THE IMAGE OF CHRIST

English

NOT-MADE-BY-HUMAN-HANDS

The Abgar-Icon or The Mandylion

Another tradition of early images of Christ derives from the Abgar legend: According to this popular myth, the Mesopotamian King Abgar V. Ukamma of Edessa (today Şanlıurfa, Turkey), afflicted with leprosy, is said to have written to Christ with the request to visit him and heal him. Christ replied that he would send one of his disciples to Abgar after his Ascension. After having been healed miraculously, Abgar converted to Christianism and founded the first Christian kingdom.

In later versions of the legend, we are told that the messenger sent by Abgar painted a picture of Christ. Another myth reports that this attempt failed, because the painter was unable to reproduce the face of the Savior. Jesus then wettened his face and pressed it into a cloth, in which it was permanently imprinted. This „true image" could be handed over to Abgar and brought about his healing.

However the picture may have been created, it is said to have remained in Edessa until the 10th century and then came to Constantinople, where it was verifiable until the siege of the city in 1204. In later times, Rome, Genoa and Paris claimed to own the Abgar Icon of Edessa.

In the tradition of the Eastern Churches, the image is called Mandylion (from Greek: μανδύλιον, „cloth" or „towel"). The group of images „not-made-by-human-hands" (Greek: *Acheiropoíeta*) did not fall under the Biblical prohibition against images and thus, avoided the controversial question of whether God's Son can be depicted. They were venerated as relics and became the first icons.

Abgar Icon

Anonymous
1st half of the 17th century
Oil on Canvas, mounted on wood

The small-format picture shows the face of Christ frontally, gazing at the viewer. An inscription explains its meaning: VERA IMAGO SALVATORIS D[OMINI] N[OSTRI] I[ESU] XPI [CHRISTI] AD REGEM ABGARUM MISSA (from Latin: „True image of our Saviour Jesus Christ, sent to King Abgar"). Unlike comparable pieces dating from this period, no information is given with regard to the location of the original. It is most likely the Abgar-Icon from the Poor Clares Monastery of San Silvestro in Capite in Rome, mentioned by the Oratorian Caesar Baronius in his History of the Church a few decades earlier, in 1588, and which was preciously restored in 1623 in the wake of remodelling the monastery church.

It is obvious that this image – today kept in the Vatican – became so well known that there was a demand for corresponding devotional pictures for private use. In fact, there are paintings which, according to their inscription, are explicitly created as copies of the image kept in Rome and correspond to the one shown here. The similarity of all these pictures to the original from San Silvestro can be seen above all in the zone of the eyes, the nose and the mouth. The differences

between the copies and the Roman Abgar-Icon (in the zone of the hair and the beard) are probably due to the condition of the heavily darkened original, parts of which were covered by a metal frame. Presumably, the copyists had to recreate it to a certain extent, and most of the replicas are probably based on such re-worked copies.

Museum am Dom, Inv.-Nr. M 706

Icon of Christ Mandylion

Anonymous
19th century
Tempera on Wood

The cloth with the face of Christ, held by two archangels, lies on a slightly recessed surface. Because of this particular design of the panel, icons are called „Windows to Eternity". Unlike comparable pieces, however, the two angels are not standing on the sides, but only their upper bodies are recognizable within the gussets above the cloth. This type of representation is considered typical of the Novgorod school of icon painting in the 16th century. Since much less artistic freedom is allowed in the making of icons than, for example, in Western European paintings, and the artists have to follow precise guidelines, it is difficult to determine the age of this artwork. It was probably created in the 19th century.

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Icon of Christ – The Grim Eye

Anonymous
19th century
Tempera on Wood

Because of Christ's stern gaze, this type of icon, known since the 14th century, is called „The Grim [Fiery] Eye". In contrast to the Holy Face images, which refer to the legendary traditions of the Sweat-Cloth of Veronica and the Abgar Icon, Christ is depicted here in bust portray style. This type is derived from the depiction of Christ as the Pantocrator, i.e. The Almighty or Ruler of the World, which originated in Byzantine art and was particularly widespread in the Romanesque period. However, these icons show him clearly reduced, without the right hand making a gesture of blessing and the book held in the left hand. In a certain sense, this icon type takes a kind of intermediate position between the representation of the Almighty Ruler of the World and the Holy Face Icons.

Museum am Dom, Inv.-Nr. M 707

Holy Face

Workshop of Albrecht Bouts
App. 1500
Oil on Wood

In its austerity and the strictly frontal depiction of the face of Christ, the painting is oriented towards the tradition of the images not-painted-by-human-hands. Unlike the Sudarium (from Latin: sweat-cloth) or the Abgar Icon resp. Mandylion, for example, it shows not merely the face, but also the neck and shoulders of Christ. Thus, we can here observe the step away from the image not-painted-by human-hands towards a portrait.

From the middle of the 15th century, the in Leuven established workshop of the Bouts, a family of painters, produced numerous images of Christ, which were primarily intended for personal devotion. Particularly widespread at the time were the motifs of the veneration of the Passion, but several examples of this austere „portrait" of Christ have also survived and must have enjoyed a certain popularity.

