

Did the early Church use Art? (the Iconoclastic Controversy)

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A common theory is that the earliest Church, on the basis of the Second Commandment, prohibited religious art as idolatrous. Part of the rationale is that the first Christians had been Jews who would naturally follow the Jewish practice of forbidding religious art in their synagogues. I can not find any writings from the first centuries that convince me the theory is true. It is based on assumptions and arguments from a much later period. Contrary to the theory, there is evidence that the use of symbolic drawings and religious pictures by the Church was common by the 2nd Century. A popular religious picture, familiar to most of us today, was the drawing of a fish. The Greek word for "fish" (IXOYE or ichthus) became an acrostic for "Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior". Another popular symbolic picture was a boat with a bare mast that looks like a cross. Like the ark in which Noah's family was saved, the boat represents the Church (Latin for ship is "navis" and the traditional name for the auditorium part of a church building to this day is "nave"). There is an extant depiction of Jesus working a miracle dating to 230-240 and an image of him as Good Shepherd circa 250 and other drawings from the 3rd Century. (Jesus is depicted with a beard for the first time in the late 4th Century.) Ancient Church Art often depicts Bible stories. That seems to be its original, didactic purpose. The earliest Christians did have and use Art and it existed to visualize Christian concepts (rather than for its own sake or for beauty).

http://www.religionfacts.com/jesus/image_gallery.htm

It is also common to read that the earliest Church had a prohibition against Temples on the basis of Acts 17:24 The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man. However, the underground and often persecuted early Church did use catacombs and converted private houses for places to meet and worship. Early Christian art from the 3rd Century can still be seen on the walls of those catacombs. The earliest building used as a church that we know about dates from the 3rd Century. It is in Dura Europa and there are religious paintings on its walls. (Some believe this building had been a synagogue). In the 4th Century, having become an official State Religion under Constantine in 313 (Edict of Milan), Christians were building basilicas and mausoleums which we would consider holy places or churches. http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/askthe_expert/ask_churchbuildings.html

http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761579100/early_christian_art_and_architecture.html T

he theory that the early Church (of the first three centuries) was aniconic and iconoclastic is examined and laid to rest by Steven Bigham in his Early Christian Attitudes Toward Images It may be read online here However, the Church was seriously divided over this subject from the beginning and eventually shed blood over it, in the 8th and 9th Centuries. This was the "Iconoclastic Controversy". It was eventually resolved officially in favor of the use of Icons by the Seventh Ecumenical Council which met in Nicea in 787, Opposition to the Council's decision continued for generations until the 10th Century. Their use is now common in Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches. The controversy on the surface was about idolatry. Beneath the surface it was about Theology and beyond that, the "War" was political and a struggle for power between Church officials, Emperors and advocates of both positions on the subject.

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