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Sacred art and iconography in religious traditions

Abstract. This study was conducted to provide a comprehensive examination of sacred art and iconography, as well as their significance in shaping religious identity and conveying spiritual ideas across diverse cultural contexts. Key stages in the development of sacred art were explored, revealing its evolution and impact on religious and cultural traditions. Iconography was examined as a distinct form of religious expression, highlighting its role in constructing religious images and symbols used to communicate profound spiritual meanings. The research also addressed key concepts of symbolism, which play a central role in the transmission of religious messages through visual imagery. Symbols such as colours, forms, and animal motifs were analysed to better understand their function in the formation of religious ideas and concepts. It was found that metaphors and allegories present in sacred art play an important role in creating multilayered meanings, contributing to a deeper understanding of spiritual and moral truths. The study also encompassed contemporary approaches to the preservation of sacred art, including the role of museums and fonds in safeguarding religious heritage. The use of digital technologies for creating high-quality reproductions of iconographic objects was examined, highlighting how such methods contribute to the preservation of these artworks for future generations and enhance their accessibility to wider audiences. The findings demonstrated that sacred art serves as a vital instrument in shaping religious identity, offering believers the opportunity for profound spiritual experiences through rituals and ceremonies. Iconography, with its intricate symbolism, emerged as a key medium for conveying religious messages, contributing to a deeper understanding of spiritual and moral truths. Overall, the study emphasised the importance of an integrated approach to the preservation, interpretation, and transmission of sacred art, which is essential for maintaining religious and cultural heritage for future generations

Keywords: symbolism; religious image; restoration; metaphorical approach; cultural heritage

INTRODUCTION

Sacred art and iconography occupy a special place in religious traditions, functioning not only as aesthetic but also as spiritual expressions of faith. In the contemporary world, where globalisation and technological progress are altering approaches to cultural heritage, there arises a need for a deeper understanding of the role of sacred art and its significance across various religious traditions. The current

approach to sacred art often focuses on isolated aspects, failing to account for the integrity of this phenomenon within the context of religious traditions. Furthermore, the increasing influence of new technologies on cultural practices presents fresh challenges regarding the preservation and transmission of sacred art. Concurrently, there is a growing need for dialogue between different religious

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traditions in the modern world, reflected in iconography, which serves as a crucial instrument of cultural mutual enrichment. These aspects necessitate a comprehensive approach to the study of sacred art, which will help address existing gaps in knowledge and foster the development of new scholarly methodologies.

The need for this research arose from the necessity for a deeper understanding of symbolism in the sacred art of various religious traditions, as well as an examination of contemporary methods for preserving iconographic heritage. Sacred art is a key element of religious identity, and its role in shaping the cultural and spiritual context of each religion cannot be underestimated. However, in the conditions of the modern world, there is a threat of losing this heritage due to insufficient attention to the preservation of sacred art and its transmission to subsequent generations. Furthermore, many studies lack a comprehensive analysis of symbolism and formative elements, which necessitates deeper theoretical reflection.

Research into sacred art and iconography attracts considerable attention from scholars who seek to understand more deeply the interaction between religious traditions and visual arts, the significance of symbolism in spiritual and cultural contexts, and the impact of contemporary technologies on these aspects. In this context, several key themes were considered, including the evolution of religious images, the significance of symbols in sacred art, and their impact on contemporary society. One direction of the research was the interaction between religion and visual arts, which was analysed through a bibliometric approach. H. Zhang and C. Zhenyu Qian (2024), in their study, covered scholarly literature from 1991 to 2023, enabling them to identify a growing interest in symbolism and its role in religious practices, and to confirm the importance of visual arts in strengthening religious identity. The role of church iconography in the spiritual life of believers also attracted the attention of researchers. V. Miron (2021) underscored the significance of iconography not only as a visual representation of religious doctrines but also as an important instrument for strengthening the spiritual connection between believers and their faith. His research showed how church iconography influences religious experience and plays a vital role in religious education within the Christian tradition.

Medieval art was also a subject of study, particularly regarding the interpretation of iconographic images in different cultures. S. Fozi (2019), in his analysis of Romanesque and Gothic art in Northern Europe, found that the iconography of these eras was adapted to local cultural conditions, which allowed for the preservation of religious ideas in various regions and ensured their transmission through visual images. Significant attention was also given to studying the origin and evolution of signs and symbols in sacred art. M. Bruce-Mitford (2019) researched the origins of these symbols and demonstrated that their meaning largely depends on the cultural context and religious traditions, making them important for understanding spiritual practices and religious perception.

Another important area of research concerned the interaction between spirituality and contemporary art. S. Arca (2019) found that modern artists often integrate sacred elements into their works, creating a bridge between traditional religious forms and new ways of expressing

spirituality. His research showed that contemporary art allows for a reinterpretation of sacred traditions in the context of new cultural realities. An analysis of Early Christian art revealed new approaches to interpreting its symbolism. T.F. Mathews (2022) proposed a new interpretation of Early Christian art, highlighting its role in creating a spiritual connection among believers. He showed that the iconography of this era reflected political and social changes while remaining an important element of religious life.

