefs of Christ as the Savior. Second, New Testament scriptures support the notion that while God is invisible, the Father is revealed through Christ’s appearance. For example, Colossians 1:15 states that “Christ is the visible image of the invisible God.” The opening chapter of the Gospel of John notes that while no one has ever seen God, the Son has made him known (John 1:18). Finally, 2 Corinthians 4:6 reveals that the glory of God is seen in the face of Jesus Christ. Because of New Testament scriptures such as these, Christians believe that the invisible God had become visible in a human life. Robin Jensen argues that such scriptures have had immense implications for Christian iconography. She notes that because Christ had a human face and body he regularly appears

100 Jensen, *Face to Face*, p. 132.
102 Jensen, *Face to Face*, p. 132.
in Christian art from the late third century onwards in contrast to the rare representations of the Father or the Holy Spirit. Early Christian artists did not substitute belief in Christ for belief in God; they believed that when men came face to face with Christ, they came face to face with God. For all these reasons it is clear why the artists strayed from a literal portrayal of Ezekiel’s vision. Artists could encourage the worship of God by depicting him as he had now revealed himself in a man.

As mentioned earlier, S. Pudenziana recalls the heavenly revelation of St. John with the portrayal of the winged beast iconography in addition to Ezekiel’s vision. In the Book of Revelation, John describes the beasts around the throne of God in the order of the lion, ox, human, and eagle. In his revelation he also records the beasts saying, “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God, the Almighty – the one who always was, who is, and who is still to come.” Scripture says the living beings repeat the saying “day after day and night after night.” The four living creatures constantly worship God. According to scripture they do not rest day or night. It can be argued that when the fifth-century viewer saw S. Pudenziana’s winged beast iconography, he or she would have been reminded of John’s revelation with the living creatures honoring the One on the throne, and most importantly, reminded of the chorus the four creatures repeat which signifies God’s holiness, power, and eternal being.

A visual interpretation of the winged beasts next to Christ is found in another fifth-century Christian mosaic. This mosaic is located in the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia in Ravenna (Figure 18). In the central vault of the Mausoleum is a golden cross set against a bright blue

103 Ibid., pp. 131-132.
104 Newton and Neil, 2000 Years of Christian Art, p. 25.
106 NLT, Revelations 4: 7-8.
107 NLT, Revelations 4:8.
108 During the barbarian migrations of the fifth century, Ravenna was one of the capitals, along with Rome and Milan, of the emperors of the West. Because of the generosity of its patrons, Ravenna was transformed into a
ground with gold stars. The pendentives of the dome show images of the four winged beasts. Each living creature is pictured in gold and in a separate pendentive. At the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, the cross is the focal point of the composition because of its central placement. Despite the fact that a human portrayal of Christ is not shown in this mosaic at Galla Placidia, his figure is still referred to with the cross iconography. The cross is a symbol of the resurrected Christ and his victory over death. Therefore, the selection of imagery here is similar to that of S. Pudenziana and consequently, has similar meaning. S. Pudenziana and the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia are among the earliest artistic representations of the winged beasts surrounding Christ or the cross. The display of this symbolic imagery at both of these places signals a transition to more dogmatic imagery in the late fourth and early fifth century.

Figure 18: Central dome of the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, Ravenna, ca. 450 CE

As this thesis has established, the winged beasts were inspired by both Old and New Testament scripture. Furthermore, when the heavenly creatures are displayed next to Christ or the cross, they aid in communicating invisible aspects of Christ’s being. First, because the winged beasts are recontextualized next to Christ’s throne at S. Pudenziana they remind the viewer that Christ is one with God the Father. Second, the creatures may also be seen in relation to their function in Revelation. In this scripture, they glorify and give thanks to God while saying “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God, the Almighty—the one who always was, who is, and who is still to come.” Finally, as mentioned above, the winged beasts can be interpreted as symbols of the four Evangelists because of the connection made by St. Jerome. Therefore, when these symbols are displayed next to Christ they communicate the supreme importance of the four canonical Gospels, and the visible manifestation of God’s word. In the following section of this chapter, more of S. Puenziana’s iconography will be discussed in light of biblical scripture. In addition to the winged beast iconography, several other elements of the mosaic signify Christ’s importance and Christian concepts.

