THE PAGAN INFLUENCE

In the first centuries after the crucifixion, Christians (many Jewish) were not apt to create images of Christ since the Biblical 2nd commandment prohibits graven images.

However, neutral and sometimes pagan icons came into use amongst the Gentiles to represent Christian subjects, possibly as a way to keep from being persecuted during this time of Roman rule, or maybe it was because they were not a specific ethnic group with a style of their own. The only thing they had in common was their Christianity, yet they were all a part of the pagan cultures they were born into and possibly took on those cultural styles as a means of communication.

One thought is that Christians selectively adapted these age old images from their own cultures as they had meaning for their faith, while maintaining the style of art that was prevalent at that time.

In this tour, we are going to explore some of these pieces of early Christian art and the cultural influences that are now considered norms in our own culture 2000 years later.

We will be looking at art from Syria, Italy, England, and Turkey, thus inadvertently demonstrating the far flung influence of the early Christian movement.
Jesus was rarely depicted in early Christian art except in symbolic form. However, one of the earliest paintings found was on a baptismal wall in Syria. This was a scene of Jesus healing the paralyzed man. In this same chamber there are other scenes such as Christ saving Peter from the waves.

Christ is depicted in the type of The Teacher. He wears a tunic, a pallium, and sandals. He has close-cropped hair and a youthful face. In the early works, He was shown as youthful. Some think this is to distinguish Him from the pagan gods who are often bearded. Others speculate that it is because he is a young God in the world of ancient beliefs.
Shepherds were a positive pagan icon. In addition, pastoral scenes were often found on oil lamps of the early centuries. The shepherd was also recognizable to the common people as a familiar Greek and Roman image of benevolence. There was a Roman god who was supposed to have saved a city who carried a ram on his shoulders. The Moschoforos pictured on the left is a familiar ancient icon.

It is thought that Christians could utilize this representation without getting into trouble with the authorities, while it also connected back to David in the Old Testament and also to the teachings of Christ as the Good Shepherd.

However notice the Good Shepherd on the right. This is a young man, no beard, and Roman in look. Some think this statue is the earliest known Christian sculpture while others think it could be a Roman one symbolizing humanitarianism. Either way, it is a beautiful and soothing sculpture.

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**Moschoforos**  
ca. 570 BC  
Location: Athens  
Artist: Phaidimos  
Material: marble  
http://www.mlahanas.de/Greeks/Arts/Moschoforos.htm

**Good Shepherd**  
ca. 3rd century  
Location: Rome, Catacomb of Domitilla  
Material: ivory  
Ancient legends said that a peacock's flesh did not decay. This made the peacock an accepted symbol of immortality. It also sheds its feathers each year and grows more beautiful ones, thus representing resurrection.

Christians took this symbol as their own and sometimes showed the bird drinking from a vase to symbolize a Christian drinking from the waters of eternal life. The “eyes” on its gorgeous fan also symbolize the all seeing eye of God.

These peacocks are often seen in the catacombs, since that is where the earliest art survived. It was possibly used as a symbol of faith in the eternal salvation of the loved one who was lying interred.

Cubicle of the “Velata”
Date: ca. 3rd century
Artist: Unknown
Location: Roman catacombs
Material: painted catacomb wall

http://web.tiscali.it/catacombe_priscilla/pagine-eng/velata.htm
Halos are said to have roots deep in ancient depictions of Egyptian, Greek, and Roman sun gods which were shown with rays of light coming from behind their heads. There is nothing in Biblical text to support this idea for the Christian figures; however, used in the historical context, this aligns Christ’s role in connection with the power of the symbol of the sun.

The earliest use of the halo in art is to the Egyptian, self-created, sun god, Ra. The Greek, Helios, and the Roman, Apollo, also use the halo, as well as some of the lesser deities. It is thought that Constantine carried this tradition into Christianity.

Exterior of Santa Costanza
Date: ca. 5th-7th century AD
Location: Rome

Santa Costanza Mosaic – Christ handing over the keys to Peter
Date: ca. 5th-7th century AD
Location: Rome
Material: mosaic
The chi-rho is the symbol of the name of Christ with the initial characters (a P and an X). It is often used as a monogram. The symbol was first used by persecuted Christians until the time of Constantine, when it was popularized.

In 312 AD Constantine was leading his army into battle to determine the Emperor of Rome. Some stories give it out that he began to pray to the “Supreme God” and a sign appeared in the sky with the words “conquer by this”. That night he had a dream where he was told to use the chi-rho sign as a safeguard, so it was placed on all the shields. He won and declared the Christian God a good God. In the ensuing Edict of Milan (313 AD), he ended the persecution of Christians.
**TYPOLOGY: JONAH**

Jonah was often used as a symbol of Christ in the heart of the earth in early Christian art. The famous Jonah Marbles were carved in the Hellenistic style, meaning there is a lot of Greek influence and Jonah looks much like the Greek sculptures of Zeus. Jonah with his one arm thrown over his head is a conventional pose in Greek and Roman art and reflects a similar carving of Endemion, a deity of great beauty often associated with Christ. However, both arms up over the head in the “Jonah Cast Up” is a classic early Christian posture of prayer, which would make sense given the circumstances depicted!

The Jonah Marbles – Jonah Cast Up
Date: ca. 270 AD
Artist: Unknown
Location: Central Turkey
Material: Marble

The Jonah Marbles – Jonah under the Gourd Vine
Date: ca. 270 AD
Artist: Unknown
Location: Central Turkey
Material: Marble

http://www.clevelandart.org/byzantine/pop239.html
http://www.clevelandart.org/byzantine/pop238.html
The Italian city of Ravenna converted early to Christianity in the second century AD. In the 5th century it became a part of the Byzantine empire under Justinian. The early Christian art was influenced by Roman, Ostrogothic, and Byzantine art. The mosaics found in this small city are among the best in the world.

It is to be noted that wings did not appear on angels until after Constantine and the council of Laodicea. As well as there being no Biblical reference to wings on angels, there is an obvious connection to the various winged gods and creatures of Greek and Roman mythology. Wings were often associated with the gods of Death and Sleep and were found in Homer's Iliad carrying the dead and on Mercury, the messenger of the gods.
If you wish to learn more on any of these subjects, check out the Sources