

Thomas F. Mathews with Norman E. Muller: *The Dawn of Christian Art in Panel Paintings and Icons*. Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum 2016. 256 p., 137 colour and 56 black-and-white illustrations. \$ 49.95. ISBN: 978-1-60606-509-9.

Two decades ago, the art historian Thomas Mathews began research on paintings upon wood which he then termed “pagan icons”.¹ Nobody before him had studied these as a coherent group (13–14). Ranging in date from the first to the fourth century AD,² they survive almost exclusively from Egypt³ and depict Graeco-Roman or Egyptian deities.⁴ Mathews, the conservator Norman E. Muller, and the Egyptologist Vincent Rondot assembled a corpus of sixty specimens (240). Since Rondot chose to publish his findings separately, the volume under review complements his own.⁵ It should be noted that Mathews and Muller discuss five items which the French scholar ignored and ignore one which he studied (10).

The book’s thesis is that icons in the narrow sense of the word, i.e. panel paintings of Christ, the Virgin, and the saints, are but a version of the religious paintings traditionally used by polytheists in the Roman Empire. This idea was proposed by André Grabar⁶ and developed by Marguerite Rassart-Deberg, whose “courageous effort” Mathews and Muller acknowledge (14).⁷ A thorough survey of the Christian material from the sixth through eighth centuries (no earlier icons survive), much of which comes from Egypt,

- 1 Th. F. Mathews: *The Clash of Gods. A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art*. Revised edition. Princeton, NJ 1999, 177–190.
- 2 There are two exceptions: the early London, British Museum, [1975.0728.1](#) and the late Paris, Musée du Louvre, [AF 10878/79](#).
- 3 With a single exception: New Haven, Yale University Art Gallery, [1929.288](#).
- 4 Again with one exception: Berlin, Staatliche Museen Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Antikensammlung, [31329](#).
- 5 V. Rondot: *Derniers visages des dieux d’Égypte. Iconographies, panthéons et cultes dans le Fayoum hellénisé des IIe-IIIe siècles de notre ère*. Paris 2013.
- 6 A. Grabar: *Byzantium: From the Death of Theodosius to the Rise of Islam*. Translated by S. Gilbert and J. Emmons. London 1966 (*The Arts of Mankind* 10), 186.
- 7 M. Rassart-Debergh: *De l’icône païenne à l’icône chrétienne*. In: *Le monde Copte* 18, 1990, 39–69.

would have permitted systematic comparisons. But such was not the authors' task: "Since our study is primarily concerned with the precedents of Christian icons, we have made no effort to be complete in our citation of Byzantine and Coptic panel paintings" (13). The two prefer to pick out and trace individual lines of continuity: one such line involves painting technique (a), another, compositional devices (b), a third one, iconography (c), a fourth one, the cultic setting of images (d).

(a) Encaustic, in which the binding medium is wax, is traditionally considered the standard technique of Graeco-Roman painting on wood (Plin. *nat.* 35.31, 35.39, 35.41). In spite of this, all cultic panels that Muller could examine were demonstrably painted in tempera, the pigments having been intermixed not with wax but with egg, glue, or gum (224–229, 238–239).⁸ Given that egg tempera was the most common vehicle of medieval panel painting, Mathews and Muller argue for continuity between ancient and medieval artistic practice (21–22). "Byzantine artists were responsible for the transmission of the ancient technique to the Renaissance" (229). Perhaps the process was not as smooth as that, since sixth-century Byzantine icons (the oldest ones preserved) are generally executed in encaustic.⁹ Several of these are painted on thin boards reinforced with frames along the edge: in that respect they do resemble "pagan icons" (see for instance Mathews' and Muller's figs. 3–5 and 6.10, where the panels' thickness is indicated in the image captions), yet their frames are constructed in a rather different manner (compare Mathews' and Muller's figs. 1.6, 1.18–21, 2.3, 2.7, 2.11, 3.3¹⁰ with their fig. 4.9¹¹).

8 Cf. now C. Thieme/A. Rommel-Mayet/L. Sand: *Bilder von Göttern und Menschen der römischen Kaiserzeit – eine kunsttechnische Betrachtung*. In: Y. Schmuhl/E. P. Wipfler (eds.): *Inkarnat und Signifikanz. Das menschliche Abbild in der Tafelmalerie von 200 bis 1250 im Mittelmeerraum*. München 2017, 120–150. This whole volume is eminently useful and contains excellent colour illustrations.

