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The Sun

Source of Light in Art

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Contents

Foreword

The sun in art is a universal human theme: as the source of light and origin of life, it has been the focus of religious and mythological conceptions since the earliest documented cultures. In Central and South America as well as in Asia, Egypt, and large portions of Central Europe, the sun was considered a deity and was venerated as a symbol of inexhaustible power. In the wake of the Christianization of Europe, the sun's identification with the Roman god Sol was transmuted into the light symbolism of Christ. With the disappearance of the medieval gold background, fifteenth-century artists began integrating natural phenomena such as the sunrise or sunset into their religious images. Yet the representation of the sun in landscape painting remained the exception until well into the eighteenth century, though it occurred in the context of mythological themes such as the fall of Icarus or Phaëthon. Not until the early seventeenth century was the sun depicted more frequently as the expression of atmosphere or mood, and after 1850 it often constituted the actual, if indirect, subject matter for the Impressionists with their precise evocation of natural phenomena. From the late nineteenth century on, the intensification of color and its liberation from a purely descriptive function was based on the observations of Impressionism and knowledge gained from the prismatic study of sunlight.

The exhibition *The Sun: Source of Light in Art* explores the iconography of the sun in European art from antiquity to the present. The show was conceived in partnership with the Musée Marmottan Monet in Paris, where it was presented from September 14, 2022, to January 29, 2023. This cooperative exhibition was inspired by two paintings: *Impression, Sunrise* (cat. 98), the centerpiece of the Musée Marmottan Monet in Paris, and *The Port of Le Havre, Night Effect* from the Hasso Plattner Collection (fig. p. 44), which was acquired in 2016 when Hasso Plattner decided to reconstruct the Palais Barberini in Potsdam to serve as the future home of his Impressionist collection. The pictures comprise a pair: Monet painted them in 1872 from a hotel room overlooking the port of his hometown city of Le Havre. He captured the view by night, showing it as an energy-charged site of modernity with its artificial gas illumination, and again at dawn, with the red fireball of the sun hovering over the awakening scenery. When the latter painting was shown at the first group exhibition of the Société anonyme in Paris in 1874, a critic made fun of the title *Impression.* The criticism stuck, and shortly thereafter the term "Impressionism" was born.

One of the greatest aspirations of the still-young Museum Barberini was to be able to show the painting in Potsdam. The present exhibition, mounted in honor of the 150th anniversary of Monet's famous painting, has now made it possible to fulfill this wish: *Impression, Sunrise* is the focal point of an exhibition devoted to the sun in art within the broader conceptual context of artistic and scientific ideas since antiquity. The show was curated by Marianne Mathieu in Paris and Michael Philipp, chief curator of the Museum Barberini, who expanded the exhibition in Potsdam to include numerous loans and edited the catalog as part of the publication series of the Museum Barberini. We are profoundly grateful to them. Together, we would also like to express our thanks to the lenders who generously supported our project.

In recent years, a number of scientific and historical exhibitions have been devoted to the sun, such as *The Sun: One Thousand Years of Scientific Imagery* at the Science Museum in London or the wide-ranging cultural-historical presentation *Shine on Me: The Sun and Us* at the Deutsches Hygiene-Museum in Dresden (both in 2018). *The Sun: Source of Light in Art,* however, is the first exhibition to address representations of the sun in art from antiquity to the present. The fourteenth symposium of the Museum Barberini on November 10, 2021, paved the way for the exhibition; we would like to thank the authors for their insightful contributions. We are also grateful to Anne-Sophie Luyton and Helene von Saldern, who worked alongside the curators in the realization of the project. Thanks are also due to Jacqueline Hartwig for her editorial assistance with the catalog and to all who contributed to the success of this outstanding exhibition in Paris and Potsdam.

