

# The Changing Face of Christ: Alice Stallknecht and the Mural Painting Tradition

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From the very beginnings of the Christian religion, mural artists in the Western world have grappled with the necessity of portraying the person of Christ who was, according to the theology, both God and man. Thus, an image of Christ had to be at once a portrait of a man, yet also immediately recognizable as the incarnation of God. When mural painting enjoyed a rebirth of its own in the United States, artists perforce revisited the iconography of Christ. American Renaissance artists such as John La Farge tackled the problem of a Christian iconography for a new nation in his paintings for Trinity Church in Boston, where the mural painting revival in America is usually pinpointed as beginning. John Singer Sargent also famously—and controversially—dealt with the issue in his murals for the Boston Public Library. Even realist Thomas Eakins painted a mural-scale Crucifixion. Still, a Christ for a modern age had yet to be established with any authority when Alice Stallknecht painted her series of murals in Chatham. She appropriated centuries-old iconography—from Byzantine art to the Renaissance—and integrated it with the people and folkways of the small Cape Cod town in which she had lived for over two decades. The remarkable result is a significant departure from established iconography for the image and person of Christ, and is as reflective of American culture and values as the Christ of Raphael was reflective of the papacy in Renaissance Rome. In a period of empire such as the Byzantine, Christ quite naturally appeared as a formidable ruler; in a period characterized by the humanist revival of learning in the Renaissance, it is not surprising that Christ should appear as the ideal man. How to imagine a Christ for a democratic society, one principally based upon Protestant ethics? The liberal and democratic ethos of New England religious culture, particularly as it was represented in such sects as the Unitarian and the Congregationalist, where Alice Stallknecht was herself a member and for whom she initially painted the murals, lent itself to a re-envisioning of Christ as a modern-day Everyman, literally a blue-collar, working-class man.

## **Christ Preaching to the Multitudes**

In the earliest of the three murals, "Christ Preaching to the Multitudes," Stallknecht incorporated ancient traditions into her modern subject matter in several ways. She chose, for example, a tripartite composition, and fashioned what is essentially a triptych. The triptych is a very old art form, dating to medieval times, and defines an altarpiece in three parts. This tripartite composition allows for a fine compositional symmetry: a center section of focused interest, and balancing, framing elements to either side. Its was also a widely used format because of the significance of the number three for Christians, usually associated with the Trinity. The image of Christ associated with the sea also has its basis in tradition. Medieval images of the "Calling of Saints Peter and Matthew" refer to the memorable passage in the Gospel according to Matthew, in which Jesus says to the two would-be disciples, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." [Matthew 4:18] Stallknecht chose another passage, from Matthew 13:2, as her specific reference: "And great multitudes were gathered together unto him, so that he went into a ship, and sat; and the whole multitude stood on the shore." The ancient association of Christ with fishermen and the sea provided her with an uncannily appropriate image of a Christ for a town of seafaring men.



Stallknecht transformed this ancient tradition, however, by reimagining Christ as literally walking among the people of her day and her place—the people of Chatham, physically present as the audience of Christ, and Christ himself transformed into a man of the early twentieth century. During her lifetime, Stallknecht refused to reveal who had served as her model, for obvious reasons of propriety. According to contemporary and family accounts, however, he was Sabin “Slim” Hutchins, a local man—but with the important distinction of having come from “away.” With a lean face, a fairly long nose, deep-set, rather intense eyes, and high forehead, “Slim” Hutchings made, in many ways, an ideal model for Christ. But in choosing to represent the First Man as a particular man known to many in her audience, Stallknecht was doing something pretty daring. If there is something familiar about Christ’s face in Stallknecht’s painting, it is its rhythmic linearity. Her painting style tended to form strong patterns in her subjects’ faces. Taken together with her subject’s over-large eyes, elongated nose and face, these strong linear patterns echo Byzantine images of Christ—probably the most electrifying images of Christian history. The artist acknowledged this influence: “His likeness is a composition from the oldest Byzantine mosaic, and the men of Chatham.”



