Invented traditions: Latin terminology and the writing of art history

Robert Couzin

Words matter: in totalitarian propaganda, commercial marketing and, without the sinister or mercantile implications, in the specialist vocabulary of academic discourse. Bespoke terminology redefines existing words, imports foreign locutions and coins neologisms. Its functions are both utilitarian and normative. A prescribed lexicon can facilitate concise reference to important and novel concepts while also advancing an intellectual, social, economic or political agenda.

The literature of art history\(^1\) includes many examples of loaded terminology. Some are old and have lost their edge. ‘Gothic’ architecture no longer evokes the original pejorative connotations;\(^2\) ‘Middle Ages’ and ‘Renaissance’ still confuse periodization but retain only a pale reflection of their partisan beginnings.\(^3\) In other cases, however, the implications of nomenclature remain a live concern, as in tendentious ethnic identifiers and categories like ‘Insular’ or ‘Crusader’ art.\(^4\) A broad examination of the discipline’s technical language would be invaluable in deepening the understanding of its historiography. This article focuses on a restricted subset of art historical terminology, the use of Latin words and expressions.

When such linguistic borrowing accurately reflects period usage its preservation may be natural and efficient. No modern term can fully capture the sense of *refrigerium* (an intermediate state between death and paradise posited by early Christian theologians), *pomerium* (the sacred boundary of Republican and Imperial Rome) or topographical designations of funerary catacombs like *loculus*, *arcosolium*, *hypogeum* and *cubiculum*. In other instances, reasonable translations are available but the Latin term is still preferable because of its authority: the *Ara Pacis* can correctly be called the Altar of Peace but the Latin name was provided by

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\(^{1}\) For simplicity, this disciplinary title will be used to encompass the historical study of visual and material culture.  
Augustus himself. Some terms are not strictly authentic but come close enough for practical use. The precise phrase *damnatio memoriae* is not found in antique sources but the two root words appear in close conjunction and convey the same meaning as ascribed to the pithy modern construction. *Columbarium* may not have actually applied to Roman structures comprising rows of niches for ash urns but it was used for individual niches (or pairs); the whimsical association of the dovecote and the tomb is not, therefore, modern. On the other hand, Latin words like *Urbs* for the city of Rome and *Imperium* for its empire are authentic but, unless meant to evoke written sources or particular antique conceptions, generally unnecessary and sometimes pretentious. Conversely, Latin can be too hastily abandoned. The vegetation under which the prophet Jonah is commonly depicted at rest in early Christian art might better be called *cucurbita* than ‘vine’ or ‘gourd plant’, since the botanical species understood by early viewers remains uncertain.

Apart from the retention of authentic or nearly authentic Latin expressions, some classical words may be retrieved to fill a gap in vernacular nomenclature. This explains the adoption of *mores* by modern social scientists for a collection of sanctioned cultural norms. An analogous appropriation in art history might be *spolia*. In the academic setting, such terms derive their meanings from professional consensus, not antique philology or original usage. The connection between *spolia* and its old meaning of booty from war or violence is essentially metaphorical.
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Calling elements of the Arch of Constantine in Rome or Charlemagne’s Palatine Chapel in Aachen *spolia* is not an assertion regarding the language of the architects.

The working hypothesis of this study is that not all Latin expressions in the technical toolkit of art history are benign, and that their potency is enhanced by the classical idiom. Under modern publishing conventions, these terms are generally printed in italics or between inverted commas, attracting the reader’s visual and intellectual attention. They seem elegant and erudite compared to the mundane vernacular. And, like any specialised vocabulary, they fortify the experience of scholarly community and possibly a certain uniformity of opinion. Latin nomenclate may channel or deflect the course of art historical analysis.

New language for new concepts

Theodor Mommsen was a giant among Romanists. His first work in the field, published in 1843 at age 26, dealt with the mutual associations known as *collegia*, among which he identified a discrete group dedicated to funerary activity. He called them *collegia funeraticia*. The expression hardened into a term of art through repetition, fortified by Mommsen’s growing reputation. Only in the last thirty years has new research into the sources undermined both the authenticity of the terminology and the reality of the institution it claimed to represent.

This historiographic anecdote illustrates the pervasive and persistent impact of a theoretical proposition co-developed with its supporting ‘antique’ terminology by an influential scholar. *Collegia funeraticia* was not, at its inception, a foreign intrusion since Mommsen’s treatise was published in Latin. Indeed, it is not entirely clear (at least to this reader) whether the author meant to claim ancient authority for the terminology or merely used these words to describe the putative institution. Such considerations do not, however, apply to the consistent adoption of the Latin expression by other historians, and indeed by Mommsen himself, writing in the vernacular.

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13 His precise words were: ‘Quaere quicquid communi collatione indigere videretur, non propriis collegiis ad hoc institutis, sed applicatione ad collegia funeraticia perfectum esse’; translated by Perry, *Roman Collegia*, 31, as: ‘Whereby, whatever seemed to need a common collection was accomplished not by applying to colleges founded specifically for this reason, but by applying to the collegia funeraticia.’
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Collegia funeraticia seems to have been cut from whole cloth, not revived or repurposed but invented to fit the posited institution. A different process was at work when Richard Krautheimer elevated the expression domus ecclesiae. By the third century, he suggested, the Christian community’s space requirements for worship, clerical housing and charitable activity could no longer be met by a private residence; a dedicated building owned by the congregation was required. ‘Such a structure... would be called a domus ecclesiae, an oikos ekklesiás, or, in the local parlance of Rome, a titulus... Once purchased, the structure would as a rule have to be altered to fit the congregation’s needs.’

