

## Religious Images of the Christian East

Portraits of Jesus Christ, His mother and His saints invoke the presence of God, to whom every Christian prayer is addressed. Before the Reformation, such images were habitually used by believers all over Europe, both in church and in private. The custom of painting them on wood originated in present-day Egypt, Syria and Turkey, later spreading from there to Italy and further north.

Orthodox Christians in Greece, Russia and elsewhere refer to such paintings as icons. In order to make the holy figures easily recognizable, icons usually repeat familiar compositions on the basis of earlier models. Some such models are supposedly derived from authentic, miraculously produced portraits of Christ. Others go back to images that have frequently helped those who prayed in front of them.

The examples in this gallery illustrate the traditionalism of icon painting: even though they were made in the early modern and modern periods, ca. 1500-1900, their artistic style does not differ greatly from that of the fourteenth-century Italian panel exhibited nearby.

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Agnolo Gaddi

Italian, 1350-1396

*Saint Ursula*, ca. 1388-1393

Egg tempera on wood

27 1/4 x 16 1/4 in. (69.2 x 41.3 cm)

SBMA, Gift of Mr. Arthur Sachs

Ursula, a Christian martyr, holds one of the arrows with which she was murdered by her pagan persecutors. A Gospel book in her other hand signifies her faith. The panel, now trimmed down from its original size, once showed the young woman full-length, probably within a group of saints flanking a central image of either Christ or the Virgin Mary. This multi-figural composition would have stood behind a church altar, where the faithful could contemplate it while the priests celebrated Mass.

At the time this work was made, the technique of painting images on wood with egg-based pigments and gold was relatively new in Italy, having been introduced there ca. 1200 as a borrowing from the Christian East.

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Unknown (Greek)

*Christ, the Virgin Mary, Saint John the Baptist, and Saint Nicholas*, ca. 1600-1700

Egg tempera on wood

19 1/8 x 15 in. (48.6 x 38.1 cm)

SBMA, Anonymous Gift

This relatively small panel was probably used at home. Nicholas, fourth-century bishop of the city of Myra (now in Turkey), may have been patron saint of the person who commissioned it. Nicholas is depicted at the bottom, closer to the viewer, while Christ above is shown blessing from heaven. Mary and Saint John turn towards Him, their hands crossed in a gesture of prayer. (People would have prayed in front of this image a similar manner.)

The book in Christ's lap contains the words: "I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me will not hunger, and he who believes in Me will never thirst" (John 6:35). Saint Nicholas holds the text (read out in church on his feast day, December 6): "The Lord said: 'I am the door; by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved and shall go in' (John 10:9)".

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Unknown (Greek)

*Christ, the Virgin Mary, and Saint John the Baptist*, ca. 1700-1800

Egg tempera on wood

4 7/8 x 3 1/4 in. (12.4 x 8.3 cm)

SBMA, Gift of Barbara Last, Evelyn B. Thompson, Sarah B. Griswold and Robert F. Boggs in memory of Barbara Field Benzigner

The Virgin and Saint John were closest to Jesus during His early life on earth, so they frequently flank Him on devotional images and provide with their gestures a visible expression of the viewer's own prayers. The divine king and judge is seated here on a throne, declaring by means of a book that He holds: "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12).

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Icon: Unknown (Russian)

Icon cover: Fedor Verkhovtsev (Russian, 1804-1867)

*Jesus Christ*, ca. 1837

Egg tempera on wood, silver revetment

Icon: 13 1/2 x 11 3/8 in. (34.3 x 28.9cm)

Icon cover: 14 1/2 x 11 1/2 x 2 1/2 in. (36.8 x 29.2 x 6.4 cm)

SBMA, Anonymous Gift

Even though this image is painted in a conservative style, it is most likely contemporary with its metal cover, stamped with manufacturer's marks from 1837. Such covers protected the icon, which could be touched and kissed as a sign of veneration. The distance between viewer and image is shortened through a "close-up" that reduces Christ's portrait to His face and shoulders. The labelling Slavonic inscription reads: "Jesus Christ, Ruler of All".