The role of public iconography in contemporary society was also a subject of research. A.L. Benedetti (2021) examined how religious symbols are used in public art to form civil religion and found that these symbols are an important means of shaping societal identity and consolidating the community. Another pertinent issue became the application of modern technologies for interpreting sacred art. S. Baroncini *et al.* (2021) developed models for describing iconology and iconography that help structure the analysis of symbols in sacred art. Their work underscored the importance of technologies for further study and interpretation of religious images.

Christian iconography and its development were also an important object of study. A. Grabar (2023) researched Christian iconography and emphasised its decisive role in the establishment of Christian art. His research showed how iconography contributed to the preservation and transmission of religious ideas over centuries. The evolution of religious communication under the influence of new technologies became the object of study for B.B. Albia *et al.* (2023). They analysed how technological progress, including artificial intelligence, is changing approaches to sacred art, opening up new opportunities for interpreting and transmitting religious images.

These studies demonstrate that sacred art and iconography remain important objects of study, requiring further investigation in the context of contemporary challenges and technological progress. Despite a considerable amount of research in this field, aspects remain that require further exploration, particularly concerning the comparison of iconographic styles across different religions, the symbolism in sacred art, and topical issues regarding the preservation of these unique works. This research aimed to examine the role of sacred art and iconography in religious traditions and to determine their significance for preserving religious identity in the modern world. To achieve this aim, several objectives were additionally set, namely: analysing the historical development of sacred art, studying the iconography of various religious traditions, researching symbolism in sacred art, and identifying contemporary challenges in preserving this cultural heritage.

In the process of the research, an analysis was conducted of the historical development of sacred art and its influence on the formation of religious identity. Defining the concept of sacred art allowed for a deeper understanding of its significance in a religious context, and the analysis of iconography, as a specific form of sacred art, made it possible to identify key elements that shape the visual language of religious traditions. The study of iconography in various religious traditions, such as Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism, allowed for the identification of common features and differences in approaches to sacred art, as well as an understanding of how different cultures

interpret spiritual ideas through visual images. Attention was also paid to researching symbolism in sacred art. The main symbols used across various religious traditions, their meanings and interpretations, were analysed. Symbols such as colour, shapes, and animalistic motifs play an important role in transmitting religious messages and ideas. Analysis of these symbols allowed for a deeper understanding of the metaphorical and allegorical approach in sacred art, which is key to comprehending the spiritual practices of different cultures. Another important aspect of the research was the study of contemporary challenges in preserving sacred art and iconography. The role of museums and fonds in safeguarding religious heritage was considered, as was the use of innovative technologies for creating digital copies of iconographic objects. Examining modern methods of preserving sacred art allowed for the identification of ethical questions associated with the restoration and conservation of these works. Separate attention was given to the role of educational programmes and exhibitions in transmitting sacred traditions to new generations, which contributes to the preservation of spiritual heritage in a globalised world.

DEFINING SACRED ART AND ICONOGRAPHY

Sacred art is an intrinsic part of religious traditions, reflecting the spiritual values and beliefs of specific cultures. It serves not only as an aesthetic expression but also as an instrument of religious practice, helping believers to focus on their faith and strengthen their spiritual connection with the divine. In a historical context, sacred art emerged as a response to the need for visual expression of religious ideas, symbols, and rituals. It encompasses a wide range of artistic forms, including painting, sculpture, architecture, and decorative arts, each fulfilling a particular function in religious life. The origins of sacred art date back to the earliest times, when humans began creating the first images and symbols that reflected their understanding of the world and humanity's place within it. For example, cave paintings created by primitive cultures can be seen as early forms of sacred art, reflecting belief in the spiritual forces of nature and animals. With the development of civilisations and the formation of organised religions, sacred art became more structured and regulated, acquiring characteristic features inherent to specific religious traditions (Stokstad, 2021).

Historically, sacred art fulfilled several primary functions. It served as a means of transmitting religious knowledge, particularly in contexts where the majority of the population was illiterate. Through visual images, believers could better understand and remember complex religious concepts. Furthermore, sacred art played a role in establishing and maintaining social order, underscoring the link between power and religion. For example, frescoes and mosaics in medieval churches not only depicted biblical narratives but also symbolised the power of the church and its authority in society. One of the important aspects of sacred art is its symbolism. The images and ornaments used in a religious context have multi-layered meanings, which can change depending on the culture and era. For instance, the depiction of the cross in Christian art holds profound symbolism, combining the ideas of sacrifice, resurrection, and hope for eternal life (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. The Cross – one of the main symbols of Christianity

Source: Encyclopedia Britannica (2024)

In the history of sacred art, there is a gradual evolution of forms and styles, reflecting changes in religious and social conditions. From classical examples of ancient Egyptian art to exquisite Byzantine mosaics and Gothic cathedrals, sacred art has always remained a vital element of religious culture, combining tradition and innovation. Iconography is one of the central elements of sacred art, lending religious images particular meaning and depth. It emerged as a necessity to create a system of visual codes that help transmit complex religious concepts through images. Iconography does not simply reproduce events or persons; it imbues them with symbolic content, making every element of the image part of a larger spiritual message. Unlike other forms of art, iconography is closely linked to religious texts and traditions, which determine the content and form of the images. It acts as a bridge between abstract ideas and concrete visual images, allowing believers to better grasp and embrace spiritual truths. Thus, in the Christian tradition, iconography developed as a visual commentary on Holy Scripture, providing believers with the opportunity to “see” the events and individuals described in the Bible, and through this, strengthen their faith. Iconography has a strictly regulated structure that determines not only the content but also the composition, colour palette, and even the stylistic approach of the images. For example, Byzantine iconography adheres to certain canons that dictate how saints, scenes from the life of Christ, and other religious subjects should be depicted. This creates a specific “language” of images, understandable to those familiar with these canons. However, despite this regulation, iconography remains dynamic and capable of adaptation under the influence of cultural changes, making it a living phenomenon within sacred art. One example of the dynamic development of iconography is the depiction of the Virgin Mary, which has changed over centuries in response to theological discussions and cultural influences. This image evolved from restrained and solemn to more human and relatable to believers, which can be seen in many examples of Western European art (Larson, 2020).