In 2024 the first Impressionist exhibition of 1874 will be commemorated with an anniversary exhibition at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris and the National Gallery of Art in Washington, as well as the international program *Destination Impressionnisme.* This anniversary is also important for Potsdam as a center of solar observation: the year 1874 marks the founding of the Astrophysical Observatory Potsdam, where researchers like Wilhelm Oswald Lohse engaged in the study of sunspots (cat. 88). The tower of the Military Orphanage in Potsdam served as an observatory before the Einstein Tower on the Telegrafenberg, designed by Erich Mendelsohn, was completed in 1922. The Einstein Tower was the site of experimental tests on Albert Einstein's Theory of Relativity, and to this day it still serves for the scientific study of the sun. Our hope is that in the dialogue of art and science, this universal human theme will delight many visitors in Potsdam as well as in Paris.

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Director of the Musée Marmottan Monet
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Essays

A Star with a Face: The Physiognomy of the Sun from Antiquity to the Eighteenth Century

Michael Philipp

In one of his earliest paintings, the *Mond Crucifixion* from around 1502–03 (fig. 1), the twenty-year-old Raphael depicted not only human figures, but also two angels with chalices collecting the blood from Christ's wounds. They are shown as natural beings and thus, like the realistic landscape in which the scene is embedded, help establish a closer connection between the imagined events of the Crucifixion and the viewers' own world of experience. This realism is among the innovations of Italian painting around the year 1500. Yet at the same time, Raphael fancifully embellished the one element actually derived from perceived reality: above the horizontal beam of the cross to the left and the right, the sun and moon are each inscribed with a face (fig. 2).

A look at the sky by day or night immediately exposes the fictional nature of this motif. Raphael borrowed it from his teacher, Perugino, who shortly before had painted similar scenery in his *Crucifixion* for the *Monteripido Altarpiece* (Galleria Nazionale dell'Umbria, Perugia). Here, in a stylized depiction by an artist of the previous generation, the sun face seems less disconcerting. Both Perugino and Raphael stood in an iconographic tradition that for centuries had endowed the sun with a face in images of the Crucifixion.

In keeping with the aspiration to realism in Renaissance art, the motif of the sun face disappeared from religious painting soon after the creation of Raphael's *Mond Crucifixion*. In other areas, however, it long remained a pictorial convention, both in printed or drawn images of mythological, alchemical, astronomical, or emblematic subjects and in the iconography of rulership into the period of Louis XIV, the Sun King, and Augustus II, "the Strong," elector of Saxony in the eighteenth century.

Although the motif of the sun face was ubiquitous for centuries in a variety of settings, it has never been the subject of detailed iconographic investigation. A 1945 dissertation on images of celestial bodies in painting devotes a few pages to the sun face in the context of typological aspects of representations of the sun.[1] Scattered references to the use of the motif in antiquity appear in archaeological literature.[2] Numerous publications on the sun in art reproduce images of the sun face as a matter of course, yet without any deeper exploration of the phenomenon.[3]

This essay will analyze the origin, use, and significance of the sun face in European art from antiquity to the eighteenth century. Here, the sun face is defined as an anthropomorphic physiognomy with eyes, nose, and mouth inscribed into a circle. Apart from certain exceptions, the face is gender-neutral, although the word for "sun" is masculine in Romance languages and feminine in German.[4] For the most part, the sun face is flat and frontal and shows neither the three-dimensional character of a head nor any connection to a neck. Linear, zigzag, or wave-formed rays in various thicknesses, lengths, and number emanate from the outer circle, occasionally in a mixture of different forms.

The present discussion focuses only on physiognomic representations of the sun, which—aside from the moon—was the only celestial body distinguished with a face in religious or scientific images.[5] Although the pre-Christian sun cult north of the Alps did not employ the sun face and generally used the wheel as a symbol, the sun face occurs frequently in non-European religions; comparison across continents, however, would exceed the scope of this essay.[6] After tracing the derivation of the motif from Greek and Roman antiquity, the use of the sun face will be explored in examples from Christianity as well as from alchemy, astrology, ruler iconography, astronomy, and meteorology. As we will see, the sun face by no means functions only to identify the solar celestial body, but rather serves as a bearer of meaning. Furthermore, as a personification it is meant to address the viewer in an animated fashion and achieve a sense of pictorial immediacy. While the presence of a face per se already imbues the sun symbol with vitality, its expressive character can be further intensified through the suggestion of emotion, thereby reinforcing the content of the image.

