

Art beyond the real world

The Romans dominated Europe for almost 1,000 years (500BC - AD500). In art, they were influenced by the Greeks, who were absorbed into their empire. The Romans admired and copied Greek sculptures and techniques. In fact, many Greek sculptures were destroyed at the end of the Classical age, and are now known only from Roman copies which lasted well because they were made of stone instead of bronze. But whereas the Greeks only sculpted idealized or mythical figures, the Romans also wanted to create lifelike portraits of real people. So Roman portraits show faces with expressive features and individual details, such as wrinkles and other details.

The Roman empire had been split in two at the end of the 4th century. The eastern part became known as the **Byzantine empire**, after the old name of its capital, Byzantium (now Istanbul, in Turkey), and its art is known as Byzantine art. This empire outlasted the western empire by a thousand years.

Christianity became the official religion of the Roman empire in the 4th century, and Christian themes were common in Byzantine art. Interest in religion made artists more concerned with the spirit and less with what things looked like. They thought it was more important to create symbols of religious experience than to show natural-looking scenes. Once again symbolic representation took over lifelike art. Figures have big, soulful eyes and contemplative expressions, to show their spiritual nature. Even though the representation of space and its depth tends to turn into shallow plain background, artists still used realistic techniques such as shading, as the Romans had done.

At that time, few people could read, so big pictures on the church walls were used to tell and they had to be easy to understand. Simplified outlines and strong colours were used to focus attention, a bit like a modern comic strip.

Brilliantly coloured, shiny **mosaics** were used to decorate Byzantine churches. Mosaic pictures are made up of tiny pieces of glass or stone; a large mosaic can contain several million pieces. The pieces were all set at slightly different angles, so they would reflect light from different directions and create a shimmering effect.

With the growth of Christianity, richly decorated images of religious figures, known as **icons**, became popular. But these led to arguments about art among church leaders. Some thought images could help teach religion. Others believed icons were idols, or false gods, and wanted to destroy them. These people were known as **iconoclasts**, which means 'image-smashers'.

Iconography is the branch of art history which studies the identification, description, and the interpretation of the content of images: the subjects depicted, the particular compositions and details used to do so, and other elements that are distinct from artistic style. The word iconography comes from the Greek εἰκών ("image") and γράφειν ("to write"). In art history, "an iconography" may also mean a particular depiction of a subject in terms of the content of the image, such as the number of figures used, their placing and gestures.

Learn more on Byzantine art here: <http://smarthistory.khanacademy.org/byzantine-justinian.html>