Images of Jesus in Art

MAURICE RYAN

Images of Jesus in Art

Representing Jesus of Nazareth in Christian Tradition

MAURICE RYAN

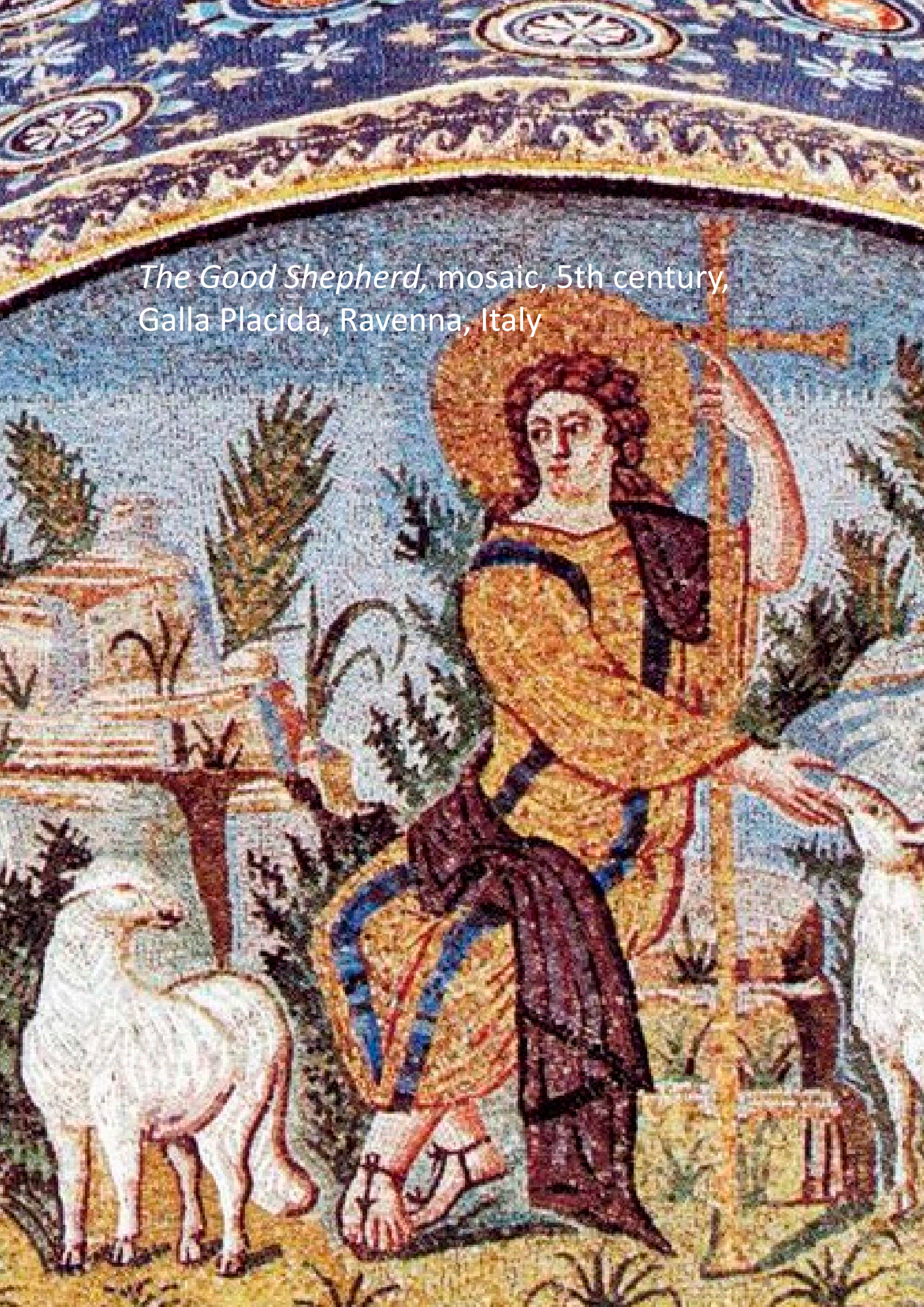
LUMINO PRESS

Contents

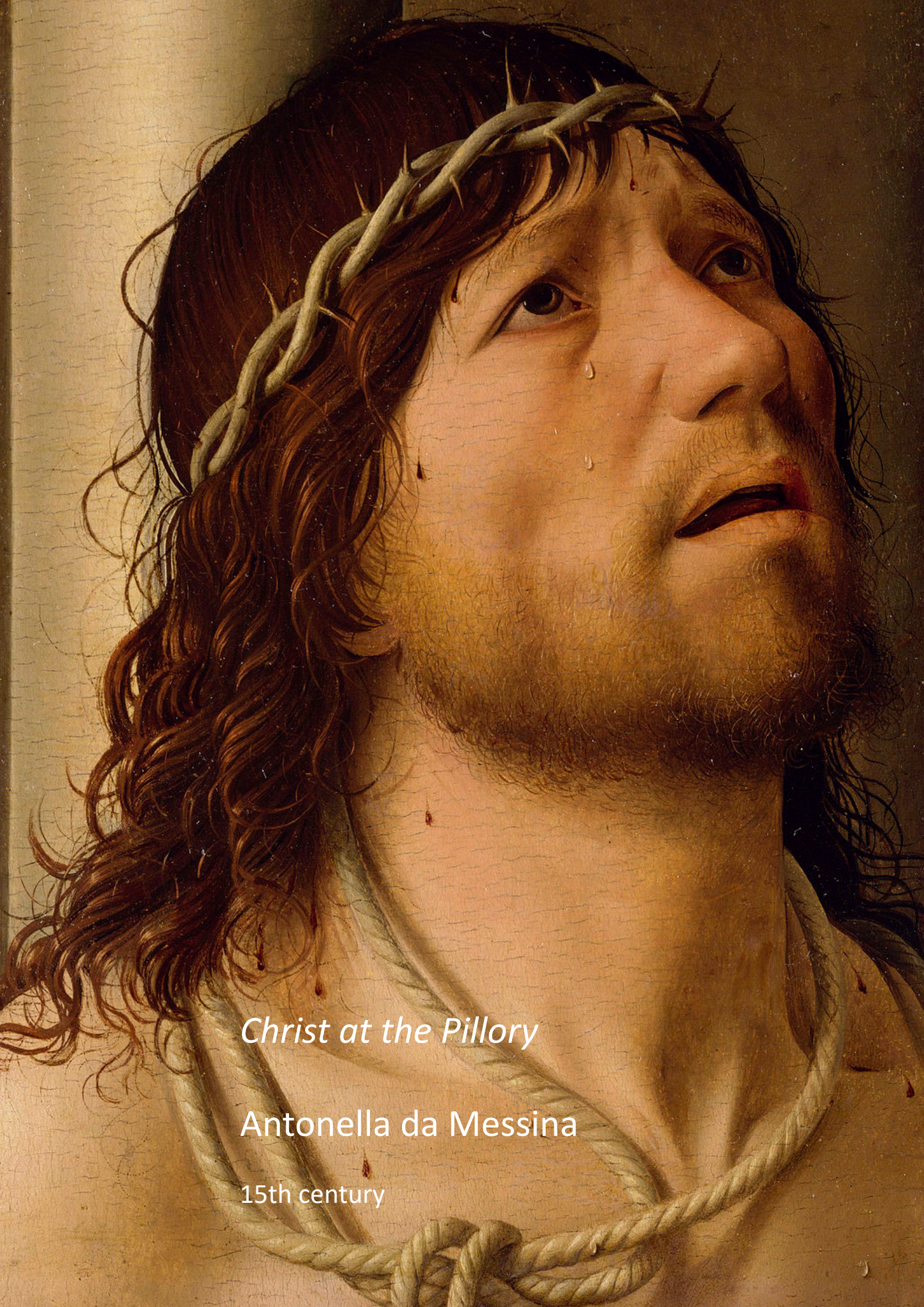
Christ as the Good Shepherd	Catacombs of Domitilla, Rome	4th century
The Good Shepherd	Galla Placida, Ravenna	5th Century
Christ at the Pillory	Antonella da Messina	15th century
Salvator Mundi	Leonardo da Vinci	c.1500
Christ Blessing	El Greco	c.1600
Supper at Emmaus	Caravaggio	1601
Head of Christ	Rembrandt	c.1655
Christ in the House of his Parents	John Everett Millais	1849
The Passover in the Holy Family	Dante Rosetti	1855
Christ in the Desert	Ivan Kramskoi	1872
Agony in the Garden	Paul Gauguin	1889
Christ in the Garden of Gethemane	Heinrich Hoffman	1890
Our Lord Jesus Christ	James Tissot	1894
Christ Walking on the Water	Henry Ossawa Tanner	1907
Modern Migration of the Spirit	Jose Orozco	1934
Ecce Homo	George Rouault	1935
White Crucifixion	Marc Chagall	1938
Yellow Crucifixion	Marc Chagall	1943
Head of Christ	Warner Sallman	1940
Head of Christ	Richard Hook	1960s
The Risen Christ by the Sea	Jack Jewell	1990
Mummy Portrait of Bearded Man	Egyptian sarcophagus	c.160
Son of God	Richard Neave	2001
Jesus	Bas Uterwijk	2018
The Stilling of the Tempest	Monika Liu Ho-Peh	1950s
Portrait of Christ	Pablo Picasso	1959
Madonna and Child	Karel Kupka	1956
The Sacred Heart of Jesus	Salvador Dali	1962
The Sacred Heart of Jesus	Pompeo Batoni	1767
Christa	Edwina Sandys	1975
Jesus Laughing	Ralph Kozak	1976
Jesus of the People	Janet McKenzie	1999
Maori Jesus	Sofia Minson	2014
Jesus of Nazareth	Cathy Fisher	2017

