

What Did Christ Jesus Look Like?

THE MAN JESUS of Nazareth, or technically, the physical body elaborated and indwelled by the Individuality called Jesus and later by the Archangel Christ, has been imagined and imaged by thousands of artists in as many likenesses, each as much revealing qualities of its creator as of his subject. Jesus has been “imagined” because there exists no historically verified portrait of Christianity’s eponymous founder. In one sense, this is an extraordinary fact. The one human being about whom more books have been written, and more works of art have sought to portray—in wood, stone, metal, paint, glass, ivory, cloth, and ink—was not drawn by one of his contemporaries for posterity’s remembrance.

We will not treat here of the Shroud of Turin, which purports to be the burial cloth of Christ Jesus and does bear the image of what appears to be a crucified man with characteristically Semitic features. (See the November/December, 1997 issue of the *Rays* for a discussion of this subject.)

The one being who has had the most profound impact on human evolution and sensibility, so that his name is daily on the lips of hundreds of millions of people, remains somewhat of a mystery. We have portrayals of Alexander the Great, who lived three hundred years before Christ Jesus. We have artifacts that depict Roman emperors living before and during the time He walked in Galilee and Judea, including Augustus and Tiberius.

In another sense, the absence of a confirmed image of Christ Jesus is not extraordinary. The orthodox Hebrew tradition of not making graven



Engraving, John Sartain (1808-1897), Palinsky Gallery, Flint, MI

Jesus of the Emerald

“From the only authentic likeness of our Saviour, cut on an emerald by command of Tiberius Caesar, and given to Pope Innocent VIII, from the treasury at Constantinople, by the Emperor of the Turks, for the ransom of his brother, then a captive of the Christians.” Text at the bottom of Sartain’s print.

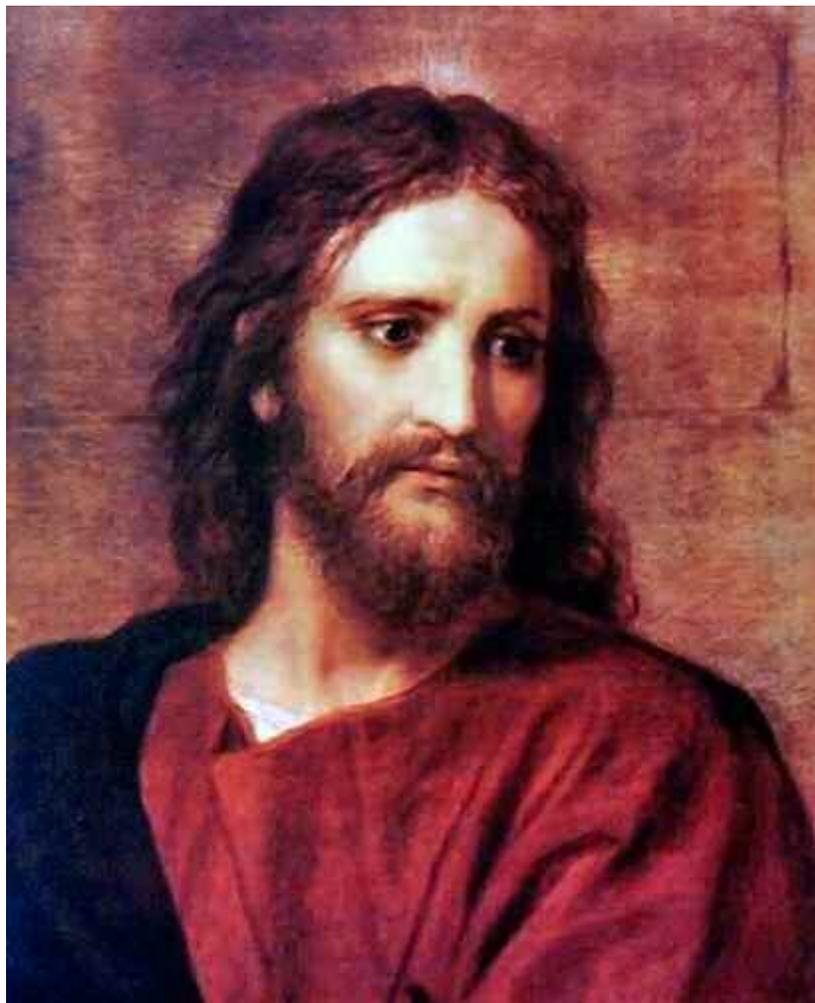
images for worship permeated the whole culture in which he lived and died. Portraiture was simply not practiced; whereas in Hellenistic Greece individual persons had already been depicted, and before that in the Archaic and Hellenic Periods (700-333 B.C.) generic humans and personified gods were represented, primarily in sculpture and bas relief, but also as intaglio on pottery.

