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European Roots of Kerala Christian Art: Natural and Transcendental Forms

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ABSTRACT

Christian art in Kerala exhibits two prominent styles: European naturalist and Byzantine iconographic, each preferred respectively by reformist and traditionalist sections of the community across different denominations. Both the styles originated and evolved in the West and was brought to Kerala by the European missionaries during the colonial period. This is an attempt to trace the western origin of these disparate styles and their philosophical foundations. The transcendental forms mostly pervaded the middle age Christian art under the neo-Platonic influence. The naturalist tendencies reappeared again during the renaissance largely under the influence of the Aristotelian revival initiated by St. Thomas Aquinas. Both these traditions brought by the missionaries during the colonial period, was widely accepted in Kerala. The dynamics under which the naturalistic style got a preference among the faithful in general, and the attempts in the recent past to reinstate the interest in the byzantine style have kept them from exploring anything beyond these two prominent styles. Neither the reformists nor the traditionalists have attempted to evolve a visual idiom engaging with contemporary art practices. By analyzing this artistic trajectory, the article questions why Kerala Christians, despite their two-thousand-year-old heritage and proximity to a rich native mural tradition, did not develop a distinct artistic idiom of their own.

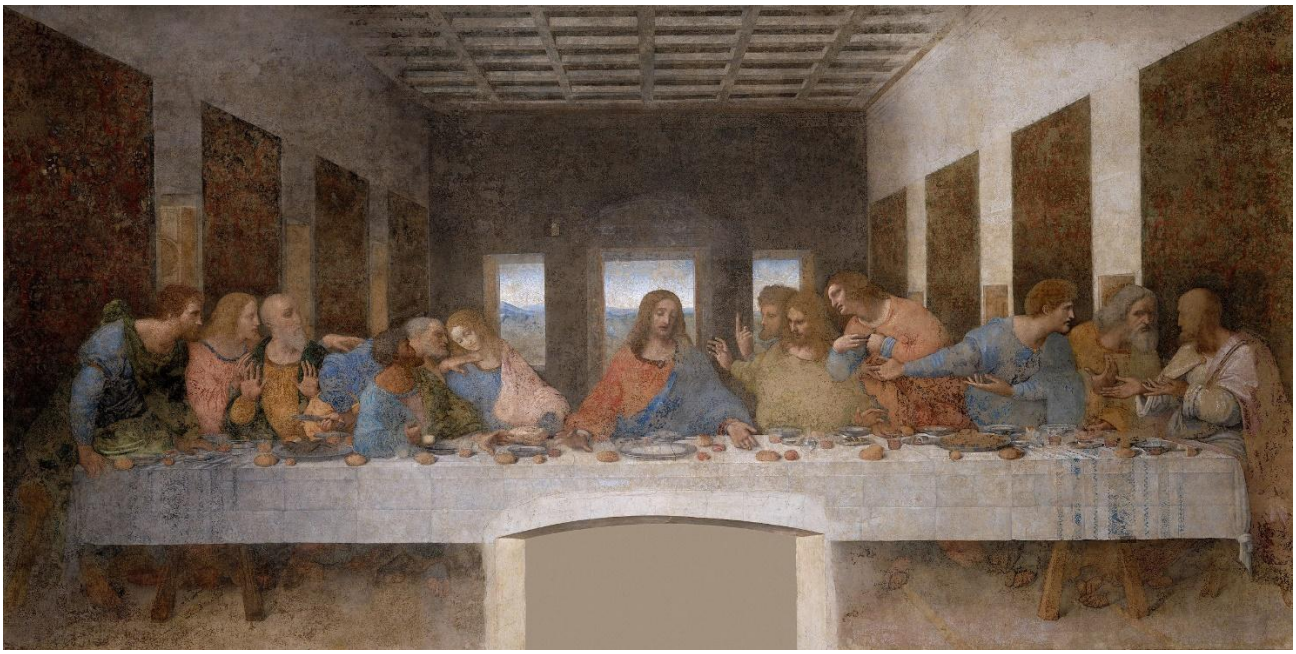

Figure 1 Leonardo da Vinci, *The Last Supper*, 1495–1498, Santa Maria delle Grazie, Milan. Public domain: image reproduced from Wikimedia Commons

