Westminster Abbey
Learning

Shapes and symbols in Christian art – teachers' notes

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All Bible references are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

SLIDE 3: What are symbols? Take answers.

A symbol is something that represents something else; it might have a hidden meaning like a code that needs to be cracked. Shapes can just be shapes but they can also become symbols when they are given meaning. Pupils might make some of the following suggestions to the shapes on the slide: heart (love, caring, character 'lives' in a videogame), cross (first aid, pharmacy, plus sign from maths, Jerusalem cross), star (golden star stickers, prizes and awards, space/stars in the sky, Christmas star). Symbols are a form of communication and this can be the same for shapes when everyone has the same understanding. For example, in countries like Poland the symbols sometimes used on toilet doors are a triangle and a circle, so everyone needs to understand what meaning these shapes have been given in order to make a decision about which one to use.

SLIDE 4: Shapes and symbols in Christian art

Examples of Christian art include, but aren't limited to, stained glass windows, wall paintings, wood carvings, missals, iconography and architecture, all of which can be found in Westminster Abbey, as a Christian place of worship. In Christian art, many interesting religious shapes and symbols are used to express ideas about Christianity. These symbols have been used both decoratively and as a way of communicating special meanings to those viewing them. In this lesson we'll focus on how the Trinity (God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit) is represented through symbols in Christian artwork at the Abbey.

SLIDE 5: Why symbols?

These are some reasons why symbols have historically been used in Christian art. During the persecution of Christians under the Roman Empire, Christian art was deliberately ambiguous and used symbols that had special meanings. A fish is a sacred symbol associated with Jesus - "I will make you fishers of men" (Mark 1: 16-18). Fish are mentioned and given symbolic meaning several times in the Gospels. This image (on the left) is from a Medieval tile found in the Abbey's Chapter House. Similarly, the ichthys (not shown here) is a symbol made up of two intersecting arcs, resembling the shape of a fish, and is speculated to have been adopted by early Christians as a secret symbol. It is known colloquially as the "sign of the fish" or the "Jesus fish." The Chi-Rho is a combination of the Greek letter chi (X) and rho (P),

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which are the first two letters of the Greek word for “Christ,” when put together represent “Jesus”. This Chi-Ro is found on the Abbey's High Altar.

Most people in medieval Britain were illiterate. Shapes and symbols, within Christian artwork, helped people understand the nature of God.

In some early Christian art, depicting God as a 'human' figure would have been thought of as unacceptable because of the second commandment, so this is another reason symbols might have been used instead.

SLIDE 6: God the Father

God the Father is the creator of all things. Christians believe that God has no beginning or end. He is thought of as eternal, infinite and omnipresent. Having the class 'draw' a circle round and round in the air can help emphasise the idea of a circle having no beginning or end, and therefore representing forever or eternity and ultimately (for Christians) God. In Christian art, a circle can also represent the infinity of Heaven. Pupils might also mention wedding rings, which in a similar way can be seen as a symbol of eternal love.

This image is a window from the Chapter House at Westminster Abbey and circles can be found in both the architecture and the stained glass. Often in Christian art shapes and symbols can be found within other shapes, which builds up layers of meaning.

SLIDE 7: God the Son

Jesus is the incarnation of God as a human being. This carving of Jesus is shown within a circle which emphasises his relationship to God the Father. The four-sided shape that Jesus also sits within is called a quatrefoil (meaning 'four leaves') and represents the four Gospels, the books of the Bible which tell the story of Jesus. What might all these shapes and symbols be communicating together?

There are also different religious hand gestures which can be found in Christian art. Like gestures we all use today (and which differ culturally but might include thumbs up/down, waving, the peace sign etc.), these have meanings to those who understand them. Hand gestures in Christian art often have sacred meanings; sometimes they are words or names "written" in Greek. In this carving, the positioning of Jesus' fingers unites Heaven and Earth, which is a gesture of blessing. Christians believe that Jesus is God on Earth, so this again is communicating the nature of God. These gestures would have been understood by people at the time this artwork was made, but people today might need help deciphering them.

