



St Luke and the Birth of Christian Art

I want to start with a reminder to ourselves: the church has a mission *to* art and a mission *in* art. I will not go into the two sides of this mission here, implied in my emphases. I will just say that this mission is easily forgotten in modernity, when there is a crisis in the meaning of art and some have gone so far as to speak of “the death of art”. This is where St Luke comes in. Luke is patron of (among other activities) art and artists and I want to introduce this matter briefly in what follows.

Tradition remembers that St. Luke painted three paintings of the Virgin Mary after Pentecost, which have become the type, both in form and content, of all subsequent portrayals of proper Christian subjects or “iconography”. Alongside the Lukan paintings we have the so-called “icon not made by human hands”, which I will not talk about here, except to say that the imitation of it goes right through the Renaissance and we see it for instance in Durer’s famous self-portrait. In other respects, the Renaissance effectively ended the continuity of iconographic tradition in the West, but it continues until today in the Eastern churches.

Theodore “the Reader”, a Byzantine historian and officiator at the church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople (now Istanbul) writing in the first half of the sixth century refers to an “icon” actually in Constantinople at the time of his writing. This is a painting by St. Luke. It was originally sent from Jerusalem, he tells us, by Empress Eudoxia, wife of Emperor Theodosius I, to her sister Pulcheria. The great authority among the Fathers, St. John of Damascus, confirms this.

St. Andrew of Crete and St. Germanus, Patriarch of Constantinople (715-730) speak of an icon of the Virgin Mary painted by Luke, this time in Rome. Germanus informs us that the likeness was painted by Luke during Mary’s lifetime, and he sent it to Rome, to Theophilus, who he mentioned at the start of his writings, known to us as the *Gospel of Luke* and the *Acts of the Apostles*. Another tradition says Theophilus was actually in Antioch, not Rome. Both Luke’s writings and Luke’s paintings were jealously and secretly guarded by the Church until following Christ became the state religion. Icons attributed (stylistically) to St. Luke are most numerous in the Russian church. There are twenty-one on Mount Athos and eight in Rome.

Because of the sacred character of the apostolic paintings the way of imaging Christ or his mother was fixed after that pattern. Of course, none of the originals still exist, but then neither do original manuscripts of Luke’s writings. We only have copies and this does not prove a problem.

Judaism didn’t approve images and within early Christian tradition there was considerable and understandable suspicion of them. However, Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea who wrote at the turn of the third and fourth centuries, a time in which images were hardly yet approved (this didn’t finally happen until the 8th century) recalls when he was living in Caesarea Philippi seeing the house of the woman who had suffered bleeding and who Jesus healed. The house was still there and outside it “stood a bronze statue of a woman, resting on one knee and resembling a suppliant with arms outstretched. Facing this

was another of the same material, an upright figure of a man with a double cloak neatly draped over his shoulders and his hand outstretched to the woman.” (Eusebius, *History*, Book. 7 ch.18). This statue is mentioned, according to a footnote in my copy of Eusebius, in three other writers, two of whom had also seen it. Eusebius says he has also seen coloured portraits of the apostles, Paul *and Jesus himself*, which he says, “ I have examined.”

One of Luke’s paintings of Mary is of the type known as “Our Lady of Tenderness” [Pictured above*]. She is holding her young son. A close motherly bond is obvious. Another type of Luke’s painting of Mary is translated as “She who leads the way”. Mary and a young Jesus look toward the viewer with a majestic pose, emphasising the divinity of Jesus even as a child. In the Eastern liturgies there is a strong transmission of the fact that the first icons of Virgin Mary were by painted by Luke. In 540, a time when Christian art could be more open, Pope Gregory the Great carried an icon of Mary to the basilica of St. Peter in a solemn procession with chanting. Pope Gregory believed and said that the icon was the work of St. Luke.

* Note: in the Russian icon pictured, the famous “Our Lady of Vladimir”, Mary does not have Russian features. It is supposed that the features date back to the original likeness painted by St. Luke.

[Main sources: Leonid Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon*, 2 Volumes (St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1992).
Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, (Penguin Classics, 1965)]

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