Artistic Affinities and the Identity of Kerala Christians

Kerala Christian visual representations generally follow two styles. One based on the European naturalistic tradition, rooted in Greco-Roman aesthetics, revived during the Renaissance, and widespread in Europe. The other is the Byzantine iconographic style, which developed in the medieval period. European missionaries introduced both to Kerala, and St. Thomas Christians at large embraced them across the region. Over time, ecclesiastical divisions arose due to historical circumstances. These were based on allegiance to different patriarchates rather than based strict adherence to some doctrines. There were no apparent reasons for the emergence of such distinctive visual languages. Yet, each faction developed its own artistic idiom, influenced by certain undercurrents that shaped their choice of styles.

St. Thomas Christians today are divided into various denominations. But based on their visual idioms they broadly fall into two categories. The reformists who embrace modern adaptations, favoring naturalism and three-dimensional statuettes in their visual representations, though they do not entirely reject byzantine style icons. The traditionalists, on the other hand, adhere to age-old customs, preferring two-dimensional imagery, particularly byzantine style icons. How did artistic traditions from ancient and medieval Europe come to dominate and define Kerala Christian art? To understand this, one must examine the philosophical context of their origins. Because the intellectual currents that shaped early religious thought and art continue to influence artistic landscape of Kerala Christians.

This article explores the theoretical foundations of these disparate styles, their origins, and their role in shaping the distinctive identity of St. Thomas Christian communities. Until recently, the visual traditions of these communities remained largely unexamined. Existing studies are limited, with only a few isolated attempts to classify styles and trace their evolution in Kerala's Christian murals and architecture. Some writings merely appreciate the aesthetic value of these works, but none address how visual traditions relate to identity. Thus, this study primarily relies on visual representations rather than textual sources. The writings of Johann Joachim Winckelmann, Erwin Panofsky, and Umberto Eco provide insight into the evolution of European art in antiquity and the medieval period, while Frank Thilly's work informs the discussion of philosophical doctrines that shaped artistic development in classical Greece.

Kerala Christian Aesthetics: Competing Styles

European naturalism is a representational style that emphasizes fidelity to nature. In Kerala, this style dominates Christian churches and household prayer rooms (Figure 2, Figure 1), seen in paintings, bas-reliefs, and statues. Popular subjects include Christ, the Virgin Mary, St. Joseph, and various saints, all depicted with lifelike realism. Narrative scenes such as the Nativity, Holy Family, Last Supper, Passion sequences – including the Stations of the Cross – Crucifixion, and Resurrection also follow this tradition. The defining characteristic of naturalist imagery is its attempt to render figures as they would appear in reality.

Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* (Figure 1) exemplifies naturalism in High Renaissance painting, employing perspective, foreshortening, modeling, chiaroscuro, and depth through background-middle ground-foreground relationships. Michelangelo's *Santo Spirito Crucifix* (Figure 3) stands as a testament to naturalism in sculpture, where he rendered the human form as it would appear in nature. To attain precision in this style, artists studied human anatomy by accessing cadavers from hospitals. In essence, naturalism adheres to the ancient classical notion of art as mimesis (imitation). Its widespread presence in Christian centers and households across Kerala affirms the enduring popularity of this style.

Figure 2 Prayer room images in a Kerala Christian Household 2023, Image Credit: Febina Thomas

Figure 3 Michelangelo, *Crucifix*, Basilica di Santo Spirito, Florence. Public domain: image reproduced from Wikimedia Commons

While European naturalistic style enjoyed immense popularity among Kerala Christians, medieval Byzantine iconographic style remained confined to the elite and intellectual circles. It could be found in select churches, monasteries, seminaries, and on rare occasions with individuals. One exception – perhaps the only widely embraced Byzantine style icon among Kerala's Christians – is that of *Our Mother of Perpetual Succour* (Figure 4) especially among the Catholic denominations. This image departs entirely from naturalistic representation; the figures of the mother and child do not adhere to naturalism. Their garments and colors carry symbolic meanings rather than naturalistic accuracy, and the gold-leaf background eliminates any sense of a natural setting. The relative lack of popularity of this style may stem from the hermeneutic effort required to grasp its deeper connotations. However, neither naturalism nor Byzantine iconography is an indigenous style to Kerala – both were introduced by European missionaries and gradually spread among the Christian faithful.