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Unknown (Russian)

*The Holy Face*, ca. 1850-1900

Egg tempera on wood

14 1/8 x 11 7/8 in. (35.9 x 30.2 cm)

SBMA, Anonymous Gift

The Slavonic inscription on this panel translates as: "The Image of Our Lord and God on the Cloth". The painting shows a piece of textile on which the face of the living Jesus Christ was miraculously imprinted. The original was most probably destroyed in the thirteenth century, but painters continued reproducing it on the basis of earlier models.

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Unknown (Russian)  
*The Holy Face*, ca. 1500-1600  
Egg tempera on wood  
8 1/2 x 19 in. (21.6 x 48.3 cm)  
SBMA, Anonymous Donor

This panel was probably the top part of a folding triptych, similar to the one exhibited nearby (*The Virgin of the Burning Bush*, *The Seven Days of the Week*) but larger. Two "angels of the Lord" hold the "non-manufactured [i.e. miraculously produced] image" of Jesus Christ on a cloth. Above, the three visitors hosted by Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 18:1-15) are shown also as angels and expressly labeled "The Holy Trinity". The central one is further inscribed "Jesus Christ". The sun and moon in the corners refer to God's cosmic kingship.

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Unknown (Russian)  
*Saint Sergius of Radonezh (?)*, ca. 1550  
Egg tempera on wood  
12 1/4 x 10 1/2 in. (31.1 x 26.7 cm)  
SBMA, Anonymous Donor

When the background of this icon was restored in the early twentieth century, the name of the saint portrayed in it was accidentally deleted. His face, however, is well preserved and has the familiar features of Serguis of Radonezh (1314-1392), renowned Russian hermit and founder of a monastery dedicated to the Holy Trinity. Clad in a monastic habit, Sergius stands and prays. God in heaven is symbolized by the three angelic visitors whom Abraham received at Mamre (Genesis 18:2).

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Unknown (Russian)  
*Jesus Christ, The Wakeful Eye*, ca. 1550  
Egg tempera on wood  
12 1/4 x 9 1/2 in. (31.1 x 24.1 cm)  
SBMA, Anonymous Gift

Medieval popular lore held that lions slept with their eyes open and that their whelps were first born dead, and then brought to life on the third day after birth. In correspondence with such beliefs and with biblical phrases like "He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep" (Psalm 121:4) and "Judah is a lion's whelp" (Genesis 49:4), this icon shows a youthful Christ lying down with his eyes open. An angel holds a cross, spear and reed: signs of the death and resurrection on the third day. The Virgin Mary stands in prayer, while the Holy Spirit descends from heaven in the shape of a dove: this refers to the Incarnation. The luxurious plants evidently represent the garden of Paradise: Christ is still in the bosom of the Father, before coming to earth as a man. The complex scene was first invented by Greek artists ca. 1300 and subsequently adopted in Russia.

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Unknown (Russian)

*Praises to the Mother of God*, ca. 1550-1600

Egg tempera on wood, silver revetment

12 x 10 5/8 in. (30.5 x 27 cm)

SBMA, Anonymous Gift

This icon is meant to demonstrate that the prophets of the Hebrew Bible foretold the birth of Jesus Christ. The Virgin Mary and her Son are flanked by eleven men who hold scrolls with now illegible inscriptions. Some also display objects that refer to their prophecies. On the left, Habakkuk holds a mountain (Habakkuk 3:3), Moses, a bush (Exodus 3:2), King David, a palace (Psalm 45:15). On the right, Ezekiel points to a closed gate (Ezekiel 44:2), Jacob presents a ladder (Genesis 28:12), Gideon touches a dry fleece (Judges 6:40), and Daniel, who wears a Persian hat on account of having lived in Babylon, shows a rock (Daniel 2:34). Below, Balaam points to a star (Numbers 24:17). All of these are understood as metaphors for the Mother of God: for example, "a stone was cut out by no human hand" (Daniel 2:34) is taken to refer to the Virgin as a rock from which Jesus was cut.