NOTES on Jesus in Art

Christ as the Good Shepherd,
4th century,
Sarcophagus from Catacombs
of Domitilla,
Rome, Vatican Museum



The Good Shepherd, mosaic, 5th century,
Galla Placida, Ravenna, Italy

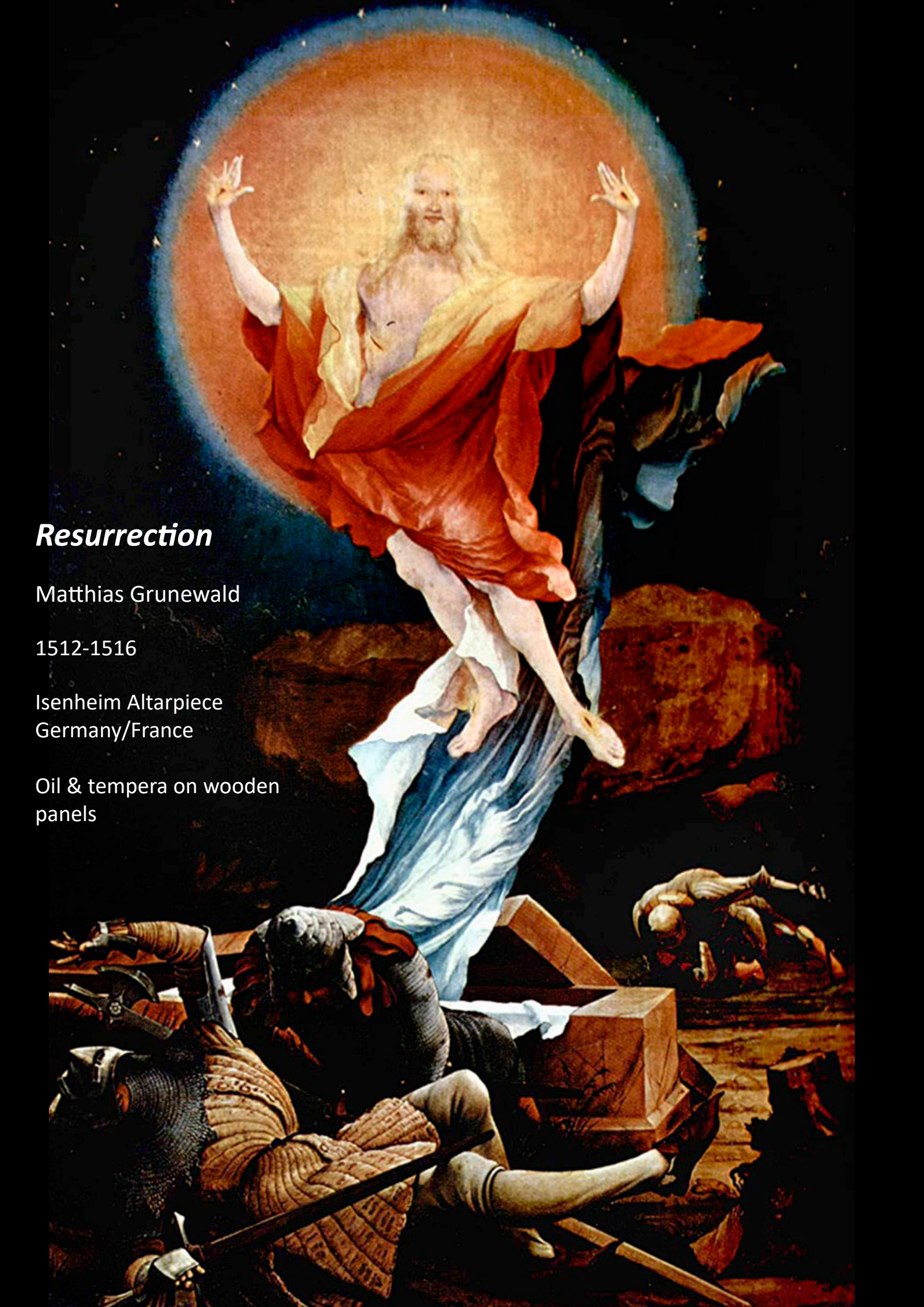


Christ at the Pillory

Antonella da Messina

15th century

Salvator Mundi, Leonardo da Vinci, c.1500



Resurrection

Matthias Grunewald

1512-1516

Isenheim Altarpiece
Germany/France

Oil & tempera on wooden panels

Christ Blessing

El Greco, c.1600
Oil on canvas

Supper at Emmaus

Michelangelo da Caravaggio

Oil on canvas, 1601

Head of Christ
Rembrandt, c.1655
Oil on canvas

Christ in the House of His Parents

John Everett Millais

Oil on canvas, 1849

The Passover in the Holy Family: Gathering Bitter Herbs

Dante Gabriel Rosetti 1855,

Watercolour, Tate Gallery

Christ in the Desert, Ivan Kramskoi, 1872

Oil on canvas, Moscow