Like collegia funeraticia, domus ecclesiae became identified with a particular theorisation promoted by an eminent scholar, its Latinity providing implicit and subliminal support.

In a closely-reasoned paper, Kristina Sessa traced the history and the semantic transformation of domus ecclesiae. In both its ancient and pre-Krautheimer modern usage, the expression bore a variety of meanings: a literal and generic ‘house of the church’, a congregation, a church building or, in some periods, the outbuildings of a church compound. Thereafter, it became identified with a more precise architectural category: a domestic structure physically adapted to function as a place for Christian religious meetings. Sessa’s primary complaint was the pre-Constantinian application of this notion, something the sources do not, in her view, support. Nor does the archaeological record reveal instances of private houses altered in order to become churches in the third century, with a single exception at Dura Europos, an outlier in this as in so many other respects.


16 As shown by Sessa, the expression domus ecclesiae was used in antiquity, at least after Constantine, but its meaning was protean. Conrad Leyser, ‘“A church in the house of the saints”: Property and power in the Passion of John and Paul’, in Kate Cooper and Julia Hillner, eds, Religion, Dynasty, and Patronage in Early Christian Rome, 300-900, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, 141, defines, or redefines, domus ecclesiae as ‘a pre-Constantinian dwelling where Christians met in private, subsequently converted to public use after the peace of the church’. The chronology in the final phrase does not conform to Krautheimer’s sense of the term but is sensitive to Sessa’s concerns.
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Both Mommsen’s collegia funeraticia and Krautheimer’s domus ecclesiae have thus been criticised as verbal innovations that conceal substantive inventions. The hypotheses of such erudite and respected historians cannot be dismissed lightly, but they should stand or fall on the evidence, without implicit corroboration from the questionable use of Latin terminology.

In a similar but deeper vein lies interpretatio christiana, defined in Brill’s New Pauly as ‘the reception of a non-Christian cultural element or historical fact with a view to adapting it to Christianity by means of appropriate interpretation’. When Dale Kinney first encountered this Latin expression as a student in the 1960s she assumed it was ‘authentically medieval’, but on more recent and closer examination, she found that it appeared in the art historical literature only in the 1930s. The most important of its early exponents was the Romanist Gerhart Rodenwaldt who, it may be observed, used the term as the title of an article without repeating it in the text. Interpretatio christiana thereupon entered the lexicon but without significant impact until 1960, when Erwin Panofsky appropriated the term to encapsulate his analysis of the process whereby medieval sculptors and painters invested a classical form with Christian content. The name was grafted on to a previously published theory. In his seminal 1944 essay ‘Renaissance and renascences’ essentially the same conceptual formulation appears, but here labelled ‘mediaevalization’. Only when that essay grew into the eponymous book did the more euphonious and compelling Latin expression appear.

Interpretatio christiana provided a convenient linguistic prop for Panofsky’s ‘principle of disjunction’, a theorisation of the relationship between medieval art and antiquity premised on a division between form and meaning. Kinney contends that this conception ‘has not fared well among art historians whose theoretical formation postdates 1975’. Without taking sides in that debate, one can agree with her prudent admonition ‘that we stop reflexively applying [interpretatio christiana] to any Roman artefact that appears in a medieval context’.

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20 Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art, Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1960, 83-84.
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Panofsky may have propelled interpretatio christiana into the forefront of the literature on medieval art, but its usage has since broadened well beyond the confines of his particular intention. The late antique practice of carving crosses on ancient statuary has been called interpretatio christiana. Thomas F. Mathews and Norman E. Muller used the same expression in connection with an observation by the second-century theologian Irenaeus condemning the heretical worship of an image of Simon Magus ‘fashioned after the likeness of Jupiter’ and another of his consort Helena ‘in the shape of Minerva’. This, the authors suggested, was ‘the first instance of what we will call the “interpretatio Christiana,” that is, the reinterpretation of classical imagery in which the old gods are reworked to make them into images of Christ and his saints’.24

In these examples something is done to alter an antique image, but interpretatio christiana may also extend to the Christian reading of an unmodified non-Christian representation. The revisionist reception of depictions of Herakles, Theseus and the Centauromachy on a Greek temple converted to Christian use has been so qualified; and according to Mary Charles-Murray, the figure of Orpheus was not recycled into something else but subjected to a ‘Christian annexation’, imbued with Christian meaning. This usage is closer to the original and still more common meaning of interpretatio christiana associated with text criticism. The interpretive strategy began when early Christians, notably Paul, developed a new understanding of the ancient Hebrew scriptures that would take into account the Incarnation and Crucifixion, the fulfilment of the old prophecies, and the new

relationship between God and Israel.\textsuperscript{27} From at least as early as the eighteenth
century church historians have referred to this technique as \textit{interpretatio christiana}.\textsuperscript{28}

Many antique sources are considered to have attracted such a Christian
exegesis. A casual search on JSTOR uncovers recent references to the \textit{interpretatio christiana} of Philo by Eusebius, Plato by Marsilio Ficino, Heraclitus by Clement of
Alexandria and the Stoic Chryssipus of Soli by Lactantius, among others. The Latin
expression was already ‘in the air’ in the 1930s when it entered into art
historiography. The earliest JSTOR references are a 1924 book review, in which
\textit{interpretatio christiana} was applied to the insertion of Christian material into ancient
Celtic legend, and a 1927 article concerning the ‘Christianization’ of a verse of the
Latin poet Albius Tibullus.\textsuperscript{29} In the latter case, \textit{interpretatio christiana} appears
between inverted commas, perhaps signalling either a borrowing from the older
tradition of textual interpretation or, as noted below, an implicit connection to
\textit{interpretatio romana}.