The Eye of Heaven

According to the biblical account, the Crucifixion of Christ was accompanied by a solar eclipse, that is, the sun was briefly obscured by the moon.[7] While this assumption could explain the presence of the moon in Raphael's *Mond Crucifixion,* it does not account for the physiognomic characterization of the heavenly bodies. With a certain amount of imagination, the dark patches visible to the naked eye on the

↑ **1**
Raphael
The Mond Crucifixion, ca. 1502–03,
The National Gallery, London

→ **2**
Raphael
The Mond Crucifixion (detail), ca. 1502–03,
The National Gallery, London

whitish disk of the full moon can be interpreted as facial features, a subject about which the Roman author Plutarch wrote in the first century.[8] The same, however, is not true for the sun, sheerly by virtue of the fact that its physical characteristics preclude any kind of direct gaze.[9]

The motif of the sun face and the attribution of anthropomorphic features may reflect a basic human need, since the presence and effect of the sun are immediately perceptible to every individual. The appearance of the sun, which is associated with the sensation of warmth and light, is a fundamental experience of human life, as is the perception of faces.[10] The face is the element of physical appearance that distinguishes humanity and human beings: it reflects experiences and emotions, and even the sight of it is an act of communication. A face prompts the one who sees it to respond to the other person, a fundamental anthropological act that already begins in the prelinguistic development of children. Perhaps that is one reason why children frequently draw the sun with a face.[11] Human physiognomy is an object of fascination, whose magical powers of expression are also transferred to symbolic representations such as the sun face.[12] Due to its universality, it is conceivable that different cultures could have developed the motif independently of each other. In any case, its origins cannot be clearly determined.

Despite the frequent occurrence of the motif in visual images, there is little to suggest its derivation from a linguistic source. The Orphic hymns describe the sun god Helios as the "all-encompassing cosmic eye" and the "eye of justice," thus alluding to a face.[13] In the Revelation of Saint John, an angel appears with a "face like the sun" (Revelations 10:1), and in his play *Torquato Tasso,* Johann Wolfgang von Goethe mentions the "Angesicht der Sonne" (countenance of the sun).[14]

The concept of the sun face took its point of departure from deified personifications of cosmic or natural phenomena in antiquity and came to expression in a variety of ways in classical and Hellenistic Greece, in the Persian cult of Mithras in the Near East and Central Asia, in the cult of Elagabal in Syria, and in imperial Rome.[15] In ancient Greek mythology, the sun was embodied in the figure of Helios—a god who as early as Homer in the eighth century BCE represented creative energy and was considered a symbol of life itself.[16] Originally imagined as a paternal deity, from the fifth century BCE on he was depicted as a beardless youth. Only a little later, Apollo—also known as Phoebus (the Radiant One)—came to be equated with Helios.

Greek images of Helios from the fifth and fourth centuries BCE generally show him on a chariot drawn by four horses with a crown of rays on his head, in keeping with the ancient practice of representing the gods in human form. Apulian vases likewise depict the sun god as a chariot driver with a crown of rays, or even with a halo from which white rays also emanate (cat. 22). In the monumental Helios Metope from the temple of Athena in Troy, the team of horses rises up to begin the daily course of the sun (fig. 3). Helios, shown with long hair and a windblown garment, looks frontally at the viewer with a challenging gaze.

Abbreviated versions of the pictorial type of the chariot-driving Helios emerged early on. A Greek silver medallion from the fifth to second century BCE shows the head of the sun god between four horses, which turn to the right and left in pairs. Below them, stylized waves allude to the sun's nightly passage through the sea (cat. 21). Another Greek medallion from the same period, this time in gold, shows only the head of Helios with twenty-eight rays (fig. 4). Here, not only is the face modeled in three dimensions, but the forehead and hair are depicted as well.

← **3**
Greek
Helios Metope, from the temple
of Athena in Ilion (Troy), 300–280 BCE,
loan of the Museum für Vor- und Frühgeschichte
in the Antikensammlung,
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

↑ **4**
Greek
Head of Helios with twenty-eight rays,
fourth–third century BCE,
Musée du Louvre, Paris

Gold and silver coins from Rhodes going back to at least 400 BCE likewise show Helios only as a head, as is also the case with grave goods from other regions of Greece, such as the island of Euboea, which depict only the god's head.[17] Both Rhodian drachmas and the small terracotta reliefs show only the face in half-round form, and very rarely the neck.