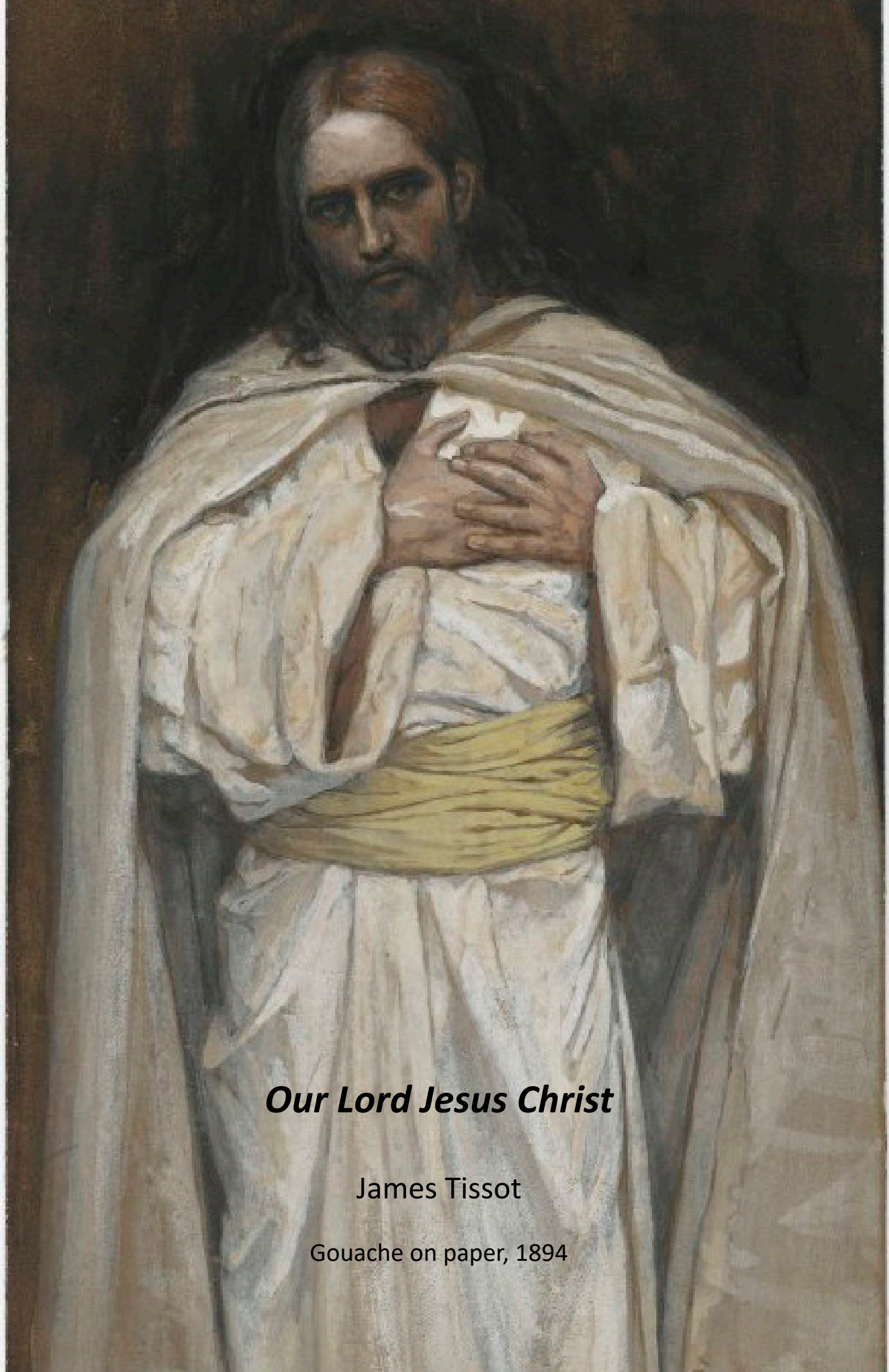
Agony in the Garden

Paul Gauguin
Oil on canvas, 1889

Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane

Heinrich Hoffman

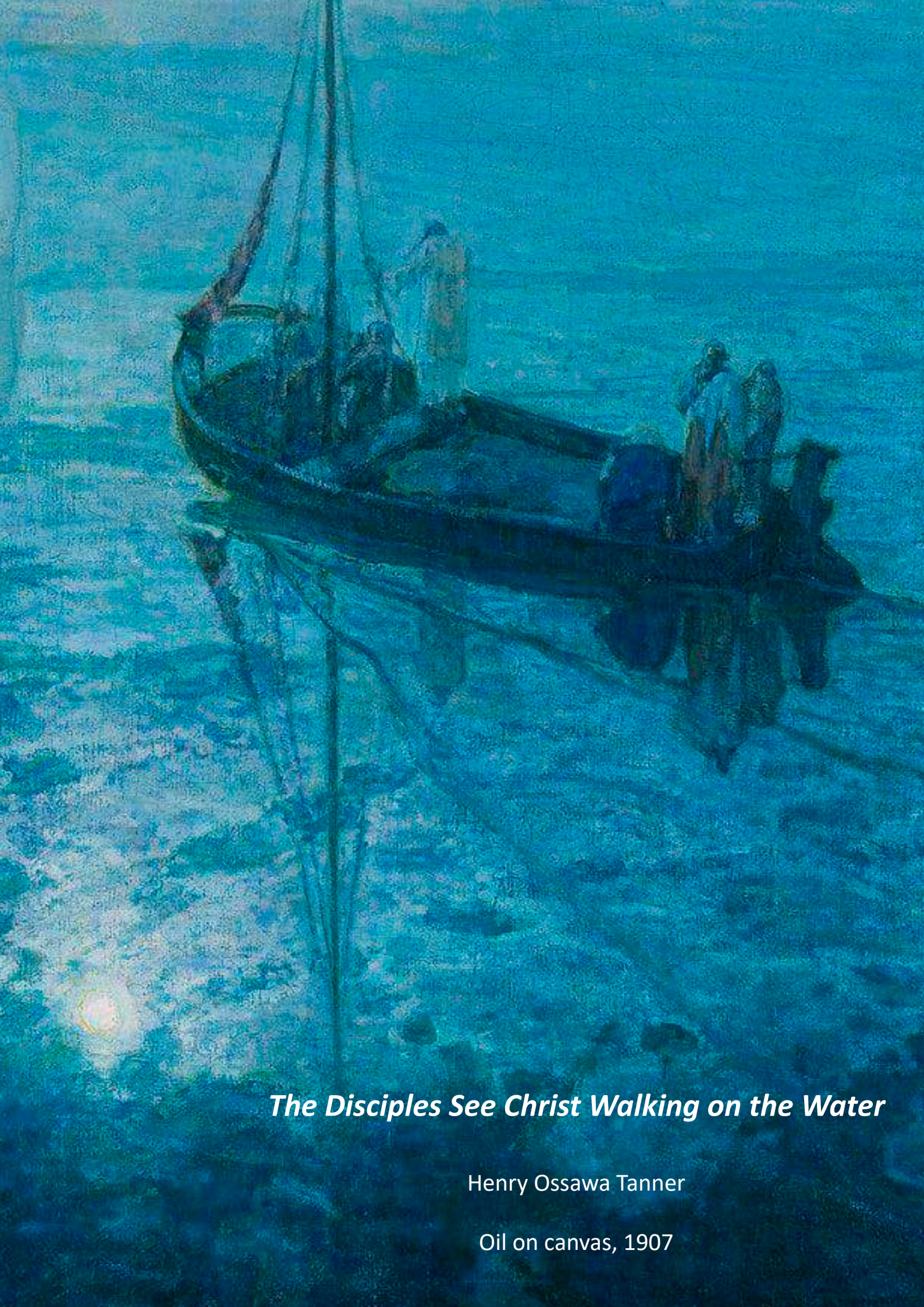
Oil on canvas, 1890



Our Lord Jesus Christ

James Tissot

Gouache on paper, 1894



The Disciples See Christ Walking on the Water

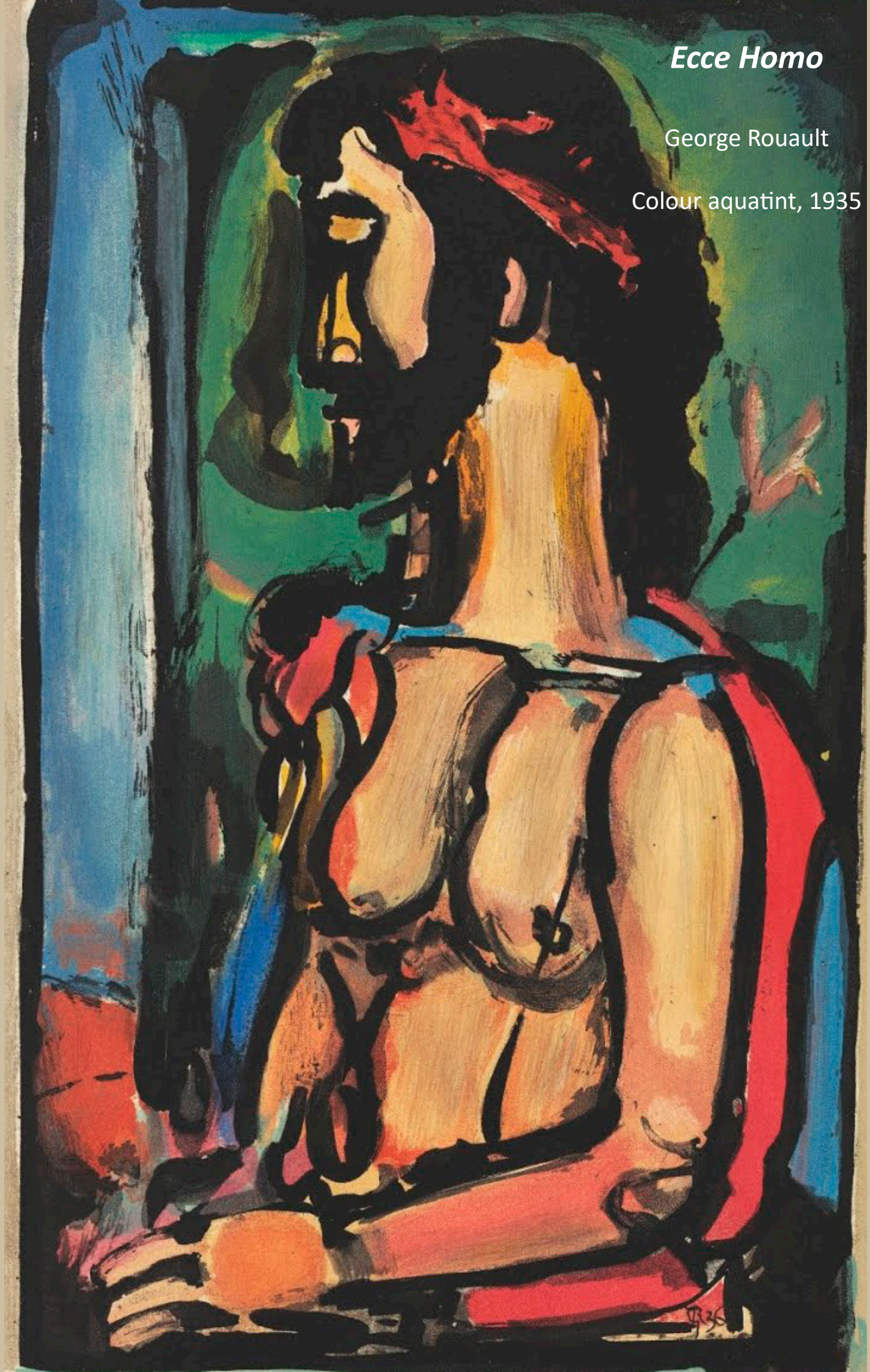
Henry Ossawa Tanner

Oil on canvas, 1907

Modern Migration of the Spirit

Jose Clemente Orozco

Mural, 1934



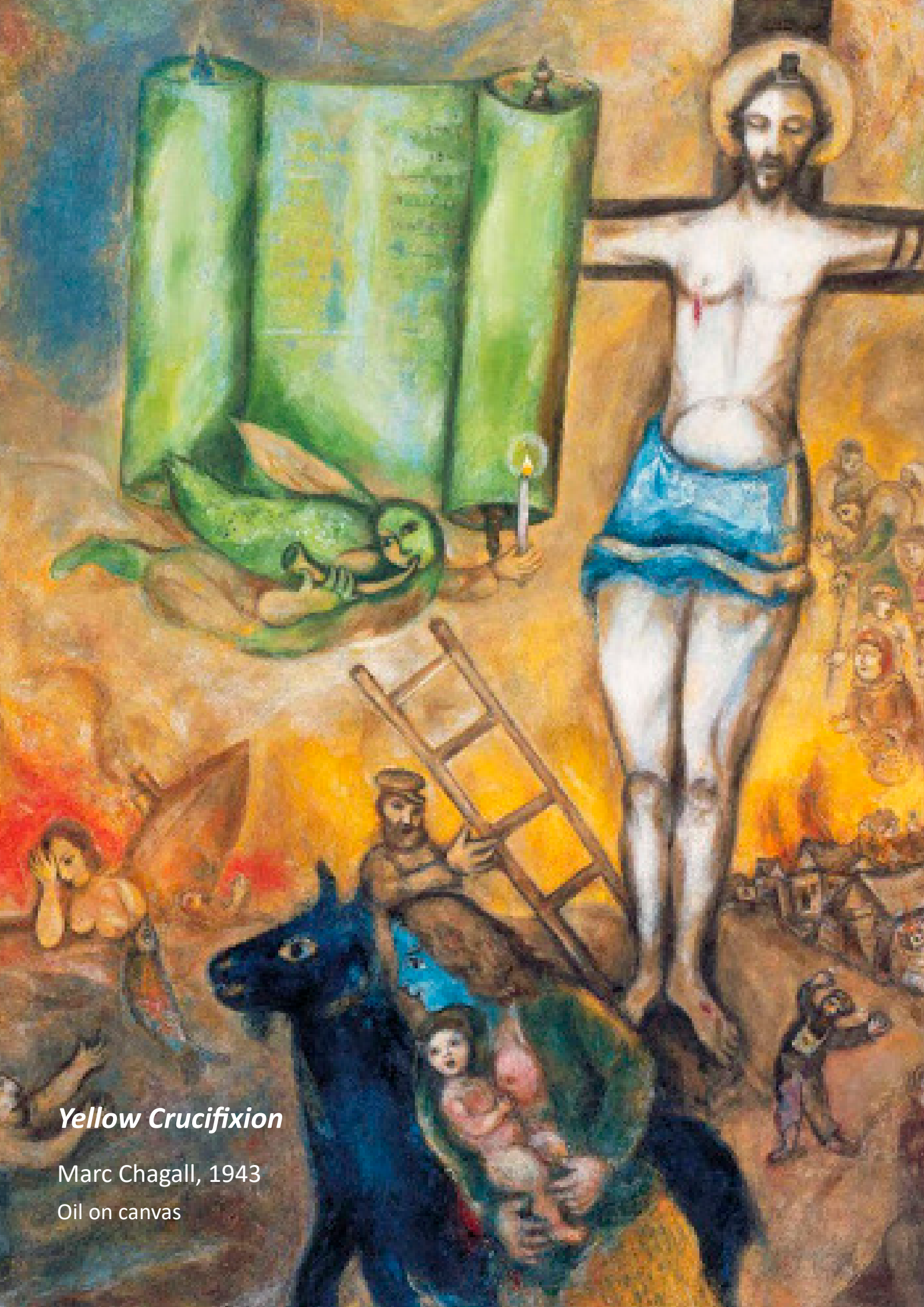
Ecce Homo

George Rouault

Colour aquatint, 1935

White Crucifixion

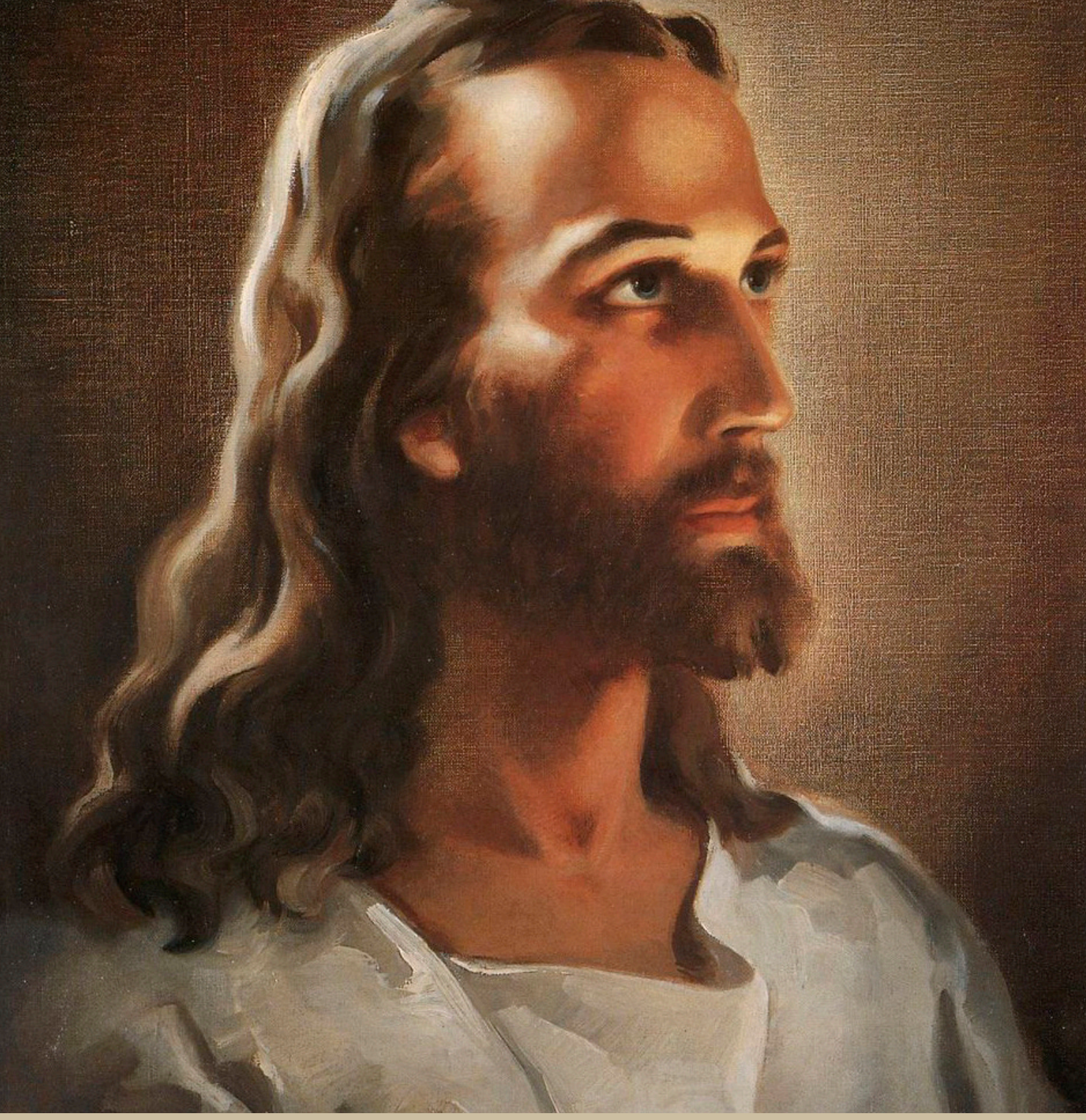
Marc Chagall, 1938
Oil on canvas



Yellow Crucifixion

Marc Chagall, 1943

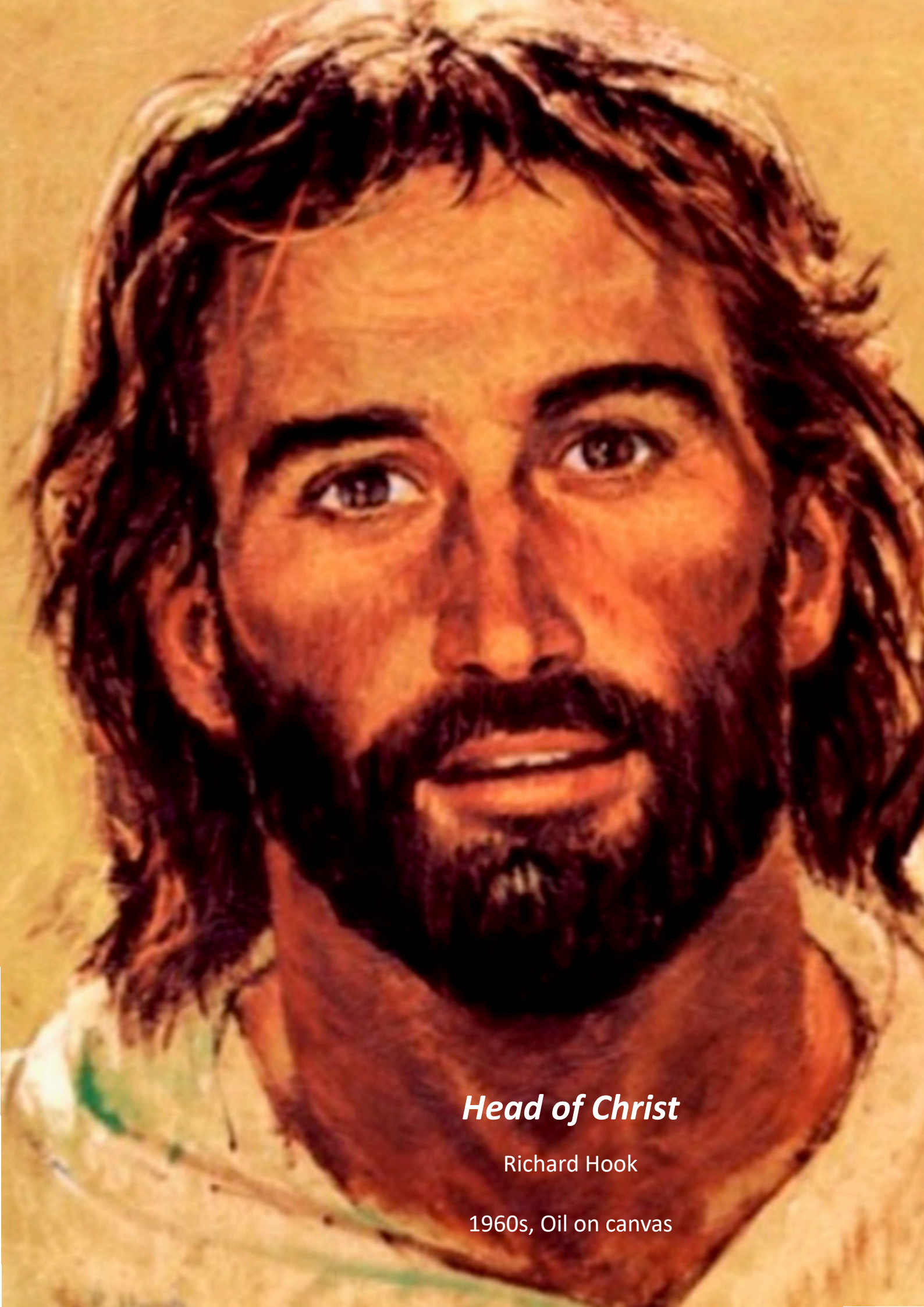
Oil on canvas



Head of Christ

Warner Sallman

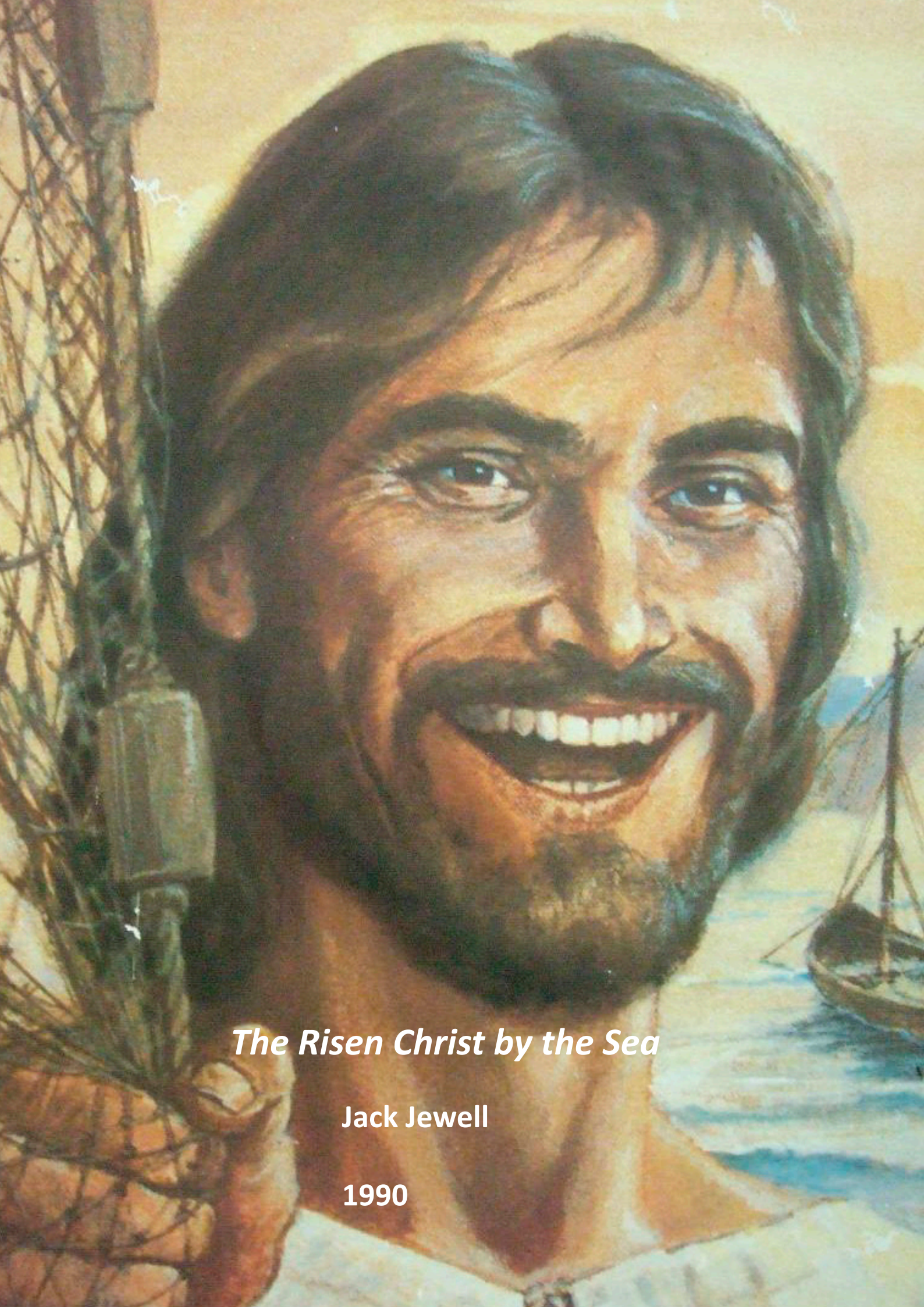
1940, Oil on canvas



Head of Christ