\textit{Interpretatio christiana} has spread widely from the field of text criticism; it has
been applied to myths and monuments, proper names and even a zoological
species.\textsuperscript{30} While less casual than some of these other adaptations, the migration of
the term from texts to images is neither seamless nor self-evident.\textsuperscript{31} Christian
readers of ancient literature appreciate, appropriate, adapt or allude to a non-
Christian source; they do not pour new wine into old bottles. This is not to deny any
value to comparisons between the Christianization of literary productions and the
medieval encounter with ancient images. But recycling the expression \textit{interpretatio

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{27} Ferdinand Hahn, “Die Interpretatio Christiana des Alten Testaments bei Paulus,” in Klaus
Wengst and Gerhard Saß, eds, \textit{Ja und nein: Christliche Theologie im Angesicht Israels: Festschrift
\textit{Theologiae cursus completus ex tractatibus omnium perfectissimis ubique habitis}, vol. 3, Paris:
Apud Editores, 1839, col. 83-96 (originally published in 1752); \textit{Lectiones theologicae ad usum
Dioecesis Rotomagensis}, vol. 4, part 2, Rouen: Mégard, 1818, 205, 206.
\bibitem{29} Alexander Haggerty Krappe, ‘\textit{Verschmelzung legendarischer und weltlicher Motive in der
Stuttgart-Berlin: Von W. Kohlhammer, 1939, 4, cites Weinreich’s usage of \textit{interpretatio
christiana} as his source for the expression.
\bibitem{30} Andreas Schorr, ‘\textit{Namen von Heiden und Christen: Heidnische und christliche Namen im
frühen Mittelalter}’, \textit{Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft} 39, no. 4, Dec. 2009, 12-27 at 19; H.J.
Rob Lenders and Ingo A.W. Janssen, ‘\textit{The grass snake and the basilisk: From pre-Christian
\bibitem{31} Compare the analogous borrowing of ‘recension’ by art historians for the genealogy and
evolution of iconography, and the criticism by John Lowden, \textit{The Octateuchs: A Study in
Byzantine manuscript Illustration}, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press,
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*christiana* for this purpose, particularly without any disclaimer or recognition of its modern invention as an art historical concept, seems inadvisable.\(^{32}\)

The art historical use of *interpretatio christiana* is further complicated by a connection, deliberate, subliminal or inadvertent, to *interpretatio romana*.\(^{33}\) This expression was promoted, if not invented, by Georg Wissowa early in the twentieth century and has been widely incorporated into academic discourse as a description of the process whereby foreign divinities encountered by the Romans were mapped into their own pantheon.\(^{34}\) Modern scholars often point to a single use of the term *interpretatio romana* by Tacitus, although he may have meant something a bit different.\(^{35}\) However understood, the intention of *interpretatio romana* does not correspond to the syntactically parallel but semantically contrary *interpretatio christiana*, and the slim but undeniable antiquity of the former cannot rub off on the latter.

It is hardly surprising that Latin expressions like *interpretatio christiana*, *collegia funeraticia* and *domus ecclesiae* should have a chronological dimension. Mommsen’s and Krautheimer’s linguistic innovations conveniently supported the early appearance of the funerary association and renovated domestic meeting space, respectively; Panofsky’s version of *interpretatio christiana* is, fundamentally, a claim regarding the transmission of antiquity into the Middle Ages.\(^{36}\) These expressions do not, however, explicitly or exclusively refer to chronology in the manner of *ante pacem*, a reference to the period ‘before the peace’, and more specifically before a state of harmony between church and state attributed to the religious policies of Constantine the Great.

There is some early authority for associating the reign of Constantinian with a ‘peace of the church’.\(^{37}\) This is not, however, the primary meaning of that expression as understood by ancient, medieval or modern writers. For Augustine

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32 Keller, ‘Terminology’, 127, prudently admonishes ‘that it is intellectually dishonest to alter the meaning of a common term, without due notice, and then pass it back into circulation’.


and Ambrose, *pax ecclesiae* meant peace within the church;\(^{38}\) in a papal bull of 19 September 1147 it was peace among Cistercian abbeys;\(^{39}\) the ‘Peace of the Church’ urged in the recital to the English *Uniformity* act of 1662 was a resolution of contemporary divergences in religious practice;\(^{40}\) for the Rector of Grace Church, New York, in 1891, it meant peace among Christian denominations.\(^{41}\)