The Roman sun god Sol, later known as Sol Invictus, appears on coins from the Roman Empire from the late third century on, albeit almost exclusively in profile.[18] Abbreviated images of Sol as a bust, however, were widespread in Roman art, as in the small bronze relief of *Daedalus and Icarus* from the second to third century (cat. 33). A second- or third-century Roman relief of Mithras—an adaptation of the Mithra cult from the Perso-Phrygian world—likewise shows Sol as a bust with a crown of rays (cat. 5).

Neutralization, Not Approbation

While the sun face was frequently used as an abbreviated symbol for Helios or Sol Invictus in Greek and Roman antiquity, in Christian contexts it never appears in the place of Christ, who is shown in human form and distinguished by a halo with rays—as, for example, in the engraving *Sun of Righteousness (Sol Iustitiae)* by Albrecht Dürer from around 1499 (cat. 10).[19] The attributes of scales and sword point to the office of a judge, while the head is surrounded by a crown of rays and a double halo. The title of the engraving emphasizes the identification of Christ with the sun reclaimed since the fourth century. In images of the Crucifixion, however, the sun face represents not the sun god, but the presence of the solar body at the salvific event.

The path from Greek and Roman representations of the sun god in the reduced form of a bust or face to the Christian visual world of Crucifixion scenes down to the time of Raphael cannot be clearly traced.[20] The oldest surviving image of a Crucifixion in which a sun face appears is found in the *Rabbula Gospels.* This manuscript, named after its scribe, was completed in 586 in a monastery near Apamea, an ancient metropolis on the Orontes River in modern-day Syria. The Crucifixion in the manuscript shows Christ and the thieves on crosses, accompanied by additional figures, in a hilly landscape (fig. 5).[21] The sun and the moon appear in the sky near the horizon above the cross of Christ. The moon is depicted as a crescent inscribed in a circle, while the sun is shown as a circle with an anthropomorphic face. Here, unlike later depictions of the Crucifixion, the moon is on Christ's right hand, the sun on his left.[22]

5
Syrian
Crucifixion, in the *Rabbula Gospels,* 586, fol. 13v,
Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Florence

The illustrator may have adopted the motif of the sun face from the iconography of the Great King Khosrow I of Persia, who had absorbed the city of Apamea into the Sasanian Empire in 540 shortly before the manuscript was made. Sasanian seal stones, for example, show the sun god Mithra as a bust above a chariot.[23] It seems unlikely, however, that the sun face in European Crucifixion iconography was derived from this manuscript. The *Rabbula Gospels* are documented in the Maronite monastery of Qannubin in Wadi Qadisha in modern-day Lebanon from the fourteenth to the early sixteenth century and were probably located in the same region prior to that time as well.

More plausible is a line of tradition derived from Roman depictions of Sol. Isolated examples of busts of Sol and Luna are found in Christian iconography as early as the beginning of the third century; they appear, for example, on an oil lamp made in a Roman workshop probably shortly after 300.[24] Two medallions on the Arch of Constantine in Rome from the year 315 show Sol ascending in a chariot and Luna descending with a team of oxen (fig. 7). This iconography of celestial bodies in a clipeus recurs around 550 years later in a Crucifixion scene: on an ivory miniature from around 870–90, the motifs appear to the right and left above the horizontal beam of the cross (fig. 6).[25]

In the centuries between these two examples, objects with Sol and Luna scarcely occur, making it impossible to prove a direct line of tradition.[26] Other works of art from later periods, however, contain echoes of antique forms. In the Crucifixion scene from the magnificent *Regensburg Sacramentary of Henry II* from shortly after 1000, for example, the bust of Sol wears a costume that at the time was considered Roman: as a sign of grief, Sol covers his face with his red toga.[27] Small ivory panels from the eleventh to twelfth centuries likewise show two busts above the beam of the cross, with inscriptions that explicitly refer to Sol and Luna (cat. 41).