Richard Hook

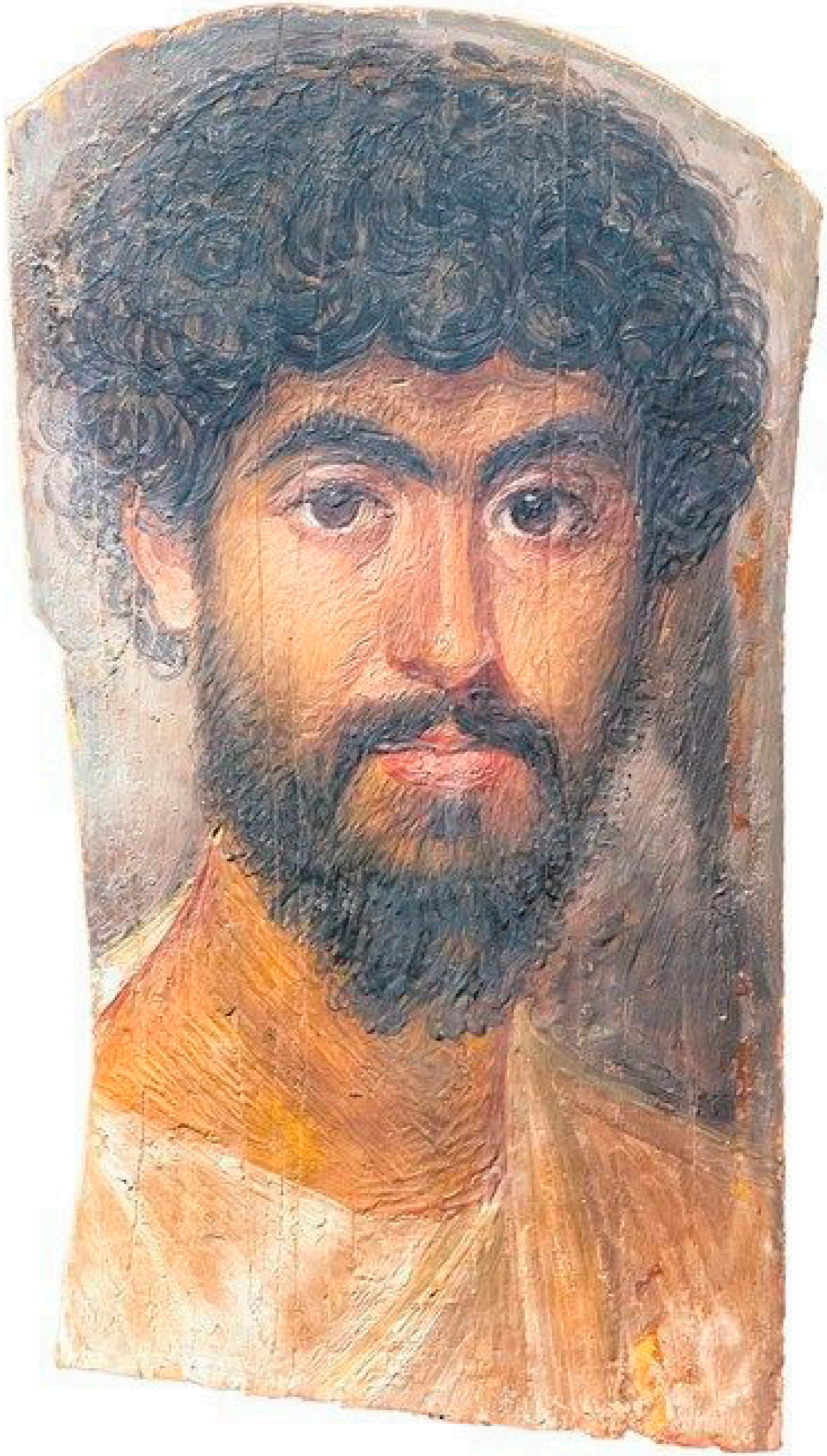
1960s, Oil on canvas



The Risen Christ by the Sea

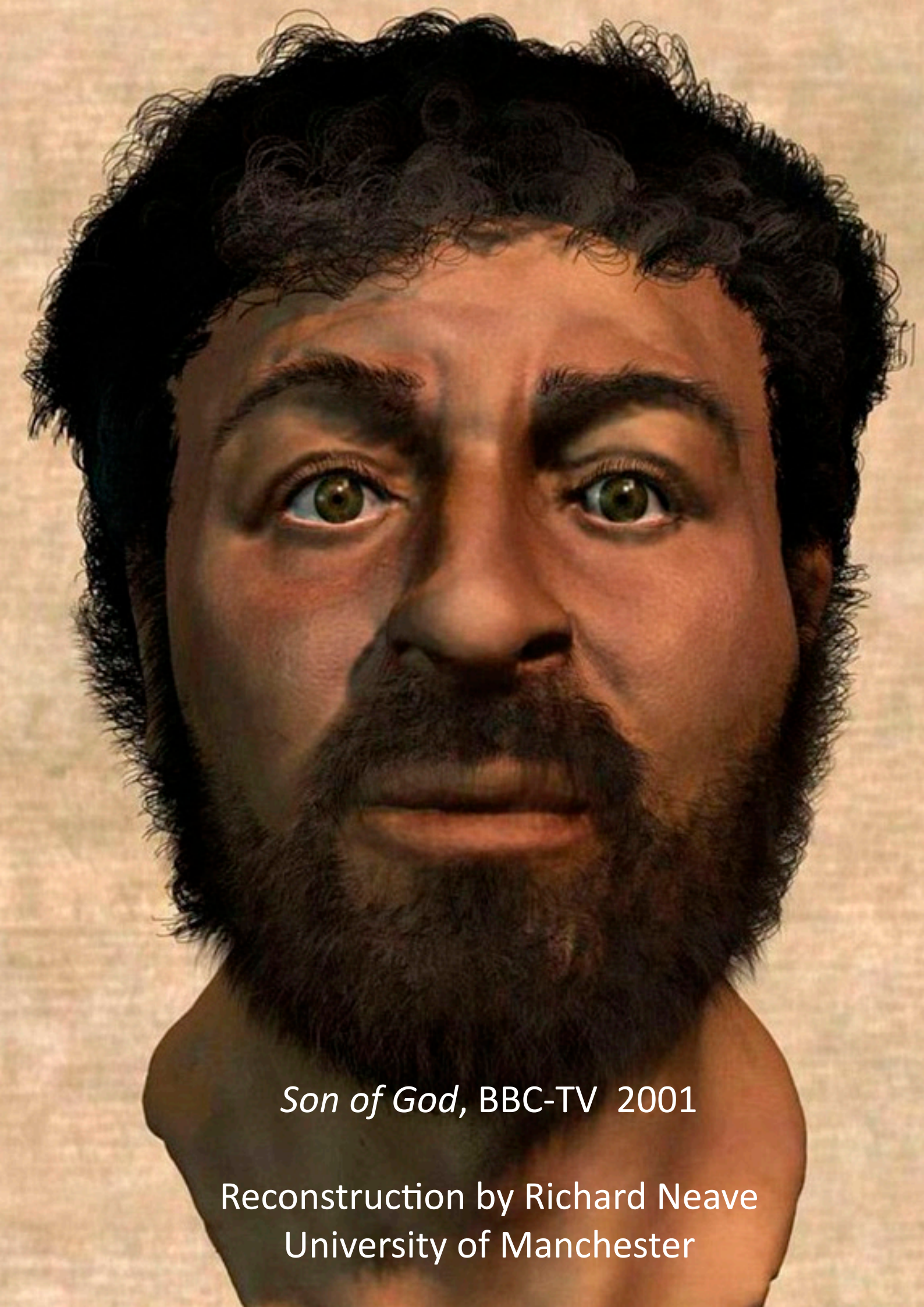
Jack Jewell

1990



Mummy portrait of bearded man

Fayyum, Egypt,
Encaustic on wood, c. 160s CE



Son of God, BBC-TV 2001

Reconstruction by Richard Neave
University of Manchester

Jesus

Bas Uterwijk

Photograph using artificial intelligence, 2018

The Stilling of the Tempest

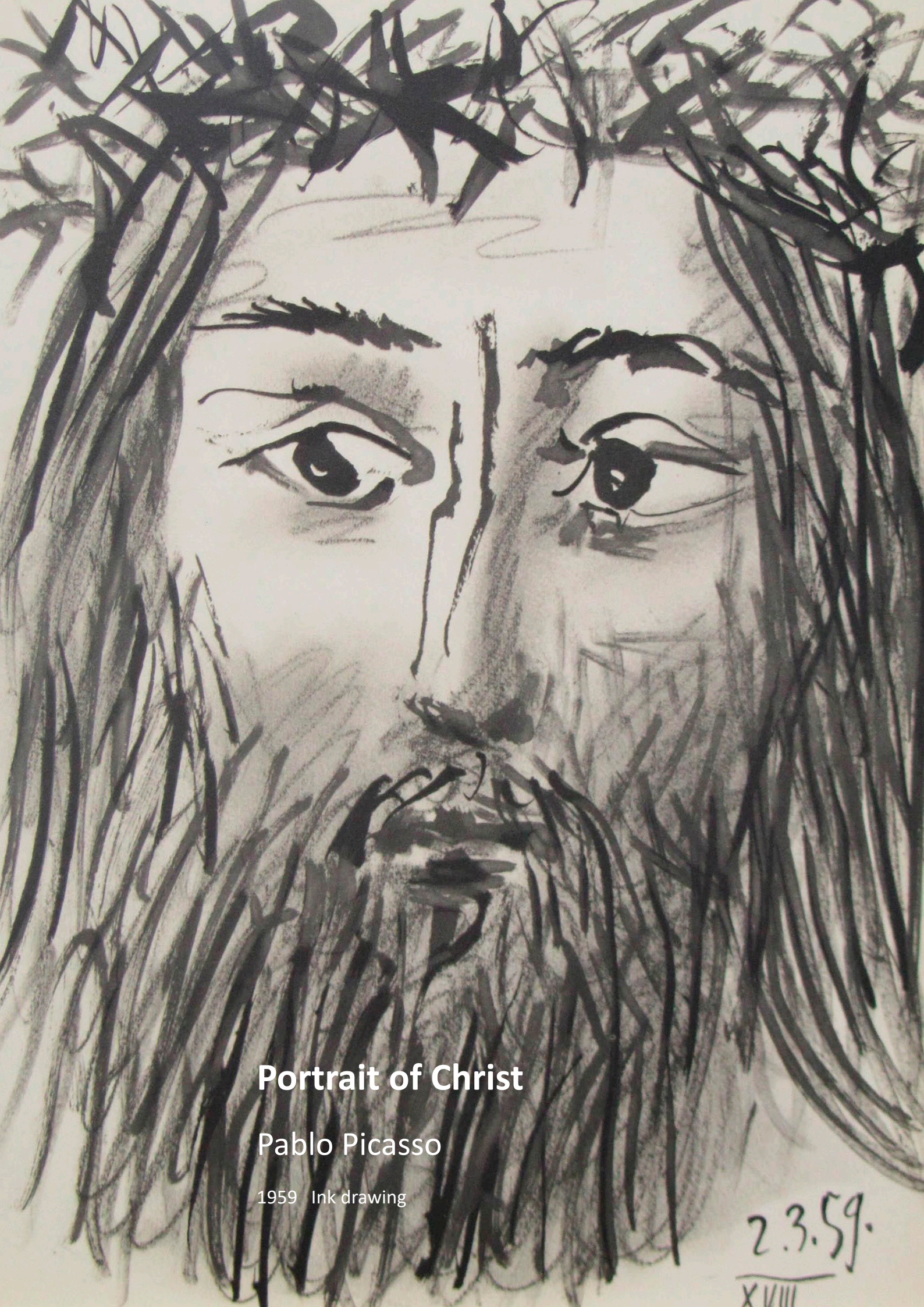
Monika Liu Ho-Peh

1950s China/Canada

Madonna and Child Karel Kupka

1956 Oil on Canvas

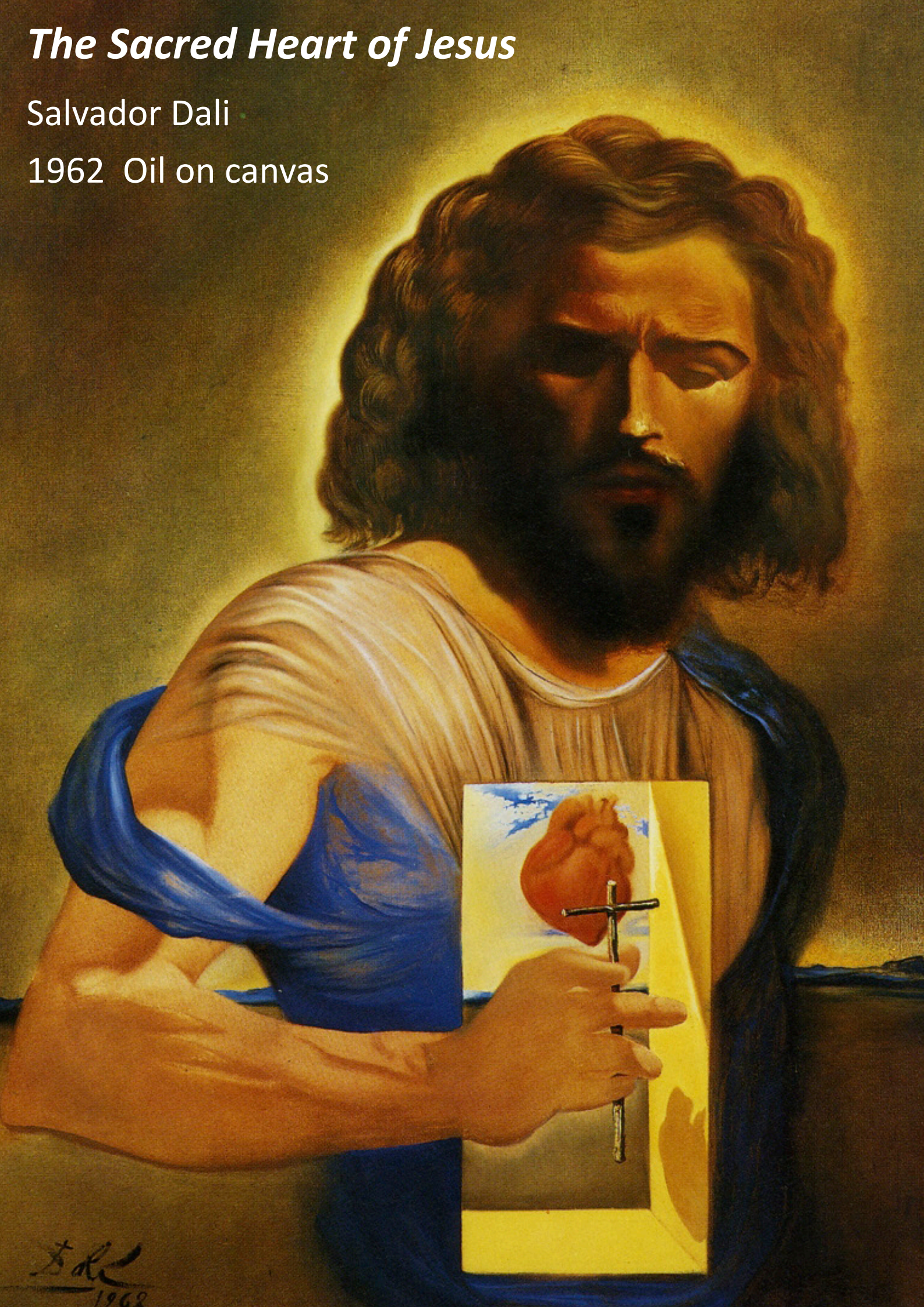
Darwin Catholic Cathedral



Portrait of Christ

Pablo Picasso

1959 Ink drawing


The Sacred Heart of Jesus
Salvador Dali
1962 Oil on canvas
1962

The Sacred Heart of Jesus
Pompeo Batoni
1767
Oil on canvas

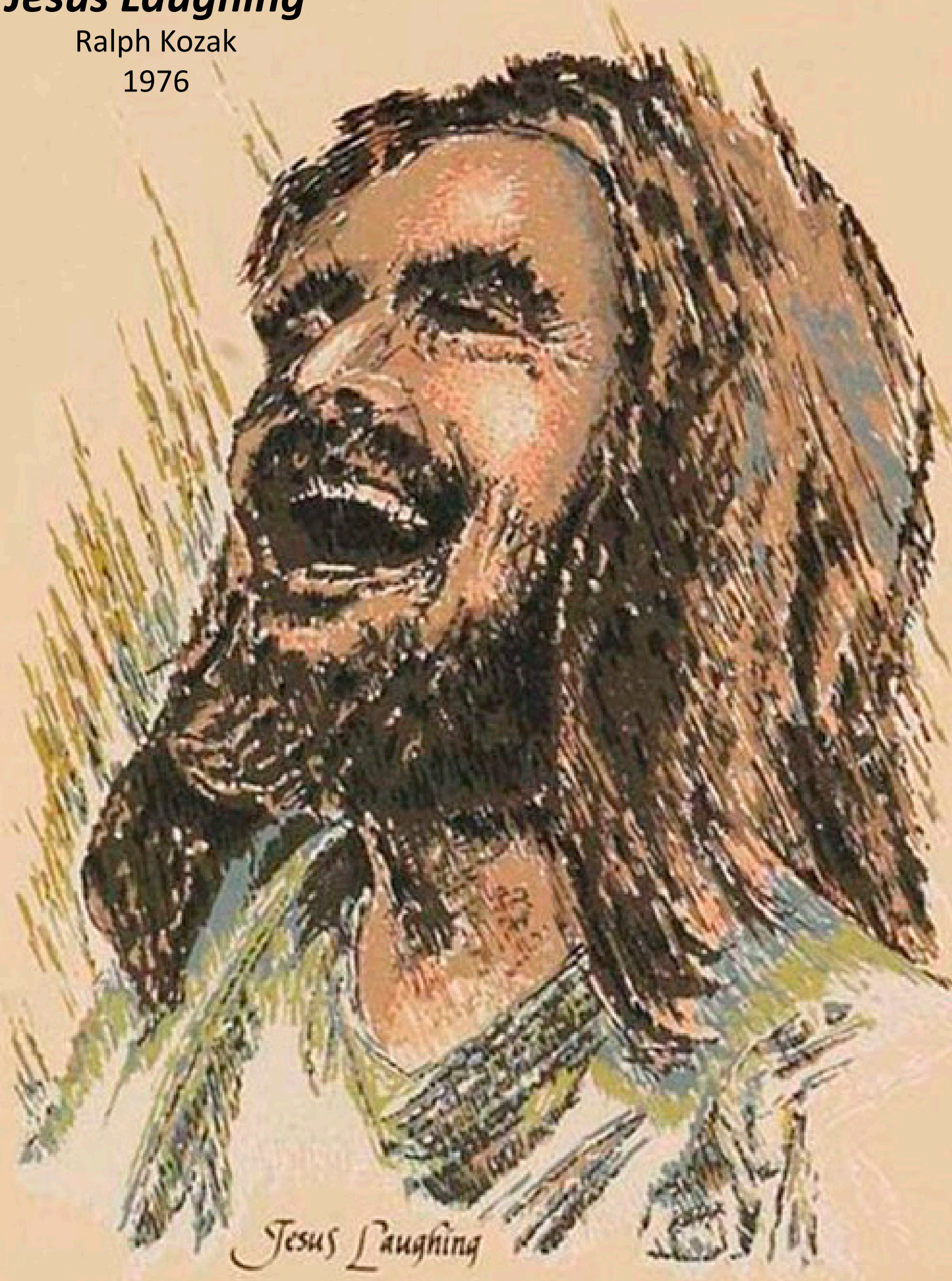
Christa, Edwina Sandys, 1975

Sculpture in bronze