It is very likely that the production of a large number of such small-format devotional pictures for private use is connected with the *Devotio moderna*, a spiritual renewal movement that relied heavily on the believer's personal connection to God.

The museum has a counterpart to this painting, a depiction of The Praying Mary, which possibly originated from another workshop. Whether the two paintings were originally framed as a diptych, like other examples, is unknown.

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SUDARIUM OF VERONICA

The Vera Icon

One of the images not-painted-by-hands is the cloth that was given to Christ by a woman on the way to the crucifixion, on which his face miraculously appeared after he had wiped his blood and sweat with it.

This is also a legendary tradition: A woman mentioned in the Gospels, who was healed of bleeding by touching Christ's robe, was given the Greek name Berenice in the Acta Pilati, dating from the 4th century. Its Latin form Veronica is a Greek-Latin blend word of vera („true" and the Greek Εικών ikon „image". In a further development of the motif, Veronica was linked to the story of the sweat-cloth (Latin: „Sudarium"), on which the face of Christ appeared, and finally, the road to Golgotha was established as the scene of the event. Thus, the incident with the sweat-cloth became the Sixth Station of the Cross. Veronica is also said to have taken the cloth to Rome, where the Emperor was healed by it.

Initially, Christ was depicted on the cloth in an idealized way. In the second half of the 15th century, a particularly intense preoccupation with the Passion of Christ, the veneration of his wounds and the Holy Blood began. The sweat cloth was then seen more as part of the Passion story and Christ's head was depicted on the cloth covered in blood and wearing a crown of thorns.

Christ with Crown of Thorns

Sudarium of Veronica
Maatschappij Dukkerij Bogaerts, Vucht (Holland)
Peinture Bogerts: Oleography on canvas after Franz Ittenbach
(1813 – 1879) | after 1876

The thorn-crowned, blood-covered head of Christ is shown against a background whose grey-brownish colour suggests an unfolded cloth.

Like a weaving pattern, two inscriptions can be seen in the painted textile: Populo meus, quid feci tibi? / Aut in quo contristavi te? / Responde mihi. („My people, what have I done to you? With what have I offended you? Answer me!"), and below: Ego dedi tibi sceptrum / regale et tu dedisti capiti / meo spineam coronam. („I gave you a royal sceptre, but you gave me a crown of thorns.")

These are quotations from the „Reproaches". They are part of the Good Friday liturgy. The deeds of Christ for his people are contrasted with the mockery and mistreatment committed against him. They are sung during the Veneration of the Cross – and it is therefore no coincidence that the folds of the painted cloth form a cross. Probably for the sake of this symbolism, Ittenbach chose not to show the fabric hanging freely in its usual form but instead suggested a cloth lying flat or actually framed.

In the painted textile, to the right and left of the head, a pelican can be seen, too, opening its chest to nourish its breed with its own blood, a symbol of Christ giving his life to save his people.

The painter Franz Ittenbach belonged to the Nazarenes, a group of early 19th century young German painters who strove for a revival of the spiritual values

of Christian art. Due to the technical developments of the following decades, their works could be reproduced in large numbers and achieved enormous popularity that lasted well into the 20th century, before they were dismissed as kitsch – an assessment that is probably unjustified in view of the sophisticated symbolism of this painting.

The printing process of this reproduction of the painting from 1876, a lithograph executed with oil paints, was cheaper than a painted copy, but came surprisingly close to an original – so close that it was already criticized as a fraud at the time. The reproduced Ittenbach picture must have been very popular, as copies still appear on the art market today.

Bischöflicher Stuhl, Inv.-Nr. Biho 60

Master: Sudarium of Veronica

Flemish Anonymous Master
1550
oil on wood (parqueted)

Many of the depictions of the Sweat-Cloth that have been widespread since the 15th century show a standing Veronica holding the Shroud in front of her and presenting it to the viewer. In this painting, however, only the cloth itself is shown, albeit with the typical folds that form when it is hold.

Nevertheless, what is striking, is Christ's gaze, which is not distorted by pain or dejection, but looks directly at the viewer. This is probably also the reason why the painter concentrated on the cloth and did not even include the holding hands of the saint into the picture. In this way, the viewer can concentrate entirely on the eyes of the tortured Saviour and man, who seems to be looking onto the beholder's gaze.

Nicholas of Cusa commented on this type of picture and on the fact that painters succeeded in painting a picture in such a way that the gaze of Christ seems to follow the viewer, regardless of the latter's spatial position: „If I strive to convey you by human means unto divine things, then I must do this through a likeness. Now, among the human works, I have not found an image more suitable to our purpose than the image of someone omnivoyant, so that his face, through subtle pictorial artistry, is such that it seems to behold everything around it. There are in existence many of these excellently depicted faces […], e.g. the one of the Veronica [i.e. the Image of Christ] in my chapel at Coblenz […]. It contains the figure of an Omnivoyant (or the All-seeing God); and I call it the „Icon of God. Hang this Icon somewhere, e.g., on the north wall; and you brothers stand around it, at a short distance from it, and observe it. Regardless of the place from which each of you looks at it, each will have the impression that he alone is being looked at by it." (Nicholas of Cusa: „De Visione Dei", c. 1453)

Similar to the picture mentioned by Cusanus, this painting may also have served private devotion in a chapel room.