Furthermore, iconography plays an important role in shaping religious identity, as it not only reflects but also constructs the images that believers associate with their faith. By changing alongside society, it contributes to the

preservation of religious traditions and their adaptation to new conditions, while retaining its essential spiritual role. Understanding iconography as a specific form of sacred art is impossible without referring back to the historical origins of sacred art itself. The emergence of sacred art is closely linked to the development of religious traditions, which reflect fundamental aspects of a society's worldview. In different cultures and religions, sacred art emerged as a way of expressing the sacred, providing a visible image for the invisible divine, and also as an instrument for enhancing religious practices and beliefs. In the early stages of civilisation, sacred art was inextricably linked to rituals and religious ceremonies. In particular, in Ancient Egypt, art developed as a way of immortalising gods and pharaohs, who were considered their earthly incarnations (Fig. 2). Temples and pyramids were adorned with intricate reliefs and sculptures that had not only aesthetic value but also sacred significance, as it was believed they provided a link between the world of the living and the world of the gods.



Figure 2. Ancient Egyptian reliefs depicting gods
Source: The University of Memphis (n.d.)

At the same time, in the ancient world, such as Greece and Rome, sacred art also played an important role in temple architecture and sculpture, depicting gods and mythological subjects that emphasised their power and influence on human life. These images not only adorned the sanctuaries but also served a visual educational function, contributing to the spread of religious ideas among the populace. With the emergence of monotheistic religions, such as Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, sacred art underwent significant changes. In the Christian tradition, iconography became a central element of sacred art, intended to reflect events from the lives of Christ, the Mother of God, and the saints. Byzantine art, in particular, became a key stage in the development of Christian iconography, establishing canons that are used to this day. Islamic sacred art, in contrast to Christian, focuses on ornamental motifs and calligraphy, avoiding depictions of human and divine figures. This art creates a unique aesthetic where each element has symbolic meaning, and every ornament or inscription carries profound spiritual content (Dzalto, 2019).

With the development of religious traditions, sacred art continued to change and adapt, responding to new challenges and societal needs, while maintaining its primary purpose – the visualisation and glorification of the divine. Iconography, which developed in parallel with sacred art, played a key role in shaping the religious identity of various communities. As with sacred art in general, iconography served not only as a means of transmitting religious

knowledge but also as a tool by which believers could identify themselves with a particular religious tradition, culture, and history. Due to its visual power, iconography became an integral part of religious experience, influencing the collective consciousness and subconscious of believers. In Christianity, for instance, iconography shaped faith through depictions of biblical narratives, saints, and events from the life of Christ. These images not only reflected religious truths but also consolidated communities around shared symbols and beliefs. Byzantine icons, with their strict regulation of depictions and rich symbolism, became an important element of religious worship, providing a connection between the earthly and the heavenly, the material and the spiritual (Fig. 3). They not only adorned churches but also functioned as objects of veneration, through which believers could interact with the divine.



Figure 3. Byzantine icon of the Virgin Mary
Source: VintageLeGrecque (2024)

In Islam, although iconography in the traditional sense was not as widespread due to the prohibition on depicting living beings, ornamentation and calligraphy fulfilled a similar function. They became symbols of the unity and identity of the Islamic world, expressing the greatness of Allah through the beauty and complexity of geometric patterns and sacred texts (Fig. 4). Thus, even without direct depiction of the divine, Islamic iconography retained its role in shaping religious identity, particularly through mosque architecture and sacred texts.



Figure 4. Ornamental calligraphy on the wall of the Great Mosque of Cordoba
Source: X (2013)

Changes in society and culture also influenced the development of iconography, which, in turn, affected the transformation of religious identity. During periods of religious conflict, such as the iconoclasm in Byzantium, iconography became a battleground for the preservation or alteration of religious identities, reflecting internal conflicts and transformations within religious communities. Iconography serves as an important element not only of religious practice but also of the formation of collective identity, contributing to the preservation and transmission of spiritual heritage from generation to generation. Sacred art penetrates deeply into religious life, fulfilling important functions that extend far beyond decorative art. It is an integral part of religious practice, helping believers to focus on the spiritual aspects of their faith and establish a connection with the divine. This type of art, from sculptures and frescoes to calligraphy and ornamentation, serves as a medium through which religious ideas become accessible and tangible (Daskas, 2020). One of the most significant aspects of sacred art is its ability to create sacred space. Artistic works do not simply adorn religious buildings; they shape an atmosphere in which believers can immerse themselves in prayerful contemplation. For example, the use of colour, light, and symbolism in the creation of stained glass windows in Gothic cathedrals contributes to the creation of an elevated and spiritually charged space, fostering deep religious reflection (Fig. 5).