Jesus Laughing

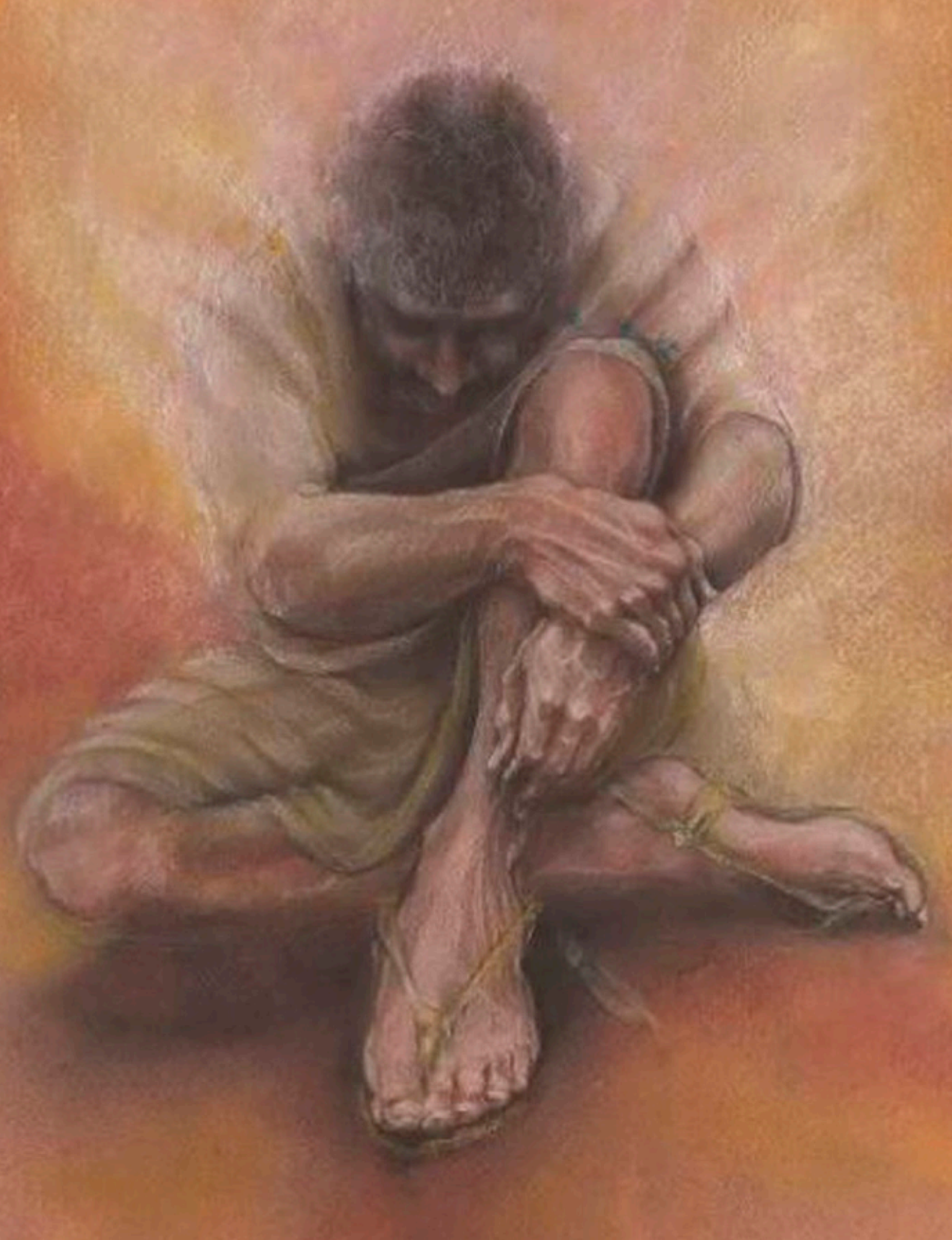
Ralph Kozak

1976



Jesus of the People
Janet McKenzie
1999

Maori Jesus
Sofia Minson
2014



Jesus of Nazareth, Cathy Fisher, 2017

Images of Jesus in the Bible

Scholars accept that no descriptions of Jesus' physical appearance are included in the gospels, aside from some incidental mentions of his clothing. Even the style of Jesus' clothing is little understood from the gospels or from historical sources since Jewish clothing of the first century is an understudied topic. No contemporary pictures of Jesus have ever been discovered. No scholarly consensus exists concerning the reasons why the gospel authors do not record descriptions of Jesus' appearance.

This silence of the gospel authors contrasts with the practice of biblical authors who consistently feature commentary on the appearance of Jesus' biblical