

Who? Masolino da Panicale



What? The central image is one of Christ on the cross, but an interesting feature of this piece of art is that there are many other symbolic images surrounding the main frame.



When? Twelfth Century.



Where? San Clemente church in Rome

Why? To depict the following:

1. God is the first and the last.
2. The battle against evil is won by the Cross of Christ.
3. Jesus sacrificed himself to save humankind.
4. The importance of peace for a Christian.
5. The importance of the four Gospels as a means to hear Jesus' word.



The Alpha & Omega

- **Alpha and Omega** - the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. This is used to symbolise the belief that God is the beginning and the end of all that can be seen and all that can't.
- In the book of Revelation, the Greek letters Alpha and Omega are used several times to symbolise Christ.
- They are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet which expresses the idea of something being complete.
- In the book of Revelation, God speaks of himself as the Alpha and Omega.
- From early Christian times Alpha and Omega were used to refer to Jesus.
- We are therefore being reminded that Jesus is eternal, because he is God!

Chi-Rho

- This symbol is frequently used in Catholic Churches today on baptismal candles and the priest's vestments (their clothing).
- The symbol looks like the letters X and P which are the first two letters of the word Christ in Greek.
- With the use of both of these symbols the artist is emphasising the importance of Christ.

TREE OF LIFE APSE MOSAIC



What is a mosaic?

It is a picture or pattern produced by arranging together small pieces of stone, tile, glass, etc.

What is an apse?

An area with curved walls and a domed roof at the end of a church.

Areas to Discuss

1. The Alpha & Omega
2. Chi-Rho
3. The twelve apostles
4. The lamb
5. The doves
6. The four evangelists
7. The cross
8. The tree of life
9. The Vine

Knowledge Check

1. Who painted the Tree of Life?
2. What is the purpose of the painting?
(What key ideas does it convey?)
3. Where is the painting displayed?
4. What is an apse?
5. What is a mosaic?

Choose a Task

1. Create a detailed mind-map (try to make this visual)
2. Create a multiple-choice quiz (aim for at least 10 questions)
3. Create a poster/leaflet

Exam Question

c) Explain the rich Christian symbolism that you will find in the Tree Of Life Apse mosaic. [8]

The Lamb



- At the bottom of the cross there are 12 lambs who are pointing towards a thirteenth lamb at the centre of the picture directly under the cross.
- *This central lamb has a halo and is representing Christ, whom Christians refer to as the 'Lamb of God'.*
- In the story of the Passover in the Old Testament book of Exodus, a lamb was sacrificed and its blood put on the doorposts of the homes of the Israelites.
- The angel of death 'passed over' these houses and instead killed the first born sons of the Egyptians. The event is celebrated by Jews every year in the feast of the Passover. The Israelites had been saved from their slavery.
- *Jesus is described as the 'Lamb of God' because his death saved humanity from their sin and death, just like the sacrificed lamb had saved the Israelites. It is, therefore, fitting that this sacrificed lamb is placed under the cross in the mosaic.*

The Twelve Apostles

- There is reference made to the twelve Apostles who were specially chosen by Jesus to continue to spread the Good News once he had left them.
- The apostles also lived a sacrificial life; they gave up their homes and families to follow Jesus and spread the word after his death. St Peter quite literally lost his life - he was executed in Rome. This is why they are also depicted a lambs.



The Doves

- The twelve doves on the cross not only represent the twelve apostles but also the Holy Spirit.
- The Holy Spirit is often depicted as a dove.
- The Holy Spirit came to the apostles at Pentecost, and filled them with courage and they began to spread the word.
- This is often described as the 'Birthday of the Church' because without this event Christianity might not have spread.



The four evangelists

- The four evangelists (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) appear throughout the scene. They are the authors of the four Gospels of the New Testament. They tell us about Jesus' life and were instrumental in spreading the Good News.
- They appear at the top of the mosaic, next to the image of a living, risen Jesus.



The Vine

- One of the most predominant features, apart from the cross itself, is the green vine that wraps around the entire scene and emerges from the tree of life.
- This is another reminder of the Garden of Eden and the green paradise God created for all humanity.
- The vine can also represent Christ himself who, in John's gospel said, 'I am the vine' (John 15:5).
- The vine is labelled as the Church by an inscription along the band just above the sheep: *'We have likened the Church of Christ to this vine: the Law made it wither but the Cross made it bloom.'*

The Cross

- Christian art often focuses on the suffering and death of Jesus but THIS IMAGE IS DIFFERENT.
- Jesus is placed on a black cross but this EMPHASISES THE BRIGHTNESS OF THE FIGURE against it. Jesus' sacrifice is about life and hope, not death and despair.
- The cross is a complete crucifixion scene with Mary and St John present either side of the cross, but this symbolic creation goes far beyond just depicting the death of Jesus.
- The hand of God the Father can be seen at the top of the cross reaching down to earth from heaven handing a crown to Christ. This symbolises how the TRANSCENDANT God become an IMMANENT God (in the person of Jesus).

The Tree of Life

- The cross emerges from a tree at its base. This is considered to be the tree of life.
- The image is, therefore, a reminder that all people are saved through the crucifixion of Jesus; his death 'healed the nations' because he came not just for Jews but for everyone.
- Through his death all sins are forgiven and humans can look forward to life after death with God.
- There are also lots of references to Genesis in the image; the tree at the base of the cross is perhaps a reminder of the tree of knowledge of good and evil in the garden of Eden. Adam and Eve eating the fruit from this tree against the wishes of God was the FIRST SIN OF HUMANITY.
- The presence of the serpent wrapped around a fawn this is drinking from the rivers of life seems to confirm the link, as a serpent tempted Eve to taste the fruit.
- The message is that sin ruins life on earth as well as the relationship between God and humans.