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## Jesus

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"When I enter my religious themes in the art shows, I am almost always rejected," Zeller said.

"I Am the Resurrection" was featured in the April 1997 newsletter of the Fellowship of Merry Christians, a national organization based in Kalamazoo, Mich. The newsletter's editor, Cal Samra, said that artistic images of an upbeat Jesus — as opposed to a bloodied, crucified image — are fairly recent and long overdue.

"Jesus didn't depress anybody. He was a healer of depressed people," Samra stated. "The artists are reaching out and searching for something besides depressive and stern representations of Jesus. A gory and grotesque image — does it really represent the Lord?"

Despite Samra's viewpoint, many Catholics in the United States might be surprised — and even offended — by images that fail to show Jesus with light skin, brown hair, a beard and a solemn expression. In actuality, however, depictions of Jesus have varied greatly in different time periods and cultures.

According to Adams, the widely accepted portrayal of Jesus in this country is also prevalent in Europe. Adams said this image became standard beginning in the 11th century.

But can a light-skinned Jesus be considered the real thing? Not according to Father Michael Upson, administrator of Immaculate Conception Church in Rochester.

"What we have in the states is a Jesus who has become very European, very 'Anglicized,'" Father Upson said.

A large mural depicting a black Jesus has hung above the tabernacle at Immaculate Conception — a predominately African-American parish — since the 1960s. Father Upson noted that artistic depictions of a black Jesus began to increase in other parts of the United States during the '60s as well.

Father Upson added that the mural, as far as he knows, has been accepted by people of all ethnic backgrounds who attend Immaculate Conception.

"They just like it. I have never heard of a problem," Father Upson said.

The mural displays a black Jesus with short, curly hair. Statues of a light-skinned Jesus occupy other parts of the church.

"I don't believe in painting white statues black," Father Upson commented. Yet he added, "For too long a time, we've had to relate to images of Jesus that were purely white."

Interestingly, neither an African-American nor Anglo-Saxon image represents Jesus' actual background — that of a Middle Eastern Jew who likely resembled modern-day Palestinians with dark hair and olive skin. Adams asserted that Americans would have a hard time accepting the possibility that Jesus' likeness is linked with a culture often torn by violence.

"In our society, can you imagine if Jesus looked like one of those Arab terrorists?" Adams remarked. "But that's probably closer to what he looked like."

Maria Jaoudi, assistant professor of re-



Artist Deborah Zeller says she has received criticism for her painting, "I Am the Resurrection" (reprinted here with permission).

ligion at Nazareth College, said that modern media, also, have failed to seek a true representation of Jesus.

"There really haven't been films that depict Jesus as a Semitic Middle Eastern figure," Jaoudi said.

Adams said that the earliest depiction of Jesus is believed, "in some circles," to have been painted by St. Luke, the patron saint of painters. However, no such painting is known to survive.

"It's a tradition that he did a painting, but most experts would not say it's likely," Adams said.

In fact, the Jewish culture disapproved of religious imagery, and there are no known representations of Christ from the first years of Christianity. The earliest images to have apparently survived, Adams said, are from the years 240-260, based on Jewish art that was discovered when the ancient Syrian city of Dura-Europos was excavated in the 1920s and 1930s.

However, the time lapse between Christ's life on earth and this period lend doubts to the possibility that the Dura-Europos works can be regarded as Christ's true image, Adams said.

"You're already talking 250 years after the crucifixion for the first image," he pointed out.

Christian art became openly established in the early fourth century when the Edict of Milan officially recognized Christianity. Adams acknowledged a link between the rise of Christianity and the style in which Christ was artistically portrayed.

"In the fourth and fifth centuries, he was an emperor," Adams said.

In the West, early paintings of Jesus depicted him as the Good Shepherd, or as a miracle worker — not as a crucified or resurrected Christ. Many of these renditions showed Jesus with short, blond hair and no beard.

