

Christian Art of The Sabbath: A Commentary

by Margaret Whidden

A considerable body of Christian art, ranging from early mosaics and medieval manuscripts and sculpture to present-day wall decorations, interprets ideas and events connected with the biblical Sabbath, either directly or indirectly. Although the artistically rich and complicated treatment by Christian artists of the Annunciation, Crucifixion and Last Judgment cannot be duplicated in Christian art of the Sabbath, certain divine activities on Sabbath have been recurrently depicted: the seventh day of creation, Sabbath incidents in Christ's earthly ministry and the Revelation to John on the Lord's Day.¹ This commentary on the portfolio of reproductions is organized according to the sequence of events given in the Bible. Discussion of the portrayals of each event will follow the historical order in which the artists completed their work.²

The days of creation appear in an enormous number of church wall-paintings, mosaics, stained glass and sculpture cycles and numerous manuscripts. While many of these move directly from the sixth day of the creation of humanity to the expulsion of

Adam and Eve from Eden, those which do include the seventh day typically recreate the biblical image of God the Father resting on the Sabbath, blessing His creation. "And God *blessed* the seventh day and sanctified it; because that in it he had *rested* from all his work which God created and made" (Gen. 2:3, italics mine).

Byzantine mosaics consistently portray a beneficent God the Father reposing on a throne. An example is a twelfth-century mosaic from a creation cycle in the nave of the Palatine Chapel in Palermo, Sicily (p. 29). God sits regally on a throne, with his feet comfortably supported by a cushion. Viewers of the mosaic were not to see it merely as an extension of the real space of the church. By focusing on the glittering, slightly uneven surface of the wall with its rich colors, believers were drawn into regarding their basilica as a microcosm of God's universe. Their worship was to share the glory of that creation Sabbath.

A mosaic in the narthex of Saint Mark's Cathedral in Venice (p. 31), also part of a creation cycle, shares with the Palermo mosaic a Byzantine style that is more concerned with simply stating doctrine through clear, unpretentious design than with accurately copying nature. As a result, the figures may look clumsy to twentieth-century eyes.

Margaret Whidden, presently working at Action on Smoking and Health, has taught art history at Atlantic Union College and Andrews University. Her M.A. is from Edinburgh University.

The angels step on each others' toes, and their large hands are dislocated at the wrists. The artist's knowledge of perspective was evidently not academic; and he was certainly no botanist. But he did know how to give his composition a solemnity by posing his main figure so that he is viewed frontally. The gold of the background is rich and inspiring and knits the scene with the others in the cycle. The result is a unified design, not just a jumble of little unconnected scenes.

Iconographically, the San Marco creation cycle is exciting because, although it was created in the thirteenth century, it is based on much earlier works of art. A fifth- or sixth-century Byzantine manuscript³ (which, unfortunately, survives only in fragments) contains scenes so similar to those in San Marco that it is entirely possible that the mosaic artist in Venice depended for his model on some other mosaic or even on a manuscript dating back to a sixth-century emphasis on the Sabbath.

Cesare da Sesto, a sixteenth-century painter generally considered to have been a pupil of Leonardo da Vinci, merges traditional medieval symbolism with Renaissance ebullience in his depiction of the creation Sabbath. In a Milan fresco (p. 30), he employs the Renaissance techniques of overlapping, naturalistic figures and carefully foreshortened haloes. However, he uses the same general pose used by artists throughout the Middle Ages to depict Christ — complete with the great mandorla, or almond-shaped glory. While new artistic devices have been adopted, the fresco continues to portray God in a courtly setting, surrounded by angels, holding His orb of creation.

The grandeur of the creation Sabbath continues as a motif in the nineteenth century. Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld, a dramatic, romantic painter, was famous for his great illustrated German Bible, published in his native Leipzig. He traveled to Rome in 1812 to share some of the ideas of the Nazarene painters (German expatriates who were the counterparts of the English Pre-Raphaelites), and visited Sicily in 1826. While there, he must have seen the powerful Byzantine mosaics of Christ in Monreale Cathedral, for the God of "Der Sabbath" (p. 30) reflects a

Byzantine weight and grandeur. But with the traditional angels and the vigorous mandorla come a new mystery in the shaded eyes and massive knees. Here God, by his beard and wrinkles, is Father of all living things. Schnorr's romantic spirit is drawn to depicting God as some massive spirit brooding over his creation.