Redeemed and Reconciled through God

As previously shown in Chapter Three, symbolism for the Church of the Jews and Gentiles is emphasized in S. Pudenziana’s mosaic through images of Peter and Paul, the women with wreaths, and the churches in the background. In Ephesians 2:13-18, Paul speaks of the establishment and universality of the Church:

But now you have been united with Christ Jesus. Once you were far away from God, but now you have been brought near to him through the blood of Christ. For Christ himself

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110 NLT, Revelations 4:8.
111 Odell, Ezekiel, p. 33.
has brought peace to us. He united Jews and gentiles into one people when, in his own body on the cross, he broke down the wall of hostility that separated us. He did this by ending the system of law with its commandments and regulations. He made peace between Jews and Gentiles by creating in himself one new people from two other groups. Together as one body, Christ reconciled both groups to God by means of his death on the cross, and our hostility toward each other was put to death. He brought this Good News of peace to you Gentiles who were far away from him, and peace to Jews who were near. Now all of us can come to the Father through the same Holy Spirit because of what Christ has done for us.\textsuperscript{112}

In S. Pudenziana’s mosaic, this scripture from the Book of Ephesians is visualized through the selection and placement of iconography. Peter and Paul represent divergent tendencies. This along with the personifications of the Jews and the Gentiles (the women with wreaths) helps to portray the idea that the Jews and Gentiles have been reconciled to God and united as one body. The cross pictured directly above Christ’s throne conveys that this was done by means of his death on the cross.\textsuperscript{113} The concept of the universality of the Church also extends to the surrounding imagery. When the designers depicted the Church of the Nativity and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher just behind Christ’s throne, they did so to point to the idea that Christ united all of the Jews and the Gentiles into one people.\textsuperscript{114} Picturing both iconic churches communicates the beginning and completion of Christ’s redemptive work to reconcile both groups.\textsuperscript{115}

S. Maria Maggiore, a fifth-century Christian basilica in Rome, delivers a similar scriptural message with the use of iconography on its triumphal arch (Figure 19). As previously mentioned, the iconic cities of Jerusalem and Bethlehem are displayed on the left and right side of this triumphal arch (see Figure 16). At S. Maria Maggiore Peter and Paul are also shown (Figure 20). They are pictured at the center of the triumphal arch, and they frame an empty

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{112} NLT. \\
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., 29. \\
\textsuperscript{115} Brandenburg, \textit{Ancient Churches of Rome}, p. 188.
\end{flushright}
throne that is surmounted by a golden cross. The cross can be understood as a symbol of Christ’s victory over death, and the empty throne symbolizes his return at the end of time. Therefore, the throne and cross iconography at S. Maria Maggiore is a nonfigurative representation of the victorious, enthroned Christ. Finally, this triumphal arch displays the winged beasts hovering over the chief apostles and the empty throne. All of these elements are comparable to S. Pudenziana’s imagery.

Figure 19: Triumphal arch of S. Maria Maggiore, 432-440 CE

Figure 20: The center of the triumphal arch at S. Maria Maggiore, 432-440 CE

116 For more on the meaning of the empty throne iconography, see ibid., pp.187-188.
Both mosaics display a reconciled world in order, under the universal control of the Son of God at the center.\textsuperscript{117} The iconography for the Jews and Gentiles placed in the same setting as Christ projects an allusion to the unified Church. The imagery serves as a reminder that a new era had come with Jesus Christ. As the Apostle Paul explains in New Testament scripture, there is no longer Jew or Greek, free men or slave; all are one in Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{118} The iconography at S. Pudenziana is a powerful visualization of the meaning of what Christ has done for the Church. In the following chapter, S. Pudenziana’s mosaic will be placed within its art-historical context. This chapter will make clear why S. Pudenziana’s artists chose the specific iconography and content discussed in this thesis.

\textsuperscript{117} Mathews, \textit{The Clash of Gods}, p. 97.
CHAPTER FIVE: PLACING S. PUDENZIANA IN ITS ART-HISTORICAL CONTEXT

This chapter will show how S. Pudenziana fits into a wider art-historical context by first, briefly discussing key examples of Christian art from the second and third centuries. This discussion will be followed by an analysis of new Christian images of the latter part of the fourth century. Finally, the chapter will conclude with a discussion on S. Pudenziana and other contemporary mosaics of the fifth century. This chapter will explain the external historical pressures and internal theological debates that shaped the development of Christian art over time, and consequently clarify the iconography and content of S. Pudenziana’s apse mosaic.

