

**75 MASTERPIECES**  
**EVERY CHRISTIAN**  
**SHOULD KNOW**

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**THE FASCINATING STORIES BEHIND GREAT WORKS  
OF ART, LITERATURE, MUSIC, AND FILM**

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**TERRY GLASPEY**



**BakerBooks**

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Terry Glaspey, *75 Masterpieces Every Christian Should Know*  
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For all the creatives  
who carry on the tradition  
of expressing your faith  
with skill, artistic integrity, and a sense of wonder.  
You are a part of the story this book tells . . .

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This book is humbly offered in memory of my father, Larry Glaspey, who died while it was being written. I miss you, Dad.

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# Introduction

**O**n a sunny, leaf-strewn fall afternoon a couple of years ago I visited the Philadelphia Museum of Art, which is one of the finest art museums in the United States. I was captivated by their fine array of classic and modern masterpieces, lingered over their wonderful collection of Impressionist paintings, and even paused outside the building for a few minutes at the top of their long flight of steps leading up to the entrance, where Rocky Balboa once stood triumphant in the iconic scene from the movie. I barely managed to restrain myself from raising my hands like the fictional prizefighter had done.

One of the areas of the museum where I spent a little extra time that day was in their impressive American Art galleries. I won't soon forget the experience of entering one of the rooms in that area and finding my eyes immediately drawn to a large and powerful

painting depicting Mary's visit from the angel Gabriel in which he announced that she would be the mother of Jesus. I hadn't previously known of this painting, but the warm, bright golden tones, the look of shy astonishment on Mary's face, and the unusually creative way the angel had been rendered all combined to take my breath away. This moment of biblical history portrayed in the painting is commonly known as "the annunciation," and as I bent forward to read the information plaque affixed to the wall nearby I discovered that this was the title of the work, and that its creator was Henry Ossawa Tanner.

When I returned to my hotel room I searched the internet for information about Tanner and found that he was an African-American painter from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who specialized in paintings of biblical subject matter

and was himself a committed Christian. The more I researched, the more fascinated I became by the man and his work, and the more I was inspired by his vision of the biblical stories.

It's my hope that this book can have the same effect on you as that moment of discovery in the museum had on me—of introducing you to some of the great artistic achievements of fellow believers, from the very beginnings of the church to our present time. I'd love for you to meet some of these fascinating people and experience some of their work so that you might be inspired, entertained, and challenged by their art, music, writing, and films.

It is not possible to do full justice to the works discussed in this book within the constraints imposed by page count. These short introductions are more like trailers for a movie rather than the movie itself. Think of this book, if you will, as a fistful of invitations—invitations to begin your own personal exploration of art, music, literature, and films that you've never experienced before, or as an opportunity to revisit some old favorites. Let this volume be a departure point for your own journey of exploration.

As a culture we are often enamored with the latest thing. We "consume" art, music, books, and films and then pass on quickly to whatever is the next big thing, often neglecting the rich heritage of the past. I think this is especially true for Christians;

many of us are unaware of how many of the great masterpieces—works universally admired—were created by people who share our faith commitment. We have a heritage in the arts of which we can justifiably be proud.

What this book offers is a selection of seventy-five creative expressions of faith that range across time, genres, and nationalities. This is most emphatically not a list of the absolute best or greatest works, nor does it imply any ranking system. Instead, it attempts to represent the breadth and depth of what Christians have accomplished in the arts, and is an intentionally quirky mix of the widely known and the mostly unknown. I could easily offer an alternative collection of seventy-five works that would be just as valid as these. Frankly, it was a painful process to limit myself to the works represented in these pages. Many of my favorites got left out in my desire to express something of the stylistic variety of creative work done by believers.

My guidelines for the selection of the works featured in this volume were pretty simple: (1) they had to be works that are universally esteemed for their craftsmanship and creativity, not only admired by Christians but also by those outside the faith; (2) they had to be works that stand up well to repeated exposure, the kind of art that can be visited again and again, because there is always something new to discover; (3) they had to be works that speak

to people across time, cultures, national boundaries, and denominational divides.

The artists whose works are represented here come from a variety of traditions—Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox, and sometimes a little bit *unorthodox*. They didn't always express their beliefs with carefully constructed theology. They were not theologians, but through their works they give us fresh insights into Scripture and into the key teachings and experiences of faith.

Though the works of these artists deserve the highest regard, their lives were not always so praiseworthy. As you read their stories you'll discover that many of them lived messy and imperfect lives, and didn't always live out their convictions very well. They were fellow strugglers more than role models, and their honesty about their own personal battles makes them that much more accessible to us today.

These artists were not interested in creating propaganda or some sort of advertisement for Christianity but simply in recording the truth as they saw and felt it. Through the years, though, many people have ultimately found their witness to faith more compelling and convincing than even the best of sermons or theological treatises. Art can reach places in the human heart that reasoned argument can never penetrate.