A twentieth-century German artist, Ernst Barlach, entirely abandons the figure of God as a monarchical figure. His woodcut (p. 29) portrays a figure resting from his activities, almost a part of His creation, rather than elevated above it. Still, Barlach continues some emphases found in the earliest Byzantine art of the Sabbath. The parallels between the "Seventh Day of Creation" and particularly the Palermo mosaic are interesting. As in the earlier work, Barlach's God figure is reclining. The two designs also share interesting limitations imposed by the materials used. The mosaicist, working in tesserae (small pieces of marble, tile and glass), and Barlach, with his woodblock, were both forced to emphasize lines and simple, flat shapes, rather than subtle variations in tone. There is very little illusion of space in either work. Instead, in both the mosaic and the woodcut, texture is important. The many pieces of the mosaic refract the light of creation, while the bold strokes gouged out of the wood block suggest a powerful Creator, even a Rock of Ages.

Twentieth-century artists have often been interested in conveying their ideas through colors and shapes not associated directly with naturalistic representation, but abstracted from visual and understandable objects. By stating only red or blue, rather than by making a red dragon or a blue lake, a painter can approach the freedom of music. Like music, many twentieth-century art works often use widely known symbols to convey ideas. John Coburn's tapestry (p. 34) is rich in such symbolism. It is the seventh of a set of richly colored wall-hangings designed by this Sydney artist and given to the John F. Kennedy Center by the government of Australia.⁴ Mr. Coburn says that he "thought of the seventh day as a day of grand achievement rather than

as a day of rest.” The other tapestries in the cycle portray age-old symbols — the sphere of eternity, the square which represents the earth, or earthly existence, the cross of Christ’s sacrifice and the tree of life. The colors are vivid and clean — brown for the earth, green for the trees, red-orange for flames and leaves and red-blooded animals. Perhaps Coburn does not intend all these meanings. However, “The Seventh Day” does reflect the great black-framed mandorla, or almond-aureole of Christ. It dominates a kind of psalm that includes, against seven bands of background color, the light and the dark, encircled by the sphere of eternity and rising above a chalice that is both an offering on the altar of life and a cup of oil for flames that are the source of everlasting light. Other religions worshiped the sun, but Jews and Sabbatarian Christians worship God who created light before he made the sun.

“The Seventh Day,” the work of the Seventh-day Adventist artist Ken MacKintosh, is reproduced on the cover of this special issue. It is the seventh and culminating

“The vivid colors of ‘The Seventh Day’ suggest joy and celebration, while its vertical thrust depicts God’s presence.”

piece of MacKintosh’s creation cycle, “In the Beginning God” This magnificent mosaic mural of Byzantine smalti tile dominates the foyer of the Fine Arts Center at Walla Walla College. It reflects MacKintosh’s emphasis on design and color and his concern with Christian symbolism. In seven vignette shapes, the mural develops the symbols for each day of creation week, from chaos to the rest and thanksgiving of the Sabbath. The vivid colors of “The Seventh Day” suggest joy and celebration, while its vertical thrust depicts God’s presence. The praying hands symbolize the sanctity of the Sabbath, while its continuity as a day of worship is represented by the Hebrew “Star of David” and the adjacent Christian cross shaded into the tiles. The mural portrays the

trinitarian symbolism also reflected in MacKintosh’s wood engraving, “The Sabbath” (p. 35). The star-burst at the top represents God the Father; a descending dove, the Holy Spirit; a sacrificial lamb, Christ himself. Both the mosaic and the wood engraving are powerful artistic statements of the Sabbath’s holiness, its eternity and its centrality to redemption.

In the history of Christian art, Christ’s ministry on the Sabbath does not receive as much attention as the Sabbath of creation, but some significant actions of Christ on Sabbath have been recreated. The two examples in this portfolio make the Sabbath immediate to the lives of believers. In both instances, Christ’s Sabbath actions are set within the period and place of the artist and his fellow-Christians.

The Byzantine mosaic depicting Christ healing a crippled woman on the Sabbath and then justifying his act to the rulers of the synagogue places Christ in the midst of Byzantine architecture (p. 35).⁵ The seventeenth-century Flemish portrayal of Christ and His disciples confronting the Pharisees concerning the plucking of grain on the Sabbath is set in a Flemish farming scene (pp. 32–33).⁶ In the field, harvesters scythe the grain. On the left, a horse-drawn cart laden with oats or wheat is brought into a farmyard. The painter, Martin Van Valckenborch, famous for his landscapes, economically combines two scenes in one picture. The painting acts as both a lesson about Christ and as a decorative *genre* scene, a landscape with harvesters. It is further a reminder that Jesus, the Lord of the Sabbath, is also ruler of the seasons. The central oak tree is a symbol of Christ and His strength.

