EASTERN ORTHODOX ICONS

An icon is an image of a saint or other religious figure. Derived from the Greek eikon, meaning likeness, the word is applied particularly to those images of the Byzantine Church, and subsequently the Greek and Russian Orthodox Churches, that are believed to be sacred in themselves and to facilitate contact with the personage portrayed. Often the figures have wide-staring eyes and are set against a gold background to indicate their divine status. Icons vary in size and medium, but typically they are comprised of fairly small panels, and certain conventions have dictated their form and use.

By the sixth century, Christian buildings were full of icons placed on walls, ceilings, floors, and in shrines. During the eighth and ninth centuries, they became the subject of a violent controversy. The Iconoclastic Controversy, which raged for more than one hundred years (730–843), began with the temporary victory of the image-destroyers (“iconoclasts”), who believed that icons were closer to idolatry than true worship and that the image of the human form could not embody spiritual presence. In 730, an imperial edict banned religious imagery throughout the Byzantine Empire, and artists were either forced to migrate to the west or to turn their talents to secular subjects. The ban was lifted in 843 and religious painting was again encouraged in Byzantium.

Icon painting, particularly in Russia and Greece, has continued to flourish for centuries, extending the life of the style well beyond the collapse of the Byzantine Empire in 1453. In use, the panels are quickly blackened by incense and smoke from the devotional candles that burn before them, and therefore many have been frequently repainted. The repainting retains, however, the basic forms.
1. **Anonymous** (Greek School)
   *The Blessed Virgin Mary*, 16th century
   Tempera and gilding on wood (64.72)

   The configuration of the Madonna’s face, with its long, straight nose, small mouth and almond-shaped eyes is a good example of stylistic conventions found in icons.

2. **Anonymous** (Russian School)
   *Scenes from the Life of Christ: His Nativity and Infancy*, ca. 1600
   Tempera and gilding on wood (64.18)

   The lack of chronological order in the sixteen episodes depicted, as well as the overlapping of forms and profusion of detail, are characteristic of the Russian School during this period.
3. **Anonymous** (Russian School)
   *St. Demetrius Tsarevich, 1866*
   Oil on wood with silvered, gilded, and enameled riza (61.86.11)
   Gift of Mr. Allan Gerdau

Following a Greek practice, many Russian icons are partly covered by an elaborate form of metal relief called a riza. St. Demetrius, the son of the Russian Czar Ivan the Terrible, was stabbed to death in 1591, and thus the image depicts the saint holding a knife.

4. **Anonymous** (Macedonian School)
   *St. Athanasios and St. Catherine of Alexandria, no date*
   Tempera and gilding on wood (66.345)

St. Athanasios and St. Catherine both lived around A.D. 300 and are recognized as defenders of the Greek Orthodox faith. St. Athanasios is often viewed as the father of Orthodoxy, while St. Catherine is the patron saint of, among others, scholars and theologians.
EARLY CHRISTIAN AND BYZANTINE

Triptych with Scenes from the Gospel
17th cent.
Anonymous, Russian, Moscow
Tempera on wood (64.30)
Gift of Irene S. Taylor

Icon with Scenes from the Gospel
17th cent.
Anonymous, Russian, Moscow
Tempera and gilt on wood (64.18)

The Russian Orthodox Church was an off-shoot of Byzantine Christianity and, even after the fall of the Byzantine empire in the fifteenth century, adhered to Byzantine artistic canons of style and iconography. This triptych icon (meaning holy image) was easily portable and thus was presumably made for private use. It depicts the major festivals of the Orthodox Church, in a style which is based upon the "Transfiguration theology" of the Orthodox Church.

1. Birth of the Virgin
2. Presentation of the Virgin
3. Annunciation of the Virgin
4. Nativity of Christ
5. Presentation of Christ
6. Baptism of Christ
7. Transfiguration of Christ
8. Entry into Jerusalem
9. Raising of the Cross
10. Ascension
11. Pentecost (as the Three Angels of the Old Testament)
12. The Dormition of Mary
13. Mary Enthroned as the Church
14. Christ's Descent to Hell
15. Ascension of Mary

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