

INTRODUCTION

One of the most distinctive and beautiful styles of Christian art flourished in Irish and Northumbrian monasteries from the sixth to the ninth century. This style is usually called Celtic, though some of the finest examples were made by Saxons. Notable especially for intricate, labyrinthine patterns of knots, spirals, keys, and animals, the greatest masterpieces are sacred manuscripts such as the Lindisfarne Gospels and the Book of Kells. Although this style of art fell into disuse, the surviving manuscripts continued to be held in the highest esteem. In 1185, Gerald of Wales wrote, “You will make out intricacies so subtle and delicate, so exact and compact, so full of knots and links, with colors so fresh and vivid, that you might say that all this was the work of an angel, and not of a man.”

Today, Celtic knots are popular decorations, though they are most commonly encountered on knickknacks or tattoos than in churches. One of my intentions in creating this book is to reconnect this style to the purpose that occasioned its greatest works: not to decorate bits of paddywhackery but instead to honor the Holy Gospel.

In a different tradition of Christian art, labyrinths are created on the floors of churches, usually at a large enough scale that their paths can be walked. This kind of labyrinth was inherited from classical culture and given new use and meaning by the early Christians. The most famous examples are in the Gothic cathedrals at Chartres, Reims, and Amiens.

In recent years labyrinth walking has been revived as part of New Age spirituality, causing some Christians to be wary of labyrinths altogether. I believe labyrinths are well established within the artistic tradition of orthodox Christianity, and my intention is to restore Christian labyrinths to their rightful contexts—biblical, patristic, and liturgical—as they were in illuminated manuscripts and Gothic cathedrals.

In this book, I have taken inspiration from both the manuscript and medieval floor labyrinths. I designed all the illustrations and ornamental elements myself, first drawing them by hand, in ink on calfskin or paper. I hope to demonstrate that the beauty, the mystery, and indeed the joy of these things properly belong to orthodox Christianity.



Many of the great Evangeliaries illuminated in the Celtic style contain entire pages filled with ornaments arranged into crosses and other Christian symbols. Art historians call these carpet pages.

On each of the five carpet pages of the Lindisfarne Gospels is one deliberate mistake—a place where the ornament is inconsistent with the rest of the page. Its scribe and artist, Eadfrith of Lindisfarne, may have done this to say that only God is perfect. In each page of this book (including the cover), I too have included one inconsistency. I hope you will enjoy the challenge of finding them!

The Six Days of Creation. The older tradition in Christian art is to depict God the Son as the Creator, reflecting the doctrine of John's gospel, "All things were made by Him, and without Him was made nothing that was made."