Unlike these hortatory references, the ecclesiastical peace credited to Constantine is claimed as a chronological marker for visual and material culture. Whether by over-simplification or for rhetorical emphasis, the achievement of this state of affairs is often compressed into the single year AD 313, in which many historians have situated both the emperor’s conversion to Christianity and an imperial decree legalising or recognising his new religion, the so-called Edict of Milan.\(^{42}\) Robin Jensen called that year ‘a watershed moment for the church and, by extension, for Christian art’;\(^{43}\) for James Hall, ‘Early Christian art had two distinct phases, the first ending in 313 when Constantine granted freedom of worship to Christians’.\(^{44}\) The claim that Constantine’s religious policies were transformative for Christian imagery, in terms both quantitative and qualitative, is intuitively attractive but not easy to prove given the very small number of securely datable monuments.\(^{45}\) Nonetheless, a Constantinian fulcrum is widely accepted and identified with a ‘peace of the church’, whence the practice of labelling objects and images as ‘pre-Constantinian’ or, more explicitly but less commonly, as dating from ‘before the peace of the church’.

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\(^{43}\) Understanding Early Christian Art, Abingdon/New York: Routledge, 2000, 16.


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The Latin translation, ante pacem, serves as the title for an oft-cited book by Graham F. Snyder.\(^4\) This expression is not used much in the text itself; most chronological references spell out the relationship to the emperor (‘before Constantine’, ‘pre-Constantinian’) and when the ‘peace’ is mentioned, it is almost always in English.\(^4\) Yet ante pacem is more than a mere literary flourish or publisher’s marketing device. The impact of Constantine’s ‘peace’ on the appearance and production of early Christian art is a central theme of the book and ante pacem are its closing words. The claim that early Christian imagery should be arrayed on either side of Constantine’s ‘peace of the Church’ is bolstered by this allusion to an implicit antique authority.

**Branding images**

Assigning a name to an image abbreviates citation at the risk of pre-empting interpretation.\(^4\) The same is true for image types. Historians identify or establish such groupings to facilitate the organisation and analysis of the visual record, much as chemists and psychiatrists approach an otherwise bewildering array of substances and mental disorders.\(^4\) Such classification systems are often criticised for ambiguity, incoherence and inconsistency in their application; the names applied to the types, however, are not usually signalled as problematic.\(^5\) A field like art


\(^4\) Occasionally ‘peace’ is placed between inverted commas (96, 128), and at least once capitalized (118). Pre-Constantinian inscriptions are labelled ante pacem at 232-33.

\(^4\) See Richard Brilliant's discussion of successive titles applied to Titian's painting now catalogued as 'Amor Sacro e Amor Profano' (Sacred and Profane Love) in My Laocoön: Alternative Claims in the Interpretation of Artworks, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000, 75-80.


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history, where subjective judgment plays an important role, is particularly sensitive to typological nomenclature. Names can affect the construction and application of the categories as well as the consequences of inclusion; casting them in Latin may tend to reinforce the weight and credibility of the classification.

Figure 1 Sarcophagus with *orans* and bucolic motifs, late third-century. Palazzo Farnese, Rome. Photograph: D-DAI-ROM 64.1737 (Como).

Two of the most common figures in late Roman and early Christian funerary art are the shepherd and the praying woman, or less often, man (Fig. 1). The former is commonly identified by the name of his pastoral profession in the language of the text, without resorting to the Latin *pastor*. If supporting a ram or sheep on his shoulders, he may be called a Good Shepherd as an allusion to Luke 15:4 and John 10:11, although that expression is certainly over-used.\(^{51}\) *Pastor bonus* occasionally appears in discussions of this iconography, but not as a name for the image itself.\(^{52}\)

The woman in prayer receives a different treatment. Literary sources confirm that the stereotypical form of representation – standing, frontal, arms out, elbows bent and hands open – is, indeed, a depiction of prayer, whence the label *orans*, the present active participle of the Latin verb *orare* used as a substantive.\(^{53}\) The word, of course, is old, and mourners gathered at the tomb could well have uttered it when discussing wall paintings or sarcophagi; however, as the name for an image it is modern, probably dating to the first half of the nineteenth century. The Latin *orans* has inspired the vernacular neologisms orant and orante in English and French.\(^{54}\) In


\(^{52}\) But see Arnold Provoost, ‘*Pastor* or *Pastor Bonus*?: The interpretation and evolution of pastoral scenes in the late antiquity’, *Church History and Religious Culture* 84, 2004, 1-36.


\(^{54}\) The earliest use cited by *the Oxford English Dictionary* is Walter Lowrie, *Christian Art and Archaeology, Being a Handbook of the Monuments of the Early Church*, New York: Macmillan, 1901, 201, where he introduces the term as an alternative to *orans*, which is otherwise used consistently throughout the book. *Le Grand Robert* suggest a date of 1874 for the initial
German *Orans* is the most popular designation, with an initial capital and a plural *Oranten*, following German usage. Thus, Latin and Latinism appear to be equally satisfying and often interchangeable.

The nomenclatural distinction between the praying and pastoral figures has no apparent semantic or heuristic rationale. It could be a matter of linguistic convenience. Most modern languages of art history lack a concise term for a person in the act of prayer (although German has *die Betende*) but they can all label as ‘shepherd’ the man tending a flock. Whatever the reason, *orans* and its vernacular derivatives are the norm, while *pastor* is unnecessary and, given the modern cognates referring to church ministers, inadvisable.

