

Research in Context

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Question 5: From the lens-based image making research strand lectures, choose a theme, movement, or selection of artists that relate to your practice or interests, and construct a 2,500-word essay. Critically assess primary themes, key writers, and relevant practitioners.

Illustrations List

- Figure 1. Anon., 4th century. *Christ between Sts Peter and Paul*. Fresco. The Catacombs of Marcellinus and Peter, Rome, Italy. <https://www.christianiconography.info/Wikimedia%20Commons/xPeterPaulCatacombs.html> (Accessed 10th November 2025).
- Figure 2. Anon., 5th century. *Jesus and His Apostles*. Fresco. Catacombs of St. Domitilla, Rome, Italy. <https://www.thehistoryblog.com/archives/47523> (Accessed 16th November 2025).
- Figure 3. Anon., 2nd century. *The Healing of the Paralytic*. Fresco. Dura-Europos, Syria. <https://silouanthompson.net/2008/11/healing-of-the-paralytic-dura-europos/> (Accessed 21st November 2025).
- Figure 4. Giotto di Bondone., 1303-1305. *Nativity*. Fresco. Scrovegni Chapel, Padua, Italy. <https://www.thehistoryofart.org/giotto/nativity/> (Accessed 22nd November 2025).
- Figure 5. Michelangelo., 1508-1512. *The Creation of Adam*. Fresco. Sistine Chapel, Vatican. <https://www.thesistinechapel.org/the-creation-of-adam> (Accessed 3rd December 2025).

This essay will explore the representation and impact of fresco paintings and how they have represented, depicted and explored Christ and Christendom. Themes of history, discovery, Christianity and importance. Artists include three anonymous, Giotto di Bondone and Michelangelo.

Christian art and iconography can be traced back to the late 2nd and early 3rd century. There have been eight distinct and major periods of Christian art through the ages, Medieval, Byzantine, Renaissance, Baroque, Rococo, Romanticism, Modern and Contemporary. Fresco paintings depicting Christ and Christendom were done in the 2nd and 3rd century making some of the oldest artworks of Christ, along with this some of the most popular and impactful Christian artworks are fresco paintings.

A Fresco is a mural painting technique where water-based paints are applied to freshly laid wet plaster with the pigment fusing with the plaster as it dries making the painting a permanent part of the wall, ceiling or floor. Dry frescoes have been found up to 15,000 years ago found in caves of France and Spain, "Some 15,000 years ago, frescoes were created in other caves in Lascaux, France, and Altamira, Spain. These early examples of fresco painting are testimony of the long and varied history of this art form." (Fresco Arte, 2025). Though what we currently associate most with frescoes are the wet frescoes that can be dated back to the Minoans on the island of Crete around 1500BC. Frescoes are predominantly seen within Roman society and art especially when depicting Christ. The impact on art that early frescoes had still lingers to this day as murals and mosaics are created and celebrated and have inspired whole mediums of art and have stood strong in a variety of different empires, cultures and nations in history.

One of the earliest Christian artworks named *Christ between Sts Peter and Paul*, is a fresco painting found in the Catacombs of Marcellinus and Peter in Rome.



Fig. 1

The mural is a Fresco from the 4th century; it depicts Saints Peter and Paul either side of Jesus Christ, Peter wearing a square beard and Paul a long beard and receding hairline, both wearing white togas. Christ is wearing a dark toga and wears a long beard, to the left of his halo is the symbol for Alpha and to the right the symbol for Omega of Revelation 1:8 "I am the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, saith the Lord God, who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty" (The Holy Bible, Revelation 1:8). The verse touches on God as eternal and all powerful, the source of purpose and all things, the beginning and the end. Below Christ, Peter and Paul are four martyrs Gorgonius, Peter, Marcellinus and Tiburtius, all wearing white togas and reaching their hands up and toward Jesus.

Christ between Sts Peter and Paul is one of the most impactful and important artworks to the Church and Christendom as a whole, it visually establishes the authority of Peter and Paul as leaders entrusted by Christ to spread Christian law and teaching. The Church of Christ was built on the two pillars of Peter and Paul, Peter's ecclesial authority and Paul's missionary zeal. Along with this the Frescoes and mosaics depicting Christ and the Apostles in the 2nd 3rd and 4th centuries are among the earliest depictions and artistic expressions of Christianity.



