

Symbols Associated with the Gospel Authors

The four authors of the New Testament gospels are Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Each is associated with a symbol often seen in sculptures, manuscript illuminations, and paintings:

Matthew	a divine man with wings (sometimes misinterpreted as an angel)
Mark	winged lion
Luke	winged ox
John	a rising eagle

Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyon, lived about 130-200 AD, and wrote the following rationale for the symbolism associated with the four gospel authors:

Matthew is represented by a divine man because the Gospel highlights Jesus' entry into this world, first by presenting His family lineage — “A family record of Jesus Christ, Son of David, son of Abraham” and His incarnation and birth — “Now this is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about.” “This then,” according to Irenaeus, “is the Gospel of His humanity; for which reason it is, too, that the character of a humble and meek man is kept up through the whole Gospel.”

Mark, represented by the winged lion, references the Prophet Isaiah when he begins his gospel: “Here begins the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. In Isaiah the prophet it is written: ‘I send my messenger before you to prepare your way: a herald’s voice in the desert, crying, “Make ready the way of the Lord, clear Him a straight path.” “The voice in the desert crying” reminds one of a lion’s roar, and the prophetic spirit descending to earth reminds one of a “winged message.” The lion also signified royalty, an appropriate symbol for the Son of God.

Luke is represented by a winged ox. Oxen were used in temple sacrifices. For instance, when the Ark of the Covenant is brought to Jerusalem, an ox and a fatling were sacrificed every six steps. Luke begins his gospel with the announcement of the birth of John the Baptizer to his father, the priest Zechariah, who was offering sacrifice in the Temple. Luke also includes the parable of the Prodigal Son, in which the fatted calf is slaughtered, not only to celebrate the younger son’s return, but also to foreshadow the joy we must have in receiving reconciliation through our most merciful Savior who as Priest offered Himself in sacrifice to forgive our sins. Therefore, the winged ox reminds us of the priestly character of our Lord and His sacrifice for our redemption.

John is represented by the rising eagle. The Gospel begins with the “lofty” prologue and “rises” to pierce most deeply the mysteries of God, the relationship between the Father and the Son, and the incarnation: “In the beginning was the Word, the Word was in God’s presence, and the Word was God. He was present to God in the beginning. Through Him all things came into being, and apart from Him nothing came to be” and “The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us, and we have seen His glory: The glory of an only Son coming from the Father filled with enduring love”. The Gospel of John, unlike the other Gospels, engages the reader with the most profound teachings of our Lord, such as the long discourses Jesus has with Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman, and the beautiful teachings on the Bread of Life and the Good Shepherd. Jesus, too, identified Himself as “the way, the truth, and the life,” and anyone who embraces Him as such will rise to everlasting life with Him.

See if you can identify these symbols in many examples of art from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance!