ENCYCLOPEDIA of Comparative Iconography

THEMES DEPICTED IN WORKS OF ART

Edited by Helene E. Roberts
ENCYCLOPEDIA of Comparative Iconography

THEMES DEPICTED IN WORKS OF ART

VOLUME 1 & 2

A–Z

Editor
Helene E. Roberts

FITZROY DEARBORN PUBLISHERS
CHICAGO • LONDON
CONTENTS

EDITOR’S NOTE AND GUIDE TO USAGE  page vii
ALPHABETICAL LIST OF ENTRIES  xi
GENERAL READING LIST  xiii

ENCYCLOPEDIA ENTRIES A–Z  1-957

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS  969
INDEX OF ANCIENT MYTHOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL PERSONAGES, PLACES, AND CONCEPTS  975
INDEX OF JUDEO-CHRISTIAN PERSONAGES, PLACES, AND CONCEPTS  989
INDEX OF REFERENCES TO THE BIBLE AND OTHER SACRED BOOKS  1001
INDEX OF OTHER CULTURES, RELIGIONS, AND MYTHOLOGIES  1007
INDEX OF ARTISTS AND WORKS OF ART  1011
INDEX OF AUTHORS, LITERARY TEXTS, COMPOSERS, FILMMAKERS, AND FOLKTALES  1051
INDEX OF OTHER NAMES AND TERMS  1065
God is the Light of the heavens and the earth; the likeness of His Light is as a niche wherein is a lamp (the lamp in a glass, the glass as it were a glittering star) kindled from a Blessed Tree, an olive that is neither of the East nor of the West whose oil welling would shine, even if no fire touched it; Light upon Light; (God guides to His Light whom He will.) (And God strikes similitudes for men, and God has knowledge of everything.) in temples God has allowed to be raised up, and His Name to be commemorated therein; therein glorifying Him, in the mornings and the evenings, are men whom neither commerce nor trafficking diverts from the remembrance of God and to perform the prayer, and to pay the alms . . . (The Holy Koran 24:36–37)

These verses from the Surat an-Nier, the Surah of Light, in the Holy Koran, are carved into the doorway of the Mosque of Sultan Hassan, in Cairo, Egypt (1356–1362). They are also frequently written on the graceful glass enameled lamps that hang in the prayer hall of the mosque. Said to be among the last revelations received by the Prophet Muhammad, these verses refer to God’s likeness as a light, to the light in the lamp, and to the lamp in the niche. God sent this revelation to the Prophet in terms understood by Jews, pagans, and Christians, as well as by early Muslims, and this image of the light hanging in a niche is still resonant today.

In the ancient world, the symbolic connotations of light were depicted through the use of several different images: the candle, the lamp, the sun, the mandorla, the halo, and fire. These different aspects of light developed powerful connotations throughout the medieval period and even more so during the Renaissance, spreading to include a variety of art forms and styles from the early experiments in chiaroscuro to impressionism. The iconographic history of these developments has been extensively documented in separate studies devoted to specific cultures or periods of time. A comprehensive article by Oskar Holl in the Lexicon der christlichen Ikonographie collected a rich bibliography.

Here we will consider parallel developments in the iconographic representation of light through Jewish, Christian, and Islamic sources. At the heart of the different representations of light is a mystical symbol born in the late classical Mediterranean and still relevant today: a lamp hanging in a niche. From its early beginnings, the niche represented the temple, the synagogue, the church, or the mosque. It is the light shining in the niche that is said to point the way to a meaningful and credible truth.

God as Light

The identification of light with pleasure, goodness, and eternal life is as old as the sun of the Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaton. This signification of light was opposed to that of darkness, which signified death and destruction and clung to the dim, gray, lightless underworld of the Babylonian hero Gilgamesh. The opposing images occur in the first verses of Genesis (1:3–4), where God creates light and divides the light from the darkness and thus establishes the rule of divine law, order over chaos. The symbolism is frequently repeated throughout the Old Testament, especially by Isaiah: “The sun shall be no more thy light by day; neither for brightness shall the moon give light unto thee: but the Lord shall be unto thee an everlasting light, and thy God thy glory” (Isaiah 60:19).

