

ARTICLES (2)

THREE MARYS ICONOGRAPHY (THE MYSTERY OF THE SKEWED SLAB)

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Before the conversion of the Emperor Constantine at the Battle of Milvian Bridge in 312 AD, and the emergence of Christianity from three hundred years of persecution, Christian art was a secret discipline, and such images as remain are mostly painted on the walls of catacombs. Apart from general Christian symbolism, such as fishes or boats, scenes from the New Testament also appear, although none, so far found, illustrating any aspect of the passion or resurrection.¹ These began to appear towards the end of the 4th century, representing a handful of specific scenes, and among the earliest, the most enduring and the most popular is a composite of several Easter morning elements, representing the visit of the Holy Women to the Tomb of Christ. From Mark we have three women (The Mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalen and Salome), from Matthew the guards, and from Luke and John two distinct burial cloths. The scene is sometimes entitled 'Quem Quaeritis' ("Whom do you seek?"), a question which biblically comes from the Garden of Gethsemane, but became attributed to the angel at the tomb as well.

The earliest versions of this scene that we have come from Rome or northern Italy in the form of small ivory plaques, either from the sides of religious caskets or the covers of liturgical books. Two or three women approach an angel who may or may not be winged, sitting on a hummock or rough rock, outside a square brick building with double doors, surmounted by a circular turret. A couple of soldiers, usually asleep, are positioned wherever they will fit. After a while the doors of the mausoleum are shown open, and a tomb can be seen inside, and sometimes a cloth or two lying on or in it.

It is clear that although the subject matter of these scenes is derived from the gospels, the architectural elements certainly don't. All four gospels clearly mention a tomb cut out of the rock, and Matthew and Mark mention the stone rolled against the entrance. Neither of these appears in Three Marys iconography for centuries. Why ignore the gospels, and where does the two tiered building come from? The second question is easier to answer than the first, and the best clue to it lies in the present Aedicule of the Holy Sepulchre, which, although it only dates from 1810, is probably based on the Aedicule originally constructed during the reign of Constantinople in 330 AD or so.



Here is one of the earliest Three Marys, now in the Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Munich, from about 400 AD, and a photo of the current Holy Sepulchre. The resemblance is striking. However some early Three Marys have a round lower storey rather than a square one, which may either be a more accurate depiction of Constantine's Aedicule, or possibly a reference to the vast circular cupola within which the Aedicule was, and

still is, enclosed. In this early ivory, note that the doors of the sepulchre are closed and the guards are asleep.



In this version, from the Castello Sforzesco, Milan, also from about 400 AD, the doors are open and the guards awake.

Below, from later in the 5th century (in the Cathedral Treasury, Milan), the doors are open, the guards fleeing, and the angel sits on an uncomfortably angled slab.



This is the earliest depiction of the 'skewed slab' I have come across, and its meaning is obscure. Whether it is symbolic of the earthquake mentioned in Matthew's Gospel, or Christ 'bursting' from his prison, a depiction of the stone 'rolled away' from the tomb, a reference to an Old Testament prophesy, a representation of an actual architectural arrangement somewhere, or some combination of these, has yet to be

properly explored. Nevertheless, from this time onwards, it becomes an almost essential component of Three Marys iconography.



This 6th century mosaic, from the Basilica of Sant' Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna, shows the 'skewed slab' inside the sepulchre,

By the 10th century, not only does the angel have something to sit on, and occasionally stand on, but one or two burial cloths can now be seen inside the Aedicule.



This 10th century ivory from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, shows the angel sitting on a 'skewed slab' and burial cloths inside the circular Aedicule, while the one below, also from the MMA, has a sarcophagus instead. Before long it was normal to have both.



The next development was the gradual disappearance of the Holy Sepulchre buildings, until by the 11th century they are rare, and the

sarcophagus and its lid are presented without architectural context. The angel perches awkwardly on the 'skewed slab', which is now often the lid itself, and the burial cloths are piled in, on or around the sarcophagus.



11th Century depictions of the Three Marys showing the skewed slab. The one on the left includes Quem Quaeritis text.

During the reign of Constantine XI the original rock shelf around which the Aedicule and Rotunda were built was so badly eroded by pilgrims that a new marble covering was placed over it, with three portholes (oculi) through which people could still see the real thing inside. This seems to be reflected in the iconography, although variations on the theme seem to lift the sarcophagus further off the ground.



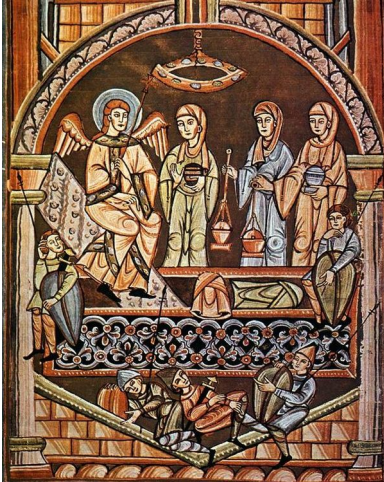
This is from the Nicholas of Verdun's enamelled altarpiece at Klosterneuburg Monastery in Austria. Although it is an 'Entombment', not a 'Three Marys', it shows the three oculi particularly clearly. Although there are 51 panels, the three Marys is not included.

The sculpture below, in the West Portal of St Gilles du Gard, also shows the three oculi, although here the tomb-lid is closed and the angel is sitting in a chair!



The introduction of the 'Quem Quaeritis' ceremony into the Easter ritual, during the 10th century, which became slowly more elaborate and eventually developed into a full-scale theatrical representation of the story, may have had its own effect on the development of Three Marys

iconography. The sarcophagus is sometimes shown raised completely off the ground, and the guards, or the legs of the mourners, can be seen underneath it. One or other of the Marys is sometimes shown carrying a thurible rather than spices.



While only two of the last four illustrations show the skewed slab, it continued to be a common feature of Three Marys iconography. Here are a couple of more classical paintings, c.1310 by Duccio di Buoninsegna (c. 1310) and c.1415 by Hubert Van Eyck, brother of the more famous Jan.



The theme of the Three Marys at the Tomb continues to be favourite of iconographers, and increasingly, recently, the angel has begun sitting on a round stone, although there is rarely any context for it. This version is usually called the 'Myrhhbearers' and seems to have appeared about 200 years ago. Here are a couple of typical versions, the left hand one from the 18th century.





The latest original version (as opposed to mere copies of iconographic style) of the skewed slab I can find is by William Adolphe Bouguereau, in the late 19th century.

The Shroud is sometimes asserted to be connected with the Three Marys, either they being derived from the Shroud or vice versa, and I hope it may be useful to put these images in context. It may also be connected with the *Quem Quaeritis* ritual. Curiously, though, I have never seen a Three Marys image, either before or after the 14th century, showing a shroud with an image on it.

¹ The single exception to this is at Dura Europos, on the banks of the Euphrates in eastern Syria, where a building used as a church has been identified dating from about 230 AD. On one wall are the remains of a large mural showing at least two women and a large box-like object with a pitched roof. This has been identified as a Visitation, although it lacks many of the traditional elements of the Three Marys scene, such as the angel, the door of the temple, the sarcophagus and the burial cloths which are almost always present in later iconography, and the women are carrying wands of some kind, which are not. It has been suggested that it represents the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins.