As you begin to explore these works you'll find that some are pretty easy to access and immediately enjoyable, while others may take a little more time to reveal themselves,

especially when they represent an unfamiliar musical or artistic style. Just because you don't "get it" the first time around doesn't mean there is something deficient in the work or in you. For example, I grew up with virtually no exposure to jazz, and when I first started to explore it, it seemed hard to access. But spending a little time with Miles Davis, John Coltrane, and Charles Mingus taught me to love jazz. All it took was a little patience and some exposure.

On the other hand, if you find that some of the works in this book just don't touch your heart and mind, then don't sweat it. We all have different tastes, and different things appeal to different people. Just make sure you have allowed yourself to be challenged a bit before you move on. Remember, great art is the result of hard work on the part of its creator, and therefore it sometimes demands a bit of work on the part of its audience—deeper and more focused attention than we are often used to giving in this fast-paced world of ours.

Whether you are looking to expose yourself to some of the greatest masterpieces ever created by people of faith or are an artist looking for inspiration and motivation, I hope you'll enjoy seeing your faith, the world around you, and maybe even your own self a bit differently than you did before. May this book be a modest doorway into a world of deeper appreciation, a sort of travel guide to the treasures of our tradition.

# 1

## Paintings in the Roman Catacombs

(paintings, c. 300)

The earliest surviving Christian art is not hanging on the walls of a museum or adorning a cathedral but rather can be found in the labyrinth of tombs underneath the city of Rome. At a time when Christianity was not seen as an acceptable religious option, Christian art went underground. Literally. Beneath the streets of the Roman capital and its suburbs, Christians decorated the tombs of their loved ones with simple paintings of biblical scenes or Christian symbols, there in the dimly lit maze of catacombs.

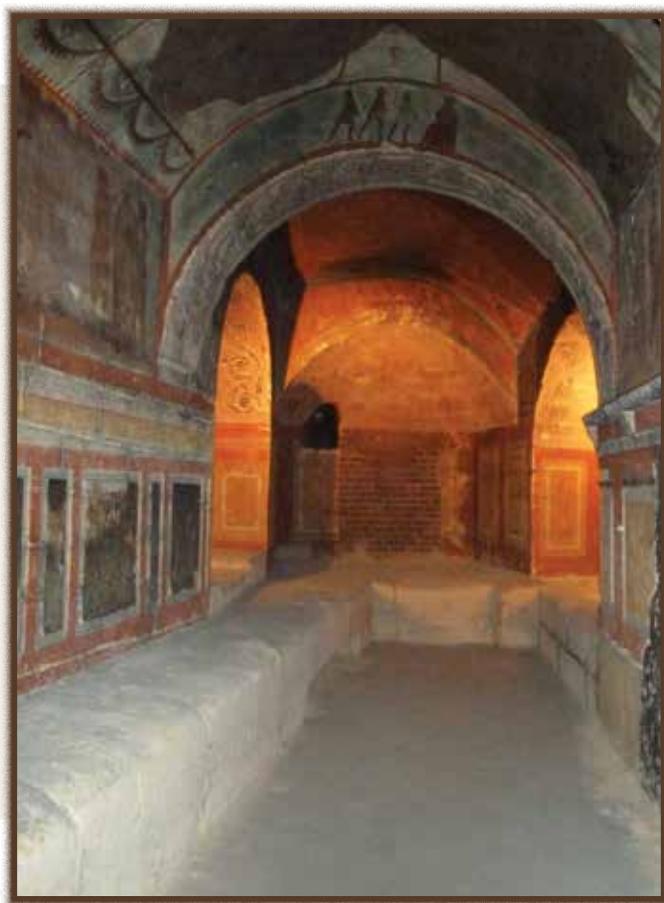
One of the common images in early Christian art, an image that can frequently be seen in the catacombs as well as in mosaics and in the earliest statuary, is the

depiction of Christ as the Good Shepherd. His features bear a strong resemblance to traditional depictions of Apollo in classical art—handsome, strong, and dignified—and he is tending to his flock with gentle care, usually with a lamb draped over his shoulders. It is an image that reminds the viewer of Jesus's love for his people and the protection he offers in a world filled with predators—precisely the message most needed by early Christians suffering from marginalization and persecution. In the days of Christian faith's infancy it could be dangerous to be a believer. And because the image of a shepherd with a flock wasn't a blatantly religious image, it was art that could communicate from one Christian

to another without drawing unwanted attention from hostile authorities. It was a sort of coded message of reverence for the Savior based upon Jesus's words from John 10:11, "I am the good shepherd."