9 K. M. Collins/R. S. Nelson (eds.): *Holy Image, Hallowed Ground. Icons from Sinai*. Los Angeles 2006, 127 (text by Thomas Mathews).

10 See also London, British Museum, [1889,1018.1](#); Providence, Rhode Island School of Design, [59.030](#).

11 See also Sinai, Monastery of St Catherine, icons no. [9](#) and [93](#).

(b) The authors observe similarity between the painted doors of Roman portable shrines (*naiskoi*) (figs. 3.9, 3.23, 3.28, 3.32–35)¹² and the side wings of Christian triptychs (figs. 3.29–31).¹³ Unlike triptych wings, however, *naiskoi* doors were only painted on the inside, while their back (outer) sides remained blank (115). Another compositional device that Christian icons are claimed to have inherited from their Romano-Egyptian forerunners is “the multi-register template of hierarchically sized figures” (120). I fail to see how this “template” – found on Apulian vases¹⁴ or Roman bas-reliefs¹⁵ – is peculiar to images of the ancient gods painted on wood.

(c) “The iconography of Christ was defined against the old imagery of Zeus, and the iconography of Mary against that of Isis” (24). The point about Christ is illustrated with the story of a fifth-century painter who dared to paint the Saviour in the likeness of Jupiter (193). The point about the Virgin is argued from the premise that “the parallel with Isis and Harpocrates [...] could hardly have gone unnoticed when the iconography of Mary was being formed” (166): both women are depicted enthroned (164), and the now-lost original of the famous *Hodegetria* icon might have shown Christ’s mother pointing at her own left breast, the way *Isis lactans* does (166). The authors tentatively claim certain clay figurines of pregnant women, found in Egypt, “as the first step toward an icon of Mary” (157).¹⁶

(d) Finally, paintings of the ancient gods and Christian icons are argued to have both served as votive offerings (*dedicationes*, ἀναθήματα). Indeed, the dedicatory inscriptions on three pagan and two Christian panels (figs. 2.5–2.9, 4.9, 7.3) attest their votive character.¹⁷ Through brilliant combination of documentary and physical evidence, a portrait of Emperor Septimius Severus

12 See also Malibu, J. Paul Getty Museum, [74.AP.21](#) and [74.AP.22](#).

13 See also Sinai, Monastery of St Catherine, icons no. [325](#), [326](#), [496](#), [2](#).

14 E.g. Baltimore, Walters Art Museum, [48.86](#) and [48.2759](#).

15 E.g. the *Gemma Augustea* or, on a more modest scale, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, [21.88.175](#). The latter object is reproduced in Mathews (above, n. 1) fig. 134.

16 Cf. D. Frankfurter: Female Figurines in Early Christian Egypt. Reconstructing Lost Practices and Meanings. In: *Material Religion* 11, 2015, 190–223.

17 On the two Christian examples see also M. Rassart-Debergh: A propos des « icônes coptes » du Musée Benaki. Un visage du Christ. In: *Le monde Copte* 20, 1992, 13–14; K. Corrigan: Visualizing the Divine. An Early Byzantine Icon of the ‘Ancient of Days’ at Mount Sinai. In: S. E. J. Gerstel/R. S. Nelson (eds.): *Approaching the Holy*

with his family¹⁸ is shown to have likewise been an *ἀνάθημα* (74–83). Mathews and Muller explain that one could place offerings like these either in a temple or at home – most often in gratitude for having received divine assistance (68–69, 214). The second-century *Acts of John* report that a thankful Christian had a likeness of the apostle painted for precisely this reason (131–134). Some six hundred years later, the dogmatic definition (ῥόγος) of the Seventh Ecumenical Council prescribes ἀνατίθεσθαι τὰς σεπτὰς καὶ ἁγίας εἰκόνας, which Mathews thoughtfully translates as “sacred and holy icons should be offered and dedicated” (211).

