

Jesus up close: What did he look like

by [Robin M. Jensen](#) in the [September 20, 2003](#) issue

Last year *Popular Mechanics* announced that a team of British scientists, assisted by Israeli archaeologists, had fashioned “the most accurate image” of the face of Jesus. Assuming that Jesus would have looked like a typical Galilean Semite of his time, the scientists gathered skulls from that date found near Jerusalem and proceeded to reconstruct Jesus’ face.

I viewed the portrait with a group of seminary students and teachers. We all had the same reaction: this Jesus looked very little like the Jesus of our imaginings—and not because we had assumed he was a blue-eyed blond. The purported “true image” wore a particular dumbfounded—one might say stupid—expression. His mouth was shown partially open and his wide brown eyes held a puzzled or somewhat worried expression. The caption “Who, me?” came to mind.

Pondering this image, I couldn’t help posing other questions: What exactly do we mean by a “true image” of Jesus? How appropriate or relevant is it to try to determine what Jesus really looked like?

As the *Popular Mechanics* article points out, no physical description of Jesus comes to us from the New Testament. If anything, the Gospels suggest that Jesus is hard to recognize, and may even take on different appearances, especially after the resurrection. For example, Mary Magdalene is cited as mistaking the risen Christ for the gardener (John 20:15). Two of the apostles walk the road to Emmaus with Jesus without realizing who he is— “their eyes were kept from recognizing him” (Luke 24:15). In John’s Gospel, Jesus stands on the shore calling to the apostles in a boat, but from that distance they do not know him (21:4).

Over the centuries the followers of Jesus have made a host of portraits of him, but neither ancient nor contemporary artists have felt constrained by the need for historical accuracy. They have felt free to picture Jesus in many different guises and to affirm different images simultaneously.

I recently brought a series of pictures of Jesus to a confirmation class. These mostly white, middle-class children had no trouble recognizing Jesus, whether he was

portrayed with a dark beard and a stern look or with blond hair and a sweet expression. They had some preferences, laughed out loud at a few images, and were slightly disturbed by the image of Jesus as a woman. They wondered about the meaning of certain images but they did not ask, "Which one is right?"

I think they realized that no one image could be correct. Jesus is baby and lamb, shepherd and Messiah, friend, judge, ruler and victim. In our hymns he is both "Beautiful Savior" and "Judge Eternal, throned in splendor." An enormous variety of representations have emerged from 2,000 years of Christian imagination, and yet we can find in these diverse images some element that identifies it as a portrait of Christ.

Not only is there no "accurate" visual representation of Jesus, but it is a heresy to insist that such a thing might exist. The heresy is that of limiting Christ's character, nature or power by circumscribing his appearance. To put forth only one image as the "real portrait" of Christ is theologically untruthful. The Gospels' account of his transfiguration testifies to the changeability of Christ's appearance. One could argue that the four Gospels themselves offer four different portraits.

Some second-century church leaders did raise the question of whether Christ was handsome or ill favored. Origen took on the rumor, reported by the pagan critic Celsus, that Jesus had been ugly. Ugliness, in the mind of a traditional polytheist, was proof of his mere mortality and lack of divine status. Instead of simply denying the rumor, Origen (like Justin before him) claimed that Jesus' unattractiveness fulfilled prophecy, and he cited Isaiah 53: "He had no form nor comeliness that we should look upon him." At the same time, perhaps betraying his own discomfort with the rumor, Origen pointed to Psalm 45, which, according to his christological interpretation, claims that Jesus was the most handsome of men.

The question of what makes a true or false portrait, or whether a "true portrait" is even conceivable, vexed the ancient philosophers. The external appearance of a person was considered to be far less real than the invisible soul or mind, and so the possibility of representing a person through his or her physical appearance was denied. The recording of an external likeness was denounced by the third-century neo-Platonist philosopher Plotinus, who refused to allow his portrait to be painted, in part because he believed it only an "image of an image" (in true Platonist fashion), and in part because he rejected his material existence, claiming that its mortal fragility demonstrated that it was essentially untrue and unreal.

Most intellectuals of the first three centuries after Christ believed that the Divine One could not or should not be visually represented. Jews and pagans generally taught that the manifestation of God or the gods to humans usually took place in a mediated or disguised mode (through burning bushes or nocturnal visitors, for example). Moses, for example, was allowed to see only God's backside (Exod. 33:17-23). But Christian doctrine proclaimed that in Jesus God was incarnate as a human being in historical time and space. Christians claimed that their god took on human bodily existence, and with it an actual human appearance.