The inclusion of Sol in images of the Crucifixion—the central narrative of Christianity—signified not approbation of the ancient sun god, but rather neutralization, a reflex of an early Christianity that had long found itself in competition with the Roman cult of Sol Invictus.[28] Already in the *Rabbula Gospels,* Sol was degraded to an inactive, impotent witness who at most was permitted to demonstrate emotion. A more decisive aspect, however, was probably the fact that since antiquity, the personified Sol and Luna or other symbols of the sun and moon had been used to enhance the iconography of rulership. Moreover, as living participants in a narrative, they signaled a cosmic dimension: as early as the east pediment of the Parthenon from the fifth century BCE, the mythological battle of Athena and Poseidon was framed by Helios on the left and the Greek moon goddess Selene on the right. Christian iconography likewise

← **6**
Carolingian (Court School of Charles the Bald)
Crucifixion, ca. 870–90,
Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich

↑ **7**
Roman
Sol and *Luna,* 315,
Arch of Constantine (details), Rome

appropriated this level of meaning for the Crucifixion.[29] Images of the latter demonstrate the gradual transition from a mythological to a symbolic conception of the sun and thus also to the use of the sun face.

As a symbol or sign, the sun face appears in the engraving *Allegory of Christianity* by Sebald Beham from the first half of the sixteenth century. The image shows a winged figure holding a heart to represent charity and a scepter representing faith and hope; her attributes also include a sun face in half profile, symbolizing the *lumen aeternum* or Eternal Light (fig. 8). The sun face was also used in illustrations of biblical stories such as an illuminated

↑ **8**
Sebald Beham
Allegory of Christianity,
first half of the sixteenth century

→ **9**
Anonymous
Black Sun, in Anonymous, *Splendor Solis,*
last third of the sixteenth century, fol. 49r,
Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin—Preussischer Kulturbesitz

manuscript of Genesis from the first quarter of the fourteenth century (cat. 39). Supplied with a face, the sun appears as an animate being—albeit one created by God and not itself an autonomous deity.

Unity in Harmony

In images of the Crucifixion, the ancient sun god was demoted from a chariot driver to a bust, then to a sun face, and finally to a symbol, only to disappear from Christian painting altogether soon after 1500. In secular contexts, however—in alchemy as well as in humanistic tarot cards and the concept of the "children of the planets"—the sun face remained present throughout the early modern period.

Medieval alchemy, which was derived from late antique conceptions that originated in the Hellenistic-Arab world, assigned the sun a central role in two respects. Firstly, Sol symbolized the male principle, the Red King who weds Luna, the White Queen; secondly, the sun represented extraction, the seventh and final step in gaining the Philosophers' Stone. Both attributions—the personification and the concept of effective power—prompted the illustrators of alchemical treatises to endow the sun with anthropomorphic physiognomy.

The anonymous treatise *Splendor Solis oder Sonnenglanz* (Splendor Solis or Splendor of the Sun), an important textbook of alchemy created around 1500–30, emphasizes the significance of the central star in its title. The sun is the decisive motor for the aimed-for state of perfection, a Golden Age. In the illustration of the individual steps of the alchemical process, a black and a red sun in stylized landscapes are each characterized by a face. The black sun, rising on the horizon with an eerie gaze, stands for the step of *putrefactio,* or putrefaction (fig. 9). The red sun, which symbolizes the union of individual substances and the harmony thus attained, appears in the sky with a glowing red face, emitting its yellow

rays (cat. 55). At the beginning of *Splendor Solis oder Sonnenglantz,* Sol and Luna are shown as a king and queen whose identity as sun and moon is indicated by the celestial bodies—with a red and a gray face respectively—hovering over them.[30] The royal pair represents the polarities the alchemical process seeks to overcome, such as those of man and woman, fire and water, heaven and earth.

Just as alchemy constituted not only a secret chemical doctrine, but also a metaphorical expression of humanistic erudition, so the game of tarot first emerged in the context of courtly intellectual humanism. The oldest known cards from before 1467 are traditionally—albeit incorrectly—known as *Mantegna Tarocchi.* A personified sun already appears in this early form: the figure, called Iliaco, holds a small sun face in his hand as an attribute (cat. 50). In this series, which uses enigmatic images to represent cosmic principles and Christian virtues, Iliaco embodies the genius of the sun or of light. In later versions of tarot from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the sun features as the nineteenth trump card and is usually shown with a face (cats. 51–54).