Mathews and Muller firmly argue against scholars who diminish the role of Christian images in the pre-medieval period.¹⁹ “Icons were intimately connected with the origins and growth of Christianity itself” (27). This is because several relatively early texts, such as the abovementioned *Acts of John* and the *Vita* of St Pachomius,²⁰ discuss icons or icon-like visions (131–143). By the sixth century, icons have “come of age; they are now ready to be marshalled, arrayed, and programmed” (171). That is evident from “the most *unstudied* major monument in the entire history of Byzantine art” (172), viz., the reliefs on the silver *templon* (chancel screen) of the Constantinopolitan cathedral of Hagia Sophia. The reliefs in question do not actually survive, but a sixth-century description (184) suggests they would have resembled ten marble ones excavated in the ruined substructure of what was once the Church of St Polyeuctus (figs. 6.6–6.9 and 6.11–6.18). Although these ten differ in technique and quality from all other marble decoration associated with this

Mountain. Art and Liturgy at St Catherine’s Monastery in the Sinai. Turnhout 2010 (Cursor Mundi 11), 285–303, esp. 287.

- 18 Berlin, Staatliche Museen Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Antikensammlung, [31329](#).
- 19 E. g. L. Brubaker: Icons before Iconoclasm? In: *Morfologie sociali culturali in Europa fra tarda antichità e alto medioevo*. Spoleto 1998 (Settimane di studio del Centro Italiano di Studi sull’Alto Medioevo 45), 1215–1254. Cf., however, the forthcoming paper by R. Price: Icons before and during Iconoclasm.
- 20 Pachomian Koinonia. Vol. I. The Life of Saint Pachomius and His Disciples. Translated, with an Introduction by A. Veilleux. Kalamazoo, Mich. 1980 (Cistercian Studies 45), 94–97 (§ 73). Instead of quoting Veilleux’s English translation of the Coptic text, Mathews offers his own translation from the French.

church,²¹ Mathews identifies them as part of its *templon*. No comparable *templon* images in marble are known from the sixth or seventh centuries, but then, a few wood-carvings²² and a painted panel,²³ all found in Egypt, are assumed to have been inserted in chancel screens (38–41, 194–198). The evidence here, it must be admitted, is flimsy. Elisabeth Enß quite reasonably interprets the very same carvings as *Füllungsplatten* for doors or furniture.²⁴ The panel, on the other hand, has clearly been re-used as a writing-board (three columns of Aramaic text cover the image),²⁵ so in the context in which it was excavated, it no longer functioned as a painting – let alone as part of a *templon*. And if the Church of St Polyeuctus, known to have been built in the 520s, had images on its original chancel screen, how could the “concept of surrounding the altars with a circle of icons” have originated with St Eutychius (189), who was Patriarch of Constantinople in 552–562 and 577–582?

Whether icons had reached full “maturity” in the sixth century and whether they were then being placed on *templa*, are not crucial questions for the book as a whole. Nonetheless, the manner in which Mathews and Muller stretch the evidence to make it fit their argument brings to light, I think, a general weakness: they simply overstate their case that “Christian icon painting [...] stands squarely in the tradition of ancient art” (13). Pursued with unwavering single-mindedness (and with repeated reminders that everyone else either overlooked things or got them wrong), “continuity versus rupture” becomes a false dilemma. One thinks of the first-century Romans (Plin. *nat.* 35.2) who would hang up portraits of athletes in their exercise-room and a likeness of Epicurus in their bedchamber (134). Are those likely to have been painted

21 Cf. most recently C. Barsanti/M. Pilutti Namer: Da Costantinopoli a Venezia. Nuove spoglie della chiesa di S. Polieucto. In: *Νέα Ῥώμη* 6, 2009, 133–156.

22 E.g. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, [1987.440.6](#); Paris, Musée du Louvre, [E 17118](#).

23 Paris, Musée du Louvre, [AF 10878/79](#).

24 E. Enß: *Holz Schnitzereien der spätantiken bis frühislamischen Zeit aus Ägypten. Funktion und Dekor*. Wiesbaden 2005 (Spätantike, Frühes Christentum, Byzanz Reihe A: Grundlagen und Monumente 13), 45, 177–178.

25 This is evident even from Mathews’ and Muller’s fig. 1.10, which like many other photographs in the book has been rescanned and is of substandard quality.

in tempera? To have been shaped like triptychs? Or to have resembled the icons corner in an Ukrainian peasant's house (fig. 8.9)?

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Empfohlene Zitierweise

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