Still, while claiming that Jesus was a particular human appearance of God, the early church did not look for descriptions or portraits of Jesus "from life." In the earliest Christian images, Christ appears in different guises, often as a Good Shepherd, or like one of the youthful, savior gods from the Roman iconography of late antiquity. He is ordinarily beardless and youthful and wears long curls, but occasionally he looks older and wears the heavy beard of a philosopher. Sometimes he uses a wand to perform such wonders as changing water to wine or multiplying loaves and fishes. When he heals the sick, he lays his hand upon the sufferer. In most cases he is shown as no taller than his followers and no differently dressed.

In the mid-fourth century, artists started showing Jesus with a beard. He was shown enthroned as a ruler, lawgiver and judge as well as a savior, wonder-worker and healer. In some cases these different representations appeared in the same buildings—apparently without causing a great deal of concern among viewers about which one was "correct."

Augustine of Hippo, aware that different artistic representations of Jesus were circulating, claimed that such variations were unavoidable since individual imaginations construct unique fabrications. The problem of verisimilitude, or even consistency, did not trouble him. Since no way exists to judge which image is closest to reality, he said, the only nonnegotiable fact is that Jesus had a human face. In his treatise *On the Trinity* Augustine states that it is not "in the least relevant to salvation what our imaginations picture him like, which is probably quite different from the reality." What really matters is that we think of Jesus as a human being.

Most of the representations of Christ from the third and fourth centuries cannot be called "proper portraits," since they often appeared within complex scenes based on biblical stories, or were designed more to be symbolic or expressive than a record of a particular likeness. Only at the end of the fourth century do we see anything like a

face of Christ presented alone, without background details or other figures in a narrative composition. Here again there were variations. Jesus was shown as old or young, bearded or unbearded, with light complexion or dark.

Did the rest of the Christian world agree with Augustine that Jesus had a particular human face, but that his particular appearance was immaterial to faith? That's not clear. The belief that the Incarnate One possessed both human and divine natures raised a few additional questions on this matter: Did Christ's divine nature also have an external appearance through its union with the human one? Was the human face of Jesus thus a manifestation of the invisible God? If so, how could Jesus be visually represented without danger, error or blasphemy? And if not, would his portrayal only in his human nature be incomplete or partial and thus untrue or even heretical? Was it better to aim for consistency or to deliberately project inconsistency in order to express the duality of Christ's natures?

One response to this quandary is attributed to Eusebius of Caesarea in a famous (but possibly forged) letter to Constantine's sister, Constantia. He rebuffed her request for a portrait of Jesus, saying: "What sort of image of Christ are you seeking? Is it the true and unalterable one which bears his essential characteristics, or the one which he took up for our sakes when he assumed the form of a servant?"

Other interpreters looked to verses in the New Testament presenting Christ as the "image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15). Moreover, two passages from the Gospel of John present Jesus himself as claiming some kind of visual identity with God: "Whoever sees me sees the one who sent me" (12:45) and "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (14:9). Such texts imply that the invisible God is made visible through the incarnation in a concrete and not simply mystical or anagogical way—that those who saw Jesus in his earthly life also "saw" the first person of the Trinity. Such an interpretation was strongly argued by early-church writers, including Justin Martyr, Irenaeus and Tertullian.

This claim—that through the incarnation the invisible Divine became both visible and human—marked a critical break with traditional Judaism as well as with Greco-Roman philosophy. The doctrine of the incarnation created a bridge between the created and uncreated worlds, between the physical and spiritual realms, and allowed the image itself to serve a mediating function. The visual representation of God was a vital link in the chain of reality, and closed the gap between absence and presence. And so, in time, a portrait came to be accepted as a representative

presence of a sacred model, one that inspired devotion and prayer—an icon.

Although icons of Jesus or the saints claim to be some kind of “likeness,” they do not claim to be “real” in the sense that the scientists cited in *Popular Mechanics* sought the “real” image. Nor do the makers of icons believe the image can “contain” or spatially limit the divine being. This aspect of icons separates them from idols. Icon makers of all generations have been careful to emphasize the two-dimensionality of their images, elongating noses and enlarging eyes, breaking perspective and adding prominent frames, to ensure that the viewer does not mistake the image for something “real” or living.

A fascination with icons has emerged lately in the Western church. Many observers have concluded that the general suppression of images, especially within the Reformed traditions, has resulted in a kind of visual starvation and a consequent desire to reincorporate art into liturgy, devotional practices and church design. Icons, books about icons, and even video instruction on the Orthodox liturgy have become best sellers in religious bookstores. Seminaries are now offering courses in icon painting and instruction on how to pray with icons.

People want to see the divine “face to face.” They are fascinated not so much by how Jesus might have really looked as by how his image conveys his holiness, his character and his presence. We recognize that his “real” appearance transcends our human understanding of literal “truth” and our desire for consistency. When it comes to Jesus, a portrait is not an achievement of external verisimilitude, but a means for us to catch a fleeting and clouded glimpse of the divine, to allow the eye to see what the mind might not know unaided.