ancestors. Moses was "a fine baby" (Exodus 2:2), a view that is affirmed by Luke who says that when Moses was born "he was beautiful before God" (Acts 7:20). Joseph was "handsome and good-looking" (Genesis 39:6). Saul "was a handsome young man. There was not a man among the people of Israel more handsome than he" (1 Samuel 9:2). David, the future king, possessed "lovely eyes and a handsome appearance" (1 Samuel 16:12). The physical attractiveness continues down the Davidic line with Absalom (2 Samuel 14:25), and Adonijah (1 Kings 1:6).

Commentary on the physical appearance of prominent leaders and acknowledgment of their handsomeness seem to be consistent features of Jewish sacred literature completely omitted in the gospel accounts of Jesus. Psalm 45:2 indicates why the description of physical appearance might be significant in the identification of Israel's leaders: "You are the most handsome of men; grace is poured upon your lips; therefore God has blessed you forever". Leaders are handsome because they are the recipients of God's grace; biblical authors recognised this outward sign of physical attractiveness as an indicator of divine favour and fitness for leadership.

Despite this consistent feature, the gospel authors do not follow suit in describing Jesus' physical appearance. Perhaps the reason for their silence is that there was nothing distinctive about his appearance that made it worthy of comment. Or, maybe the gospel authors followed the prediction of the prophet Isaiah that the suffering servant would have "no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him" (Isaiah 53:2). Or, the authors were reliant for their sources on others who shared their lack of interest in Jesus' appearance. One guess is as good as any other; none is persuasive.