Images of Christ evolved into their present-day rendering through the Middle Ages. During the Byzantine Empire, which lasted from the sixth through 15th centuries, Adams said, Eastern art portrayed Jesus as a "ruler of the world, stern and strong." However, much of the Eastern art was lost during the period of iconoclasm in the eighth and ninth centuries, when Byzantine leaders strongly opposed the veneration of images.

Western art, on the other hand, focused on the crucified Jesus, depicting him as "pathetic, suffering, broken in body and spirit." Depictions of Christ with a somber or pained expression have dominated much of Western Christian art until recent centuries. Adams said that such art reflected a spirituality of suffering that developed during the Middle Ages.

"Self-mortification and suffering was seen as a way to salvation more in the West than in East. You didn't get any sweet, gentle images until the 18th or 19th century," Adams observed.

Adams said that current images may also be derived from supposed image of the crucified and entombed Christ on the Shroud of Turin. The garment was first venerated as the actual burial cloth of Je-

sus in Turin, Italy, in 1578.

Adams further noted that the spread of Protestantism sparked a new era in Christian art and its depiction of Christ.

"Protestant images would be more natural, without the halo," he said. He added that Catholic images display the stigmata — Christ's wounds — more often, and that Catholic artists depict Christ's full face whereas Protestant artists favor profile images.

Artistic discipline also varies within the Catholic Church. Whereas images of Jesus have continually evolved in Latin Rite artistry, Father Kenneth Sherman said that Eastern Rite iconography reflects his rite's emphasis on preserving traditional images.

"The iconographer follows a structure and is not free to express himself. You wouldn't see a blond-haired, blue-eyed Jesus," noted Father Sherman, pastor of St. Nicholas the Wonderworker Church, a Greek Melkite church in Rochester.

"The icon painter has to be as faithful to the original model as possible," Adams added. "You can go hundreds of years and there's very little stylistic change. It's probably the most conservative kind of art that's ever been devised."

Father Sherman acknowledged that a painting of a smiling Jesus would not go over well among Eastern Rite Catholics.

"In fact, it would probably be insulting," he remarked.

Conversely, Zeller is perplexed at such adherence to what she deems narrow artistic guidelines regarding the image of Jesus.

"You never saw any teeth on the man!" she exclaimed. "(But) he has to show emotions and go to either extreme, sadness or laughter. He had to laugh."

"Jesus had to have a sense of humor," Father Upson agreed. "He experienced very human things, so he had to have very human emotions."

Jaoudi ventured that cheerful images of Jesus in the 20th century may be a response to a world torn by war, hunger and poverty.

"People are trying to keep that child-like dimension. Today there's so little innocence," Jaoudi remarked.

Adams added that 20th-century artists operate with the mind-set, "OK, this is the way I feel, this is the way I see it, this is the way I interpret it." He added that most artists have historically presented Christ without physical imperfections — perhaps wrongly so.

"What if we did have a real portrait of Jesus and it turned out he was homely or had moles, or a weak chin, or a hooked nose?" Adams wondered. He remarked that artists might still stay away from such representations "because we have to have this ideal of perfection."

"We seem to make a figure we want to extol because of our social conceptions of nobility and beauty," Jaoudi added.

Whatever the time period or culture, Father Upson suggested, any artistic portrayal of Jesus should appeal strongly to its intended audience.

"In your own environment, it's important to be able to look up to people who look like you, who you can identify with," Father Upson said. "It's important to be able to relate to the image of God."

For example, Adams noted that Japanese Christian art displays Christ with slanted eyes, whereas images in India depict a Buddha-like Christ and Hispanic art portrays a dark-skinned figure.

Ultimately, Jaoudi feels that a literal interpretation of Jesus is not nearly as important as the ideals he represents.

"If you think of the cosmic Christ, in all reality, these are just hooks, if you will, to help us in our spiritual development," Jaoudi said. "The presence of Christ transcends one image."

Jaoudi said she expects one constant of Christianity to hold up regardless of artistic trends.

"There's a teaching of love as the central theme. I don't think that will ever change," she concluded.



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