Figure 4 *Our Mother of Perpetual Succour* (Between 1325 and 1480), Church of Saint Alphonsus of Liguori, Rome. Public domain: image reproduced from Wikimedia Commons

Mimetic Theory and Imitative Art

The visual culture of any region is deeply shaped by the prevailing philosophical and intellectual currents of each historical period. This interplay becomes especially evident through art historical analysis. The

ancient Greek thinkers defined art as "imitation," a concept that found its fullest expression in the naturalistic style. Nowhere else in the world between the 5th and 3rd centuries B.C. do we find a level of naturalism comparable to that achieved by Greek sculptors. Winckelmann praises this accomplishment and remarks that "the rule of Polycletus became the rule of art" (Winckelmann, 1765, p. 3).Polyclitus (*ca*. 460–420 B.C.), a renowned classical Greek sculptor, is best known for his *Doryphoros* (*Spear Bearer*) (Figure 5) and for formulating canons of proportion in art. Though his original text is lost, later writers extensively referenced his theories. As Panofsky cites, "…beauty does not consist in the elements but in the harmonious proportion of the parts, the proportion of one finger to the other, of all the fingers to the rest of the hand, of the rest of the hand to the wrist, of these to the forearm, of the forearm to the whole arm, in fine, of all parts to all others, as it is written in the canon of Polyclitus" (Panofsky, 1955, p. 64). He further describes Polyclitus as the father – or at least the formulator – of Greek anthropometry, adding that although other theoreticians of proportion existed, "… we know nothing but their names" (Panofsky, 1955, p. 64). Polyclitus' canon, which codified the principles enabling art to embody the mimetic ideal, emerged from Greek intellectual traditions. It was a direct reflection of the philosophical ethos of its time, demonstrating how artistic expression was deeply intertwined with contemporary theoretical thought.

The Pythagorean number theory and Protagoras' *homo mensura* statement played a crucial role in shaping the intellectual ethos within which Polyclitus formulated his canon. Pythagoras (*ca*. 570–490 B.C.) and his school were deeply concerned with form, proportion, and the relationships between things, perceiving an inherent order and harmony in nature. They reasoned that this order was governed by numerical relations, believing that numbers were the fundamental principles underlying all things (Thilly, 1914, pp. 19–20). Their conceptualization of the world as surfaces and lines, structured according to numerical principles, enabled them to understand natural forms with an unprecedented degree of accuracy.

Figure 5 Roman period copy of Polykleitos' *Doryphoros* (front view and alternate view) from the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli, marble. Public domain: images reproduced from Wikimedia Commons

Protagoras of Abdera (490–421 B.C.) contributed to this intellectual framework with his *homo mensura* statement, commonly rendered as "man is the measure of all things." The fuller formulation – "Of all things the measure is man, of the things that are, that [or 'how'] they are, and of things that are not, that [or 'how'] they are not" (Diels-Kranz, 2001, p. 4) – has been subject to various interpretations. However, scholars widely agree that it positions man as the fundamental standard by which all things are measured and judged.

The Greek understanding of measure is further elaborated in Plato's writings. In the *Statesman* (*Politicus*), art is explicitly defined as "measurement," deemed an essential condition for its very existence: "… for if there are arts, there is a standard of measure, and if there is a standard of measure, there are arts; but if either is wanting, there is neither" (Plato, Statesman, 1892, p. 485). He further asserts that "… for all things which come within the province of art do certainly in some sense partake of measure" (Plato, Statesman, 1892, p. 485).

Greek mastery of mathematical concepts such as proportion, mean, median, and measure allowed them to determine precise formal relationships between different bodily structures and with the art made imitating any bodies including that of the humans. This knowledge was demonstrated in Polyclitus' assertion that "… the beautiful comes about little by little by many numbers" (Panofsky, 1955, p. 68). Similarly, the Platonic theory of forms, which posits the existence of ideal forms in a transcendental world (Plato, Republic, 1888, pp. 214-220), inspired artists to pursue idealized representations of beings in mimetic art. Aristotle further expanded this concept, asserting that artistic representation could either reflect reality, fall short of it, or surpass it. "… it follows that we must represent men either as better than in real life, or as worse, or as they are. It is the same in painting. Polygnotus depicted men as nobler than they are, Pauson as less noble, Dionysius drew them true to life" (Aritstotle, 1922, p. 11). This may have served as a driving force for artists to excel, creating idealized images that refined and transcended the imperfections of the actual world.