A slightly more complex but still essentially descriptive Latin image name is applied to the representation found on many Roman monuments and a modest number of early Christian sarcophagi of two standing figures clasping their right hands (Fig. 2). *Dextrarum iunctio* – joining of the right hands – literally denotes no more than the image depicts but it connotes a solemn or ceremonial occasion; Roman tradition associated the gesture with political and marital concord. At least one ancient authority pairs the label with the image: on a funerary stele for a married couple in Dion in Macedonia (formerly Dium), the motif appears over an inscription referring to their ‘two joined right hands’ (*manus dextrae duae*

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coniunctae). Dextrarum iunctio as the name for an image is nonetheless fairly described as modern since it was introduced into the academic literature in the nineteenth century and this artefact was found only in 1994. The most common English alternative is ‘handshake’. Like dextrarum iunctio it carries certain nuances of social custom, but these are not identical to the ancient associations. ‘Handclasp’ is used occasionally and might be a more neutral choice.

Even in the case of dextrarum iunctio, what passes for a naturalistic description imposes some degree of semantic prejudgment when the Roman ceremonial connotations do not fit the dominant theme of the image. The expression would be at least awkward and likely misleading if applied to a depiction of Peter and Paul clasping their right hands on a mid-fifth-century sarcophagus lid in Toulouse. This tension between description and prescription becomes more than a tangential curiosity in the names chosen for certain image types of Venus, the Virgin Mary, Jonah and Christ examined below.

Antique statues are often designated by a find-spot, an early modern proprietor or the museum of current conservation, but some have more colourful names. Aphrodite or Venus anadyomene refers to the goddess rising from the sea; the Greek term is found in early sources describing a painting by Apelles and was adopted into Latin by Pliny. Venus genetrix refers to her role as progenitrix of the Roman people and, especially, the Julian house; its antique application to a form of image, albeit somewhat loose in definition, is confirmed on several Hadrianic

58 ‘Handshake’ is often provided as a definition of dextrarum iunctio: e.g., Richard Brilliant, Gesture and Rank in Roman Art: The Use of Gestures to Denote Status in Roman Sculpture and Coinage, New Haven: The Academy, 1963, 19.
60 Musée Saint-Raymond, Inv. Ra501; Brigitte Christern-Briesenick, Repertorium der christlich-antiken Sarkophage III. Frankreich, Algerien, Tunesien, Mainz: von Zabern, 2003, 248-49, no. 517 (not referring to the image as dextrarum iunctio).
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coins. Other names can claim no such literary or epigraphic confirmation, including, in particular, Venus pudica.

The historiography of this type begins with a statue attributed to the fourth-century BC master Praxiteles that graced a temple in Knidos, described by superlatives of admiration in antique sources. The work eventually came into the collection of a certain Lausos in Constantinople, only to be destroyed by fire in AD 476. The original is believed (based on presumed copies) to have depicted a standing female nude, in elegant contrapposto, with her right arm bent so that the hand shields her pudenda from the gaze of the viewer, or at least the directly frontal viewer. It inspired many emulations and variants in the Hellenistic and Roman periods, including two forms of considerable importance to the later history of art epitomised by the Capitoline Venus in Rome (Fig. 3) and the Medici Venus in the Uffizi Galleries, Florence. On these sculptures the Knidian gesture is shifted to the left hand while the right is raised so that it crosses the body at, or more usually just below, the breasts.

In an influential study of Aphrodite published in 1873, Johann Jacob Bernoulli drew a distinction between the one- and two-handed versions. In the Knidian form, he remarked, Aphrodite covers the ‘temple of her body’ (das Heilighthum ihres Leibes) as if by accident, scarcely aware of her momentary state of undress; but in the others, she is aware of her helpless nakedness and in a gesture of feminine shame or modesty, uses both hands to cover her vagina and breasts. Bernoulli labelled this second type Venus pudica. He was not the first to use this expression to describe statues of the goddess, but he can lay claim to its introduction into the literature of art history, where it came to be applied to the

Figure 3 Capitoline Venus (Aphrodite), second-century. Capitoline Museum, Rome, inv. 409. Photograph: D-DAI-ROM 57.720 (R. Sansaini).


63 ‘Pudica’, between inverted commas, at LIMC II.49-54, nos. 391-421; VIII.202-6, nos. 78-87.

64 Havelock, *Aphrodite of Knidos*, and bibliography.


Knidian as well as the two-handed form. This trope of a bashful or embarrassed Venus is not restricted to sculptural nomenclature. Pudency also characterises the translation of a comment by Ovid on the strategic placement of Aphrodite’s hand: ‘Venus herself, as oft as she lays aside her robes, half stooping covers with her left hand her secret parts’. Other oblique renditions of the covered body part include ‘parts obscene’ (Blanchard, 1855), ‘her charms’ (May, 1930), and ‘her sex’ (Kline, 2001). Ovid was more direct, referring to her pubis.\(^68\)

One difficulty with the Venus pudica label and its uncritical application is the conflation of distinct attributes: chastity, modesty, shame and embarrassment are not identical. Nor does the interpretation of these sculptures as expressions of pudicitia, however understood, exhaust the possibilities. It could reflect nineteenth- and twentieth-century prejudgments rather than the aims and experiences of the sculptors and original viewers. Recent scholarship has focussed attention on the complexity of the Knidian Venus and its progeny, significantly broadening the range of possible readings.\(^69\) The gesture of the goddess could have evoked the danger of the (male) gaze, as she tentatively shields ‘her most powerful, and therefore most dangerous part’.\(^70\) It could have signalled eroticism. Inefficual or half-hearted concealment is an age-old technique of arousal.\(^71\) This evidently worked for the Knidian Aphrodite: Pliny recounts that an amorous admirer attempted to make love to the statue, leaving the stain of his lust.\(^72\) The label Venus pudica favours a particular class of interpretations of these sculptural forms, an effect supported and masked by the Latin adjective. They are never called ‘Embarrassed Venus’ or ‘Venus ashamed’.

