

A READING ON THE REPRESENTATION OF BREAD IN ART HISTORY

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Abstract:

This research aims to examine notable works of art history that feature bread, considering the dynamics of the periods in which they were created. Bread, made by mixing flour obtained by grinding grains such as barley, wheat, and corn with water and then baking the dough using various methods, has been one of the most common foods in the human diet. Bread, which has existed since Ancient Egypt, has also been present in art history throughout this period. In this study, the place of bread in everyday life is explained, starting with Ancient Egyptian and Greek myths, and then notable works of art featuring bread are interpreted in relation to one another. In this analysis, common narratives are explored in the treatment of bread as a sacred object. This study extends to the Renaissance period, where the concept of representation was prominent in art. In this research process, which will proceed through purposeful sampling, data was obtained through document analysis and evaluated through qualitative analysis.

Keywords: *Art history, representation, bread.*

I.INTRODUCTION

This research aims to examine notable works of art featuring bread in the context of the dynamics of the periods in which they were created. Bread, the most basic and common food source in the history of human nutrition, has developed in parallel with anthropological developments, the transition from hunter-gatherer communities to settled life, and the beginning of agriculture. Bread, made by mixing flour obtained by grinding grains such as barley, wheat, and corn with water and then baking the dough using various methods, has become one of the most widespread foods in the human diet. Wheat, the main ingredient of bread, is believed to have originated in the Neolithic period in the region known as the Fertile Crescent (Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Palestine), with the first domesticated wheat species being *triticum monococcum*, or single-grain wheat. Among the first domesticated wheat species are Einkorn (single-headed wheat) and Emmer (double-headed wheat). The yeast/natural fermentation process of wheat, which is among the ancient grains, dates back to around 6000-5000 BCE in the Nile Delta. The Ancient Egyptians' two main staples were einkorn wheat (kavılca) and barley. "The Egyptian people, who scattered wheat and barley seeds on the ground with their hands, walked goats over the soil to prevent birds from eating the seeds and ensured that the seeds were thoroughly embedded in the soil. Until the Ptolemaic period, durum wheat was made into a paste, pounded in a mortar to separate the husks, and then ground in a hand mill to obtain flour" (Şahin, 2021, 132). The Sumerians, on the other hand, added beer yeast to bread dough between 4000 and 2000 BCE, making a type of bread known as bappira, which they used in beer production, and the baking profession emerged during this period. With the development of agriculture, bread became part of art history, primarily representing abundance, fertility, and life in myths, rituals, and religious stories.

II. BREAD IN ANCIENT TIMES

Bread in Ancient Egypt can be interpreted in wall paintings as a reflection of daily life, seasons, and social and economic dynamics. As a staple food, it varied depending on the additional ingredients added and the method of preparation. “While the common people ate bread made from coarsely ground barley and wheat, the wealthy ate bread made from finely ground flour without bran. Workers' wages were also paid in bread” (Şahin, 2021, 132). When viewed through the lens of social identity, bread production also reflects the division of labour between men and women. The paintings in tombs dating back to the New Kingdom (1550-1070 BCE) depict the transportation, grinding, kneading, baking, and serving of wheat. In the reign of Ramses III, when looking at a depiction of a bakery showing the bread production process and division of labour, each worker has separate tasks (Image 1). The general characteristics of bread-making scenes are as follows: the threshing of wheat is shown by men standing, while the grinding is shown by women squatting at stone mills. Bread baked in conical stone ovens was a sign of a feast or ritual offered to the gods or the dead. There are many tomb paintings depicting the sowing of wheat and the harvesting process with a sickle. “The Egyptians' organization of bread production is seen in tomb wall paintings and archaeological findings” (Samuel, 2001, p.196-198). Similarly, in the tomb of Rekhmire, a vizier in Egypt, there are images depicting workers grinding flour on a millstone and women kneading dough, reflecting the idea of nourishing the soul of the deceased with bread/fertility. (Images 2).