The image of Jesus that may make claim to being most authentic was cut on an emerald by command of Tiberius Caesar and given to Pope Innocent VIII from the treasury at Constantinople, by the Emperor of the Turks for the ransom of his brother, then a captive of the Christians. Pilate had informed Tiberius Caesar of the appearance and work of Jesus Christ in several letters addressed to

the emperor and the Roman senate. In his book *Jesus of the Emerald* (Doubleday, Page and Company, 1923) Gene Stratton-Porter writes: "That Caesar had been deeply moved by the report brought to him [by an envoy dispatched for this purpose] concerning the work of Christ Jesus and by the subsequent nobility and attitude of his followers, is amply proved by Caesar's many acts of clemency to the Christians even in defiance of the rulings of the senate. In this I find ample and substantial ground for my conception as to how the likeness of Jesus of the Emerald was produced." The emerald is in the treasury of the Vatican and has been seen by various persons. An engraving based on this emerald by John Sartain, a London-born portraitist was made in 1866.

Christians who see representations of Christ Jesus know it is He, however He may appear, because they see Him as much with their mind's or heart's eye, they see him paradigmatically. The earthly narrative of the Son of Man has reserved to Jesus a sequence of ritual visualizations which illustrate spiritual principles or supernormal powers. By virtue of Who He is, Christ Jesus cannot be shown simply as another human being. He always is exemplifying an archetypal quality that inspires wisdom and wonder, arouses emulation and inner adoption. Knowing Him to be the incarnation of the Way, the Truth, and the Life, what manifests in Him is what we interiorly must discover, what we should do to conform our lives and even our outward physical person to the likeness of Him in Whom bodily dwelled the Godhead.

Any artist who has sought to capture the divinity of Christ in the physical body of Jesus has been challenged and inspired to portray certain human qualities in their consummate form, such as humility, love, quiet dignity, virile piety, for which He must serve as the Exemplar. Therefore, to be faith-



Heinrich Hoffman, 1824-1911

Christ

Albert Bailey in his book The Gospel in Art observes that Hoffman's portrayal of the face of Christ, "while effeminate rather than strong, has elements of beauty that make a strong appeal." It can only be "a partial Christ."

fully rendered, Christ Jesus must always manifest love, be it as infinite solicitude, in a compelling healing gesture, or with patient sufferance bearing human spite and ignorance. He will frequently be shown in communion with his heavenly Father, not on His knees, but by the tilt of His face or a posture that suggests being grounded in more than self-generated confidence.

Representations of Christ Jesus are iconic. They define ideal modes of human bearing and doing. They are avataric, signifying that superhuman power and divine intelligence have touched down, invested in, and magnified mortal flesh.

Particularly popular representations of Christ Jesus show him full of fellow concern and caring,



