



## *Icon of Saint Paraskevi*

by Benton Kidd, Curator of Ancient Art

**T**oday's subject could not be better suited to Friday since Saint Paraskevi was named for the very day, and Greeks still use that word for the sixth day of the week. But the saint's history is multifaceted, and at least three pious women are known by the name "Paraskevi." Moreover, biographical details are shared by all three and thus identification can become blurred.

The Museum's icon depicts the saint holding a cross, her usual emblem, and a palm branch, a symbol of peace and victory. Greek inscriptions identify the subject (*upper right*), the painting's date (*lower right*), and provide an artist's dedication (*left*). The cross symbol has led scholars to suggest that Paraskevi is no more than a personification of Good Friday, the day of the Crucifixion. Others point to biographical details in the traditions that identify the three women as separate individuals.

The earliest account of this saint identifies her as young girl who lived in second-century Rome. Allegedly born on Friday, her wealthy Christian parents named her for the day of the Crucifixion. She would later denounce her wealth and devote herself to Christian teaching. Her mission took her to Asia Minor, where she was eventually arrested and tortured. But

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*Icon of Saint Paraskevi*

Greek, 1852

Tempera and gilt on wood

Gift of Mrs. Jeanne A. Fistedis in memory of Mr. Stanley H. Fistedis (90.101)



# MUSEUM FRIDAY FEATURE

after healing the emperor Antoninus Pius of blindness, he freed her. Arrested again at a later date, she was commanded to worship pagan idols, which she caused to crumble. She was then beheaded by an outraged Roman official, and thus became a martyr and patron saint of eye diseases.

The biography of a second martyr called Paraskevi also places her in Asia Minor, her birthplace cited as the ancient city of Iconium (today Konya, Turkey). Once again, the girl is born to affluent Christians, but she abandoned her wealth and became a traveling preacher. This Paraskevi was also arrested and martyred, but under the emperor Diocletian in the third century CE.

When we consider the third Paraskevi, the details have become familiar. She is born to wealthy Christian parents, this time in Kallikrateia near Constantinople, in the eleventh century. While in church as a child, she heard a divine voice say to her: "If you want to follow me, you must deny yourself, and take up the cross." The passage from the gospel of Mark (8:34) caused Paraskevi to forsake her wealth, and live as a virgin ascetic, traveling widely. She would ultimately return to Kallikrateia, where she died. Her relics were later transferred to the Metropolitan Cathedral in Iași, Romania, where they remain venerated today. Although not precisely clear, the Museum's icon probably represents this later Paraskevi, who has churches dedicated to her throughout Greece and the Balkans.

Icons, images of saints painted on wooden panels, were originally used as devotional images in Byzantine churches. They hung on a screen before the altar known as an *iconostasis*. Today, they can still be found in Orthodox churches, but also in home shrines, and icon painters still practice this artistic tradition. ■