Bread in tomb paintings is also associated with the cult of Osiris. This society, which associated the growth and sprouting of wheat grains buried in the ground with the concepts of death and rebirth, adorned their mummies with necklaces made of wheat leaves. “In the tomb chambers where they lay, there were barley beds filled with mud. These barley beds contained a model of Osiris. When the barley sprouted over time in the closed and dark tomb, it symbolized the renewal of Osiris and the rebirth of the deceased” (Brier, 2008). From this perspective, the bread in tomb paintings can be thought of as a life force offered to the deceased.

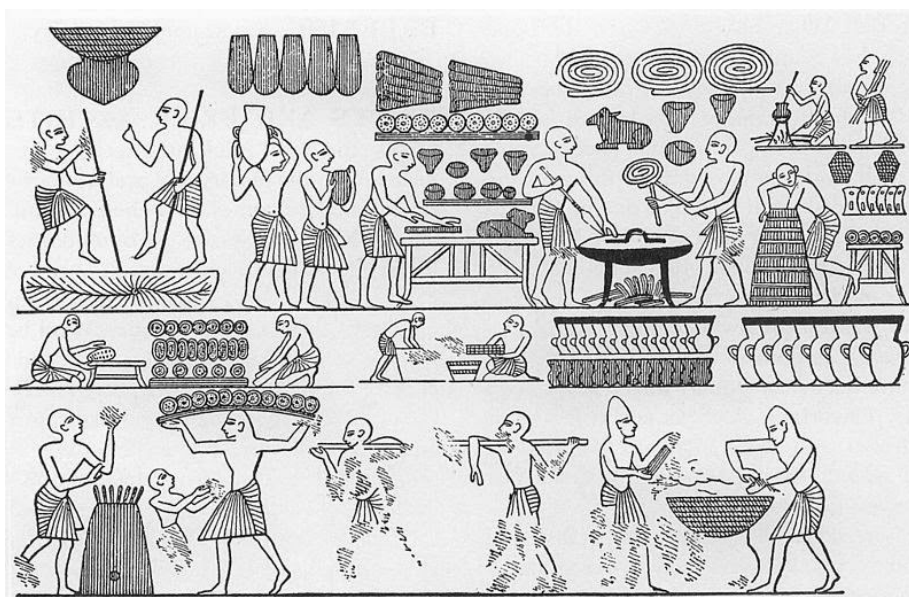


Image 1. Drawing of the bread oven in the tomb of Ramses III. Twelfth Dynasty.



Image 2. Scene of workers preparing bread, Rekmire Tomb Wall Painting, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Access address: <https://www.atthemummiesball.com/tiger-nut-sweets/>

In pagan beliefs and ancient Greek mythology, bread was associated with the continuation of the land and harvest; it was considered sacred, and the process from sowing to harvest was celebrated with festivals and thanksgiving to the gods of nature. Bread was offered as a sacrifice in ceremonies dedicated to *Demeter*, the goddess of grain and sowing, and *Ceres*, the goddess of plants in Ancient Rome. Looking at everyday life, the remains of wall paintings found in cities such as Pompeii and Herculaneum, which were destroyed by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius (79 AD), show that bread was not only a source of nutrition but was also intertwined with concepts such as social class, productive power and immortality. Flour ground in stone mills powered by human and animal labour was processed in public and private bakeries. Private bakeries were under state control, from the supply of materials to their distribution to the public. As Bakker (1999, p. 111) notes, “The administrators of Roman cities regarded the operation of bakeries (pistrina) as a priority of central authority”.

Initially, bread was given free of charge to low-income citizens, but as the city of Rome grew and the size of the army increased, it became subject to a fee. Due to the social, political and economic impact of bread production, the first bakers' guild was formed in 168 BC and this organisation was later legalised. This guild is known today as the ‘*collegium pistorum*’. Here, the term *pistorum* refers to the process of producing and grinding grains. This term should not be taken too literally, as bakers were not merely a class of artisans involved in the bread-making process; they also played an active role in the production and grinding of grains (Albustanlıoğlu, 2019).