The world of Homer inherited the images of Gilgamesh, and for the early Greeks light versus darkness described a life of victory and glory above ground as opposed to the dark underworld of death. Odysseus was told to enjoy his life in this world, because it was “. . . better to be a slave in this world, than a king in the next.” To this relatively primitive concept of light, the pre-Socratic philosophers added connotations of knowledge and reason. Apollo was not only god of the sun but also god of music, poetry, and science. For Plato, in the fifth century B.C., to “see the light” meant to understand truth. The man in Plato’s Allegory of the Cave saw truth only in reflected light. When he emerged from the cave and saw actual truth, he was blinded. Sophocles’ Oedipus was mentally “blind” so long as he had eyes but did not see the truth; when the “light” of truth struck him, he became physically blinded. Alexander made the similar mistake of stepping into the “light” of Diogenes.

By the first century A.D., this vision of light had filtered into the cave of Aeneas, hero of Virgil’s Aeneid, where, among the shades, Aeneas found Orpheus with his lyre, bathed in light. The possibility of a bright life after death was latent in the story of Orpheus, who not only descended into the underworld and emerged from it, but who was also supposed to have visited Egypt and become acquainted with the sun worship of Akhenaton. Orpheus became the principal priest in Dionysian rites, in which notions of renewal and rebirth were illustrated by an extensive vocabulary of symbols. The idea that death introduced light was an astounding contradiction, and this revolutionary image introduced a mystical concept of light that became central to the three Mediterranean religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

For late-Hellenistic Jews, the hint of an afterlife was portrayed by David with his lyre, a transformation of Orpheus, as in the synagogue at Dura-Europos (third century A.D.), or the synagogue in Gaza (A.D. 508–509). Christians associated Orpheus with Christ or with the Good Shepherd, as in the
mosaics of Gallia Placidia in Ravenna, Italy (a.d. 450), or the floor mosaic of the Church in Jerusalem, now preserved in the Istanbul Museum (sixth century a.d.). In a Virgilian sense, these personifications pointed the way to a bright eternal life for the deceased who had followed the law.

The mystical message of Christ as “the light” incorporated both a Neoplatonic vision of light as truth, as well as a notion of eternal life. This image became central to the writings of the church fathers over the following centuries. The Gospel according to John frequently refers to Christ as the light: “Then spake Jesus again unto them, saying, I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life” (John 8:12). Or again: “I come a light into the world, that whosoever believeth on me should not abide in darkness” (John 12:46). This mystic vision was conveyed in early Christian art by the formula “Life and Light,” written in the form of a cross. Because the cross signified victory, this formula merged the idea of light with the idea of victory over death. Among numerous examples of this device is a cross inscribed on a sixth-century silver plate from the Phela Treasure, presently in the Abegg-Stiftung in Bern, Switzerland. The cross is depicted standing on the hill of Golgotha, from which flow the four rivers of paradise. In this case, Christ, life, light, victory, and paradise are combined in a single expressive image.

The Lamp, as the Vehicle of Light

A simpler representation of Christ as light, lighting the path to eternal life, was conveyed by means of a decorated lamp. The lamp, or candlestick, has symbolic origins in the very light it produces and has developed its own distinct iconographic history. The Psalm calls the word of God “a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path” (Psalm 119:105). To this day, Jews celebrate a dedication of light at the festival of Hanukkah. In Isaiah, the seven-branched candlestick, or the menorah, came to represent the divine revelation of “the law.” As it represented “the law,” so the menorah was associated with the Ark of the Covenant. According to Erwin Ramsdell Goodenough, the menorah became even more: it became “a symbol of God, of his streaming Light and Law; it was the Tree of Life, the astral path to God, and the mediating female principle, the Mother” (Goodenough, p. 113).

On a Greek stela, the rendering of a lamp in the hands of a mourner represented the eternal flame of the spirit, an image that frequently appeared on Roman funerary monuments as well. In the classical Mediterranean, lamps were buried with the deceased person to light the soul’s way into the darkness of the underworld. Since the lamp accompanied the soul into the afterlife, its decoration reflected the development of ideas about death and life after death. By the second and third centuries a.d., the mythological figures common to earlier classical lamps had often been replaced by images from the same myths, but with new moral implications. Leda and the swan, for example, might represent the descent of God’s spirit to the receptive mortal; Venus with an apple might indicate the promise of pleasure and future happiness in the next world for the mortal who made the right choice. Symbols of the hunt indicated struggle, reward, and victory, especially victory over death for the owner of the lamp. Frequently, new symbolic themes were explained by means of inscriptions. For example, on a second- or third-century lamp from Syria, now at the Museum of the American University of Beirut in Lebanon, the ubiquitous figure of Venus, reclining on a couch, is accompanied by a lover and a Greek inscription: Heidonos (happiness, or pleasure). Lamps like these, many of which were found in Mediterranean burial sites along the shores from Turkey to Africa and Italy, were inscribed in either Greek or Latin.

By the second and third centuries, flowers, vines, and fruit—symbols of renewal and rebirth associated with the cult of Dionysus—also were portrayed on lamps. These symbols were readily adopted by Jews and Christians. Lamps for Jews, for example, were decorated with Dionysiac motifs and adorned with specifically Jewish insignia: the menorah, the ethrog, and the lulab. Fish and crosses were added to the vines and garlands adorning Christian lamps to guide the faithful along the right path. Indeed, early Christian lamps soon became a vehicle for a vast repertoire of subjects suitable to illustrate the truth in the next life. In addition to specifically Christian insignia, all the beasts of the heavenly kingdom—lions, lambs, panthers, leopards, deer, bears, horses, rabbits, and peacocks—adorn the lamps that light the soul into eternal life and happiness. In place of classical mythological figures, saints and prophets stood by the vines and vases of eternal life, acting as intercessors for entry into the next world. In other words, the lamp, as vehicle of light or truth, offered a field for a variety of decorative motifs, all of which received their meaning through the eternal flame that burned in the vessel.

While the pottery lamps of East and West remained fairly simple in their shapes and decorations, lamps made of more valuable material not only were decorated, but assumed complicated symbolic shapes. Frequently these lamps were in the shape of animals, either pigeons or griffins, creatures long associated with the ascent of the spirit. Some lamps were of more original shape, such as the more popular bronze lamps from the fifth or sixth century in the form of a boat. (There is a well-known example in Florence, Italy, and another one in the Virginia Museum of Art.) The boat originally represented the ship of souls guided by Charon across the river Styx, but in Christian examples the pilot became Peter, Paul, or Odysseus, who, in his Christian incarnation, stood for the indomitable traveler in the troubled seas of life. Because the beam on the mast of the ship formed a cross, these lamps are usually interpreted as Christian, but Jews also understood the image, for it occurs in the mosaics of the House of Leontis in Beit She’an (fifth or sixth century). Another unusual shape of lamp, now preserved in the Hermitage, in St. Petersburg, Russia, is in the form of a basilica.

By the fifth century, iconoclasm was creating problems for the image of the lamp, and in lands where iconoclasm was rampant, the figurative decoration on lamps was often explained or even replaced by selected written formulas. John’s notion of Christ as light, or the written word for light as the eternal life on the cross, was also described. Writing was especially suitable for the depiction of an abstract idea, and the lamp, as the vehicle holding the flame of truth, gave form or meaning to the writing. For example, early pagan lamps were traditionally decorated with conventional subjects of delight, dolphins, and tritons, but by the third and fourth centuries, mythological subjects selected for their moral implications had to be reinterpreted, and inscriptions were needed to explain them. A
Christian lamp decorated with the ubiquitous vines, flowers, rabbits, and doves was then explained by a simple inscription: “Blessing,” “Jesus help me,” “Lord help me,” or with the name of a saint who might intercede in the next world on behalf of the bearer of the lamp. From the third to the seventh century, apart from such obviously sectarian symbols as the cross or the menorah, there does not seem to have been much difference in the decorations on pagan, Jewish, or Christian lamps. By the sixth or seventh century, inscriptions sometimes replaced the image altogether. A familiar expression on Christian lamps, with and without other decoration, was “The light of Christ shines for all,” written in Greek. The same sentiments adorn lamps from the West at this time, with the inscriptions written in Latin.

All these forms of decoration appeared on lamps in lands conquered by the Arabs, and while many continued to be inscribed in Greek, some were also inscribed in Arabic. In some cases, whether the lamp was intended for a pagan, Muslim, Jewish, or Christian owner is not indicated. A lamp for either an Arab Christian or an Arab Muslim might be decorated by a single word, “Blessing” written in Arabic. By the sixth and seventh centuries A.D., in areas subject to iconoclastic ideas, the Dionysiac formula of vines and flowers was sometimes replaced by geometric designs, or by suitable inscriptions in Greek or Arabic conveying hope for the deceased or blessings for the bearer of the lamp. Several lamps are known to be inscribed with the following message in Greek: “Shine, oh Light! Do not go out. Light with your flame and do not spill.” On two sixth- or seventh-century lamps from Syria, now preserved in the Museum of the American University of Beirut, the same potter apparently turned out one lamp for a Greek-speaking customer, with the Greek inscription cited above, and another one, identical in all other respects, with an inscription in Arabic: “Blessings in the name of God to the owner of the light.” Whether the lamp was destined for an Arab Christian or an Arab Muslim is not indicated.

This custom of inscribing a lamp with suitable written verses instead of figural decoration lingered for many centuries in Islamic art, especially where inscriptions replaced figurative images. It is important to point out that inscriptions from the Koran were not used on the smaller, domestic lamps, because it is said that words from the holy book should not be touched by unwashed hands. On the other hand, the great enamelled glass mosque lamps from Mamluke, Syria (twelfth–fourteenth century), which hung high in the mihrab (a niche, cut into the qibla wall of a mosque, and hung with a lamp to indicate the direction for prayer) or in the prayer halls or doorways of a mosque, were frequently inscribed with all or part of the Surat an-Nur quoted at the head of this article.

The Light in the Niche

If the lamp lit the way for the deceased into the next world, then the path traveled by the soul on this journey was signified by an arch, or a niche holding a lamp. In this way, the niche, like the lamp, became an inseparable part of the imagery of light. As the means by which the spirit ascended to the next world, the niche represented a temple, synagogue, or church. In early Greek architecture, sculpture on a temple pediment explained the temple as the way of the logos—the path of divine law and order in the universe, as opposed to apparent chaos. The sculpture on the opposing tympana of the Temple of Olympia (sixth century B.C.) and the Parthenon (fifth century B.C.) in Greece illustrate the triumph of law over chaos. Thus, a temple facade represented in the background of a mythological scene on a Greek vase not only framed the figures portrayed but also explained the relevance of the story. The columns framing the diners on a krater in Würzburg, Germany (fourth century B.C.), for example, indicate that the meal takes place in the next world. The aedicula on an amphora in Naples, Italy (fourth century B.C.) conveys the same idea regarding the woman standing beneath the arch.

The Roman victory arch, like the gates of the city, not only connoted a military victory, it symbolized the victory of the Pax Romana, the divine rule of law over chaos. Virgil portrayed Aeneas entering the underworld through gates of ivory (Aeneid, 6.552–554). In the time of Virgil, the shape of a sarcophagus frequently represented a temple facade with a door through which the spirit could pass into the next world. On the end of a well-known sarcophagus in the Melfi Cathedral in Italy (second century A.D.), the mythological figures carved on either side of the door indicate the way and give comfort to the soul along its path.

By the third and fourth centuries A.D., in hypogea throughout the Mediterranean world, the temple facade—as a simple pediment on two columns or as an arched niche—represented the passage from this world to the next. Carved into or painted on the walls of the second- and third-century tomb complexes at Palmyra, Syria, arches and columns indicate the passage through which the spirit might escape after burial. Temple facades, columns, and tympana were painted with hanging lamps on a third-century tomb fresco from Roman Syria, preserved before the Persian Gulf War in the National Museum of Beirut. Pagan and Christian sarcophagi and funeral stele often displayed the bust of the deceased in a niche to suggest the passage of that soul into eternity.

This image of the door was so familiar that it was used by Jesus Christ to explain his position as intercessor: “I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved . . .” (John, 10:9). Thus, where deities, or personifications of divine qualities, had stood in front of niches on pagan sarcophagi, so Christ and the saints stood in front of niches on early Christian sarcophagi: for example, on the fourth-century sarcophagus in S. Ambrogio, in Milan, Italy, and the Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus (A.D. 359) in the Vatican.