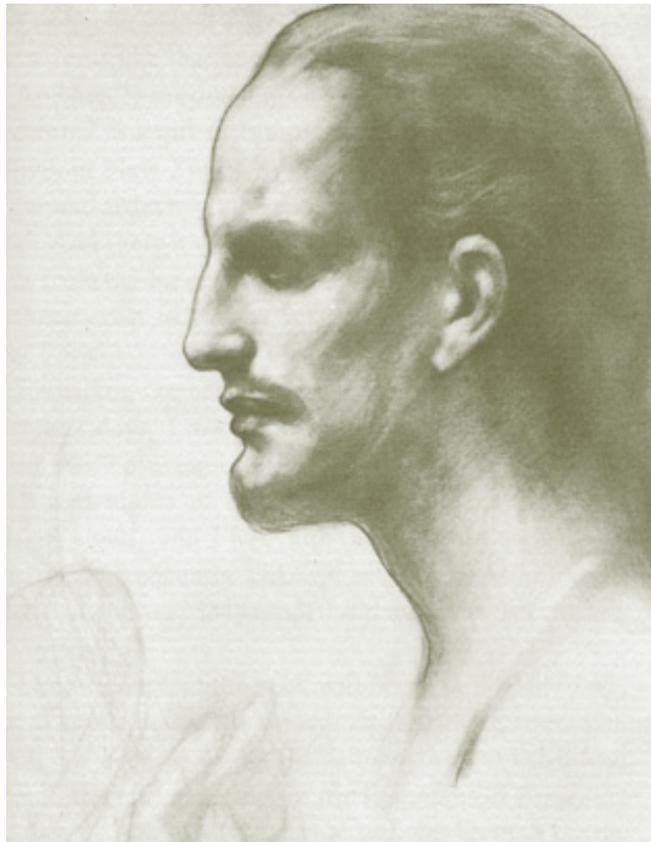
Bertha Valerius, 10 ft. x 6 ft., private chapel, Stockholm

The Prince of Peace

Forty years in the making (1856-1896) this painting was created "under guidance from the Beyond." Miss Valerius, quite untrained in art, was told by Angelic Messengers that this world should not dwell continually upon the dead Christ, but that it should rejoice in His living, loving Presence, here shown bathed in the Divine Light as He is glorified by the Father.

radiating empathy and pathos for the darkened human condition. Overemphasis of this quality may cause unseemly lapses into sentimentalism and mawkishness. Perhaps the most popular image of Christ Jesus that stops just short of a descent into the sentimental mode is the Heinrich Hoffman painting that evokes what might be described as the Master's beautiful heartfulness.

Is it important that we know what Christ Jesus looked like? That we have a photographic souvenir of Him? In fact, there may well be occult reasons why none is available. Not only was His spiritual identity an enigma, even to His disciples, His physical person was not apparently outstanding, either in handsomeness, physical impressiveness,



Graphitel, Kahlil Gibran (1883-1931), International House, New York City

Jesus, the Son of Man

As Barbara Young in her study of Gibran (This Man from Lebanon) says of his book Jesus, The Son of Man, "We behold the Young Man of Nazareth as we have never beheld Him." These words may also apply to the above drawing, which serves as the book's frontispiece, created by "a countryman of Jesus." Here is a Jesus with gravitas, whose eyes cast in shadow suggest an abyss of inwardness and power. Though in profile, this portrayal's affinity with the Shroud of Turin image is considerable.

or striking features, for such outward distinctiveness would have detracted from His purpose and drawn attention to incidentals. Describing Him Who was to come, Isaiah writes, "he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him" (53:2).