While distributing free bread to the public (*panis gradilis*) was a possibility in Roman times, some changes could occur in times of famine. “Bakers were always expected to provide the bread they were supposed to make. However, during times of wheat shortages, there was little commercial incentive to continue producing large quantities of bread at a reasonable price under normal conditions, although some relief came from the financial support provided by the wealthy” (Erdkamp, 2005, p.295). Looking at the circular eight-slice bread remains found carbonised in Modestus's bakery, it is thought that this shape was chosen to facilitate the even baking and sharing of the bread. In period frescoes, it is possible to see scenes depicting bakers, known as *pistors*, who were freed slaves, and the people buying bread. In a fresco depicting a bread oven, wooden benches and bread of various sizes are present, providing information about the status of the people purchasing the bread. (Image 3).



Image 3. Sale of Bread, fresco from the House of the Baker or Casa del Forno (c. 79 CE) in Pompeii, Italy. Access address: <https://www.worldhistory.org/>

III. BREAD AS A SACRED SYMBOL

In papal understanding and mythology, bread represents fertility, abundance, and harvest, and it has retained this familiar meaning with the transition to monotheistic religions. Bread offered to mythological gods and goddesses has come to be associated with sacred persons and stories over time. For example, in Islam, the sanctity of bread is thought to date back to Adam. In Evliya Çelebi's *Seyahatname*, in the section titled *Ekmekçiler Esnafı* (Bakers' Guild), he records that after Adam came down to earth from paradise, Gabriel brought wheat to earth, and since the first food Adam ate was wheat, Adam is considered the first patron saint of bakers. In Islam, the act of kissing bread when it falls to the ground and bringing it to the forehead three times is related to not seeing the absence of a blessing as much as its sacredness. Especially during times of famine, when bread was the only food source available to the people, the phrase 'to be in need of a handful of bread' was used both as a sentence of punishment and as an expression to describe the degree of poverty. In the Jewish faith, bread has a deep historical foundation. During their exodus from Egypt, the Israelites baked bread without yeast to save time and named it matzah. In Hebrew, lechem means both life and bread, while unleavened bread has become a symbol of liberation from slavery since that time (Kalaycı, 2020, 168). Leaven represents pride, while unleavened bread represents purity, and families eating matzo can be seen in Jewish manuscripts. In Christian belief, bread can again be interpreted through the concept of freedom. In early Christian iconography, bread appears in different contexts and is fundamentally associated with a miracle. "The miracle basically unfolds as follows: Jesus takes a small amount of bread and fish, looks up to the sky and gives thanks, that is, blesses them, breaks them, and then gives them to his disciples to distribute to the crowd that has nothing to eat. Even after the crowd was fed, there were still baskets full of food left over" (Ersin, 2019).

All four Gospel writers treat this story in a similar way, and the objects of the miracle add a frequently encountered representational dimension to early Christian iconography. From a textual interpretation perspective, in Christological language, when explained through the Eucharist, which is based on the consumption of Jesus' body and blood, the Greek word *εὐχαριστία* can be translated as *thanksgiving*, while the ritual is the blessing of bread and wine and its distribution to the people. This narrative is expressed in the Bible as

follows: 'While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and gave it to those who were with him, saying, "Take, eat; this is my body"' (New Testament, Matthew 26:26, John 14:30). The bread offered to God in pagan rituals is offered to the people here through the body of Jesus. *The Last Supper*, which is often interpreted in art history, is based on this narrative. The Eucharist ritual includes the acts of receiving, giving thanks and sharing. In terms of the similarity of the actions, the Miracle of Manna experienced by Moses in the desert may also be a source for *The Last Supper* narrative. "When the Israelites who had left Egypt began to complain because of their hunger in the desert, God sent them small, daily loaves of bread called Manna from heaven with the morning dew (Exodus 16:1-35). Jesus, in his sermon on the "Bread of Life", states that the ancestors who ate Manna in the desert died, but that he is the true bread that comes down from heaven, and that those who eat this bread and drink his blood will live forever" (Ersin, 2019). Jesus points out the difference between the earthly and the divine in this narrative; it can be thought of as the meaning of eternal life instead of the temporary. These rituals, explained by the promise of resurrection for those who consume the bread, are in the same context as the myths of Egypt and Ancient Greece.