Finding a way to memorialize their dead was one of the things that inspired the artists who created most of the earliest surviving Christian art, and much of it can be found in these catacombs. These underground burial sites were composed of

a network of narrow interconnected passages with niches where the dead could be laid. Developed in the second century, about the time of the persecution of Christians under the emperor Decius, the catacombs were a common burial ground until the mid-fifth century. There were about 550 miles of catacombs around Rome, and an estimated 4 to 6.5 million people were buried in them. They were a popular option for citizens of Rome who could not afford



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Roman catacombs

## 20 + 75 Masterpieces Every Christian Should Know

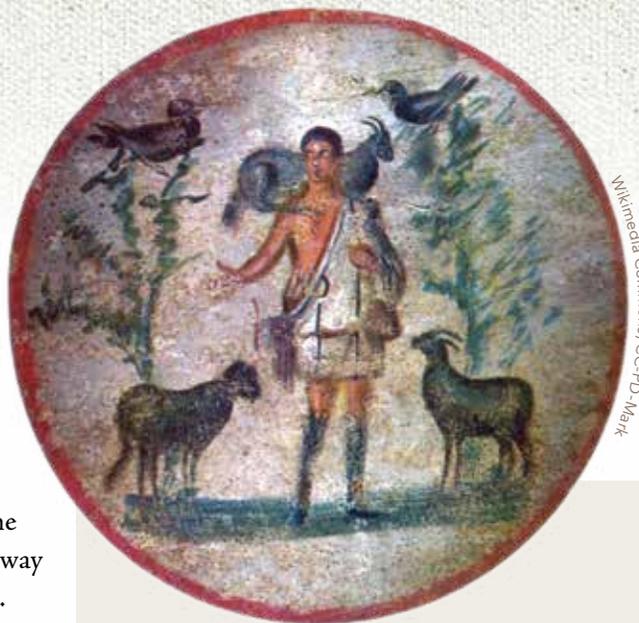
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land in which to bury their dead, as real estate was scarce and expensive in the capital of the Roman Empire. Since the early Christians generally considered cremation to be a pagan practice, burial in the catacombs was a good and reasonably priced alternative. The soft volcanic rock underground was easy to dig and carve but hardened nicely when exposed to air, so these niches in the network of catacombs were an ideal way to lay the bodies of loved ones to rest.

Contrary to popular mythology, the catacombs were not generally used either as places to hide from persecution or as places where Christians worshiped. But they were places that were visited with some frequency, where one might celebrate a deceased loved one by having a funerary meal—a kind of “picnic with the dead.” And since the early Christians had few other public places to display their art, the catacombs are one of the main places in which it can be found.

The art used to decorate these funereal niches is somewhat crude and naïve in style, pretty much what you would expect from paintings done underground by the light of a torch. We do not know the identity of the artists who created the images for the catacombs or exactly when they were created, but they share a simple beauty and dignity and are the earliest artistic masterpieces of the Christian tradition.



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*The Good Shepherd, Catacombs of Priscilla, Rome*

Classical Greek and Roman art was their main stylistic source, and the most common subject matter is either stories from the Old Testament or events from the life of Christ.

These early Christian artists drew especially upon the redemptive stories of the Old Testament, stories where God was portrayed as a deliverer, such as the story of Daniel and the lions, the three Hebrew brothers in the fiery furnace, Noah and the ark, or the trials of Jonah (who was considered as a prefiguration of Jesus and his resurrection). Their favorite subjects from the life of Jesus were the miracle stories, especially stories of healing. Interestingly, images of the cross and the crucifixion are very rare in early Christian art, and it seems there was a distinct preference for images

### Paintings in the Roman Catacombs + 21

and symbols that represented resurrection and immortality—images such as doves, palms, peacocks, the phoenix, and the lamb. Instead of focusing on the sufferings of Christ, as became so common in later Christian art, these early artists seemed more interested in painting pictures that offered hope.

In a time when it was a crime to practice the Christian faith, and where one could be sentenced to death for proclaiming Jesus as Lord instead of Caesar, it should not be surprising that much of this art also shows an interest in venerating the holy martyrs of the faith, those who had surrendered their lives in the cause of Christ. In fact, Christians sometimes jockeyed for a place in the catacombs so they could bury their dead as near as possible to where the martyrs of the faith had been laid.

In ancient Rome, wealthy Christians were fewer in number but they could more easily afford to be buried in the traditional way rather than in the catacombs. They were often laid to rest in a sarcophagus, a stone casket on which decorative art could be carved. One of the most well preserved of the surviving sarcophagi is that of Junius Bassus (c. 350). The front of this sarcophagus is decorated with two rows of sculpted images that are more artistically

refined than the paintings in the catacombs. The top level depicts scenes of Abraham, Paul, Christ with Peter and Paul, Christ before Pilate, and Pilate washing his hands of responsibility for Jesus's fate. The bottom level has carvings of Job, Adam and Eve with the serpent wound around the tree of life, Christ's entry into Jerusalem and meeting with Zacchaeus (the wee man in the tree), Daniel flanked by tamed lions, and the apostle Paul being led to his execution. These key biblical stories show both the Old Testament roots of the faith and scenes from Jesus's life. (The scene of Paul's execution is not recorded in Scripture but drawn from extrabiblical studies.)

In the generations that followed, Christian art would begin to become more grand and showy, striving for splendor and a highly aesthetic effect. The earliest Christian art, however, with its greater simplicity and obvious devotion, remains a powerful testimony to the way that art could reflect deep faith and trust in God, even at a time of great persecution. Despite the threat of death, early Christians held fast to a faith in the God who was a deliverer, and who would ultimately snatch them even from the jaws of death. That message echoes out from the Roman catacombs.