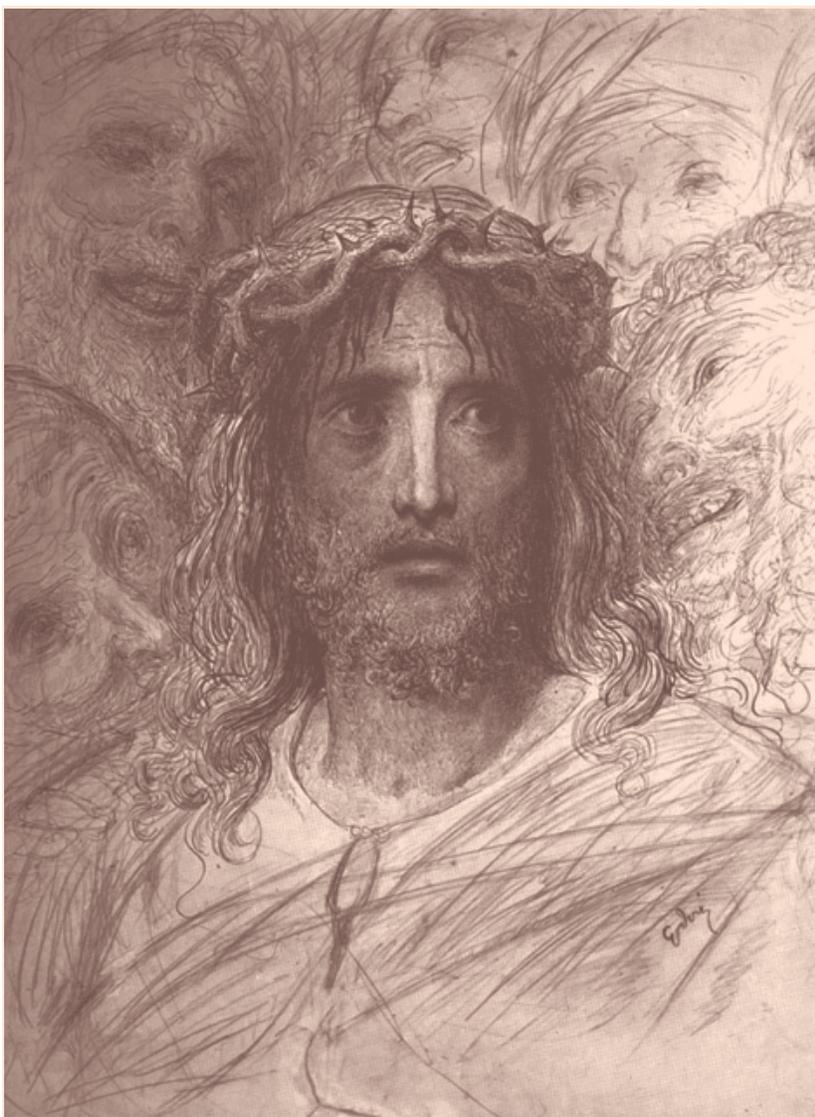
What made Christ Jesus authoritative, effective, and affecting were qualities of soul and spirit which shone through and radiated from his physical being so that others were deeply influenced by Him and yet they knew not why or how. Jesus could physically come and go as any common person, for attention was not called to Himself unless he intended it. So, for instance, after three years of ministry, this famous and infamous thorn in the

side of the Pharisees yet required an “insider” to identify Him for others, for there was a curious similarity between Jesus and His disciples when the Spirit moved among them and subtly molded their outwardness. Therefore did Judas not simply point a finger, he gave Him a kiss.

Again we are to understand there is a kind of sublime anonymity to Christ Jesus, suggested by His question to His disciples about Who He *really* was. For the traditional Jews, His identity was determined by His place of birth, Nazareth, and his genealogy, as the son of Mary and Joseph of the tribe of Judah. These racial and tribal typologies Christ Jesus came as a sword to sever and supplant with a spiritual lineage, bequeathed as by adoption through Him. Not blessed are the paps that gave Him suck, but blessed is he that does the will of His heavenly Father, Who is a brother not by blood but by spiritual affiliation and ordination.

Then what did Jesus look like? He looked like each of us as we appear in the eye of God. He looked how, as Christians, we want to feel, better, how we want to be. But seeing is in the eye of the beholder. A hate-filled person, a fearful person, will not see Love incarnate in the man Jesus. They will see a troublemaker, a blasphemer, a threat to their security.

The question “What did Jesus look like?” is a variant of the Messianic question asked by the Jewish people, “How shall we know Him when He comes?” Not by his features but by what he can do and does. For Christians, the ultimate deed is that Christ Jesus rose from the dead. Else is all their faith in vain. The Jewish criterion was that He would free their people, be their leader and ruler in *this* world. The Jesus they were looking for would wield magisterial authority and possess a comparably imposing physical person. He would cham-



Ink and pencil, 1875, Gustave Doré (1833-1883)

Head of Christ

A strong and poignant rendering of the Man of Sorrows surrounded by hard-hearted mockers, whose near-demonic faces reminds us that Christ Jesus contended with the rulers of the darkness of this world, with spiritual wickedness.

pion the political cause of His people. He would *not* be one who, oppressed, opened not his mouth, who as a lamb to the slaughter and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb and opens not his mouth (Isaiah 53). Yet this describes the Man Who was brought before the Jews by Pilate and to this Lamb of God, as image of their saviour, they cried, “Away with him.” Better Barabbas. At least as a nationalist (albeit murderer) he fought for the Jewish cause.

