

INTRODUCTION

But what does this image mean?

Long before I studied art history, I gazed at ancient Christian art and asked this question. Although an editor and writer by profession, I migrated toward art, visiting museums while traveling and taking advantage of exhibits in my hometown. I bounded up the steps at the Art Institute of Chicago and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, looked at every painting and sculpture possible, and eventually wound up stumped.

As I shifted back and forth on throbbing feet, pondering a famous medieval triptych or Renaissance tapestry, I identified a few biblical figures or something as obvious as a unicorn. Flowers, animals, symbols, liturgical objects, and odd people crammed backgrounds and spilled into borders. But if the curator hadn't posted their meanings, these images seemed as good as invisible.

Still, I didn't lose interest in Christian art. I considered it my religious heritage—something that could enrich me spiritually—and I wanted to decipher it. Over the years I began studying art history, one class at a time, and when I reached early Christian and medieval art, my soul shifted. As the professor's slide show illuminated a dark classroom, I envisioned God's creative hand hovering above history, imprinting the world through artists and their works. With a sprinkling of symbology, Christian art finally blossomed for me. I longed to learn more. I also wanted to infiltrate aspects of Christian art into my writing, helping the curious to better understand this faith's visual metaphors. Perhaps as it did for me, deciphering sacred art would sharpen their spiritual outlook and deepen their understanding of church history.

Over time I earned a master's degree in art history and began teaching the subject part-time at a local university, focusing mainly on early Christian and medieval art. In these classes students learned the forms of Christian art, along with how to identify its eras, themes, and stories; to interpret its symbolism; and to analyze specific works. I needed an easy-to-read reference book that would guide students through these processes. But even more, I wanted a book that travelers, art enthusiasts, museum visitors, church parishioners, and others could easily carry and consult. Besides unraveling symbolism, it could enhance faith, heighten worship, and perhaps cultivate a few armchair art historians.

After much thought and a few excuses, I decided to combine my roles of seasoned professional writer and modest art historian and create *The Art of Faith*. I grew passionate about developing a guidebook with an accessible writing style and length that most anyone could use to learn the basics—or supplement formal studies—about the wonders of Christian art from its inception through the Baroque era.

Even if you're not an art fan, *The Art of Faith* can help you better understand the Christian heritage. Early Christians were called People of the Book. But they also were People of the Image. Art played an important role in spreading, communicating, and commemorating their faith. Exploring Christian art can influence your life, too.—*Judith Couchman*

Note: I kept this book as reader-friendly as possible, especially for students and those new to the study of art history. Consequently, you won't find the usual style conventions for scholarly art books and textbooks. For example, I fully cited the locations for works of art, including cities, states, regions, and countries, as needed. As much as possible, I also presented the common and English names of churches, galleries, libraries, museums, and other exhibitors.