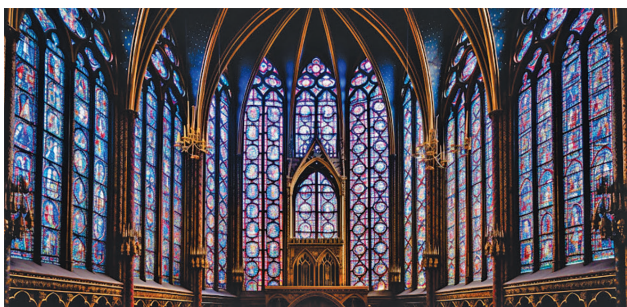


Figure 5. Stained glass windows in a Gothic cathedral
Source: Knights Templar (n.d.)

Another aspect is that sacred art is often used as a tool for religious education. Visual images can be just as important for understanding religious ideas as texts. Mosaics, icons, and frescoes placed in churches, monasteries, and shrines not only decorate the space but also serve as “books for the illiterate”, conveying biblical narratives, moral guidance, and religious truths. This allows even those who cannot read to understand and experience their faith more deeply (Dominte *et al.*, 2018).

Sacred art plays a crucial role in rituals and ceremonies, enriching them with aesthetic and symbolic content. Ritual objects, such as chalices for communion, exquisitely adorned crosses, or other sacred artefacts, are used not only for their utilitarian function but also as objects of veneration that intensify the meaning of the religious act. They become not just part of the rite but its important carriers, adding further depth to the ritual (Archbishop, 2017). It is also important to note that sacred art creates a sense of community among believers. Shared contemplation of holy sites, participation in rituals where sacred images or

objects are used, unite believers, strengthening their religious identity and shared faith. Art, therefore, becomes a channel through which the religious community feels its unity and strength. Sacred art is an indispensable element of religious practice, combining aesthetics with spirituality, creating an environment in which faith finds its highest expression.

SYMBOLISM IN SACRED ART

Symbolism is the heart of sacred art; it lends visual images multi-layered meaning, allowing profound religious ideas and sentiments to be conveyed through visible forms. Symbols in sacred art can only be understood within the context of the religious, cultural, and historical conditions that shape their meaning and usage. These symbols, while they may appear universal, often hold specific significance within each particular tradition, reflecting the characteristics of beliefs and spiritual practices. One of the most ancient symbols used in sacred art is the circle. It often symbolises eternity, infinity, and perfection. In Buddhism, the mandala is an example of the use of the circle as a symbol of the cosmos, reflecting harmony and order in the Universe (Winfield, 2019). The mandala not only serves as a visual representation of universal order but is also used as a tool for meditation, helping to achieve inner enlightenment (Fig. 6).



Figure 6. Buddhist mandala
Source: BuddhaNet (n.d.)

The symbolism of forms and geometric figures in sacred art is a powerful tool for expressing religious ideas, spiritual truths, and cosmological principles. These forms often possess a universal character, allowing them to convey complex concepts through simple yet profound images that influence the conscious and subconscious minds of believers. One of the most prevalent geometric figures in sacred art is the circle, which symbolises eternity, perfection, and divine order. The circle is frequently used to denote the endless cycle of life and death, the infinite, and the continuity of the divine presence in the world. In many religious traditions, the circle is also associated with the heavens, the sun, and other celestial bodies, underscoring its connection to the cosmos and the divine. For example, in the Christian tradition, the halo, depicted around the heads of saints, is an instance of the circle being used as a symbol of sanctity and divine light. Another important form is the triangle, which holds strong symbolic meaning in religious art. In Christianity, the triangle is often associated with the Holy Trinity: the Father, the Son, and the Holy

Spirit. The three sides of the triangle represent the unity of the three persons in one God, emphasising their equality and interconnectedness. In religious architecture, the triangle is used to create altar compositions symbolising divine order and harmony. The square is yet another geometric figure carrying deep symbolism. It is typically associated with the material world, earthly realities, and stability.

In Christian iconography, the square is often used to denote the four corners of the world or the four evangelists who represent the fullness of the Gospel. The square can also symbolise the New Jerusalem, the holy city described in Revelation, where its perfect proportions represent divine order and perfection. This symbol is frequently employed in iconography and architecture to emphasise the stability and steadfastness of the divine plan. The spiral is a form that also holds significant meaning in sacred art. It often symbolises movement and development, the continuity of the spiritual path. Spiral forms can be found in the architectural elements of temples and cathedrals, where they underscore spiritual progress and ascent towards the divine. The spiral can also symbolise the cyclical nature of time, continuous renewal, and transformation, making it a powerful symbol within the context of religious rites and rituals. These geometric figures and forms do not merely adorn sacred art; they serve as important symbols that help believers to apprehend and experience spiritual truths. Their universality and depth of meaning allow for the transmission of complex theological concepts through simple yet powerful visual images (Ujvari, 2020).