SLIDES 8: God the Holy Spirit

The dove is a Christian symbol that represents the Holy Spirit but has other connotations as well. For example, after the flood (Genesis 8) a dove returned to Noah with an olive branch in its beak, revealing the end of God's judgment and is therefore also a symbol of peace. Additionally, Jesus told his followers to be “innocent as doves,” (Matthew 10:16) making the dove a symbol of purity.

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Pentecost is a Christian festival celebrating the gift of the Holy Spirit to Jesus' followers after the Resurrection. The name comes from the Greek pentekoste meaning "fiftieth" as it is celebrated on the Sunday 50 days after Easter. Ministers often wear robes featuring the colour red to represent the tongues of flames.

'Transfigure' means to be transformed or changed. In the New Testament (Mark 9: 2–13) Jesus leads three of his disciples up a mountain where they witness his transfiguration into full heavenly glory - his face shone like the sun and his clothes became dazzling white.

There are also other symbols that represent the Holy Spirit, including wind, water and anointing oil.

SLIDE 9: God the Holy Spirit

These images are from (L) a missal and (R) a stained-glass window. They both show depictions of Pentecost.

SLIDE 10: Trinity

The trefoil ('three leaves') and the triangle are shapes used in Christian art to represent the Trinity. This is because Christians believe in one God (just like the trefoil and triangle are one shape) but they experience God in three different ways (like the three petals of the trefoil). The triangle is one of the earliest representations of the Trinity, where the three corners and three sides symbolise one God in three persons. On the right is an image from a missal showing the Trinity. You could ask pupils to see if they can find and identify the Holy Spirit, represented as a dove.

SLIDE 11: Sacred geometry

Geometric shapes have been part of religious symbolism for thousands of years – this is known as sacred geometry and it reflects the perfection of God. This slide shows some of the different shapes used symbolically in artwork found at Westminster Abbey. Some have been looked at in this lesson and can be recapped (circle, trefoil, triangle), while others are new and can be used to extend learning if desired. As already touched upon, these shapes have meaning and are purposefully used to communicate certain things in Christian art. The square represents the Earth (the four corners of the Earth) and by combining the square (Earth) with the circle (God) this created an octagon, something between the two shapes, and represents Jesus, who lived a human life on Earth. These shapes are not only used in artwork but also architecture. For example, the Chapter House building at Westminster Abbey is octagon in shape.

SLIDE 12: Summary

We've learnt about some important shapes and symbols found in Christian artwork, which are used throughout Westminster Abbey to help Christians understand the nature of God, and to remember God in all things. This lesson has focussed on some of the symbols used to represent the Trinity, but there are many more Christian symbols which not only represent the Trinity, but other aspects of Christianity as well. Symbols, some different and some similar, are also important in other religions, and for different reasons.

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What other symbols have your pupils seen in a church? How many can they spot in this image of St Edward the Confessor's shrine? Although there isn't a trefoil or triangle, remind them of the importance of the number three – you will see there are some enclaves with three points at the top. As well as the symbols mentioned, they might also spot:

- A cross
- Candles
- A halo

SLIDE 13: Activity

This art activity is designed to help pupils consolidate their learning by creating a symbol representing themselves. Their artworks can then be combined into a collaborative piece which can be displayed, to tell the story of your class.

Christians believe in the Trinity; three in one and one in three (Father, Son and Holy Spirit). In the same way, we can all be thought of as one person with many different 'people' or aspects within that i.e. you are one person (yourself) but you might also be a teacher, a daughter, a sister, a mother or a friend, a footballer, a painter . . . You can model this to your class by designing a symbol that represents yourself and explaining why you chosen each shape or symbol. This might include symbolic shapes (e.g. a shape showing the number of children you have, or a paintbrush if you're an artist) and layering shapes for meaning (e.g. having your most important aspect encompassing the other symbols). It might be useful to brainstorm some ideas and how they could be represented symbolically.

These symbols could then be combined into a collaborative artwork to tell the story of your class. This might include ideas like:

- Creating a large canvas which each pupil can stick their (cut out) symbol onto, or print onto using a stamp created from lino or polystyrene.
- Adding each drawn symbol onto a display wall or hanging them from a line.
- If you want to use different mediums, having each child paint or draw their symbol onto a tile to make a mosaic, or onto a 'pane' of glass (made from paper) to form a joint stained-glass window display.

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