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\(^70\) Davies, *Gender and Body Language*, 86.


Images of the Virgin Mary have attracted an even more elaborate typological system than Venus, in particular in the study of Byzantine icons. The names may refer to a place (Blachernitissa, Hagiosoritissa, Kyriotissa), a quality or activity (victory in the Nikopoios, lactation in the Galaktotrophousa), or both (Eleousa simultaneously evokes the mother’s tenderness and names a church; Hodegetria refers to the Hodegon monastery and the act of ‘showing the way’). The early authenticity of many of these terms is reasonably secure, although the connection to specific forms of mother-child imagery is rather less so. Only one of these conventional names has a common Latin form, Virgo lactans (occasionally Maria lactans) for Galaktotrophousa.

The iconography of the Christ child nursing at his mother’s breast spans a broad chronological and geographical range, from sixth-century Coptic Egypt, through the various phases of Byzantine icon painting and into the medieval and later art of the West (Fig. 4). Virgo lactans shares its terminological status in the academic literature not only with the Greek Galaktotrophousa but also with modern vernacular alternatives, including Vierge au lait (Vierge allaitant, Vierge nourricière), nursing Virgin (Suckling Mother of God), Madonna del latte (Allatante) and Virgen de la Leche. One modern language may borrow from the others, most commonly English-language texts importing the French and Italian labels. The foreign term then serves as a signal (usually, but not always, intended) of the ‘nationality’ of the image, an assertion regarding authorship, place of origin, and historical context. The implications of using Greek or Latin terms are more complex.

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75 Galaktotrophousa, literally ‘nourishing with milk’, can apply to any nursing mother and is also used, although far less often, for representations of Anna with Mary and Elizabeth with John the Baptist. Examples are noted by Elena Ene Draghici-Vasilescu, ‘A case of power and subversion? the fresco of St. Anna nursing the child Mary from the Monastery of Zaum’, Byzantinoslavica 70, 1-2, 2012, 241-72. Occasionally, the Greek label is supplemented by adding Theotokos to reference the Mother of God.
76 Milchnährrende seems to function more as a German translation than an independent name for the image. The Russian Mlekopitatelnitsa is used to translate the Greek or as a designation for Russian icons.
The origins of both the Byzantine icon and its Greek name are debatable, but they extend back into the Middle Ages. The term 
*Virgo lactans* is older in the text tradition but more recent as a name for a depiction of the Virgin. Augustine used this expression in asserting the persistence of Mary’s virginity through marriage, pregnancy, and lactation (*virgo in coniugio, virgo praegnans, virgo lactans*), a trope that carried forward in later Christian theology and liturgy. It is not, however, found as a label for an image in old sources. Yet in the art historical literature, *Virgo lactans* and *Galaktotrophousa* are often treated as interchangeable. In many cases,

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79 A letter attributed to Pope Gregory II (715-731) describes such an image, although it does not apply a label. Since the letter is likely a ninth-century Greek-language forgery it provides no authority for a Latin image-name. See the discussion by Cutler, ‘Cult of the Galaktotrophousa’, 338-39, with the Greek text in note 21.

their respective usage is a function of sub-disciplinary habit: when not using the vernacular, Byzantinists prefer the Greek while Latin dominates discussions of western art. Occasionally the linguistic alternatives are taken seriously and deployed systematically to distinguish between the two traditions.  

Even such careful usage cannot, however, do justice to the contentious cross-relationships among early Egyptian images, Byzantine icons and the art of the Latin West. Anthony Cutler, for example, has argued that many Italian Suckling Mother paintings are indigenous, ‘independent of overseas inspiration and innovative in their own right’. If so, calling them Galaktotrophousai would be inappropriate and misleading. Conversely, labelling a Byzantine icon Virgo lactans intimates its connection to a different corpus of imagery, probably unintended and generally misleading. The concern is partly an erroneous suggestion of genealogy but it may also go to the meaning of the image. Elizabeth Bolman argues that the nursing Virgin in early Coptic art was a Eucharistic metaphor and that the emphasis shifted to the mother-child relationship only later, with the developing cult of the Virgin. In order to leave space to debate such issues, prudence dictates choosing a label for the images with as few extraneous connotations as possible. In practice, the Coptic nursing Virgins are generally identified by a vernacular description or labelled with the Greek Galaktotrophousa. Less often, the misleading Virgo or Maria lactans is invoked. No Coptic name, if one exists, is ever assigned.