The iconographic implications of the niche flourished in areas favoring iconoclasm. In northern Syria during the fifth and sixth centuries, a basket-of-plenty was placed in a niche to ensure a life of plenty for the soul in the afterworld or, quite frequently, a veil through which the deceased’s spirit must pass was hung across an arch. Five lamps from the second or third century A.D., each hanging in a niche, appear on a pagan sarcophagus in the National Museum in Damascus, Syria. These lighted niches on the Damascen sarcophagus expressed bright hope for the deceased in the next world. The symbolic representation of a niche as an indication of passage to the next world spread westward from the Mediterranean and as far east as the sculptures on the stupas of Gandhara, in what is now Afghanistan and Pakistan.
The images of light and the door thus were firmly established in the iconographic vocabulary of the fifth and sixth centuries. A light within a niche or a light standing above an altar became so popular in early Christian church mosaics that it is difficult to select one example over another. The Archaeological Museum in Istanbul, Turkey, preserves a Christian lead sarcophagus (fifth century) on the lid of which the sole decoration is a lamp hanging in a niche. A fifth-century mosaic covers the floor of the memorial to Moses on Mount Nebo (Pisgah), Jordan. The mosaic portrays an arch from which hangs a lamp in front of a chapel altar. Another mosaic, also on Mount Pisgah, is in the Church of the Priest John and portrays candlesticks flanking a center inscription under a temple tympanum. This type of composite image culminated in the great church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople (now Istanbul), built in the sixth century by Emperor Justinian, ruler of the eastern Roman Empire. Over the imperial door in the narthex of Hagia Sophia, an enthroned Christ holds an open book on which is written “Peace be upon you; I am the Light of the world.” Every aspect of the architecture and decoration in Hagia Sophia, as described by Paul the Silentiary in the sixth century, further supports the notion of the church as a light to the world.

Jews also used the image of a light in a niche to express their own understanding of the law or the “way.” The lintel of a doorway in a third-century synagogue in Capernaum (ancient Palestine) is decorated with a Torah ark in the form of a temple facade, closed with a curtain. In the synagogue of Dura-Europos, an ancient Mesopotamian town now in Syria, a third-century Torah shrine is decorated with a temple facade for the ark, and beside it is a menorah, along with the sacrifice of Isaac, the lulab, and the etrog. A lead sarcophagus from Beth She’arim portrays an arch over a menorah. The ark, closed with a curtain and flanked by two menorahs, appears three centuries later on the pavement mosaics of the synagogue in Beit She’an (fifth–sixth century) and without the curtain at Beit Alpha (sixth century).

The representation of temple, church, or synagogue and light—the temple showing the transition, or the way, and the light showing the direction to eternal life—is thus rooted in biblical and classical tradition. It is not clear which of these traditions established the use of these images first. They seem to have borrowed from each other and to have developed simultaneously during the first five centuries of the Christian era. These images persisted in the medieval art of both East and West, rapidly gathering strength on both sides of the Mediterranean, developing a vocabulary of related motifs that spread in their diversity and implications.

Along with a menorah on either side of the ark, a menorah in a niche became a familiar image in later Jewish iconography. A splendid example is a hanging Torah from Turkey (eighth century) that is decorated with a niche on columns, filled with flowers. The Torah contains seven hanging lamps and is inscribed with the words from Psalm 118:20: “This gate of the Lord, into which the righteous shall enter.”

Fully developed Byzantine art relied on light as its most significant symbolic image. Symbols of light were plentiful: the lamp, the sun, the moon, the stars, the nimbus, the mandorla, the city, and Jerusalem, to name but a few. The icon was a primary symbol of light. Standing between humans and God, it received the grace of God through His light and transmitted this light to the faithful. The image of the enthroned Christ holding the Gospel as a light to the world, first created in the Church of Hagia Sophia, became even more elaborate with time. In the Cathedral of Cefalu in Italy (twelfth century), a huge apse mosaic under a triumphal arch holds the central “figure” of light in the shape of the Pantocrator. In his hand he holds the open Gospel inscribed with the words from John 8:12: “I am the Light of the world.” These developments are fully explained in Byzantine texts.