Fig. 2

Jesus and His Apostles is an early 5th century fresco painting found in the catacombs of St. Domitilla in Rome, Italy. The fresco depicts Christ on a throne among two groups of Apostles. A name written in charcoal spells BOSIO, this name was written as graffiti by an archaeologist Antonio Bosio in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. Antonio Bosio "was a Maltese scholar, the first systematic explorer of subterranean Rome and author of *Roma Sotterranea*." (Wikipedia, 2025.) The frescoes found in the catacombs of St. Domitilla created a tangible and historical link to the 2nd 3rd 4th and 5th centuries and gave us paintings of Biblical scenes, portraits of Saints and Apostles and depictions of Christ enthroned, finding paintings as old and well preserved as these carry significant weight to both the Christian world and the art world. These catacomb findings held historical significance in the content of the paintings and the paintings themselves, even the graffiti done by Bosio held its own

historical importance highlighting the first attempts of people exploring these ancient catacombs and discovering this art for the first time in hundreds of years.



Fig. 3

Found in 1921, *The Healing of the Paralytic* is believed to be the oldest painting of Jesus Christ. The fresco was found on a wall in the Duro-Europos church in Syria, the painting depicts Jesus Christ healing a bedridden man, who then gains the strength to carry his bed on his back and walk. While being the earliest painting of Jesus Christ it is also the earliest depiction of Christ's many miracles, the telling and depictions of Christ's miracles are a central point in Christianity and its teachings. While many more went unwritten, the Bible notes 37 distinct miracles performed by Christ. "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home. He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying we have never seen anything like this!" (The Holy Bible, Mark 2:11-12). *The Healing of the Paralytic* directly depicts and references the miracle performed by Christ in the book of Mark, chapter 2, verses 2-12 where Jesus returned to

Capernaum and was met with a crowd outside the house he was occupying, the crowd so large and dense four men carried and lowered a paralytic man through the roof, seeing the faith of these four men and the paralytic Jesus forgave the paralytic man of his sins and in front of skeptic religious scholars healed the man and had him walk out the house in view of everyone. Along with the theme and depiction of miracles, themes of Christian values and morality are shown by the passage and thus the fresco, the four men who made sure to bring the paralytic man before Christ despite the difficulty of doing so in face of a massive crowd and Christ being in an enclosed space highlight the theme of generosity and helping each other even if it may be to the detriment and exhaustion of yourself. Christianity itself is built on the self-sacrifice, kindness and determination in bettering a world of Christ himself, the disciples and those that have chosen to follow Christ and Christ's teachings which in turn highlights the importance of *The Healing of the Paralytic* and its depiction of scripture.

The importance and impact of fresco art itself cannot be understated and is still actively shaping and inspiring art today while contributing to the vast and incredible history of art. The durability and material of fresco art have allowed artists for centuries to create large scale and long-lasting artworks. Fresco paintings have been used to depict events, values and cultures for thousands of years, some of the most famous paintings are frescoes, the works on the Sistine Chapel ceiling, the *Apotheosis of Washington*, *Expulsion from the Garden of Eden*. Artists such as Michelangelo, Raphael, Giotto, Diego Rivera and many more have been seen, declared and revered as some of the greatest artists to ever live. Fresco paintings have defined an entire era of art history, the renaissance was a period of human history that is considered by many a golden age for art, science and literature, frescoes and sculptures in particular were favourites for artists during the renaissance and made up a great amount of the art produced and also a great amount of the best art during this period and even art considered the best in all of history.



