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The Renaissance

Analyzing Visual Primary Sources
World History Series

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Introduction

Primary sources are the building blocks of history. Using these sources to introduce students to historical periods offers students the opportunity to become historians themselves—to analyze the evidence, form hypotheses, and learn how to support arguments based on evidence. They learn what it means to interpret the past in ways that provide meaning for the present. Textual primary sources can often be difficult for students to engage with because they are often couched in unfamiliar language from a different historical era. Visual primary sources can prove more appealing and accessible to students, and they also involve different types of "reading" skills.

How to Use This Product

This PowerPoint® presentation is designed to walk students through the process of primary source interpretation. Slides help to focus students' attention and train them how to "read" visual primary sources. Targeted questions and enlarged insets from images help to train students to see deeper into the historical record, to uncover evidence that, though plainly before their eyes, is not always obvious at first glance.

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Dr. Aaron Willis
Chief Education Officer
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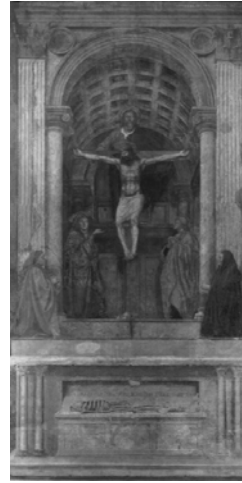
The Renaissance

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Medieval Art

- The dominance of religion
- The importance of symbolism
- Lack of realism

Religion dominated life in the Middle Ages. The Catholic Church wielded not only religious power but political power as well: it was wealthier and more powerful than most medieval kings, who themselves were unable to rule without its blessing. Medieval art was also highly influenced by religion. Most artists came from monasteries, and almost all major works of art during the Middle Ages were commissioned by the Church as decoration for either churches or Bibles. Therefore, it is not surprising that depictions of Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and various saints were by far the most common motifs. Occasionally, kings commissioned works of art, but these also tended to be religious, not only because the artists had likely been trained in the monastic system but also because kings relied upon religion to maintain their power. There was no such thing as the separation of church and state in the Middle Ages.

A very significant element of medieval art was symbolism. Since no one knew what characters in the Bible had actually looked like, a system of iconography developed so that viewers would instantly understand the meaning of a work of art. One could instantly recognize Jesus, for example, by his long brown hair, an image that is still widely used today. Other elements of iconography are less obvious to the modern-day viewer, but would have been instantly understood by people in medieval times: the apostles Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were represented by a man, a lion, a bull, and an eagle, respectively.

A common perception of medieval art is that the artists were unskilled. There is certainly some truth to this: many of the techniques of classical art were neglected or lost during the Middle Ages, and there were no schools for training artists. It is often thought that this is why medieval art tends to look unrealistic, and in many instances, almost cartoon-like. However, there was another factor at work: medieval artists placed a much greater value on symbolism than on faithful representation of the human form. Such values would shift dramatically during the Renaissance.

Medieval Art

Give students approximately one minute to view this image before proceeding on to the next slide.

What kind of an image
do you think this is?

Although this appears to be a drawing or painting, but it is actually a page from a medieval book known as the *Godescalc Evangelistary* (an Evangelistary is a book containing the Gospels). It is an excellent example of a medieval illuminated manuscript (that is, a book that contained decorative drawings), and was created by a Frankish scribe named Godescalc in the early 780s. It was commissioned by Charlemagne, the powerful king who ruled much of Europe during the late eighth and early ninth centuries and whom the pope crowned Holy Roman Emperor.

Who might the person in this image be?
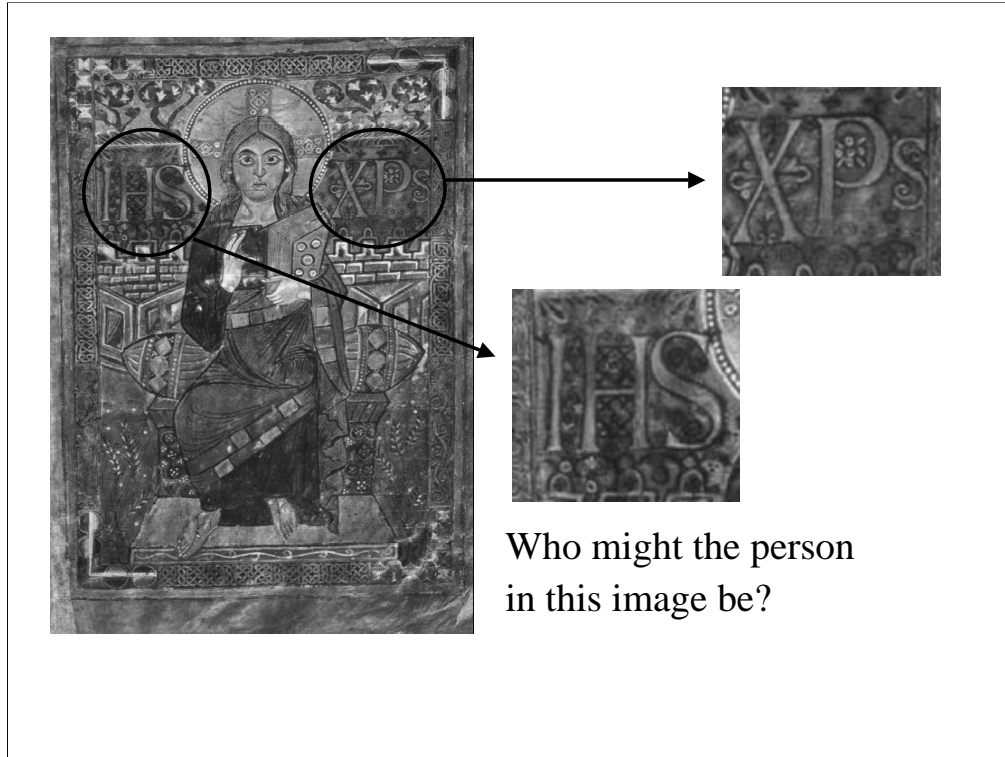
Since this image comes from an Evangelistary, we can assume that the person depicted is some important religious figure. It is in fact Jesus Christ. He has long, straight brown hair, which is the way Jesus is commonly depicted in works of art both today and in the Middle Ages. Also, the letters "IHS" and "XPS" are visible in the background: these letters are known as "Christograms," or letters that represent Jesus' name. "IHS" is derived from the Greek spelling of "Jesus," while "XPS" is derived from the Greek spelling of "Christ."