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Unknown (Russian)

*The Virgin of the Burning Bush*, ca. 1750

Egg tempera on wood, silver revetment

21 1/8 x 17 1/4 x 1 1/4 in. (53.7 x 43.8 x 3.2 cm)

SBMA, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Godwin Pelissero

The complex symbolic composition seen in this icon was invented by Russian artists ca. 1540 and quickly became popular. It shows that the prophecies of old were fulfilled through the Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ, and that God commands the forces of nature. The eight winged figures who surround the Virgin and Child are labeled "the angel of tempests", "the angel of clouds", "the angel of thunder", "the angel of fire", etc. The four creatures wedged among them are those seen by Ezekiel near the throne of God (Ezekiel 1:5); they also stand for the four evangelists. In the corners are the prophetic visions of Moses (Exodus 3:2), Hosea (Hosea 14:5), Jacob (Genesis 28:12) and Ezekiel (Ezekiel 44:2). The title "Icon of the Burning Bush", written in the frame above, is derived from the first of these: just as the bush seen by Moses burned without being consumed by the fire, so Mary gave birth without losing her virginity.

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Unknown (Russian)

*The Virgin of the Burning Bush, The Seven Days of the Week*, ca. 1700

Egg tempera on wood

6 1/2 x 8 1/4 x 1/2 in. (16.5 x 21 x 1.3 cm)

SBMA, Gift of Barbara Last, Evelyn B. Thompson, Sarah B. Griswold and Robert F. Boggs in memory of Barbara Field Benziger

This folding, easily portable icon was used for private prayer. In its center is a symbolic image of the Virgin and Child surrounded by angels and prophets. Above, Abraham and Sarah receive the three angels (Genesis 18:1-15): a representation of the Holy Trinity. Each scene on the side

wings corresponds to a given day of the week: Sunday (Resurrection of Christ), Monday (Archangels), Tuesday (John the Baptist Beheaded), Wednesday (Annunciation), Thursday (Washing of the Feet), Friday (Crucifixion), Saturday (Second Coming).

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Unknown (Russian)

*The Virgin of the Burning Bush*, ca. 1800-1900

Cast brass, enamel

Case: 9 1/4 x 8 3/4 x 1 in. (23.5 x 22.2 x 2.5 cm)

Object: 4 x 3 1/2 in. (10.2 x 8.9 cm)

SBMA, Gift of Barbara Last, Evelyn B. Thompson, Sarah B. Griswold and Robert F. Boggs in memory of Barbara Field Benzigner

Cast metal icons were industrially produced in nineteenth-century Russia. Smaller ones could be worn on the neck as a token of personal devotion. The image of the Virgin "of the Burning Bush" was particularly popular, because it was believed to protect against fire.

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Unknown (Russian)

*The Virgin of Vladimir*, ca. 1600-1700

Egg tempera on wood, silver gilded revetment

12 x 10 x 1 in. (30.5 x 25.4 x 2.5 cm)

SBMA, Gift of Barbara Last, Evelyn B. Thompson, Sarah B. Griswold and Robert F. Boggs in memory of Barbara Field Benzigner

This panel's metal cover is inscribed "Jesus Christ", "Mother of God" and "of Vladimir". The "Virgin of Vladimir" is an icon brought from Constantinople (now Istanbul) in the twelfth century and known to have helped countless Russian in their prayers. Its fame resulted in the production of numerous replicas, such as the present one.

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Unknown (Russian)

*The Resurrection of Jesus Christ*, ca. 1850

Egg tempera on wood

12 1/8 x 10 3/4 in. (30.8 x 27.3 cm)

SBMA, Anonymous Gift

This small icon entitled "The Resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ" was meant to be read almost like a book. It illustrates Christ's victory over death through a number of scenes. Above, Jesus is seated in heaven at the right hand of the Father. In the center, he triumphantly leaves the tomb and releases Adam and Eve from their captivity in hell. Up on the right are the gates of Paradise, which the Good Thief has already entered (Luke 23:39-43). On the upper left are the Crucifixion, Incredulity of Thomas and Ascension. Below, the myrrh-bearing women and Saint Peter visit Christ's empty tomb. On the lower right, the risen Christ appears to His disciples at Lake Tiberias (John 21:1-14).