Similarly, the elaborate ornamentation of cathedral lanterns and candelabra conveyed the image of divine light in the medieval West. Like the early Christian church, and like the synagogue and the temple, the portals of the great cathedrals represented the passage out of this world into the next. These portals were decorated with depictions of the Last Judgment, showing Mary and John acting as intercessors. As the worshippers entered a cathedral, their eyes were directed to the candles, the lantern, the allegory of the cross, the enthroned Virgin, the life of Jesus, the Eucharist, and the Holy Grail, all of which were portrayed in terms of light. Medieval manuscript illumination offers a vast repertoire of light imagery, while the significance of light in Renaissance art and architecture in later periods is well documented in modern sources.

It is less recognized that this artistic vocabulary was also understood by early Muslims and interpreted according to the Revelation of the Koran. The verses of light in the Koran associate it with truth and also, when hung in a niche, as indication of a temple’s divine blessing. The light in the niche became, in more specific Islamic terms, the mihrab in the prayer hall of a mosque. (A mihrab is a niche cut into the qibla wall of a mosque, hung with a lamp to indicate the direction for prayer.)

The mihrab in every mosque is the most essential architectural element of the hall for prayer, because it indicates the direction of the qibla, the direction toward Mecca, Saudi Arabia, toward which every Muslim should pray. In other words, the central image of every mosque is the light in the mihrab, or the niche hung with a light to indicate the direction of truth.

The verses of light in the Koran describe a lamp like a “glittering star” hanging in a niche. One of the earliest surviving mihrabs is in the mosque of Ibn Tulun in Cairo, Egypt (ninth century). Here a star is portrayed in the niche, although the lamp became the usual symbol and is most commonly used today. Modern prayer rugs, too numerous to mention, feature representations of lamps and are a familiar example of such symbolism. In Cairo, however, this image adopted an even wider interpretation and significance by the fourteenth century.

In the mosque of Sultan Hassan, the massive principal doorway leading to the interior sanctuary is inscribed with the verses of light. A light actually hangs in the doorway, which is shaped like a niche, or mihrab. The presence of the verses of light in the doorway of Sultan Hassan indicate that the function of this doorway is as a worldly mihrab, a kind of compass pointing to truth. According to the Koran, the light in the niche will only be found in temples that God has allowed to be raised, in which His name is glorified, and toward which men do not forget to pray as they perform their religious obligations in the world outside throughout the day.

As the image of the light in the niche persisted in Jewish and Christian art in succeeding centuries, it also was retained by the world of Islam. For example, in the huge King Feya (Faisal)
mosque in Islamabad, Pakistan, completed in 1988, the usual mihrab in the form of a niche in the gíbla wall is replaced by an enormous representation of the Koran, open at the page of the Surat ar-Rahman, the Beneficient, surrounded by the 99 names for God. The Surat ar-Rahman describes the bounteous reward awaiting the faithful. Above this startling and deliberate deviation from tradition, however, the symbolism of light dominates the entire building complex. A brilliant gold chandelier, illuminated by 4,000 lanterns, hangs from the center of the dome so that the dome appears suspended in light, very much like the dome of Hagia Sophia. (Actually, the King Faisal Mosque is indirectly associated with Hagia Sophia; its Turkish architect, Vedat Dalakay, was inspired by the Blue Mosque of Istanbul, itself modeled on Hagia Sophia.) The lantern is the most powerful image in the hall. It represents the Light of the Revelation, and like a portal it transforms the interior of the mosque into a mihrab for the world. The large open book representing the Koran in the gíbla wall then performs the function of the mihrab, indicating the direction for prayer and the promise of reward in the next world.

The central connotations of light could be said to have been conceived before the written word, when God divided light from darkness. Such symbols illuminated the medieval, mystical language of the three Mediterranean religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—and became a powerful part of the artistic vocabulary of the Renaissance. Much later, among the most beloved images deeply embedded in nineteenth-century artistic vocabulary of the Renaissance. Much later, among the most beloved images deeply embedded in nineteenth-century conscience is William Holman Hunt’s Light of the World (1854). In this painting, flowers, apples, and trees of paradise; the crown of thorns; and the wood of the cross are added to the familiar images of the door, the niche, and the lamp. Indeed, the development of this imagery has become so diverse that it can better be illustrated through the study of single motifs, such as the lantern, illumination, mandorla, or nimbus. All these motifs reflect the differing and brilliant facets of a common theme: amid the chaos and confusion of this world, light shines eternal at the end, as it was in the beginning.