Fig. 4

Nativity by Giotto is a famous fresco created during the renaissance, it depicts the Nativity, the birth of Christ in the manger in Bethlehem. The scene is part of a cycle of frescoes which depict the life of the Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ. At the top five angels can be seen hands clasped in prayer and worship, Mary and the baby Jesus lay upon a bed covered with a wooden canopy on which the Angels lay. To the left of the bed a woman helps to hold the baby Jesus and below her an Ox and Ass to represent the Old and New Testaments. Directly under Mary sits Joseph draped in a gold and white garment, to Joseph's right are seven goats and two men who look up at the angels atop the bed's canopy. Giotto di Bondone, an Italian painter and architect regarded as one of the first in a line of great artists to have contributed to the Italian renaissance, Giotto inspired by Byzantine art practices and methods built upon those methods to create paintings that look natural, real and "He made a decisive break with the Byzantine style, and brought life to the great art of painting as we know it today, introducing the technique of drawing accurately from life, which had been neglected for more than two hundred years." (Vasari, no date.). The depiction of the Nativity and the birth of Christ is especially important, the themes, incarnation, humility and hope though plentiful come second to the historical and religious importance. The Nativity not only symbolises but is God given flesh, the birth of the son of God and the beginning of the saving of humanities souls. Scenes depicting the birth of Christ and the Nativity are some of the most valued and sacred, whilst not being completely accurate and with Giotto taking small artistic liberties his depiction of the Nativity became not only the defining piece of art in his career and

that which could be most definitely attributed to him but also became an incredibly impactful piece of art to the Church and to artists throughout the Renaissance, marking the medieval era over and the era of cultural, artistic and scientific revolution and development to begin.



Fig. 5

Arguably the most famous fresco, and one of the most famous paintings ever created, Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam* located in the Sistine Chapel, Vatican depicts two figures, God on the right who is portrayed as elderly with grey and white hair and beard, adorning a white robe that clings closely to the body. "God is shown inside a floating nebulous form made up of drapery and other figures. The form is supported on angels who fly without wings, but whose flight is made clear by the drapery which whips out from underneath them." (*Italian Renaissance.org*, 2012., para. 1.). Depicted on the left is Adam naked, hand and arm limply outstretched in response to God, resting atop a hill of rock, dirt and grass. Both God and Adam are portrayed as semi muscular. This fresco in particular can be said to be the most important and impactful to the Church and Christendom, being a portrayal of Old Testament, *The Creation of Adam* and the creation of mankind/humanity. Very few Christian artworks through the ages have depicted God, as well as this many Christian artworks tend to depict acts from the New Testament rather than the old. Michelangelo's choice to represent God and scripture from the Old Testament made for a theologically impactful and public statement. Some of the main themes of such a work would be God's all-powerful creation of man, the beginning of worship to God and the inevitable first sin and need for the coming of Christ to wash away our sins in the New Testament. The creation of Adam was the beginning of Christian worship and belief in its long and complicated history. Having such a famous depiction of Old Testament helps bring to light the early books, writings and scripture of Christendom

as many in modern times only study and follow the New Testament whilst not fully understanding or knowing of the contexts and histories that dated before Christ's birth and death. "Before his death Michelangelo burned all of his notes, cartoons and other documentation that might have given us definitive answers about his art." (Bagdanov, 2022). While the meaning and interpretations of the Sistine Chapel frescoes aren't definitively known and perhaps will never be definitively known, personal interpretations and the Churches own interpretations of its meaning can come rather close to what Michelangelo intended. *The Creation of Adam* holds great impact to modern art in its influence and its technical ability. The frescoes of the Sistine Chapel have been referenced, repainted, parodied and reinterpreted amongst a vast array of different art practices and media. The symbolism of this fresco is universal and iconic, its attraction to pilgrims and tourists alike generate a sort of mythological feeling of the artworks, works that are said to be must see, jaw dropping and enlightening experiences. A great many articles, papers, blogs and posts dissecting the artwork have been published, some to figure its meaning, some to document and discuss its history and development and some to purely reflect on its theological implications. "The claim that Michelangelo is one of the greatest artists of all time, and a man whose name has become synonymous with the word 'masterpiece,' has been supported by this analysis of the 'Creation of Adam' fresco" (Porter, 2004). In Porter's analysis of *The Creation of Adam* he dissects the biography and history of both Michelangelo and the Sistine Chapel, then proceeding to analyse the artwork itself and its relation to Michelangelo, the Church and to the art world. This quote from Porter's conclusion is a small snippet of how the artwork and the artist is regarded in a number of published papers by institutes and universities.

Reference List

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