Finally, we may realize that no authentic likeness of Jesus has been reserved for us because it

would have been delimiting and misleading. If Christ Jesus' emphasis was on His spiritual and not His physical person, He would want His soul portrait shown, He would imprint on our mind's eye images of mercy, visions of healing, portrayals of willed mildness when mobbed by enmity, indelible pictures of the heart's world-overcoming passion, stations of initiatory living. Ideally, we see representations of Christ Jesus not as face and form but as divine gesturings, as epiphanies of the spirit, as showings of the heavenly through the veil of the worldly, as light-limned veronicas. We see not the static, freeze dried section of a thing, an object, but the revelation of life, of the redemptive principle itself, purely dynamic, that which made possible the first resurrection and enables humanity's eventual resurrection to permanently conscious etheric existence.

Further, consider several post-Golgotha details given in the gospels as they bear upon our consideration of the true image of Christ Jesus. What does He look like? One who was as close to Him as any, who even if from afar, while He was yet "living," must have lovingly studied and memorized his every feature, yet did not recognize Him when He appeared to her on Resurrection morning in the vicinity of the empty sepulcher. Mary Magdalene had to hear His voice, which gave a truer soul portrait than her physical eyes could deliver, before she knew Who she saw. Had Christ changed? He was using the same Jesus-donated vital body and had gathered sufficient

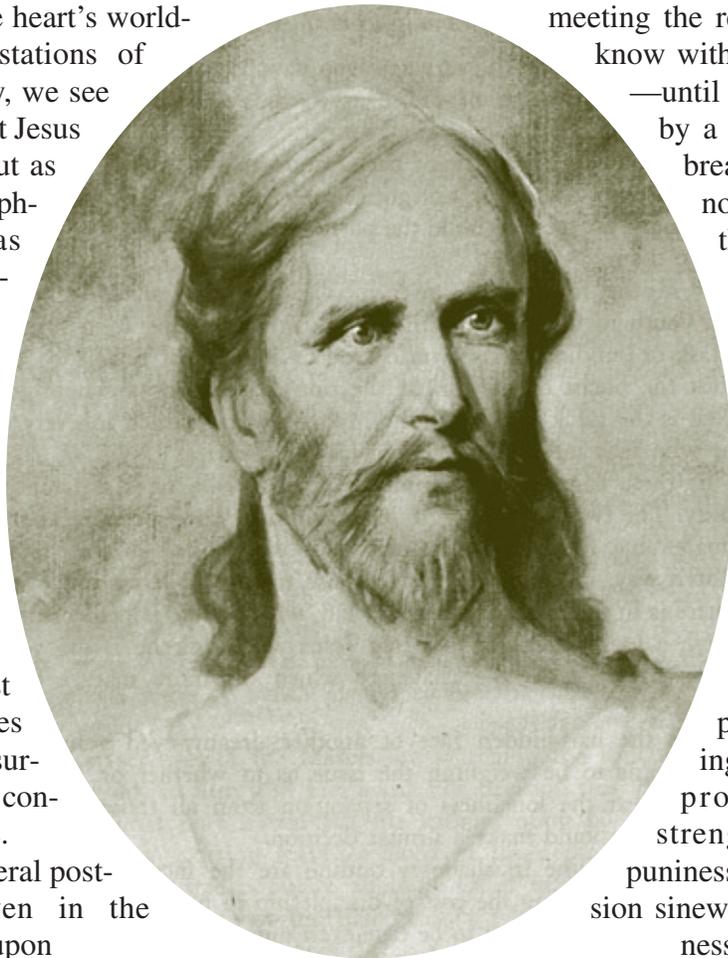
physical substance to be seen. His resurrection body was, if more attenuated, yet visually comparable to the pre-Golgotha Jesus body. But Mary was preoccupied. She was not psychologically prepared to see her "dead" master. Nor did the two

disciples on the road to Emmaus, upon meeting the resurrected Christ Jesus, know with Whom they conversed—until He identified Himself by a signal action, the ritual breaking of bread. Peter did not recognize the Lord on the shore of Lake Galilee until John informed him. Peter had learned, by thrice denying, not to see Him.