Symbolism in sacred art often includes animalistic motifs as well. For example, in medieval Christian art, the lion was frequently used as a symbol of courage, royalty, and strength. The lion could symbolise Jesus Christ as the King of Kings or relate to the Evangelist Mark, who was traditionally depicted accompanied by a lion. In this context, the lion became not only an embodiment of strength but also a symbol of spiritual guidance, authority, and steadfast faith (Fig. 7). It could also reflect victory over death, making it an important element in the iconography of the Resurrection (Saari, 2020).



Figure 7. Lion as an element of the Resurrection, embodying St. Mark

Source: Images of Venice (n.d.)

On the other hand, the lamb in Christian art symbolises Jesus Christ as the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world. This symbol is central to depictions of Christ's sacrifice, especially in the context of the Eucharist. The lamb is often depicted with a halo and a cross,

symbolising its innocence and sacrificial nature. Such a depiction not only underscores the spiritual meaning of the sacrifice but also serves as a constant reminder of God's love and mercy. Another important animalistic symbol in sacred art is birds, especially the dove. The dove is a traditional symbol of the Holy Spirit in Christianity, but can also embody peace, purity, and grace. Its depiction is often used in the context of the Epiphany, when the Holy Spirit descended upon Christ in the form of a dove during his baptism in the River Jordan. This lends the image of the dove special significance, linked to divine intervention and spiritual guidance (Tyrwhitt, 2023).

In Ancient Egyptian art, the goddess Ma'at, who embodies truth and justice, is depicted with a feather on her head, which also becomes a symbol of the soul weighed in Osiris' judgment. Such animalistic symbols serve not merely as adornment but carry deep religious meanings that convey complex spiritual concepts through familiar images from nature. Furthermore, sacred art often employs symbols that reflect the idea of transition, transformation, and rebirth. For example, the snake shedding its skin can symbolise renewal, rebirth, or even immortality, which is particularly evident in various religious and cultural traditions (Strickland, 2016). This allows sacred art to reflect deep existential questions concerning human nature and its relationship with the divine. Symbols in sacred art serve not merely as decorative elements but as key carriers of religious meanings, enabling believers to apprehend and experience the spiritual truths that lie behind these images. It is also important to note the role of the snake in sacred art. The snake is an ambivalent symbol that can simultaneously embody both good and evil. In a Christian context, the snake is often associated with the Fall, temptation, and Satan, but in some cases, it can also symbolise wisdom and rebirth, particularly in the context of medicine and alchemy. This dual symbolism makes the snake one of the most complex and interesting animalistic motifs in sacred art.

Animalistic motifs in sacred art play an important role in transmitting religious ideas and symbols, embodying profound spiritual concepts through the depiction of animals. They often serve as metaphors for expressing complex philosophical and theological ideas, making them more accessible and understandable to a wider audience. Animals in sacred art can embody various aspects of the divine, the natural world, and human nature. Another significant aspect in sacred art is colour. It carries far more than just visual pleasure; it is a powerful symbol capable of conveying deep religious ideas, moods, and meanings. The selection of colours in religious images, architecture, and textiles has always been considered and aimed to evoke specific spiritual feelings in believers, attuning them to the appropriate mood during religious rites and worship. For example, in Christian iconography, the colour red is often associated with martyrdom, sacrifice, and love. It is the colour of blood shed for the faith, and it is used to depict saints who suffered martyrdom, as well as Christ himself. Red in this context not only recalls suffering but also the power of love that transcends earthly torment. Simultaneously, red can also symbolise the Holy Spirit, particularly during Pentecost, when the apostles receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit in the form of tongues of fire. The colour green in religious art is often associated with rebirth, hope, and

eternal life. It is the colour of nature regenerating after winter, symbolically recalling resurrection and new life. In the Christian tradition, green may be used in a liturgical context during Ordinary Time (between major religious festivals), when the emphasis is on the spiritual growth and development of believers. Green is also used in depictions of paradise gardens, where it symbolises spiritual flourishing and perfection. The colour blue has its own unique symbolic connotations. In Christian art, it is often associated with the heavens and, consequently, with the divine. It is the colour of the Virgin Mary, who is typically depicted in blue robes, underscoring her purity, heavenly protection, and special connection with God. The colour blue lends the image of Mary an elevated, serene, and detached-from-the-earthly-world character, symbolising her role as an intermediary between God and humanity. The colour gold in sacred art also holds special significance. It is associated with divine glory, light, and eternity. Byzantine icons often feature a gold background, symbolising the divine realm where time and materiality do not exist. Gold emphasises the sacredness and eternal nature of the figures depicted on the icons, transporting them beyond the earthly world into the kingdom of the divine (Kosloski, 2017).

In summary, colour in sacred art is not merely an aesthetic element but also a powerful means of spiritual communication that conveys religious truths and attunes believers to a deep spiritual experience. Sacred art is a multifaceted means of expressing spiritual ideas, and its interpretation often requires a profound understanding of the metaphors and allegories embedded within the visual images. Metaphorical and allegorical approaches allow for transcending a literal interpretation of images, enabling a deeper understanding of the religious and moral messages they carry. Metaphor in sacred art is frequently used to convey complex spiritual concepts through familiar images or situations. For example, the image of light in iconography can be a metaphor for divine presence, truth, or enlightenment. In this context, light does not simply illustrate a physical phenomenon but also symbolises spiritual illumination that reveals truth and leads to God. In some works of sacred art, light is depicted as a ray emanating from the heavens, indicating divine intervention or blessing. Another example is the use of the journey metaphor, which is often encountered in sacred art to represent the human spiritual path. The starting point might be a dark forest, symbolising ignorance or sin, while the destination is light or a city on a hill, representing the kingdom of heaven or spiritual enlightenment. This allows for the creation of a deep emotional and spiritual connection between the viewer and the artwork, making it more than just a visual object (Kuczok, 2020).