These cards, each of which show a knight on horseback, a pair of lovers, two children, or a woman with a distaff beneath a sun, can be interpreted in various ways. The sun face hardly seems necessary for the identification of the celestial body, since its contours within the stylized depiction render it equally recognizable. Rather, the expressive physiognomy of the sun serves as a means of addressing the viewer in a manner well-suited to the interactive character of tarot cards.

Carried in the Hand

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Sol celebrated a comeback in human form—as one of the gods in images of the "children of the planets," and as a representative of the sun in printed series of the seven planets, which were published in numerous variants. The astrological program of the children of the planets, which goes back to antiquity, asserted a connection between human character traits and the planet under whose sign a person had been born.

10
Master of the Amsterdam Cabinet (?)
Sol, in Anonymous, *Medieval Housebook of Wolfegg Castle,* ca. 1480, fol. 14r, private collection

In the late Middle Ages, series of the children of the planets were widespread in manuscripts and, after the rise of printing in the second half of the fifteenth century, in engravings as well. The children of the sun were shown pursuing sports and games in a landscape with the figure of the sun god above them. He is usually accompanied by the zodiac sign of Leo as an attribute and often, though not always, by a sun face as well.

In the *Medieval Housebook of Wolfegg Castle* from around 1480, Sol rides through the air on a plumed horse, complete with the royal insignia of a long beard and a crown (fig. 10). Next to his mount, the lion Leo

11
Cristoforo de Predis
Sol, in de Predis, *De Sphaera,* ca. 1470, fol. 7v,
Biblioteca Estense Universitaria, Modena

and a sun face appear in the sky. The sun face enjoys special placement in images showing the sun god as a heroic nude: in his astrological manuscript *De Sphaera* from around 1470, Cristoforo de Predis used a sun face with energetically undulating rays to cover Sol's genitalia (fig. 11). This design also occurs in printed examples from roughly the same time such as a block book of the children of the planets (cat. 47).

The sixteenth-century engravers who created numerous series of personified planetary gods adopted the sun face as an attribute of Sol. Here, rather than floating freely alongside his figure as in the *Medieval Housebook,* the sun face is directly connected to the god. It appears as an emblem on his shield in 1528–29 in the work of Master IB and probably somewhat later in the work of Virgil Solis (cats. 44.4, 46). Another method of establishing a physical connection between the sun god and his attribute was a baton with a sun face mounted on its end. In the print by Sebald Beham, Sol, dressed in royal garb, holds the baton with the sun face at the level of his own head. The rays of the symbol replace the halo around his head (cat. 45), a solution that made it possible to represent Sol in accord with the sensibilities of the time.

The difficulty of reconciling the attribute of the sun face with the striving for realistic representation is manifested in a pen drawing by Albrecht Dürer from around or shortly after 1500. Dürer's young, athletic Apollo, depicted in heroic nudity, seems almost surprised at the sun face he holds in his hand (fig. 12). With its spherical form and thin, pointed rays, it is more reminiscent of a hedgehog than a symbol of the sun god. In another drawing, Dürer replaced the sun face with a bright, radiant disk bearing the inscription "APOLO," but even this labored iconography is less than convincing (fig. 13).

In a context both secular and non-mythological, the sun face is once again carried in the hand in Joachim von Sandrart's allegory *The Day* from 1643 (cat. 11). The seventeenth century had turned its back on the sevenfold conception of the planets that had held sway since antiquity. No longer did the sun and the sun face symbolize the power of a cosmic force to determine the fate of mortals; they were both part of and an expression of an optimistic view of the world.

A sun face on a marble bust of *Apollo* by Antonio Corradini from around 1720 (cat. 1) conveys a similarly positive mood. Placed at the center of the nude torso with a suggestion of three-dimensionality, it looks out with a frontal gaze. Its effect is intensified all the more by the fact that Apollo himself does not look directly at the viewer; rather, his face, with parted lips, is turned to the side and tilted slightly upward. In this way he communicates a positive expression of well-being that is directly connected to the sun face.