What do we learn from these examples? That we will see what and whom we are ready and able to see. An unconfessed guilty person does not see forgiveness. A critical person does not see lovingkindness. In humility a proud person sees not strength but offensiveness, puniness. In Christ's compassion sinewed by absolute selflessness one afraid of his own humanity may see but weakness and foolish vulnerability.

We do know who the historical Christ Jesus looked like. He looked like the love that ensouls and illumines

the face of whomever experiences it. For was it not His love that impelled God to give His Son to the world, Who had to mortify His glory, shrink His magnitude to inhabit His human house of clay? The glory was not obliterated, but it was deeply occulted. In most humans the glory is a nascent seed, this Christ spark. When we are active and loving Christians we see through the dark glass of



H. Stanley Todd, Missionary Education Movement, New York City

The Nazarene

Diverging from conventional representations, this "arrestingly modern" Christ with Nordic features is not the Man of Sorrows but supremely focused and confident. He might equally be called the Triumphant Christ, the One Who drove the moneychangers from the Temple and faced the accusers of Magdalene.



Detail, Andrea del Verrocchio (1432-1488), Orsanmichele, Florence

Incredulity of St. Thomas

In an idealized representation showing strong, regular features, this statue emphasizes the Christ Who has conquered the infirmities and weaknesses of flesh.

physical flesh; we see face to face, spirit to spirit; we see the Christ light beyond what must always, in comparison, be an unprepossessing exterior.

An unparalleled and unrepeatable degree of wisdom and divine assistance went into the preparation of the physical vehicles (dense and vital bodies) of Jesus. It is not exaggeration to say that an entire people was designated to serve as the womb in which he was to be formed and cradled. For such were the original Semites, whose racial seed atom was germinated in the fifth sub-epoch of the Atlantean Epoch of the Earth Period. In the fifth or Aryan Epoch the Semitic sect of Essenes were a people set apart for the express purpose of living lives that would prepare the purest and finest physical organism to serve the Jesus Ego and later the Christ Spirit.

Given this incomparable preparation, what irony that the flower and paragon of humanity should not have been immediately manifest as in every way

exceptional to his contemporaries. But the excellence was interior and subtle. Nor did Christ call attention to His physical (Jesus) person. Rather He sought to awaken others to their own spiritual identity.

If flesh and blood does not declare the presence of Christ in Jesus (Matt. 16:17), a depiction of flesh and blood will not disclose the uniqueness of Christ Jesus. It will not show Christ Jesus but Jesus, and this only in a moment of time. We are like John the Baptist and need the dove of the Holy Spirit to show us Christ. Still, there has ever been an artistic device for depicting the active spirit nature or holiness of a person—the use of the nimbus, and in the case of Christ Jesus, especially the Risen Christ, an aureole of light. It is light that most nearly makes visible the invisible, that reveals in the material world the presence of the immaterial. The aureole of light indicates the Sun regent's spiritual photosphere, He Who is the Light of the world. His nimbus signifies the full development of the etheric centers in the head.

While medieval Western and Orthodox icon painters, by the use of the halo and the aureole of body light, most consistently depict the presence of the transfiguring Spirit in the physical body, some later Western painters also used this device, and not only for Jesus. One thinks of Rembrandt, many of whose subjects give off an interior light.

Whereas artists must work with inanimate materials to create the illusion or suggestion of life, the Holy Spirit is the creative Intelligence that can awaken and elicit soul qualities from the raw materials of rude feelings and physical sensations and give reality to the beautiful and the true. In blessed moments we “come clean” of material limitations and are permeated by a generous affection, we are elevated by an impulse to adore God, we are flooded by a completely selfless giving-over to perceive and cherish the holiness of another person. These grace-filled moments reflect the living light of Christ's abiding presence, and it is something of this spiritual presence that Christ-centered art seeks to capture and convey, the presence of Christian virtues that consecrate the soul. It is an art that holds up an invisible mirror to the seeker in whom is revealed Christ, his hope of glory. □

—C.W.