As Chapter Two has shown, some early Christian images of the pre-Constantinian era, such as the philosopher type, were not specifically “Christian.” They were adopted from pagan contexts and moved into a Christian setting in order to communicate Christian concepts in the visual language of the surrounding culture. The viewer could only understand the philosopher motif with Christian meaning when it was portrayed with other biblical scenes or in a purely Christian setting. The same is true of the Good Shepherd in Early Christian art. With its roots in Classical imagery, it was not always possible to identify the sheep-carrying figure definitively as pagan or Christian without taking the surrounding images into consideration.119 On a Christian sarcophagus, the philosopher motif served as a reminder of wisdom or reason in Jesus’ teaching, and in the context of the Roman Catacombs the shepherd motif represented the safety of or caring for the Christian community.120 This type of symbolic imagery was particularly important to early Christians who feared their safety in times of persecution. The Christian community of the second and third centuries needed a visual reminder of Jesus’ compassion and mercy.

Similarly, images of Jesus’ ability to perform miracles and healings were equally important in

120 It is debatable whether the shepherd was an early metaphor for Jesus in the Roman catacomb frescoes; ibid.
times of persecution. His miraculous powers were told of through visual representations of New Testament stories, such as Jesus Healing the Paralytic (Figure 21), the Raising of Lazarus (Figure 22), and the Multiplication of the Loaves and Fishes (Figure 23).

![Figure 21: Jesus Healing the Paralytic, wall painting from a house-church in Dura Europos, ca. 235 CE](image1)

![Figure 22: The Raising of Lazrus, Catacomb of SS. Peter and Marcellinus, Rome, fourth century](image2)

![Figure 23: The Multiplication of the Loaves and Fishes, Catacomb of Calixtus, Rome, third century](image3)
It is important to note that these were among the only stories from Jesus’ life that were shown in the second and third centuries of Christian art.\textsuperscript{121} Jesus’ nativity, entrance into Jerusalem, arrest and trial, crucifixion, and resurrection were all excluded from this period.\textsuperscript{122} Prior to the Edict of Toleration, the New Testament scriptures chosen to be interpreted on the walls of the catacombs and house churches pertained to his role as wonderworker, healer, and teacher.\textsuperscript{123}

During the fourth century, the Christian Church saw many changes, including increased religious tolerance, the declaration of new theological doctrine, and the beginning of imperial-sponsored ecclesiastical architecture. In 313, the Edict of Milan ended the official Roman persecution of Christians. With the legality of Christianity, there was a gradual shift away from portraying stories of Jesus’ healings and miracles because of the changes in the Christian church.\textsuperscript{124} The familiar Good Shepherd iconography borrowed from the pagan community was less frequently displayed, and, as discussed previously, the philosopher motif subsequently developed, changing over time, so that it became uniquely Christian.\textsuperscript{125} Alongside the disappearance of these motifs, new iconography was emerging in the visual vocabulary that spoke of Christianity’s ascendance over its religious competition. The Arian controversy dominated fourth-century theological debates and also brought changes in the Christian iconographic repertoire.

\textsuperscript{121}Jesus’ baptism and the story of the women at the well were other New Testament stories told in the pre-Constantinian period. Most biblical scenes in the Christian catacombs were Old Testament subjects. In fact, Old Testament subjects occur as much as four times more often than New Testament themes in Christian art of the second through the fourth centuries; Jensen, \textit{Understanding Early Christian Art}, p. 69.
\textsuperscript{122}Ibid., 89.
\textsuperscript{124}Jensen, \textit{Understanding Early Christian Art}, p. 89.
\textsuperscript{125}Ibid., p. 46.
Arius, a priest in Alexandria, had begun to teach that the Son of God, who became man, was not truly God.\textsuperscript{126} Arius argued that Jesus comes “later” than God himself and, therefore, that the Son is not the Creator of all, but is rather a created being.\textsuperscript{127} The Church immediately rejected this as a heresy in the fourth century, insisting that the Son is co-eternal with the Father and is fully and absolutely God. This controversy was a major concern within the Church because if the Son were not himself truly God, then there would be no union between God and man, and therefore man would not be deified in Christ.\textsuperscript{128} In 325, the First Ecumenical Council at Nicaea condemned Arianism and declared the Son of God, Jesus Christ, as co-eternal and consubstantial with the Father.\textsuperscript{129} The Arian Controversy aids scholars in accounting for the significant enrichment of iconography in the second half of the fourth century.\textsuperscript{130} With the Church’s new establishment, Christians could freely choose to challenge Arian teachings through representations of Christ. To delineate abstract and invisible dogma, artists had to venture outside the common New Testament narrative images and beyond motifs which conveyed Jesus’ mercy and compassion.