See also Dawn/Dawning; Light II: Divine, Natural, and Neon; Logos/Word

Selected Works of Art

Classical

Greek Krater, detail showing a funeral meal under an architectural framework, fourth century B.C., Würzburg, Germany, Museum

Greek Amphora, detail showing a mourning figure in an aedicula, fourth century B.C., Naples, Italy, Naples Museum

Sarcophagus, second century, Melfi, Italy, Cathedral

Painted Hypogeum of the Three Brothers, second century, Palmyra, Syria

Painted Tomb, fresco, third century, Beirut, Lebanon, National Museum

Clay Lamp, inscribed “Heidonos,” third century, Beirut, Lebanon, American University

Sarcophagus, with detail of Christ and the Apostles on the back of a “city gate,” fourth century, Milan, Italy, St. Ambrogio

Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus, a.D. 359, Vatican, St. Peter

Sarcophagus, detail with a series of lamps hanging in niches, fourth or fifth century, Damascus, Syria, National Museum

Jewish

Torah Ark, temple facade, third century, Capernaum, Palestine, Synagogue

Torah Shrine, third century, Dura-Europos, Syria, Synagogue

David with His Lyre, fresco, third century, Dura-Europos, Syria, Synagogue

Lead Sarcophagus, with detail of arch over a menorah, fifth century, Beth She’arim, Israel

Lead Sarcophagus, with detail of arch over a menorah, fifth century, Beth She’arim

David with His Lyre, mosaic, sixth century, Gaza, Israel, Synagogue

The Ark and the Menorah, fifth–sixth century, Beit She’an, House of Leontis, Palestine, Synagogue

The Ark of the Menorah, mosaic, sixth century, Beit Alpha, Israel, Synagogue

Carpet with Seven Lamps Hanging in a Niche, with quotation from Psalm 118:20, eighteenth century, Prague, Czech Republic, Jewish Museum

Christian

Silver Plate, from the Phela Treasure, sixth century, Bern, Switzerland, Abegg-Stiftung

Bronze Lamp, in the shape of a boat, fourth or fifth century, Florence, Italy, National Museum

Bronze Lamp, in the shape of a boat, fourth century, Richmond, Virginia Museum of Art

Clay Lamp, with Greek inscription “the Light of Christ shines for all,” sixth or seventh century, found on Mount Sion, Jerusalem

Clay Lamp, with Greek inscription “the Light of Christ shines for all,” sixth or seventh century, Beirut, Lebanon, American University of Beirut

Christ Represented as Orpheus, mosaic, sixth century, Istanbul, Turkey, National Museum

Lead Sarcophagus, with lamp hanging in a niche on the cover, fifth or sixth century, Istanbul, Turkey, National Museum

Lamp in a Niche, mosaic, sixth century, Mount Pisgah, Jordan, Memorial to Moses

A Lamp in the Niche, mosaic from chapel altar, sixth century, Mount Nebo (Pisgah), Jordan, Church of the Priest John Church of Hagia Sophia, sixth century, Istanbul, Turkey

Hunt, William Holman, Light of the World, painting, 1854, Oxford, Keble College

Islamic

Clay Lamp, with Arabic inscription, “Blessings in the name of God to the owner of the light,” sixth or seventh century, Beirut, Lebanon, American University

Clay Lamp, with Arabic inscription, “Shine, oh Light! Do not go out. Light with your flame and do not spill,” eighth century, Paris, Cabinet des Médailles
Mihrab, from Ibn Tulun, ninth century, Cairo, Egypt
Mosque of Sultan Hassan, 1356–1362, Cairo, Egypt
Feyal (Faisal) Mosque, twentieth century, Islamabad, Pakistan

Further Reading

Gutmann, Joseph, Jüdische zeremonial Kunst, Frankfort, Germany: Ner-Tamid-Verlag, 1963
Jantzen, Hans, Die Hagia Sophia, Köln, Germany: DuMont Schauberg, 1967
Leclerq, Ferdinand Henri, Dictionnaire d’archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie, Paris, 1928
Seibert, Jutta, Lexikon christlichen Kunst, Freiburg, Germany: Herder, 1980
de Tervarent, Guy, Attributs et symboles dans l’art profane, Geneva, Switzerland: Droz, 1958