Notwithstanding these complications, Virgo lactans is still ostensibly and literally descriptive, like orans and dextrarum iunctio. The pictured woman is the Virgin Mary, and she is nursing a child. The nuances added by the Latin are subtle,

82 Cutler, ‘The cult of the Galaktotrophousa’.
83 In the entry ‘Galaktotrophousa’, Ambrogi and Le Tourneau, Dictionnaire Encyclopédique de Marie, 480, cite five works to illustrate the iconography: two medieval Italian panel paintings, two late Byzantine icons and, anomalously, Gerard David’s quite different Madonna and Child with the Milk Soup.
84 As in Lasareff, ‘Iconography of the Virgin’, passim.
85 Bolman, ‘The enigmatic Coptic Galaktotrophousa’.
relating to genealogy and inter-image relationships. Other Latin image-names overtly favour one among competing interpretations. A case in point is the insertion of *Jonas irritatus* into the otherwise vernacular nomenclature applied to early Christian representations of the prophet Jonah.

His story was the most visually popular before the middle of the fourth century. It almost always comprised one or more of three scenes: Jonah thrown into the sea and swallowed by the *ketos* or sea monster, Jonah regurgitated onto dry land, and Jonah at rest under the *cucurbita* or gourd plant. Unusually, he might also be depicted seated more upright under a withered plant and bearing an expression either undecipherable or ambiguous, but not indicative of peaceful repose (Fig. 5).

These additional images, often grouped together as a ‘fourth scene’, have been tagged with a variety of epithets: Jonah stricken or startled (by the Sun), distressed, complaining, pouting, angry, meditating, contemplating, sad, waiting, or watching (the city of Nineveh).  

Precisely what event, action or emotional state was intended or understood by the makers and viewers of these images is debatable, but there is no dearth of adjectives in any of the relevant vernacular languages to capture the gamut of interpretations. Ernst Dassmann, nonetheless, resorted to Latin, calling the fourth

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scene *Jonas irritatus*. The adjective, from the verb *irrito*, could mean provoked, angry, annoyed, agitated, aggravated or irritated, the translation normally depending on context. In the free-standing image-name *irritatus* it probably alludes to Jonah’s sentiment when the Lord fails to smite the Ninevites (Jonah 4:1, 9), which is expressed in the Vulgate Latin by the related, although not identical, term *iratus*, conventionally translated as ‘angry.’ Whatever may have been Dassmann’s specific meaning, his *Jonas irritatus* evidently favours some affects or activities over others, and bolsters its claim by leading a linguistic trump card.

Several aspects of the *Jonas irritatus* historiography merit special notice. First, only the fourth scene is ever named in Latin; the other three are always in the vernacular. Second, *Jonas irritatus* is sometimes preceded by the qualification ‘so-called’ (*sogenannte*). As in English, the German word may indicate either that this is how something is commonly or properly described or, conversely, that a term is being used inappropriately. Since it cannot here bear the ironic connotation it must rather constitute a claim that *Jonas irritatus* belongs to an unreferenced body of technically accepted nomenclature. Third, this Latin expression has been far less successful than the others considered above, adopted by only a few scholars, almost all of them German. Of even more limited distribution is yet another Latin name

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89 A form of the verb *irascor*. The older Latin versions of Jonah 4 - which would have been in use when the images were produced - either conform to the Vulgate or, instead, refer to Jonah’s sadness (*tristia, contristus*). Modern bible translations, which are based on the Vulgate, consistently render Jonah’s mood as angry (*zornig* in German).


91 Dassmann is not consistent. *Sogenannte* is not found in his 1973 *Sündenvergebung durch Taufe*; it is added to one instance of *Jonas irritatus* but not the other in his ‘Hirtentheologie’; it appears again in his ‘Römische Jahre’. It is also used by Wolfgang Wischmeyer, ‘Das Beispiel Jonas: Zur kirchengeschichtlichen Bedeutung von Denkmälern frühchristlicher Grabeskunst zwischen Theologie und Frömmigkeit’, *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte*, 92, 1981, 170.

92 The most important regular user is Wolfgang Wischmeyer. In addition to the articles cited in the previous footnote, see his ‘Die vorkonstantinische christliche Kunst in neuem Lichte: die Cleveland-Statuetten’, *Vigiliae Christianae*, 35, no. 3, Sept. 1981, 260-61. The great majority
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for the same ‘fourth scene’, *Jonas tristis*. It appears to be confined to its inventor, Jutta Dresken-Weiland. Ultimately, these Latin labels advance interpretive positions that can equally be, and generally are, promoted in the vernacular without any patina of antique authority.

Finally, the most successful of all invented Latin image names must be *Traditio legis*. This is the term almost universally applied to stereotypical early Christian images in which Christ stands between Peter on his left, to whom he tenders an unravelling scroll, and Paul, in a gesture of acclamation, on his right (Fig. 6). Translated or explicated in modern languages, *legis* is ‘of the law’, and *traditio* most commonly ‘handing over’. Thus, *Traditio legis* refers to a manual transmission of the scroll of the law by Christ to Peter.