On the Lord’s Day, Christ appeared in vision to John on the island of Patmos, thus symbolically blessing the Sabbath at the end of the Bible with his last words, just as he had blessed the Sabbath in the beginning.⁷ Our portfolio ends (p. 36) with two visualizations of that scene that is described in the first chapter of Revelation. The first is a simple medieval illumination from an apocalypse cycle, popular from the twelfth through the fifteenth centuries. It appears crude but is instructive for modern viewers. Among charm-

ing little birds, a mouse, a boat and several bean-shaped islands, John dreams on a token Patmos, wearing his halo and looking rather uncomfortable. Representing the “great voice, as of a trumpet” comes an angel, hovering over John in the sky. Above the Evangelist floats a long scroll, and on it a long speech in Latin from Revelation 1:9-11: “I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s Day” The angel’s message is written upside down:

“What thou seest write in a book and send it unto the seven churches” (Rev. 1:11). The second portrayal of John’s vision is taken from Schnorr von Carolsfeld’s great *Bible in Pictures* (cf. p. 30). Here Christ, as described by John (Rev. 1:12-16), comes in Schnorr’s grand manner to the Revelator. He fills the sky of John’s vision, and watches as the apostle scribbles as though his pen were winged, rather than made of a single feather.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. I used three major sources of art information. *The Princeton Index of Christian Art* (I used the copy of the Index at Harvard University’s Dumbarton Oaks Library in Washington, D.C.) is limited to the collection of early Christian and medieval representations of Christian subjects. The Prints Division of the New York Public Library is a valuable source of Bibles from the era of the printed book. And the Frick Art Reference Library in New York City indexes works of art from the early Renaissance to the beginning of this century, but, of course, does not claim to specialize in biblical iconography. It therefore leaves the researcher of the more obscure Christian imagery somewhat at his or her own devices. Obviously, this topic in art history remains wide open for further research.

2. Various quite exciting pieces of sculpture and stained glass simply could not be photographed; and insuperable problems prevented my including in the portfolio an interesting 14th C. MS from the British Library (Add. MS 15277, fol. 40v) illustrating Moses’ dealings with the Sabbathbreaker (Num. 15:32-36).

3. British Library MS Otho B. vi.

4. The tapestries were woven by the Aubusson workshops in France in 1970. John Coburn has exhibited his work very widely, not only in Australia, but also in the Americas, Europe and Japan. He has been interested in religious subjects for a long time and has won prizes specially designated for religious art.

5. Luke 13:11-17.

6. This is described by Matthew in Chapter 12, verses 1-8. The Kunsthistorisches Museum calls this painting, which is part of a set depicting the months of the calendar, *Das Gleichnis von Sabbat* — The Parable of the Sabbath.

7. Many interpretations of the “Lord’s Day” have been advanced. Some have even said that the Revelator meant that his vision came on Caesar’s day. More typically, it has been claimed as having taken place on the divinely appointed day of worship by both those who observe the Sabbath on the seventh day of the week and those who worship on the first. Both of the more widespread viewpoints obviously identify the Lord’s Day with God’s holy Sabbath.

The Art of the Sabbath

Page 29, upper
Unknown artist
The Seventh Day of Creation
Mosaic, 12th century
Capella Palatina, Palermo
Photo: Alinari/Scala

Page 29, lower
Ernst Barlach
The Seventh Day of Creation
Woodcut, early 20th century
Rembrandt Verlag, Berlin

Page 30, upper
Cesare da Sesto
Christ in Glory
Fresco, c. 1520
Civic Art Gallery, Milan
Photo: Alinari/Scala

Page 30, lower
Schnorr von Carolsfeld
The Sabbath
Wood engraving
from *Die Bibel in Bildern*
Prints Division, New York
Public Library
Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations

Page 31
Unknown artist
God Blesses the Seventh Day of Creation
Mosaic, 13th century
San Marco, Venice
Photo: Greg Constantine

Pages 32-33
Martin van Valckenborch
The Month of August
(Christ encounters the Pharisees in a cornfield)
Painting, 16th/17th century
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

Page 34
John Coburn
The Seventh Day of Creation
Tapestry, 1969/1970
Kennedy Center for the Performing
Arts, Washington, D.C.
Photo: Charles Feise

Page 35, upper
Ken MacKintosh
The Sabbath
Wood engraving, 1973

Page 35, lower
Unknown artist
Christ Heals a Crippled Woman
Mosaic, 12th century
Cathedral of Monreale, Sicily
Photo: Alinari/Scala

Page 36, upper
Unknown artist
St. John’s Vision on Patmos
Manuscript illustration, 13th century
MS Tanner 184, p. 1
Bodleian Library, Oxford

Page 36, lower
Schnorr von Carolsfeld
The Revelation of Christ to John
Wood engraving
from *Die Bibel in Bildern*
Prints Division, New York
Public Library
Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations







AVGVSTVS
MAT. CAP. 12



S. MAT
CAP. 12







