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NT630
Early Christian Art: First through the Sixth Centuries
Summer School 2026
July 20 - 24, 2026

INSTRUCTOR:

Dr. Nicola E. Hayward
Email: nhayward@vst.edu

PREREQUISITES:

none

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

This course introduces the visual culture of early Christianity, and will examine how images, objects, and architectural spaces shaped religious belief and practice from the first through the sixth centuries CE. Using a variety of interpretive lenses, students will analyse artworks within their historical, theological and social contexts, attending to questions of ritual, identity, memory and power. The course invites students to consider how early Christian visual practices can inform contemporary teaching, worship, and congregational life.

LEARNING OUTCOMES:

- Students will learn to recognize, read and analyse the symbolic works of art discussed in the class.
- Students will learn to think critically and comparatively regarding early Christian art, especially in relation to the written text.
- Students will learn how historical events impacted art.
- Students will learn a range of vocabulary needed to analyse and read art in various periods.

REQUIRED READINGS:

Charles-Murray, Mary. "The Emergence of Early Christian Art." Pages 51-62 in *Picturing the Bible*:

The Earliest Christian Art. Edited by Jeffrey Spier, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007. (Day 2)

Cormack, Robin. *Byzantine Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. (Day 5)

Deliyannis, Deborah Mauskopf, "The Mosaics of Ravenna." Pages 347-363 in *The Routledge Handbook of Early Christian Art*. Edited by Robin M. Jensen and Mark D. Ellison, NY: Routledge, 2018. (Day 5)

Elsner, Jas. *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph: The Art of the Roman Empire AD 100-450*. Oxford; Oxford University Press, 1998. (Day 2)

Fine, Steven. "Jewish Art and Biblical Exegesis in the Greco-Roman World." Pages 25-49 in *Picturing the Bible: The Earliest Christian Art*. Edited by Jeffrey Spier, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007. (Day 1)

Herrin, Judith. *Unrivalled Influence: Women and Empire in Byzantium*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013. (Day 5)

Kessler Herbert L. "The Word Made Flesh in the Early Decorated Bibles." Pages 141-168 in *Picturing the Bible: The Earliest Christian Art*. Edited by Jeffrey Spier, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007. (Day 5)

Letherbury, Sean V. "Christian Wall Mosaics and the Creation of Sacred Space." Pages 86-103 in

The Routledge Handbook of Early Christian Art. Edited by Robin M. Jensen and Mark D. Ellison, NY: Routledge, 2018. (Day 5)

Lidova, Maria. "From Shepherd to God: Images of Christ in the Fourth Century," in *The Recruiting*

Power of Christianity: Rise of the Religion in the Material Culture of Fourth-Century Rome and its Echo in History, eds., Sible de Blaauw, Eric M. Mooremann and Daniëlle Sloopjes. *Papers of the Royal Netherlands Institute of Rome*, Vol. 68 (2001): 89-106. (Day 3)

James, Liz. "Colour and Meaning in Byzantium." *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 2, Summer (2002): 223-233. (Day 4)

_____ *Mosaics, Empresses and Other Things in Byzantium: Art and Culture 330-1453.*

London:

Routledge, 2025. (Day 5)

Jensen, Robin M. *Understanding Early Christian Art.* London: Routledge, 2000. (Day 1)

_____ *Face to Face: Portraits of the Divine in Early Christianity.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005.

(Day 3)

_____ "The Object of Our Gaze: Visual Perception as a Mode of Knowing." Pages 466-483 in

The Intellectual World of Late Antique Christianity: Reshaping Classical Traditions. Edited by Lewis Ayres, Michael W. Champion and Matthew R. Crawford, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. (Day 4)

Nygren, Christopher J. "Graphic Exegesis: Reflecting on the Difficulty of Talking about Biblical Images, Pictures, and Texts." Pages 271-302 in *The Art of Visual Exegesis: Rhetoric, Texts, Images.* Edited by Vernon K. Robbins, Walter S. Melion, and Roy R. Jeal. Atlanta, Georgia: SBL Press, 2017. (Day 1)

Peppard, Michael. "Early Christian Art and Ritual." Pages 275-289 in *The Routledge Handbook of*

Early Christian Art. Edited by Robin M. Jensen and Mark D. Ellison, NY: Routledge, 2018. (Day 2)

Platt, Verity. *Facing the Gods: Epiphany and Representation in Graeco-Roman Art, Literature and Religion.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. (Day 3)

Maier, Harry. O. "Roman imperial iconography and the social construction of early Christian identity," *Consensus*, Vol. 33, Iss. 1 (2008): 59-71. (Day 2)