Allegory, in turn, allows for the transmission of multi-layered symbolism through complex compositional solutions. In sacred art, allegories are often used to depict moral truths, religious principles, or spiritual journeys. For example, the depiction of a tree can be an allegory for life, where the roots symbolise deep spiritual connections, the trunk represents a person's path through life, and the branches and leaves depict various aspects of personal and spiritual development. This allows the viewer to perceive the artwork not merely as a decorative object but as a guide to understanding their own spiritual journey (Fletcher, 2021).

Both metaphorical and allegorical approaches can also be used to interpret more abstract religious concepts, such as sin, salvation, or divine justice. For example, the depiction of scales can be an allegory for divine judgment, where good deeds are placed on one pan and sins on the other. Such an image prompts the viewer to reflect on their own life and spiritual balance, encouraging self-improvement and repentance. Thus, metaphorical and allegorical approaches in sacred art allow for the conveyance of complex religious and moral truths through multi-layered images and compositions. They provide a deeper understanding of spiritual ideas and encourage internal reflection, making sacred art an important tool for spiritual growth.

PRESERVATION AND TRANSMISSION OF SACRED ART

The preservation of sacred art in the modern era is a task faced by museums, funds, religious communities, and state institutions. The diversity of materials from which sacred artefacts are created, as well as their age and cultural value, make this task extremely complex and multifaceted. Contemporary conditions for the preservation of sacred art include not only the physical safeguarding of objects but also the preservation of their spiritual and cultural significance for future generations. One of the main challenges is the impact of the environment on the materials from which sacred artefacts are created. Temperature fluctuations, humidity, air pollution, and other environmental factors can significantly accelerate the degradation processes of materials such as wood, textiles, paper, and paints. Ancient frescoes and icons, which can lose the vibrancy of their colours and the integrity of their structure, are particularly vulnerable to these factors (Peleggi, 2021). This necessitates the implementation of specialised preservation technologies that ensure stable conditions for exhibits, as well as regular monitoring of the condition of these objects.

Another significant problem is the human factor. A lack of proper education among those working with sacred objects can lead to improper handling, which may cause irreversible damage. Unintentional damage resulting from incorrect moving, storage, or restoration can have serious consequences for the preservation of sacred art. Therefore, it is crucial that specialists involved in working with such objects possess a high level of training and access to contemporary knowledge and technologies. The restoration and conservation of sacred art are important aspects of cultural heritage preservation, but they also give rise to several complex ethical questions. These questions pertain to both the technical aspects of restoration processes and respect for the religious and cultural meanings that these works of art embody. Restoration often requires intervention in the physical structure of a work of art, which can alter its original appearance and materials. In the process of restoration, a dilemma arises: how far can one go in renovating an artefact while preserving its authenticity? It is important to find a balance between the necessity of preserving the material integrity of the object and the risk of losing its historical and cultural context. Another important question concerns the restoration of artefacts that are objects of religious worship. These items hold not only artistic but also spiritual value, so any intervention in their structure must take into account religious traditions and

the feelings of believers. For example, some religious communities may consider that the ageing and natural wear and tear of an object are part of its sacred history, and therefore any attempt to “rejuvenate” it may be perceived as a violation of its spiritual meaning.

Ethical questions also arise in connection with the use of modern materials and technologies in the restoration process. On the one hand, modern methods allow for more effective preservation and restoration of sacred artefacts, but on the other, they can lead to a loss of authenticity of the work of art. For example, replacing original materials with modern equivalents can change not only the external appearance but also the symbolic meaning of the artefact. Furthermore, the restoration of sacred art can raise questions about ownership rights and access to these objects. Some artefacts may be the property of religious communities, and therefore, decisions about their restoration should be made in consultation with these communities. This also includes questions about whether these objects should remain in private ownership or if they should be transferred to public museums to ensure better preservation conditions and access for a wider audience (Boldrick, 2020). Thus, the restoration and conservation of sacred art are complex processes requiring a careful approach to ethical issues. These questions relate not only to the technical aspects of working with artefacts but also to respect for their spiritual and cultural value, which is crucial for the preservation of sacred art as an important element of world cultural heritage.

An important component of preserving sacred art is also the issue of funding. The restoration and conservation of ancient artefacts are extremely expensive processes requiring specialised equipment and materials. In many cases, a lack of funding leads to the postponement of necessary restoration work or even its complete absence, which jeopardises the preservation of cultural heritage. This is particularly relevant for religious communities, which often lack sufficient resources to finance such projects. Beyond the physical aspects of preservation, contemporary challenges also include questions of preserving the spiritual and cultural value of sacred art. In a world where technologies are rapidly changing lifestyles, it is crucial to maintain the connection between generations through cultural heritage. This demands not only technical efforts but also active public engagement in the preservation and study of sacred art. The absence of this connection can lead to a loss of interest in sacred art and, consequently, to its gradual decline. The preservation of sacred art under modern conditions is a complex task that encompasses technical, educational, financial, and cultural aspects. Only through the synergy of these efforts can the long-term preservation of this important element of the cultural heritage be ensured.