These intellectual foundations shaped the mimetic art of the Greeks, whose achievements in naturalistic representation remain unparalleled. The Romans, inheriting Greek artistic traditions, not only absorbed but also perpetuated the naturalistic style, ensuring its continuity and influence across centuries.

Art: From the Naturalistic to the Transcendental

With the spread of Christianity in the medieval period, the style of naturalism gradually faded, giving way to a distinctly different artistic tradition. This shift is often misinterpreted as a decline in art itself or in aesthetic sensibilities, rather than being recognized as the transition from one artistic paradigm to another. Few consider the profound changes in philosophical thought that shaped medieval artistic expression. While ancient Greek thinkers largely concurred in defining art as imitation, they diverged in their interpretations. For Plato (*ca.* 428/427–348/347 B.C.), art was merely an imitation of an imitation – twice removed from true reality or "the form," which resided in world of ideas. Art for him is "… thrice removed from the king and from the truth" (Plato, Republic, 1888, p. 310). Aristotle (384–322 B.C.), on the other hand, rejected Plato's theory of transcendent Forms, arguing that form was immanent and not as a separate entity that resides in a transcendental world. For him, art was an imitation of reality as seen in nature, yet it could be imitated as better than they are, the same as they are, or worse than they are.

Plotinus (*ca.* c. 204/5–270 B.C.), the founder of Neoplatonism, also defined art as imitation, yet he proposed that it should not merely replicate nature. Instead, he viewed art as an imitation of the higher "Reason-Principles" from which nature itself emanates. As he explains, "Still, the arts are not to be slighted

on the ground that they create by imitation of natural objects; for, to begin with, these natural objects are themselves imitations; then, we must recognize that they give no bare reproduction of the thing seen but go back to the Reason-Principles from which Nature itself derives, … and add where nature is lacking" (Plotinus, 1956, pp. 422-423). According to him, true beauty of a being is not found in nature's imperfect manifestations but in its unity with the "One," the ultimate source of its existence. Thus, medieval art, deeply influenced by Neoplatonism and Christian theology, sought not merely to replicate the physical world but to transcend it, guiding the viewer toward a higher spiritual reality. The principle he suggests is that the beauty of a thing in nature shall be found in its fullest in unity with the "One" from which everything emanates. So, the "Reason-Principle" must be referred to for perfect form of the thing imitated rather than the thing in nature.

The Platonic tendencies were already deeply embedded in Christian theology during its formative years. The New Testament, particularly the writings of St. Paul, presents divinity and related concepts through the lens of Platonic theory of forms. This framework provided an effective paradigm for distinguishing between God, the Creator, and the world, His creation. Humanity, created in the image and likeness of God, was thus perceived as an imperfect copy of the divine, while Christ embodied the perfect image of God.[1] From St. Augustine (354–430 A.D.) until the time of St. Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225–1274 A.D.), most Church Fathers and early Christian thinkers formulated and articulated their doctrines within a Neo-Platonic framework. This profound reliance on Neo-Platonism significantly influenced the artistic traditions of the Byzantine Empire, which had become the most vital center of Christianity in the Middle Ages. The rejection of naturalistic forms in favor of more stylized and abstract representations in art can be traced to this dominance of Neo-Platonic thought. Artists sought to convey the truth and beauty that transcended worldly appearances. As Plotinus states: "And it is precisely here that the greater beauty lies, perceived whenever you look to the wisdom in a man and delight in it, not wasting attention on the face, which may be hideous, but passing all appearance by and catching only at the inner comeliness, the truly personal, …" (Plotinus, 1956, p. 424). Hence, aspiration for the transcendental beauty became the norm of medieval Christian art.