Museum am Dom, Inv.-Nr. M 547

A HANDSOME MAN

The Epistle of Lentulus

„A medium-sized man of stately figure and venerable appearance, so that those who see him must both love and fear him. His hair is the colour of a ripe hazelnut, almost straight to the ears, from there a little curled, downwards flowing over his shoulders and parted in the middle according to the custom of the Nazarenes. His forehead is open and smooth, his face without spots or wrinkles, beautiful, of a lovely red. The nose and mouth are shaped in such a way that there is nothing to blame about them. His beard is abundant, in colour matching his hair, not long, but divided at the chin. His eyes are blue-grey, clear and lively. His stature is straight, his hands and arms are well proportioned. He is terrible in his reproaches, but sweet and amiable in his admonitions, in his speech moderate, wise and modest, mingled with dignity. No one can remember seeing him laugh, but many saw him cry. A man who surpasses the children of men by peculiar beauty."

This is a letter purportedly written to the Roman Senate by a certain Publius Lentulus, who is said to have been Proconsul in Judea in the lifetime of Christ. In fact, it is a fictional source, the first traces of which appeared in the 14th century, incorporated in Ludolph of Saxony's „Life of Christ". In the work of the Carthusian monk, the external appearance of the Saviour is described in a very similar way, though without attribution to Lentulus.

In the 15th/16th century, the narrative description was given its final form as a letter by an alleged eyewitness. Although the first doubts about its authenticity already arose at this time, the letter continued to serve as a template and orientation for depictions of Christ.

Since then, the standards for portraying Christ have established themselves independently of the text. Last but not least, Christ thus acquired a rather Central European appearance, even if most painters turned his blue-grey eyes brown. The half-long parted hair and the divided beard – actually corresponding to the prevailing fashion at the time of the creation of the epistle in the 16th century – have survived to the present day.

Christ after the Lentulus Epistle

Anonymous
1558
Oil on Wood

The anonymous painting shows Christ in strict profile, following a common type of „visualization" of the Lentulus text that was widespread in the 16th century. Presumably, this was stimulated by true ancient coin portraits or gems that were seen as suitable for the alleged „ancient" text. For example, a woodcut by Hans Burgkmair the Elder, from 1511, intended as an illustration for a print of the entire Lentulus-Letter, shows Christ as a medallion.

The painter of this work, which was created a few decades later, only added a short inscription (THIS PICTURE OF CHRIST / HAS BEEN PAINTED / AS DESCRIBED BY LENTULUS / AND SENT TO THE SENATE OF ROME / FROM THE CITY OF JERUSALEM), which can be traced in almost identical wording on prints. The words were probably intended to underline the special authority of this picture and emphasize its authenticity.

A red line visible at the bottom of the picture and explained by another inscription complements the „true" image of Christ with another, even more concrete indication: *„His length is this line ten times"*. This refers to the height of Christ, who is therefore 185 cm tall.

The same Carthusian Ludolf of Saxony, who described Christ in the 14th century, also devoted himself to the question of the size of Christ's cross, from which one wanted to deduce the height of the crucified Christ. In other Late Medieval manuscripts, such length scales can also be found regarding the inscription plates attached to the Cross or popular saints.

The idea that salvation was conveyed with the aid of such miraculous measures finally led to the fact that paper strips printed with supplications or blessings and corresponding to the length of the supposed height of Christ's body, were rolled up and carried by the faithful as a kind of amulet to protect them from a particular danger. The exhibition displays an example from the 18th century, the condition of which shows that it was really used. Even though the church condemned this custom early as superstitious, such „Holy Lengths" are said to still have been printed around 1900.

Museum am Dom, Inv.-Nr. M 528

Christ after Annibale Carracci

Anonym
1770/80 (?)
Oil on doubled Canvas

Although this representation of Christ, with his curly hair and beard, is obviously also inspired by the tradition of the Lentulus Epistle, the portray does not show Christ in strict profile but attentively looking at the viewer. The bright eyes dominate the face almost defiantly. A faint glow in the background around the upper part of the head indicates a nimbus, without clearly depicting it. All other attributes are omitted, the emphasis is on the expression of the face and the characterization as a man „of very venerable appearance, so that those who see him must both love and fear him." The depiction is kept in a liminal state by portraying Christ – following the description of the letter – as a contemporary person, without overlooking his divine nature.

The work is a copy of a painting by Annibale Carracci (1560–1609), which was in the possession of the Elector of Saxony in Dresden and has been lost since 1945. The small format (which corresponds to the size of the copy) and the concentration of the portray of Christ suggest that it was originally intended as a private devotional picture. Perhaps it was precisely the renunciation of any drama and the emphasis on the characteristic features of the man Jesus that aroused interest in this painting in the last third of the 18th century, in the Age of Enlightenment: There are various prints and several painted copies from this period (including those by the famous Dresden court painter Anton Graff (1736–1813), and it is possible that the Trier copy also dates from this period.

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