Museums and fonds play a critically important role in preserving religious heritage, ensuring the safeguarding, research, and accessibility of sacred art for future generations. They serve not only as storage locations but also as active centres for scientific research, education, and the popularisation of cultural heritage. In contemporary conditions, where threats to the preservation of sacred art are increasing due to environmental, social, and technological factors, the role of museums and fonds becomes even more significant. One of the key functions of museums is to create optimal conditions for storing sacred artefacts. This

includes controlling temperature, humidity, and lighting, which is critically important for preserving fragile materials such as ancient icons, manuscripts, textiles, and sculptures. Furthermore, museums provide physical security for artefacts, protecting them from theft, vandalism, and other threats. Museums also act as centres for scientific research. They grant researchers access to collections, enabling detailed analysis and interpretation of sacred art. This can include studying the techniques used to create artefacts, analysing the materials from which they are made, and researching the historical and cultural contexts behind the creation of these works. Through collaboration with universities and research institutes, museums contribute to the development of new knowledge in the field of preserving and restoring sacred art (Mairesse, 2019).

Fonds, in turn, focus on preserving documentary heritage that often accompanies sacred art. This can include liturgical texts, architectural plans, and historical records related to specific religious objects or communities. Preserving this documentation is important not only for understanding the history of sacred art but also for researching the context in which these works were created and used. Furthermore, museums and fonds fulfil a vital educational function. They organise exhibitions, lectures, seminars, and other events aimed at raising public awareness about the meaning and value of sacred art. Such activities not only help to preserve cultural heritage but also contribute to its transmission to new generations, fostering in them respect for and understanding of religious and cultural heritage. The educational programmes of museums and fonds allow people of different ages and cultural backgrounds to deepen their knowledge of sacred art and its role in society.

Digital technologies have opened up new horizons in the preservation and transmission of sacred art, particularly iconography. The use of digital tools allows not only for the recording and storage of images of icons, frescoes, and other religious artefacts but also for ensuring their accessibility to a wide audience, especially through virtual exhibitions and digital fonds. This is particularly relevant in the contemporary world, where physical objects may be under threat of disappearance due to environmental disasters, wars, or other factors. One of the key technologies used for preserving iconography is high-quality digital scanning. This process allows for the creation of detailed digital copies of artworks, which can be stored in electronic fonds and used for further research and restoration. Digital copies can also be useful in cases where original artworks have been damaged or destroyed, allowing their visual form and information to be preserved. Another important technology is three-dimensional modelling. This method allows for the creation of three-dimensional models of religious artefacts, such as sculptures, reliefs, and architectural elements. Three-dimensional models can be used for detailed analysis of the structure and materials from which artefacts are made, as well as for the virtual reconstruction of damaged or lost parts. Furthermore, three-dimensional models can be integrated into virtual museums, where they are accessible for study and viewing without the need for physical contact with the originals. A significant aspect of using digital technologies is also the creation of digital fonds and databases. These resources allow for the storage not only of images and models of religious artefacts but also of

accompanying information, such as historical data and information about the materials and techniques used in creating the works of art. This approach ensures the comprehensive preservation of iconography, including both physical and contextual aspects (Marra *et al.*, 2021).

Digital technologies also open up new possibilities for popularising sacred art. Virtual exhibitions and online collections allow a wide range of people to become acquainted with religious art without leaving their homes. This is particularly important for those who do not have the opportunity to visit the museums or religious sites where these works of art are held. Online resources can also be used for educational purposes, helping students and researchers to access rare or hard-to-obtain materials (Gahtan, 2022). The transmission of religious traditions and the preservation of sacred art largely depend on the effectiveness of educational programmes and exhibition activities. In the contemporary world, where younger generations are increasingly distancing themselves from religious practice and cultural heritage, educational initiatives and exhibitions are becoming critically important tools for preserving and disseminating knowledge about sacred art. Educational programmes focused on the study of sacred art help to develop an understanding and appreciation of cultural heritage among students, researchers, and the wider public. They can encompass different levels of education – from primary schools to universities, where teaching can include not only theoretical knowledge but also practical sessions. Such programmes may involve lectures, seminars, workshops, and practical work, where students have the opportunity to study the techniques used to create sacred works, their symbolism, and historical context. This allows not only for a deeper understanding of sacred art but also contributes to the development of critical thinking regarding its significance in contemporary society (JagielskaBurduk *et al.*, 2021).

Exhibitions dedicated to sacred art also play a key role in the transmission of traditions and the popularisation of cultural heritage. They allow a wide audience to become directly acquainted with works of religious art, contributing to a deeper understanding of their meaning and influence. It is important that exhibitions can be organised not only in traditional museum spaces but also in religious institutions, where they can become part of the spiritual life of the community. This allows for the creation of a living connection between art and religious practice, which is essential for preserving cultural heritage. Contemporary exhibitions increasingly utilise multimedia technologies that enable interactive engagement with exhibits, significantly enhancing visitor involvement. Virtual tours, animations, and other digital elements can make exhibitions accessible to people from different parts of the world, expanding their impact and promoting a global exchange of cultural knowledge. This also provides the opportunity to virtually reconstruct the lost context of sacred artefacts, adding new dimensions to their perception. Furthermore, exhibitions can foster intercultural dialogue. They can bring together works of sacred art from different religions and cultures, highlighting common features and the uniqueness of each tradition. This promotes understanding and respect between different religious communities and expands knowledge about the diversity of global cultural heritage.

CONCLUSIONS

Research into sacred art and iconography has revealed several key aspects that define their significance and role in religious and cultural contexts. Sacred art plays an important role in religious life, being not only an aesthetic phenomenon but also a carrier of profound religious ideas and spiritual practices. The historical development of this art demonstrates its ability to adapt to changes in society while retaining its fundamental mission – the expression of the divine through visual images. Iconography, as a specific form of sacred art, is of decisive importance in transmitting complex religious messages. The use of visual symbols containing multi-layered symbolism allows iconography to function as a deep communicator between religion and society. The research underscores that this form of art is structured and ordered, enabling it to clearly convey religious ideas and principles, forming religious narratives that are perceived and interpreted by believers.

The study of the evolution of sacred art in different religious traditions shows its ability to reflect not only spiritual but also social changes. This art mirrors the transformations occurring in religious and social conditions, while maintaining its capacity to integrate new elements that emerge in response to societal changes. Iconography contributes to the formation of religious identity, uniting religious communities and providing them with the means to express their faith. This ensures not only a spiritual experience through rituals and ceremonies but also strengthens the connection between believers and their religious traditions. Research into symbolism in sacred art has also revealed the importance of elements such as colours, animalistic motifs, and geometric figures. These elements play a vital role in transmitting religious ideas and provide a deep level of understanding of religious concepts. Metaphors and allegories, which are frequently used in sacred art, serve as tools for conveying multi-layered spiritual and moral truths, fostering a deeper apprehension and interpretation of religious messages.

The preservation of sacred art is an extremely important task that requires attention to environmental, technical, and social factors. Museums and fonds have proven to be key institutions in this field, playing a significant role in safeguarding religious heritage and popularising sacred art. They not only preserve these works of art but also actively work towards their presentation to a wide audience, thereby contributing to their understanding and interpretation. The use of digital technologies, such as scanning and 3D modelling, significantly expands the possibilities for preserving iconography. These technologies allow not only for the safeguarding of works of art but also for making them accessible to a wider audience, including researchers, students, and the general public. This is a crucial step in ensuring access to sacred art for future generations.

Educational programmes and exhibitions play a decisive role in the transmission of sacred art traditions, engaging new generations in the learning and preservation of cultural heritage. Concurrently, the ethical questions associated with the restoration and conservation of sacred art underscore the necessity of preserving the authenticity and spiritual meaning of these works, which is critically

important for safeguarding religious and cultural heritage for future generations. Overall, the research highlights the importance of a comprehensive approach to the preservation, interpretation, and transmission of sacred art, which is crucial for ensuring its longevity and significance amidst continuous societal changes. Prospective directions for further research include examining the impact of digital technologies on the preservation of sacred art and investigating intercultural interaction through sacred art in the context of the modern world. A limitation of the study is its focus on specific aspects of sacred art and iconography without

a deep analysis of their variations across different religious and cultural contexts.

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Сакральне мистецтво та іконографія в релігійних традиціях

Анотація. Дослідження було проведено з метою всебічного вивчення сакрального мистецтва та іконографії, а також їхнього значення у формуванні релігійної ідентичності та передачі духовних ідей у різних культурних контекстах. Вивчались основні етапи розвитку сакрального мистецтва, що дозволило виявити його еволюцію та вплив на релігійні та культурні традиції. Вивчення іконографії як специфічної форми релігійного вираження допомогло розкрити її роль у структурі релігійних образів і символів, які використовуються для передачі глибоких духовних значень. У процесі дослідження були розглянуті основні поняття символізму, який є центральним елементом у передачі релігійних послань через візуальні образи. Символи, такі як кольори, форми та анімалістичні мотиви, були проаналізовані з метою розуміння їхньої ролі у формуванні релігійних ідей та концепцій. Було встановлено, що метафори та алегорії, присутні у сакральному мистецтві, відіграють важливу роль у створенні багатозначних значень, що сприяють глибшому розумінню духовних і моральних істин. Дослідження також охоплювало сучасні підходи до збереження сакрального мистецтва, включаючи роль музеїв та архівів у забезпеченні збереження релігійної спадщини. Було досліджено застосування цифрових технологій для створення високоякісних копій іконографічних об'єктів, що дозволяє зберегти ці твори мистецтва для майбутніх поколінь і зробити їх доступними для ширшої аудиторії. Результати дослідження показали, що сакральне мистецтво є важливим інструментом у формуванні релігійної ідентичності, забезпечуючи вірянам можливість глибокого духовного досвіду через ритуали та обряди. Іконографія, зі своєю складною символікою, виявилася ключовим засобом для передачі релігійних послань, що сприяє поглибленню розуміння духовних і моральних істин. Загалом, дослідження підкреслило важливість комплексного підходу до збереження, інтерпретації та передачі сакрального мистецтва, який є ключовим для збереження релігійної та культурної спадщини для майбутніх поколінь

Ключові слова: символізм; релігійні зображення; реставрація; метафоричний підхід; культурна спадщина