### The Circle Supper



In the second mural of her cycle, Stallknecht transformed one of the most famous paintings in Western art, Leonardo da Vinci’s “Last Supper” (1499). Both paintings are based on an arrangement of people sitting on one side of a long, narrow, refectory table. Christ sits alone at the center, with his hands extended. In Leonardo’s original, the twelve disciples are arranged symmetrically to either side of Christ, in four groups of three each. Stallknecht has done very much the same thing, especially in the row in which Christ occupies the central panel. The strongest parallels between the Renaissance original and Stallknecht’s twentieth-century version may be found in the panels directly to either side of Christ. There, the group to the left of Christ fairly closely mimics the same group in the Leonardo: the woman in Stallknecht’s mural who occupies the position of Leonardo’s St. John the Evangelist extends her arm out in much the same way, and leans slightly away from Christ. The woman at the center of the group of three has her hand raised to shoulder level, too, although she does not gesture quite as directly to Christ. The third person in this trio, who is the shadowy Judas in the Leonardo, appears to be borrowed from the next disciple down the line, and has her hands upraised before her, as if in surprise.



The group to the right of Christ in Stallknecht’s painting are a little more subdued than those that may be found in Leonardo’s painting, but the parallels still exist: the upraised hands of the woman closest to Christ are a far less active response to Christ’s presence than the widely stretched apostle’s arms, but the woman in the middle clearly echoes the “who, me?” pose of the apostle in the Last Supper, and the man at the far right leans upon his elbow and closes the composition much the same as Leonardo’s end disciple. Aside from such superficial similarities of pose, her work, like Leonardo’s, was based on the interweaving of glances and hands. The most important aspect of any portrait by Stallknecht was without question the expressiveness of the face, and the extraordinary communicative quality of the hands she painted.

Despite obvious reference to the Renaissance master, the artist still made important contributions to an age-old subject. Unlike Leonardo, the people in attendance on Christ were clearly not apostles, but the painter’s neighbors and fellow church members. She established this point by multiplying the numbers of the attendants, so that one cannot easily count them. The human eye can readily grasp—without consciously counting—a group of twelve, separated into 4 groups of 3. One cannot easily count, however, Stallknecht’s multitude of 51 people in addition to Christ. Truly,

this is a representative cross-section of a community: young and old, men and women, people from all walks of life, dressed in their Sunday best while Christ appears as the Everyman, the only man among the group without a tie. More obviously than Leonardo, too, this work embraces us as viewers. Christ appeals directly to us, rather than looking down and away as he does in the Renaissance masterpiece, and there is a seat left invitingly open.



### Every Man to His Trade

In the final work of the cycle, Christ is, as before, the central figure, a humble working man, identifiable solely by the carpentry tools that lie at his feet, and the fish still life below him. The symbolism of fish has a very ancient history in Christian iconography, dating back to Roman times. It came to be the symbol of Christ because the Greek word for fish, *ichthys*, is an acrostic in Greek for *Iesous Christos Theou Yios Soter*, or "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior." Since her husband was a professor of Greek, it is not unlikely that the artist knew this reference.



This image of Christ, here a full-length portrait, makes his most complete appearance as one of, and one with, the people of Chatham. Stallknecht claimed that the murals, all taken together, "show a cross-section of the United States of America—portraits of people of the Town—with Christ The Spirit of God predominating. He is the Christ of NOW, ever present in Democracy." She pointed out that she created an encapsulated view of life in the town, a kind of Joycean "day from Birth to Death" with a baby in a cradle in the upper left-hand corner, and an elderly woman next to a tombstone at the lower right-hand corner. In between, people from the town in all walks of life represent the political, cultural, social and educational life of the town.



Further meaning may be found in the title of this multifaceted mural painting. She called it "Every Man to His Trade," with the word "Every" used separately, presumably in the sense of "Each." The two words easily elide into one another, however, forming the more historically resonant "Everyman." The term comes originally from a late-15th-century English morality play, in which the central character, named "Everyman," is a stand-in for all of humanity. He finds himself summoned by Death, and first looks to such allegorical characters as Beauty, Kindred, and Worldly Goods to accompany him on his journey, but ultimately only a character named "Good Deeds" will go with him. In Stallknecht's painting, we also find ourselves summoned by death, as represented by the tombstone. Everyman is represented both by the cross section of Chatham's citizenry as well as by the twentieth-century American Everyman figure of Christ. It is through him and Good Deeds that we will find salvation both in this world and the next. The Good Deeds are clearly represented in such images as the selectmen giving alms to the unknown poor, and the shipwrecked *Novia Scotia* fishermen being given assistance by the locals. Blending historical imagery and references with her own vision of American democracy, Stallknecht created a unique synthesis of religious art and the American spirit.



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