\textit{Christ Enthroned with Peter and Paul} in the Catacomb of Domitilla, and \textit{Christ with Halo} in the Catacomb of Commodilla (see Figure 7 and 6), both previously discussed in relation to S. Pudenziana’s mosaic, show us how Christ’s image dramatically changed in the fourth century. More emphasis is placed on his appearance in both of these pictures. These Christian images also contrast with former pictures because they are artistic representations of the risen and triumphant Christ. The radiant mandorla which encircles Christ in the Catacomb of

\textsuperscript{127} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid., pp. 39-41.
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid., p. 41.
\textsuperscript{130} Schlatter, “Interpreting the Mosaic of Santa Pudenziana,” p. 67.
Domitilla conveys his ability to transcend time and space. Rather than emphasizing Christ’s earthly ministry, this new iconography represents Christ’s divine abilities. Furthermore, the inscription around Christ communicates anti-Arian dogma: “You are said to be the Son and are found to be the Father.” In the Catacomb of Comodilla, the letters Alpha and Omega present Christ as an eternal being, coexisting with God the Father from the beginning to the end. The halo iconography further expresses Christ’s divine nature.

Another picture that shows the transformation of Christ in Christian art of the fourth century is the Traditio Legis motif, or Christ handing the “new” law to his apostles.\textsuperscript{131} An example of a fourth-century image with this content is found in a small apse in the Mausoleum of Santa Costanza (Figure 24). In this mosaic, Peter and Paul flank Christ, who is positioned in the center. The Savior is shown with an open scroll in his left hand; his right hand is raised. Paul, pictured on Christ’s right, lifts his hand in acclamation.\textsuperscript{132}

Figure 24: \textit{Christ Proclaiming the New Law}, Mausoleum of Santa Costanza, Rome, 337-351CE

\textsuperscript{131} On the \textit{Traditio Legis} see C. Davis-Weyer, “Das Traditio-Legis-Bild und seine Nachfolge,” \textit{Münchener Jahrbuch der bildenden Kunst}, xii (1961), pp. 7-45.

In this image, Christ’s gesture and halo assert his divinity and authority. His hieratic appearance enhances these qualities. What is most intriguing about this fourth-century motif in comparison to previous Christian pictures is the relation between the motif and Scripture. There is no specific biblical event that provides the basis for depicting Christ proclaiming the law to Peter and Paul. In fact, there is no record of a gathering of these three persons in New Testament writings. Rather, the *Traditio Legis* motif implies a reading of the New Testament in combination with the Old, and it illustrates the conception of the chief apostles in the early Church. Christ is shown proclaiming the new law; thus, the “old” law (the Law of Moses) described in the Old Testament is effectively replaced. This motif emphasizes that there is a new covenant between God and his people. For Christians of the fourth century, the *Traditio Legis* motif proclaimed the victory and power of Christ, and it expressed early Christians’ trust in the law of Christ (i.e. the gospel) and the importance of the apostles who brought it to them. This was a more suitable theme for Christian art in an era when Christianity had triumphed over paganism and established new Christian doctrine concerning the Godhead. Moreover, this type of theological reflection and portrayal of Christ was more suitable for the walls of imperial-sponsored ecclesiastical buildings. This motif is found in only two ecclesiastical buildings in the second half of the fourth and the early fifth century (the baptistery of S. Giovanni in Naples and the mausoleum of Santa Costanza in Rome). Despite its prevalence as an apse image, the

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133 Ibid., p. 416.
134 Ibid., p. 409.
135 This understanding that there is a new situation after the coming of Christ was supported by Justin Martyr in his *First Apology*. For an English translation of his writings, see *Writings of Saint Justin Martyr*, trans. Thomas B. Falls (New York: Christian Heritage, 1948).
137 Schlatter, “Interpreting the Mosaic of Santa Pudenziana,” p. 68.
138 Historians hypothesize that this theme was also presented in the apse of Santa Sabina, Rome (422-432 CE), and St. Peter’s Basilica, Rome (320 CE); for more on the theme of *Traditio Legis* and St. Peter’s fourth-century mosaic, see Richard Krautheimer, “A Note on the Inscriptions in the Apse of Old St. Peter’s,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, Vol. 41 (1987), pp. 317-320.
Traditio Legis still presents the change of focus that was manifest in the visual art of the Early Christian basilica.\(^{139}\)