Neo-Platonic Manifestations in Medieval Christian Art

A brief overview of the characteristic features of medieval European art will help illuminate how Neoplatonic ideals shaped artistic practice. One of the most striking aspects is the hierarchical differentiation between representations of God, saints, and ordinary humans. Artists employed various methods to emphasize this hierarchy, visually distinguishing figures according to their hierarchical prominence. Among these methods was the hieratic scale, a convention also found in ancient Egyptian and medieval Indian art. This anti-naturalistic approach determined the size of figures not by spatial depth or perspective but by their relative importance within the composition. The most revered figures appeared significantly larger, while lesser figures were progressively smaller. For instance, in paintings of Cimabue (1240-1302), Duccio (c. 1255-60 – c. 1318/1319), Giotto (c. 1266/67 or 1276 – 1337) etc. the Virgin and Child are depicted on a much larger scale than the Apostles and saints, while patron figures are rendered even smaller (Figure 6).

[1] Similar thoughts are expressed in abundance in many of his epistles. 1 Corinthians 13:12; 2 Corinthians 3:18; 2 Corinthians 4:4; Colossians 1:15 etc. are some such references.

Figure 6 Duccio, *Maestà Altarpiece*, 1308–11, Siena Cathedral (Left); Giotto, *Madonna Enthroned with Saints and Virtues*, ca. 1315, Florence (Right). Public domain: images reproduced from Wikimedia Commons.

Positioning within the composition further reinforced this hierarchy. The most eminent figures occupied the central space or uppermost tiers; those of intermediate status appeared in the flanks or median zone; and the least significant figures were relegated to the periphery or lowest register. Measurement and proportion were no longer employed to achieve naturalism but instead served to convey spiritual prominence in an otherworldly setting. Additionally, halos – an iconic feature of medieval art – were used extensively to signify sanctity. Sometimes these halos varied in shape, including circular and hexagonal forms, to denote differing degrees of importance. Many were further adorned with intricate motifs, enhancing their decorative and symbolic significance.

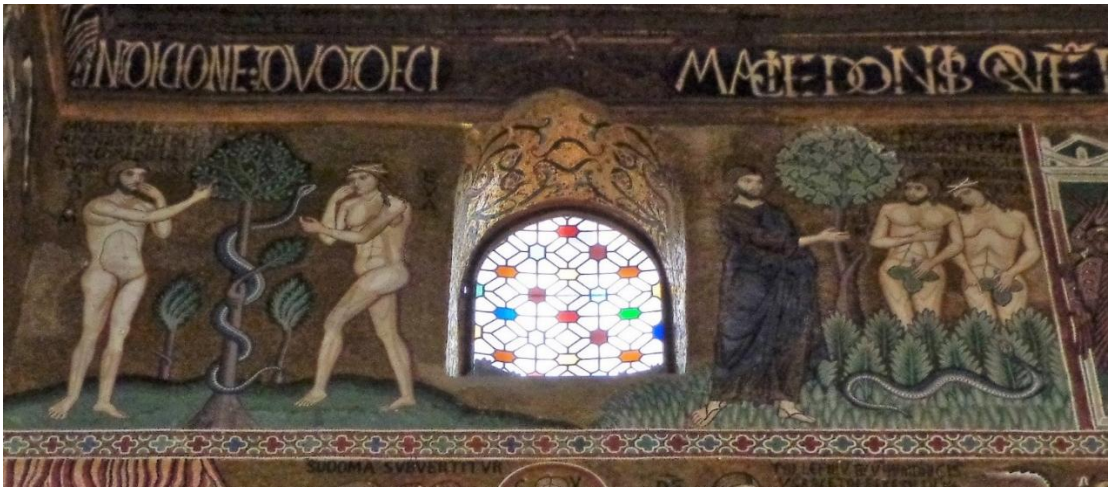

Figure 7 Mosaic of *the Temptation and Expulsion from the Garden of Eden*, Palatine Chapel (Cappella Palatina), Palermo, Sicily. Licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0; image reproduced from Wikimedia Commons

Medieval European artists largely rejected three-dimensional illusionism, instead favoring a style that emphasized two-dimensionality. Key elements of naturalistic vision—such as light and shadow, foreground-middle ground-background differentiation, scientific perspective, and foreshortening—were deliberately omitted. Their compositions relied heavily on lines and flat colors to reinforce a sense of planar abstraction. Naturalistic backgrounds were almost entirely absent; instead, symbolic representation took precedence. For instance, the depiction of a garden in the mosaic of Adam and Eve (Figure 7) was not intended as a realistic landscape but as a symbolic evocation of the Garden of Eden, as described in the Book of Genesis. More commonly, backgrounds featured gold leaf, flat expanses of deep contrasting colors, or intricate geometric and floral ornamentation. Sculptural practices similarly moved away from naturalistic representation, embracing the dominant stylistic conventions of the period.