One consequence of this silence has been the capacity for succeeding generations to literally and figuratively paint Jesus in the colours and tones of their own ideological preferences. And, European Christian artists have tended to follow the same path, presenting Jesus in their own image.

Creating a European Jesus

Images of Jesus presented in artworks that have attained dominance in the minds of modern Christians are based on northern European norms: medium height, with medium brown hair, a short brown beard, and piercing blue eyes…delicate features and a strong and well developed physique that, outside the baptism scene, remains hidden under voluminous robes. This stereotyped portrayal of Jesus has been amplified and solidified by influential images. Chief among these are Warner Sallman's, *Head of Christ* in 1940. More recent images of Richard Hook's, *Head of Christ* and Jack Jewell's, *The Risen Christ by the Sea* have added variations on the theme of the European Jesus.

Warner Sallman's Head of Christ is ubiquitous in the Christian world. Over 500 million prints have been sold since it was painted by the Chicago-based artist. Sallman was the son of Scandinavian immigrants. His portrait of Jesus relies heavily on his northern European ancestral roots for its physical features. The image has appeared on framed prints, holy cards, bookmarks, calendars, Bibles, buttons, lamps, clocks, china, stickers and stationery. Most cinematic castings of Jesus reflect the stereotypical Jesus image made popular by Warner Sallman.

Sallman appropriated the techniques of the portrait photographers and commercial artists of the 1930s who produced glossy headshots of celebrities, characterised by a half-turned face, dramatic lighting, and air-brushed elegance. His version of photorealism aimed to convince the viewer of the direct correspondence between the historical subject and the painting's subject. Photorealism appears to accurately capture a moment in time, just as photography is considered to. The painter seeks to convince the viewer that Jesus of Nazareth really looked like this!

Richard Hook's, *Head of Christ* was a direct response to the perceived effete qualities of Sallman's portrait. Hook presented a more masculine visage, whose fair complexion was sunburned and rugged, his hair golden, casually styled, windswept and 1960s contemporary - and certainly not effete. While Sallman's Jesus does not return the viewer's gaze Hook's *Christ* fixes the viewer with a front-on gaze. The appeal is direct, invitational and personal. It was created to appeal to the sensibilities of Christians and others who related to his good looks, personable allure and direct address.

A similar chord was struck by Massachusetts seascape artist Jack Jewell whose 1990 image of *The Risen Christ by the Sea* presented a smiling, affable Jesus portrayed against a backdrop representing the Sea of Galilee. This portrait aimed for cultural context with Jesus grasping a fishing net while standing on the lake shore, but still managed to present Jesus in European visage. Jewell's *Risen Christ* is happy, well-groomed and attractive. He is someone modern viewers would be content to be around, and not fearful of encountering. The image, in the words of the official website that markets and distributes the image, presents "the face of Jesus - full of Easter joy and healing love - that appears on the covers of many church bulletins of all denominations on Easter Sunday. It is the face of hope, the face of the light shining in the darkness of our times".

These renderings of Jesus revealed the late twentieth century fixation on the humanity of an approachable, friendly Jesus. While Sallman's *Christ* looked away, pensively allowing the viewer to glimpse the implied relationship between Jesus and his father, the later depictions drew the viewer directly into the gaze of Jesus, inviting a personal engagement.

Jewish Images of Jesus

From the late 1700s, Jewish thinkers grappled with a reconsideration of Jewish relations with Jesus of Nazareth. One outcome of this Jewish re-engagement with Jesus as a fellow Jew was the production of images of Jesus depicted within Jewish contexts that matched the ideological commitments being expressed by Jewish intellectuals.

Mark Antokolsky was the first modern Jewish artist to portray Jesus as a Jew in his 1876 sculpture of Jesus, *Christ Before the People*, with sidelocks and wearing a *yarmulke*. Other Jewish artistic renderings of Jesus followed.

A key figure among Jewish artists exploring Jesus of Nazareth was Marc Chagall (1887-1985). During his career, he produced several paintings of Jesus, the best known of which are *White Crucifixion* (1938) and *Yellow Crucifixion* (1943) both created in the era of Nazi upheaval. *White Crucifixion* shows Jesus on the cross dressed only in a *tallith* - a Jewish prayer shawl - and surrounded by multiple signs of destruction and corruption. *Yellow Crucifixion* shows Jesus on the cross with a large, green Torah scroll sharing the central focus. Chagall's Jesus did not follow established representations by Christian artists. His Jesus was not a redemptive figure but was presented as a victim on the cross surrounded by chaos and suffering.

A striking example of recent portraits of Jesus was created by retired University of Manchester medical artist, Richard Neave, using the techniques of forensic anthropology to reconstruct the likely head of Jesus using available evidence. His image was popularised in the BBC-TV series *Son of God*. Neave retrieved three male skulls from the Galilee region dating to the first century CE and used his artistic skills to reconstruct his version of the face of an adult male who lived at the same time and in the same place as Jesus of Nazareth. Neave's image created controversy fuelled by those who did not accept the disruption that his image created to settled Christian notions of a Nordic Christ-figure.

A similar image of Jesus has been created by Dutch photographer Bas Uterwijk who employs artificial intelligence technologies to generate hyper-realistic, photography-like portraits of historical figures using a collection of paintings and sculptures to identify common features and qualities. In this process, some artistic judgments are required and necessary to complete the image. Uterwijk's Jesus offers another perspective on the image of a male figure of the first century CE from the region of North Africa and the Middle East.

Paul Ricouer often observed that "we live what we imagine" - he thought if you wanted to change the way people acted, thought and believed, you needed to appeal to the imagination. In order to make sense of human life, Ricoeur argued that one needed to "move from an initial understanding to greater understanding on the basis of critical reflection and an appeal to the imagination". If we continue to imagine Jesus in the guise of a European Christian, we run the risk of missing and/or misunderstanding key aspects of his life and mission. This is detrimental to Christian self-understanding and to the possibilities for Christians to relate to Jews and Judaism. If we are to re-imagine Jesus of Nazareth more accurately in his authentic historical context, we need to critically appraise the images we utilise to represent Jesus, and to discover and/or create images in the light of renewed understandings provided by scholarly investigations.

Art Criticism Guide Questions

The following questions are designed to encourage exploration and discussion of the artworks in this collection of images of Jesus.

DESCRIPTION (What do you see?)

- Close your eyes and keep them closed. Open them and remember the first thing you notice in the artwork. Note the colour, size, location. Why did you see it first?
- Describe the colours. Are they bright? muted? grey? garish? pretty? soft? pastel? clashing? What colour scheme/colour palette has the artist employed?
- What emotion/s do you feel when you view this painting?
- What is the significance of the context of this painting - date, location, relation to other artworks?

ANALYSIS (How did the artist do it?)

- What is the subject matter of the painting - person/s, event, story, myth...?
- How has the artist used light - shadowy, warm, dark, light...?
- How does the artist lead your eye through this painting?
- Are there any instances where the artist used repetition of colour or shape?
- Squint through your eyelashes. What changes in value can you notice, places where the artist has featured the brightest, darkest and lightest areas of the painting?
- How would you describe the line in the painting - straight, wavy, thick, curvy, thin?
- Can you identify a variety in line in the painting? Are these variations clashing, complementary?

INTERPRETATION (Why did the artist create the work and what does it mean?)

- What would you say the painting was about, in one sentence?
- What evidence, inside or outside the painting, supports your interpretation?
- What emotion do you think the artist was trying to show when this work was created?
- What kind of shapes do you notice in the painting - geometric, amorphous, solid?
- Which of the elements (line, shape, colour, value or texture) do you think is most dominant in this painting?

JUDGMENT (Is this a good artwork?)

- What is your judgment about the quality of the painting?

Useful References

BOOKS

Baugh, L. (1997). *Imaging the divine: Jesus and Christ-figures in film.* London: Sheed & Ward.

Finaldi, G. (2000). *The image of Christ*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Harries, R. (2004). *The Passion in art.* London: Ashgate.

Harries, R. (2013). *The image of Christ in modern art.* London: Ashgate.

MacGregor, N. (2000). *Seeing salvation: Images of Christ in art*. London: BBC Worldwide.

Mendelsohn, A. (2019). *Behold the man: Jesus in Israeli art.* Jerusalem: Magnes Press.

Pelikan, J. (1997). *The illustrated Jesus through the centuries.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

Taylor, J. (2018). *What did Jesus look like?* London: Bloomsbury.

USEFUL WEBSITES

The six oldest images of Jesus

https://aleteia.org/2018/10/10/the-six-oldest-images-of-jesus/

Jesus in the visual arts

https://www.britannica.com/topic/Christology/Jesus-in-the-visual-arts

Famous Paintings of Jesus

https://www.artsheaven.com/some-famous-paintings-of-jesus-christ/

Published in Australia by

LUMINO PRESS
PO Box 1024
Hamilton QLD 4007
www.luminopress.com.au
lumino@bigpond.com

© Maurice Ryan, *Images of Jesus in Art: Representing Jesus of Nazareth in Christian Tradition,* 2021

The author asserts his ownership of the original material in this presentation. All attempts have been made to establish the rightful owners of copyrighted material used in this presntation. Anyone who believes their rights have been unintentionally infringed is encouraged to contact the publisher.

The Scripture quotations contained herein are adapted by the author from the *New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) Bible: Catholic Edition* copyright © 1993 and 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

All URLs described in this presentation were live and active with appropriate content at the time of publication. Due to the dynamic nature of the internet, no responsibility can be taken for subsequent changes or deletions to these sites.

The original images in this collection remain the copyright of their original owners

AUTHOR CONTACT DETAILS

Dr Maurice Ryan is an author, lecturer and publisher based in Brisbane, Australia.

Contact Maurice at: lumino@bigpond.com