After Constantine’s Edict, new buildings were needed to declare Christianity’s newly established status. Constantine built several Christian basilicas of great size and magnificence throughout the Empire, giving artisans the formal challenge to exploit a new setting. The active involvement of multitudes of worshippers in this space, with their processional movement toward the altar in the liturgy and their eastern orientation of prayer, made the conch of the apse the object of attention in worship.\(^{140}\) Therefore, artists had to design a Christian image that was sensible to a new context and represented Christ in such a way as to ensure that believers understood his sovereignty. S. Pudenziana is the earliest surviving Christian basilica with its apse decoration preserved (Figure 25). The mosaic informs us about what type of picture was

Figure 25: View of the nave as remodeled in 1588, S. Pudenziana, Rome

\(^{139}\) Many scholars have argued that the apse of St. Peter’s basilica played a role in the invention and diffusion of the Traditio Legis. However, this remains disputed. For more information on Traditio Legis in the early church, see Spieser, “The Representation of Christ in the Apses of Early Christian Churches,” pp. 63-71.

\(^{140}\) Mathews, The Clash of Gods, p. 94.
seen as fitting in the physical context of the Early Christian basilicas of the late fourth and early fifth centuries. The iconography chosen suitable for this context is closely related to the developing imagery of the latter half of the fourth century. As Chapter Two has shown, the artists of S. Pudenziana reproduced the arrangement of Christ and his apostles along with Christ’s halo, beard, and gold garments to signify his authority and divinity. S. Pudenziana’s apse mosaic is also more complex in meaning than previous Christian pictures. New elements appear in the composition that had never been seen in Christian art up until this point. The women with wreaths, Mount Golgotha, the triumphal cross, iconic buildings, and winged beasts considered together with Christ’s iconography and his apostolic group convey more than abstract characteristics pertaining to Christ’s being. These elements, together, tell a story that draws upon both Old Testament and New Testament scriptures. When viewing the mosaic’s iconography in relation to the whole composition, it becomes clear that the iconography is focused on conveying the concept of salvation, the unity of the church, and in affirming Christ’s divinity and sovereignty.\textsuperscript{141} Christian apses of this same period, and later, show that Christian imagery continued to develop in this direction.

At the Church of Hosios David in Thessalonica (ca. 425-450), the resurrected and triumphant Christ is also portrayed in the apse (Figure 26). A jeweled cross is shown in Christ’s halo and he is surrounded by a translucent mandorla.\textsuperscript{142} Beyond the mandorla of light emerge the four winged beasts from Ezekiel and John’s revelation. With his right hand Christ makes a gesture of speech or greeting. His left hand holds a scroll which reads: “Behold our God in whom we hope and here rejoice in our salvation, for he will give us rest and hospitality in this house” (Isaiah 25:9-10). Beneath Christ’s feet is a rocky mount out of which flow the four rivers

\textsuperscript{142} Jensen, \textit{Understanding Early Christian Art}, p. 110.
of paradise. At the far left and right are two human witnesses to this heavenly vision. Scholars have identified these figures as Ezekiel and Habakkuk.\textsuperscript{143}

Figure 26: Apse mosaic in the Church of Hosios David, Thessalonica, ca. 425-450

Similarities can immediately be seen when comparing this mosaic to the one at S. Pudenziana. Christ is triumphantly enthroned and emphasis is placed on his divinity with a halo and a mandorla. Just as at S. Pudenziana, the artists are not depicting a single biblical narrative. Rather, they are drawing from various scriptures and dogma pertaining to Christ’s being. The cross on his halo communicates his victory, just as the triumphal cross does at S. Pudenziana. The winged beasts emphasize his holiness, power, and eternal being. Finally, the inscription found on his scroll communicates similar biblical ideas as S. Pudenziana’s imagery and inscription do. In the inscription found on the scroll at Hosios David, Christ is declared God, the giver of salvation, and the protector of the church.