The belief that wheat planted in the earthen floors of Egyptian temples and the wheat of the deceased would sprout and begin to live again is quite parallel to the belief that those who consume bread on the last day will be resurrected. The presence of objects such as the Eucharistic liturgy (liturgy/holy bread container) in Eucharistic ceremonies can be thought of as representing bread as the source of life. In this context, when looking at the first examples of *The Last Supper* in Western painting, in terms of communal meals and the representation of bread, it can be seen in the Callixtus Catacomb Chapel. In this painting, which depicts a communal meal, there is a table in the middle with figures on either side. This is a depiction of a miracle: *bread and fish*. (Image 3).



Image 4. Fresco depicting the multiplication of fish and bread , Callixtus Catacomb Chapel, Rome, 3rd century. Access address: <https://www.worldhistory.org/>.

The miracle of bread and fish, the scene of Jesus feeding five thousand people with five loaves of bread and two fish, and the idea of bread multiplying through division and sharing, are the first examples in Western art history in these wall paintings. Another example of this communal meal scene can be found in the multi-panel work by Italian painter Ugolino de Siena, created for the high altar of the Santa Croce Church. At the table where the betrayal is spoken, Jesus is seated on the left in a higher position, and the person depicted next to him without a halo is Judas. The parallel relationship between the table and the figures is important, with the use of a coffered ceiling structure and spatial perspective. The table contains bread, poultry or meat, and wine vessels. In this work and other depictions of the Last Supper, the people and table objects are essentially the same.

In terms of a female painter addressing this subject, the oil painting *Last Supper* (1550) by the Florentine painter Sister Plautilla Nelli, located in the Santa Maria Novella Monastery, is a prime example. In this narrative, Jesus' taking the bread, which he describes as his 'sacrificed body,' giving thanks, and breaking it; then taking the cup and offering the wine inside as the 'blood of the new covenant' are seen as the patterns that shape the Eucharist, and it is thought that this is the point that shapes the work. In the work that illustrates the words, 'This is my body, which will be given for you' (Luke 22:19), Jesus extends the bread in his hand in a naive manner. His disciple John, who is leaning on him, has a sad expression on his face, but Jesus shows him affection in a comforting manner. John is depicted as beardless and younger than the other disciples at the communal meal. In Jean Baptiste de Champaigne's painting on the same subject, which reflects the influence of the French Baroque period, Jesus is shown in the centre of the communal table with a distinct light source. The position of the apostles, who form a semicircle, is close to the Eucharistic meal in the Visual... supplement. Jesus' body, his sacrifice and the thanksgiving ritual are similarly visible at the table, where his forearm is slightly raised and directed towards the hand holding the bread. In the Eucharistic ritual, that bread is now the body. The bread is depicted in a simple and striking manner, as if it were a source of light. Unlike other paintings on the same subject, all the apostles' gazes are directed towards the bread, and there is no other food or symbolic object on the table. Here, it is possible that the theological idea of focusing on the sanctity of bread and wine is reflected.