![Figure 6 Apse mosaic, Traditio legis, Santa Costanza, Rome. Photograph by author.](image)

Not all scholars agree that this is a correct description of what is happening. When Henri-Julien Grimouard de Saint-Laurent first published a corpus of these images in 1857–58 he called them ‘don de la loi’, referring to the ‘gift’ made by Christ to humanity through his apostles rather than focussing on any physical

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conveyance of an object. The name *Traditio legis* appeared some fifty years later.\(^9^4\) It was quickly challenged by Theodor Birt in an extended and authoritative monograph on the history of the bookroll in art. Birt reasonably argued that since one cannot hand over a scroll by tendering the unfurled end, the image actually represents Christ holding it up for display to the viewer.\(^9^5\) Under this interpretation, Peter’s outstretched, covered hands are intended not to receive the embodiment of the law, but rather to prevent it from touching the ground.

The word *traditio* was not an accidental choice by its early proponents. It recalls, but meaningfully alters, an epigraphic formula that is closely associated with this form of representation. The motto *Dominus legem dat* (the Lord gives or announces the law), usually truncated by the omission or abbreviation of some words, appears on Christ’s dangling scroll in half a dozen of the images (out of a total of about 50; on the rest the scroll is blank).\(^9^6\) The substitution of *traditio* for *datio*, the noun form of the *dat* in the inscriptions, effectively begs the question of what exactly is depicted in the image and how the scene might have been understood by its original viewers.

Be that as it may, since its invention late in the nineteenth century *Traditio legis* has been adopted as the name for this image almost without dissent. Birt, writing when the neologism was still fresh, thought it a mistake but later commentators have acceded to the dominant nomenclature, in a few cases adding a ‘so-called’ qualification.\(^9^7\) Only Walter Nikolaus Schumacher felt strongly enough to stubbornly insist on a different name.\(^9^8\) He preferred to hew to the text of the associated legend, calling the image *Dominus-legem-dat-Szene* (or *Motiv* or *Bild*). As well as being anchored in a historically authentic expression, Schumacher’s approach has the benefit of leaving open to debate the iconographical content of the image. His revision was not, however, followed by other scholars.

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\(^9^6\) The full legend is at San Giovanni in Fonte, Naples; *Dominus pacem dat* (likely changed in an erroneous restoration) appears in Santa Costanza, Rome. Incomplete texts appear on some incised and gold-glasses and in a wall painting. See Couzin, *Traditio Legis*, 7-12.


Conclusion

Latin terminology is widespread in the technical vocabulary of art history. Most of it is authentically old and retains the original meaning. Some terms are unnecessary but others would be difficult or impossible to translate (refrigerium, arcosolium, cucurbita). A few words have been borrowed and openly repurposed to serve a specific need of disciplinary discourse (spolia). The focus in this study has been expressions that dissimulate their modern origins. Even these may be harmless and efficient, although care must be taken in their application and it would be preferable if the modernity were acknowledged. Latin terminology becomes problematic, however, when an antique formulation seems to corroborate a contentious proposition. The examples in this incomplete inventory illustrate a number of characteristics, sometimes contradictory, in the deployment of such terms.

They may be attached to almost anything: theories of artistic transmission, institutions, architectural categories, chronological periods or, most commonly, image types. Some are old expressions imbued with new and special meanings (interpretatio christiana); others are novelties (Jonas irritatus). The Latin words may be essentially descriptive of the image (dextrarum iunctio, Virgo lactans), but even such descriptions can entail historiographic implications. Other terms assert a particular interpretation (Jonas irritatus, Venus pudica). The impact and successful dissemination of Latin terminology is enhanced by the authority of its inventor (Krautheimer, Panofsky), although in most cases the expressions have modest or obscure beginnings.

While not the norm, prefatory qualification is not uncommon: ‘so-called’ Jonas irritatus or Traditio legis; ‘would be called a domus ecclesiae’ (Krautheimer). Inverted commas may be used to similar effect: ‘Venus pudica’, ‘Jonas tristis’. Occasionally both means of setting off the expression are combined: ‘what we will call the “interpretatio christiana”’ (Mathews). These techniques seem to hint at some sensitivity on the part of the author. Less than complete conviction may also be suggested by the phenomenon of ‘headlining’, restricting the Latin term mainly or exclusively to titles or headings: Rodenwaldt’s ‘Interpretatio christiana’ essay; Jonas tristis in its initial use by Dresken-Weiland; Snyder’s ante pacem; and even, to a significant extent, Bernoulli’s Venus pudica.99

Some invented Latin terminology has had limited purchase in the literature (Jonas irritatus). The successful examples, however, are tenacious. The wide dissemination of the most robust terms may attenuate any link with the original theorization: interpretatio christiana becomes little more than a synonym for

99 Another example, falling mostly outside the scope of visual and material culture, is Hervé Inglebert, Interpretatio christiana: Les mutations des savoirs, cosmographie, géographie, ethnographie, histoire, dans l’antiquité chrétienne, 30-630 après J.-C., Paris: Institut d’Études Augustiniennes, 2001. His preferred expression in the text is ‘Christianization’, occasionally ‘conversion’.
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Christianization; Traditio legis no longer signifies manual transmission to many readers. Other terms are less forgiving. Jonas irritatus is not sad nor Jonas tristis angry; Venus pudica does not readily accommodate eroticism.

George Orwell complained that ‘Bad writers, and especially scientific, political, and sociological writers are nearly always haunted by the notion that Latin or Greek words are grander than Saxon ones…’. Art historians cannot be judged quite so harshly, since Latin terminology is bound with their study of ancient and medieval images and monuments. Nonetheless, the incautious or polemical use of invented Latin expressions warrants reflection.


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