The mosaics previously discussed in the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia (see Figure 18) and S. Maria Maggiore (see Figure 19) are also of this same period. They convey how Christian imagery of the fifth century was inspired by a combination of scriptures found in the Old and

\textsuperscript{143} Ibid., p. 110.
New Testaments in order to communicate new Christian dogma. At S. Maria Maggiore the artists depicted scenes of the Old Testament as seen in light of the Christian truths of the New Testament. Furthermore, they pictured iconography that communicates the completion of Christ’s redemptive work to reconcile the Jews and Gentiles.144 At the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia the artist re-contextualized the Old Testament winged beasts next to Christological symbolism to aid in conveying Christ’s role as the divine and resurrected Savior. The visual dynamics of Galla Placidia and S. Maria Maggiore demand an emotional response of veneration or worship, and aid in communicating important Christian doctrine. These were the types of pictures that were needed in apses of early Christian basilicas: images that were designed to emphasize the glory, power, and majesty of the triumphant religion.145

By comparing iconography of the pre-Constantinian era to Christian iconography of the fourth and fifth centuries, one can conclude that Christian art was shaped by its historical context. The earliest period of Christian art served a different purpose and was designed to relate to different Christian audiences. The early Christian image-makers made use of common visual forms to speak of Jesus’ compassion and portrayed biblical narratives that visualized him as a miracle-worker. The innovation of iconography in the latter part of the fourth century is linked to Christianity’s ascendance over its religious competition, as well as new Christian doctrine caused by the struggle between Arian and non-Arian teaching. Iconography such as the halo, beard, throne, and gold garments was used to speak about the new God that came to replace the old, and to give Christ a status equal to his Heavenly Father.146 Additionally, S. Pudenziana and the mosaics of this same period were shaped by the beginning of imperial-sponsored

144 Brandenburg, *Ancient Churches of Rome*, p. 175; for more on the mosaic imagery on the triumphal arch at S. Maria Maggiore, see ibid., pp. 176-189.
ecclesiastical architecture, the focus of theological reflection at that time, and the new possibility for the worshipper to be admitted into the presence of God and his heavenly sphere.\textsuperscript{147}

CONCLUSION

The mosaic in the apse of S. Pudenziana contains new iconographic elements that are juxtaposed against older image types. The designer of the image program was inspired by earlier depictions of Christ and his apostles that were based on older, pagan philosopher iconography. Furthermore, the artists adopted iconographical aspects used for depictions of Roman pagan gods to make Christ’s power, authority, and divinity clear. However, the image-makers of S. Pudenziana also introduced new iconography that would assist in communicating specific Christian truths. The mosaic’s imagery suggests the possibility of salvation that Christ’s triumph over death offers to the worshippers at S. Pudenziana. Moreover, the imagery speaks of Christ’s redemptive work to unify the Jews and Gentiles into one body and reconcile both groups to God. The heavenly creatures recontextualized next to Christ signify Christ’s holiness and equality to the Heavenly Father. At the same time this juxtaposition of iconography points to the supreme importance of the four canonical Gospels, and their divine origin. A fifth-century Roman viewer would have been spiritually strengthened by the salvific message of hope the imagery conveys, and, additionally, encouraged to follow what the Gospels teach in order to reach the eternal dwelling place with God. The apostles portrayed next to Christ’s throne set an example for all believers and make clear the reward that awaits Christ’s followers.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


VITA

Rebecca Ann Franzella was born in Covington, Louisiana, in June of 1986. At an early age, Rebecca took a liking to both art and gymnastics. She found both of these activities to be self-rewarding while offering a great creative outlet. Rebecca excelled in both of these fields. As a sophomore in high school, she was accepted to NOCCA (New Orleans Center for Creative Arts), which further fueled her passion for and understanding of art. Rebecca attended this school while simultaneously competing in gymnastics on a national level. In fact, it was gymnastics which first brought her to Louisiana State University. As a freshman in college, she made it on the LSU gymnastics team. Unfortunately the grueling hours of practice and workouts as a student athlete did not allow Rebecca to devote the time she wanted to her art study. It was then that she made the decision to forgo gymnastics and focus her attention on the study of art. Rebecca went on to receive her Bachelor of Science in secondary art education in May, 2009. During her time at LSU she developed a greater love and exposure to Christian art, which prompted her to enroll in LSU’s graduate art history program. Rebecca is a candidate for a Master of the Arts degree in art history for the spring of 2012. She currently resides in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and plans to teach art education one day.