Figure 8 Mosaic detail, *Pelican Feeding its Chicks*, Aachen Cathedral, Germany.
Public domain: image reproduced from Wikimedia Commons

Rejecting the techniques necessary for naturalistic representation, medieval artists deliberately employed methods that suppressed any mimetic tendencies in their work. Aligned with Neoplatonic ideals, they sought to convey the beauty and truth of their subjects as they existed within the "Reason-Principle," as the archetypal idea rather than as imperfect manifestations in the material world. Since the archetypal essence of these figures transcended their earthly appearances, naturalistic surroundings were intentionally omitted to prevent any association with sensory experience. Their goal was not to depict the physical world but to evoke a realm of religious experience – one that could only be apprehended through contemplation. Instead of portraying objects and figures as they appeared in nature, they represented their idealized beauty and truth as envisioned in the transcendental, heavenly reality.

Another significant aspect of medieval European art is its extensive use of signs, symbols, and allegories. Many of these allegories were rooted in scriptural and religious traditions, while others stemmed from legendary narratives or misconceptions that had no direct connection to theology. Often, such imagery served a catechetical purpose, making complex theological concepts more accessible to the largely illiterate laity. As Honorius Augustodunensis (Honorius of Autun) puts it, "Pictures were the literature of the laity" (as cited in Eco, 1986, p. 54). The intent behind these symbolic representations was not to propagate falsehoods but to convey deeper spiritual truths within a religious framework.

Through the use of metaphors, complex religious ideas could be communicated in a more comprehensible and visually engaging manner. For instance, although pelicans do not actually pierce their own breasts to nourish their chicks, medieval artists frequently depicted them doing so as a metaphor for Christ's sacrificial offering for humanity (Figure 8). Similarly, the unicorn, a mythical creature, appears in numerous medieval imageries (Figure 9) as a symbol of various aspects of Christ's incarnation. Even the use of color was not intended to be naturalistic; instead, colors served to signify specific theological ideas, figures, and virtues, further emphasizing the symbolic nature of medieval artistic expression.

Figure 9 Detail of *Annunciation with the Unicorn* polyptych (1480), Church of St. Elisabeth in Wrocław. Public domain: image reproduced from Wikimedia Commons

Why did the well-established naturalistic style that originated in Ancient Greece and became the standard in the Roman Empire undergo a radical transformation into an entirely different artistic paradigm? The answer lies in the worldview of Christian thinkers who adhered to the framework of Neo-Platonic transcendentalism. In their perspective, art was not meant to imitate the physical reality of this world; rather, it was intended to illustrate the reality of the divine realm. Medieval artists sought to represent Christian doctrine through images reflecting divine reason rather than by imitating appearances in the natural world. For the medieval European mind, every being in this world was seen as a symbol or revelation of the divine (Eco, 1986, pp. 54-56).

It was this symbolic or revelatory aspect – realized through contemplation – that artists endeavored to depict, rather than the sensory experience of nature itself. A dove, for instance, was not merely a bird but a symbol of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Triune God. Thus, instead of replicating the dove as it appeared in nature, artists strove to represent the divine/spiritual reality it signified. To emphasize its spiritual nature and distinguish it from the mundane world, they employed a two-dimensional style, deliberately rejecting three-dimensional illusionism. By removing figures from their natural context and placing them against abstract backgrounds, artists reinforced their otherworldly significance.

In essence, the artistic rationale of the Middle Ages was rooted in divine and spiritual experience rather than human or worldly perception, and this was reflected in its visual manifestation.

Aquinas and the Renaissance Revival of Naturalism

The naturalistic style of ancient classical artists was revived during the Renaissance, with artists not only restoring its principles but also developing new techniques to enhance its realization. This approach flourished for centuries, dominating European art until the emergence of avant-garde movements. Since its revival, naturalism has remained the preferred mode of representation in Christian art, persisting across the world, including in Kerala.