Miles, Margret. *Image as Insight: Visual Understanding in Western Christianity and Secular Culture.* Boston: Beacon Press, 1985. (Day 1)

Sharrock, Alison R. "Looking at Looking: Can You Resist a Reading?" Pages 265-295 in *The Roman Gaze: Vision, Power, and the Body.* Edited by David Fredrick, Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 2002. (Day 4)

Walsh, Robyn Faith. "The Mouse of the Mysteries," *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus*,

Vol. 22, Iss. 3 (2024): 219-236*. (Day 1)

Zimmerman, Nobert. "Catacomb Painting and the Rise of Christian Iconography in Funerary Art." Pages 21-28 in *The Routledge Handbook of Early Christian Art*. Edited by Robin M. Jensen and Mark D. Ellison, NY: Routledge, 2018. (Day 2)

ASSIGNMENTS:

- Attendance (100%) in accordance with VST policies.
- Thoughtful, engaged participation in class discussion and activities.
- Completion of all assigned readings *before* the designated class.

For Certificate-level students:

- One 1000-1500 word research paper demonstrating mastery of the course material and engagement with it. Due August 15th, 2026.

For Basic-level students; 1.5 credits – level 600 (MATS, M.Div, MAPPL, MAIIS):

- One 1850-3000 word research paper on the topic of the student's choice, demonstrating engagement with course material, historical sources, and 10-15 primary sources beyond the course reading. Due August 15th, 2026.

For Advanced-level students; 1.5 credits (Th.M., GDTS):

- A 3000-3750 word research paper on the topic of the student's choice, demonstrating engagement with course material, historical sources, and 15-20 primary sources beyond the course reading. Due September 14th, 2026.

For Directed Studies; 3 credits:

- A 6000 word research paper (roughly 24 pages) on the topic of the student's choice, demonstrating engagement with course material, historical sources, and 15-20 primary sources beyond the course reading. Due September 14th, 2026.

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COURSE OUTLINE:**July 20, Mon – First Century and Second Century**

- Introduction to the course – syllabus; methodological considerations; importance of texts and images.
- Readings: Margaret R. Miles, *Image as Insight*, 1-13; Robin M. Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, 32-62; Christopher J. Nygren, "Graphic Exegesis: Reflections on the Difficulty of Talking about Biblical Images, Pictures, and Text," 271-302; Steven Fine, "Jewish Art and Biblical Exegesis in the Greco-Roman World," 25-49; Robyn Faith Walsh, "The Mouse of the Mysteries," 1-18. (5 articles/chpts)

July 21, Tuesday - Third Century

- We will examine the significance of Roman and Jewish art for early Christian art.

- Readings: Jás Elsner, *Imperial Rome and Christian Triumph*, 1-23; Nobert Zimmerman, "Catacomb Painting and the Rise of Christian Iconography in Funerary Art," 21-38; Harry O. Maier, "Roman imperial iconography and the social construction of early Christian identity," 59-71; Michael Peppard, "Early Christian Art and Ritual," 275-289; Mary Charles-Murray, "The Emergence of Early Christian Art," 51-62; (6 articles/chpts)

July 22, Wed – Fourth Century

- We will examine the visual evolution of Jesus.
- Readings: Maria Lidova, "From Shepherd to God: Images of Christ in the Fourth Century," 89-106; Robin M. Jensen, *Face to Face: Portraits of the Divine in Early Christianity*, 101-172; Verity Platt, *Facing the Gods: Epiphany and Representation in Graeco-Roman Art, Literature and Religion*, 1-27. (4 articles/chpts)

July 23, Thurs – Fifth Century

- Creation of sacred space
- Readings: Sean V. Letherbury, "Christian Wall Mosaics and the Creation of Sacred Space," 86-103; Alison R. Sharrock, "Looking at Looking: Can You Resist a Reading?" 265-295; Liz James, "Colour and Meaning in Byzantium," 223-233; Robin M. Jensen, "The Object of Our Gaze: Visual Perception as a Mode of Knowing," 466-483. (4 articles/chpts)

July 24, Fri – Sixth Century

- Byzantine period
- Readings: Deborah Mauskopf Deliyannis, "The Mosaics of Ravenna," 347-363; Liz James, *Mosaics, Empresses and Other Things in Byzantium: Art and Culture 330-1453*, 192-207; Robin Cormack, *Byzantine Art*, 1-35; Judith Herrin, *Unrivalled Influence: Women and Empire in Byzantium*, 39-79; Herbert L. Kessler, "The Word Made Flesh in the Early Decorated Bibles," 141-168. (5 articles/chpts)