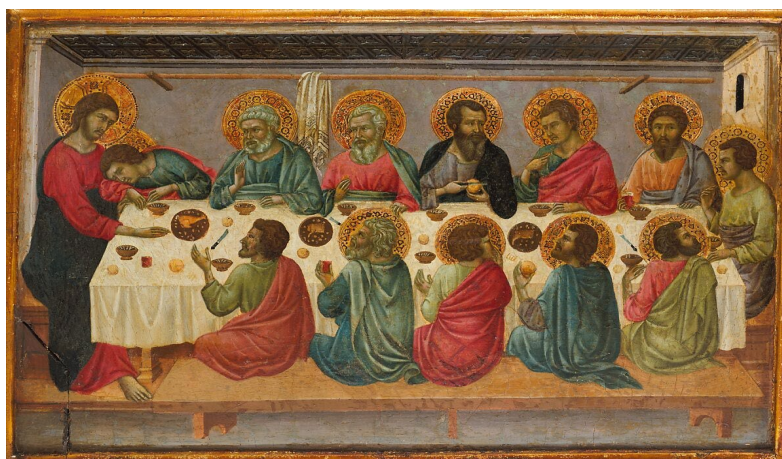


Image 5: Ugolino de Siena, *The Last Supper*, 1325-30, Wood panel. Tempera and gold leaf, 34.3 x 52.7 cm.

Access address: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/459131>.



Image 6: Plautilla Nelli, *The Last Supper*, 1568, oil on canvas, 200 x 700 cm (Santa Maria Novella Museum, Florence) <https://smarthistory.org/plautilla-nelli-last-supper/>



Image 7. Plautilla Nelli, The Last Supper, 1568, oil on canvas, detail.



Image 8. Jean Baptiste de Champaigne, The Last Supper, oil on canvas, 44 × 63 1/4 inches (111.8 × 160.7 cm), <https://dia.org/>.

IV. CONCLUSION

This article focuses on bread, one of humanity's first staple foods. Bread, made from grains such as barley, wheat and corn, which are ground into flour and mixed with water, then baked using various methods with or without yeast, has been seen as a symbol of fertility since ancient times. Around 3000 BCE, this representation was both a fundamental element of daily life and a ritual and symbol for Ancient Egypt. For this civilisation, which believed in rebirth after death, bread became a symbol of renewal, and wheat grains were used in tomb paintings and burial sites for this purpose. For Ancient Greece and Rome, this representation was not only a ritual but also valued as a political

power. In the stories offered to Demeter, the goddess of grain and bread, bread was a symbol of renewal in nature; in everyday life, it developed as a profession, and public and private bakeries were opened. Bread made from white flour was consumed by the aristocracy, while bread made from whole meal or various legumes was widely produced for the poor. In pagan beliefs, bread was offered not only to gods and goddesses but also to worshippers. The semantic language of bread, associated with labour, patience and abundance, continued in monotheistic religions after paganism. In depictions centred on prophets rather than gods, bread was attributed with sacredness. In Islam and Judaism, bread is sacred, while in Christianity, it is directly associated with Jesus Christ.

The earliest examples of this can be seen in early Christian catacombs/underground burial chambers and wall paintings. Bread is sometimes depicted not alone but alongside other symbols. The miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes is the most widespread of these, and the scene of Jesus feeding five thousand people with five loaves of bread and two fish, the idea of bread multiplying through division and sharing, is first seen in these wall paintings in Western art history. In the textual interpretation of the miracle, the theme, which addresses Jesus' divinity, is also quite influential. The origin of the Eucharist, which symbolises the consumption of Jesus' body and blood, is based on various sources, primarily the story of the Last Supper. In this story, Jesus gives thanks for the bread, which he describes as his sacrificed body, breaks it, distributes it to his disciples, and offers it again; these are the fundamental points of the Eucharist. Furthermore, the Last Supper is not the only communal meal narrative in which the concept of thanksgiving is central. The miracle of the loaves and fishes shares similarities with the Last Supper in terms of the actions of taking, giving thanks, and breaking the bread. When interpreted from a theological perspective in Byzantine and Early Renaissance art, The Last Supper, in which Jesus gathers with his disciples at a communal table, symbolises the semantic connection between Jesus and his own body as much as it symbolises the act of sharing and dividing bread as a blessing. The phrase 'This is my body' is one of the fundamental inscriptions in most churches. In this context, bread and events related to it have frequently been the subject of theological discussion in Western art history and are thought to be intertwined with the concepts of blessing, sharing, growth and surrender.

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