The Renaissance was weaved by multiple philosophical traditions, yet one of the most significant catalysts within Christendom was the intervention of St. Thomas Aquinas. As the first major Christian proponent of Aristotelianism, Aquinas challenged the dominant Neo-Platonic framework. Unlike his teacher Plato, Aristotle argued that form is immanent rather than existing in a transcendental world of ideas (Thilly, 1914, p. 78). Aquinas integrated Aristotelian principles with Christian doctrines that had long been shaped by Neo-Platonic transcendentalism. In doing so, he gradually dismantled certain Neo-Platonic premises, paving the way for a renewed focus on the material world in both art and philosophy.

Aquinas valued the use of allegories and metaphors in sacred scripture, believing they helped simplify and effectively communicate otherwise rigid and inexplicable divine doctrines through familiar worldly elements. He elaborated on the different layers of meaning within scriptural allegories and metaphors, emphasizing that the primary meaning of any scriptural text is its literal and historical significance. According to him, all moral, symbolic, and allegorical interpretations are grounded in this foundational meaning. The same principle applied to visual art – its primary meaning was literal, with all poetic or symbolic meanings dependent on it. He further asserted that, outside the context of sacred scripture, nothing in the world carried inherent allegorical meaning, at least for Christian believers (Eco, 1986, pp. 63-64).

Aquinas' arguments brought a significant shift in the medieval worldview. The beings of the world, once perceived primarily as symbols, signs, and allegories of divine revelation, gradually regained their literal meaning. His exhortations opened the possibility of seeing a dove first and foremost as a dove, with its allegorical meaning applicable only within the context of sacred scripture. This evolving perspective soon found its way into visual art. Artists now had the freedom to depict a dove in its naturalistic form, even when symbolizing the Holy Spirit.

Over time, art began to reflect human and worldly experiences rather than solely divine and otherworldly ones. At the height of the Renaissance, many characteristic elements of medieval art were abandoned. The hieratic scale and halo disappeared, and figures were placed within realistic, naturalistic settings. Whether divine, angelic, or saintly, all figures received the same artistic treatment. Artists reintroduced techniques that enhanced naturalism, such as relative foreground-middle ground-background, scientific perspective,

foreshortening, and chiaroscuro. Measurement and proportion were once again meticulously applied to achieve forms true to nature, especially in rendering the human form.

Figure 10 Passion Narratives (three out of fourteen images preserved) water colour on paper, St. Mary's Church Museum, Arakkuzha, Museum text suggests that Archbishop Joseph Kariyatty brought it when he returned from Rome in the later half of the 18th century. © Author

This transformation was the result of multiple intellectual and artistic advancements. Among those who contributed to this pursuit of perfect naturalism, Albrecht Dürer stands out. As art historian Erwin Panofsky notes, “The actual transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance (and, in a sense, beyond it) can be observed, as under laboratory conditions, in the development of the first German theorist of human proportions: Albrecht Dürer” (Panofsky, 1955, p. 99). Dürer’s efforts were exceptional among many artists striving to master proportion and achieve naturalistic representation.

This shift did not occur overnight but was the culmination of a long and multilayered process. Among the many forces that shaped Renaissance naturalism, Aquinas’ intellectual resolve played a crucial role. His Aristotelian outlook encouraged people – artists in particular – to see and represent the world as it truly was. As a result, the naturalistic style that emerged during the Renaissance became the dominant mode of artistic expression in the Christian world for centuries to come.

Coexistence and Competition of the Diverse Styles

Early Christian imagery first emerged in the Greco-Roman style but gradually gave way to the iconographic conventions of the Byzantine tradition following the Edict of Milan. During the Renaissance, naturalism began to dominate Christian representations, yet both styles continued to coexist even after this period. Missionaries who arrived in Kerala during the colonial era introduced artworks reflecting both traditions. The Synod of Diamper played a significant role in shaping Christian visual culture in Kerala. Decree XXIX of Act VIII, titled “Of the Reformation of the Church Affairs,” mandated that images shall be set up in all the churches on its principal altars and the side-altars if there are any:

Whereas almost all the Churches of this Diocese are without pictures, which was the effect of their being Nestorian Hereticks, who do not allow of the healthful use of Sacred Images; therefore the Synod

doth command, That in Churches that are finished, the first work that shall be done after that of the Baptismal Font out of the Alms of the Parish, shall be to set up some images, according to the direction of the Prelate, who shall always be consulted about every picture; and after that of High Altar is once set up, if the Church has any Side-Altars, they shall also have images set up in them, and on every Altar besides an Image, there shall be a Cross or some matter or other set up; and in all Churches that are large enough, and yet have no Pulpits, Pulpits shall be erected for the preaching of the word of God; … (Geddes, 1694, pp. 374-375)

After the Synod of Diamper in 1599, Dom Meneses wrote to a community of St. Thomas Christians in Thiruvankode about "…sending paintings, adornments, and all other things needed for him; for which there was an *Ola* and provision of the king of Travancore, …" (Gouvea, 2003, pp. 380-381). *Jornada* also reports that "And thus he provided many with pictures and big images, which he had also ordered form Goa, because none of these things were there in the churches of *Serra*,[2] … and partly because in olden times was accepted among Christians the error against the holy images, with which were provided all the churches of *Serra* with no exception with all that was needed for the divine cult and the celebration of the divine mysteries" (Gouvea, 2003, p. 454). Several local oral traditions, with no substantial records to support, corroborate *Jornada's* claim that many church images were brought to Kerala by missionaries. Over time, the Christians of Kerala received numerous such images, which were installed as retables in their churches.

Figure 11 Scenes from the Passion Narrative, Murals, St. Mary's Jacobite Church, Angamaly (Left); Mar Sapor Mar Proth Jacobite Church, Akaparambu Early 19th Century, © Author

Many church murals (Figure 11) exhibit a naturalistic tendency, as they were often copied from paintings (Figure 10) brought from Europe, the cradle of naturalism. Most surviving murals date to the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. By the early twentieth century, illustrated religious books also began arriving in Kerala. The devotion surrounding the fourteen Stations of the Cross, known as *Via Sacra*,

[2] *Serra* refers to Malabar, specifically the mountainous interior region inhabited by the St. Thomas Christians.

was particularly popular. Printed images depicting these themes became widely available in Kerala during this period, and many churches still preserve them today (Figure 12).

Figure 12 Stations of the Cross Prints from St, Antony's Church Puthenpeedika (Left), Puthenchira (Right Top), and St. Mary's Church Museum Kuruvilangad (Right Bottom) © Author

The most popular Byzantine-style image found in churches was that of Mother Mary and the Child, though various other icons of this kind also existed. However, they never gained the same widespread popularity as images rendered in the naturalistic style. The presence of Byzantine-style icons remained largely confined to churches and individuals with a particular devotion to them, with the most well-known being the image of *Our Mother of Perpetual Succour* (Figure 4).

The naturalistic style was favored over the Byzantine iconographic tradition because it required little to no hermeneutic effort, whereas Byzantine images necessitated interpretation. A crucifix carved in the naturalistic style resonated deeply with the emotions of the faithful in a way that Byzantine-style icons could not. Consequently, the latter remained largely confined to elite circles who found meaning in their symbolic depth and interpretative complexity. Naturalism, on the other hand, was more readily accepted in Kerala's Christian centers.

Figure 13 Sanctuary of St. Jude's Church adorned with Byzantine Iconographic Style paintings,1996, Kizhathadiyoor. Image reproduced from *Pala Diocese* website, https://www.palaidiocese.com/church-profile/159

In recent decades, traditionalist factions across various church denominations in Kerala have actively advocated for the reinstatement of Byzantine-style icons (Figure 13), promoting them as superior to other artistic traditions. This preference reinforces a medieval transcendental theological framework, often marginalizing contemporary realities and evolving spiritual needs. Meanwhile, modern and contemporary styles of Christian representation have gained little acceptance from either group. Even reformists have yet to fully engage with the evolving dynamics of the contemporary art world to develop a new visual idiom. Though such efforts have emerged, they have largely remained on the periphery. This raises an important question: Why, despite claiming a two-thousand-year legacy, did Kerala's Christians never develop a distinct visual art tradition of their own – especially in a region renowned for its native mural traditions, as seen in the temples and palaces of Kerala?

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