

The Sculptural Representation of Saint Paul in Damascus: A Convergence of Theology, History, and Urban Heritage

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Abstract

Introduction Christian sculpture is one of the most important artistic tools used by the Church to express faith and teach religious stories. In the early centuries, Christians avoided making statues to prevent any resemblance to pagan idol worship. But over time, sculpture became a key part of church decoration and a way to represent sacred figures. One of the most frequently depicted figures in Christian sculpture is Saint Paul. He is often shown holding a sword, symbolizing the power of the Word and martyrdom, and a book, representing his teachings and letters. These statues are not just artistic works— they are spiritual symbols that reflect Paul's strength in spreading the Christian In Syria, especially in Damascus, where Paul's famous conversion took place, his statues have a unique local style. The purpose of this research is to study how Saint Paul's image has evolved in Christian sculpture, from early symbolic forms to modern interpretations, with a special focus on examples found in Syria. The study will explore how these statues reflect both religious meaning and local heritage. Chapter One: The Evolution of Christian Sculpture – From Symbol to Embodiment Christian sculpture has undergone significant transformations since the early days of the Church—evolving artistically, theologically, and culturally. In its earliest phase, Christianity avoided figurative art, fearing resemblance to pagan idolatry. As a result, early visual expressions relied on symbolic carvings such as the fish or the Good Shepherd, frequently found in catacombs and funerary spaces (Jensen, 2000, pp. 32–35; 73–78). By the late fourth century, following the official recognition of Christianity, sculpture gained visibility within church architecture, appearing on columns, façades, and apses. Saints began to be represented as full-figure statues holding distinctive symbols that reflected their theological role—a shift from abstract symbol to embodied form. During the Medieval era, Christian sculpture reached new heights in Gothic cathedrals. These works served a didactic function, illustrating biblical narratives and Church doctrine to a largely illiterate population (Panofsky, 1957, pp. 42–47). In the Renaissance, sacred sculpture embraced classical proportion and anatomical realism, drawing from Greco-Roman aesthetics. Nonetheless, the spiritual depth of religious figures remained central: artists used the human body as a vehicle for divine meaning and transcendence (Banker, 2014, pp. 112–118; 145–149). Chapter OneIn the modern period, sculpture evolved toward abstraction and conceptual symbolism. Artists employed new materials and forms to explore spiritual themes such as suffering, salvation, and resurrection. In Eastern contexts—especially in Syria and Lebanon—Christian sculpture began to incorporate Arab and Syriac visual elements, merging religious symbolism with regional identity (Immerzeel & Snelders, 2021, pp. 137–153). These transformations also reflect the Church's evolving engagement with cultural expression, where sculpture acts not only as religious iconography but also as a medium of spiritual and social transformation (de Gruchy, 2001, pp. 11–17; 35–49).