



Religious Icons at the Metropolitan Museum of Art

Religious icons became a source of conflict and division in the Christian Church. A debate over their theological purpose occurred during the period of the Byzantine Empire. Visit the Metropolitan Museum of Art's online exhibit (links below) and then answer the following questions.

- “Icons and Iconoclasm in Byzantium” at https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/icon/hd_icon.htm
- “Relics and Reliquaries in Medieval Christianity” at https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/relic/hd_relic.htm

1. What was the function of icons in the Orthodox Christian Church? What are examples of famous icons?
2. What were the function of relics and reliquaries in the Catholic Church? What were considered the holiest of relics?
3. In the Byzantine world, what did “iconoclasm” refer to? (be detailed in your response)
4. How did icons change after the Iconoclastic controversy?
5. Study the images provided of icons, relics, and reliquaries. What similarities and differences do you see in the religious artistic styles?

“Icons and Iconoclasm in Byzantium”

By Sarah Brooks, James Madison University, originally published October 2001, last revised August 2009

https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/icon/hd_icon.htm

Definition of Icons

Icons (from the Greek eikones) are sacred images representing the saints, Christ, and the Virgin, as well as narrative scenes such as Christ’s Crucifixion. While today the term is most closely associated with wooden panel painting, in Byzantium icons could be crafted in all media, including marble, ivory, ceramic, gemstone, precious metal, enamel, textile, fresco, and mosaic.

Form and Function of Icons

Icons ranged in size from the miniature to the monumental. Some were suspended around the neck as pendants, others (called “triptychs”) had panels on each side that could be opened and closed, thereby activating the icon. Icons could be mounted on a pole or frame and carried into battle, as has been suggested for the Saint Demetrios icon. Alternatively, icons could be of a more permanent character, such as fresco and mosaic images decorating church interiors. In Byzantine theology, the contemplation of icons allowed the viewer direct communication with the sacred figure(s) represented, and through icons an individual’s prayers were addressed directly to the petitioned saint or holy figure. Miraculous healings and good fortune were among the requests.

Acheiropoieta, or Icons “Not Made by (Human) Hands”

Icons created by divine agency were known as acheiropoieta (“not made by (human) hands”). This category of miraculously created image was accorded special veneration throughout the history of Byzantium. A significant number of acheiropoieta originated in the Early Byzantine period, before the advent of Iconoclasm in the early eighth century. The most famous acheiropoieta included the Mandyion, a white cloth imprinted with the face of Christ, and the Keramion, a ceramic tile which received the impression of Christ’s face from the Mandyion. The ability to miraculously replicate was a common feature of acheiropoieta.

The Icon of the Virgin Hodegetria

By the twelfth century, a wooden panel image of the Virgin Hodegetria (“the guide”) was attributed to the miraculous creation of the evangelist, Saint Luke. In this composition, the Virgin cradles the Christ Child in her left arm and points toward him with her right hand.

One of the most famous Byzantine icons of all time, the Virgin Hodegetria image was copied widely in Byzantium in all media. The original wooden panel icon attributed to Saint Luke was housed in the Hodegon Monastery in Constantinople, a foundation made famous by its sacred spring whose waters cured the blind, guided to the spring by the monastery’s brethren. The Hodegetria image was not only enormously popular in the East, but also had an enormous impact on representations of the Virgin and Christ Child in western Europe during the Middle Ages and Renaissance.

Definition of Iconoclasm

Iconoclasm literally means “image breaking” and refers to a recurring historical impulse to break or destroy images for religious or political reasons. For example, in ancient Egypt, the carved visages of some pharaohs were obliterated by their successors; during the French Revolution, images of kings were defaced.

In the Byzantine world, Iconoclasm refers to a theological debate involving both the Byzantine church and state. The controversy spanned roughly a century, during the years 726–87 and 815–43. In these decades, imperial legislation barred the production and use of figural images; simultaneously, the cross was promoted as the most acceptable decorative form for Byzantine churches. Archaeological evidence suggests that in certain regions of Byzantium, including Constantinople and Nicaea, existing icons were destroyed or plastered over. Very few early Byzantine icons survived the Iconoclastic period; notable exceptions are woven icons, painted icons preserved at the Monastery of Saint Catherine on Mount Sinai, Egypt, and the miniature icons found on Byzantine coins, including those of Justinian II.

Iconoclasm: The Source of Debate

The Iconoclastic debate centered on the appropriate use of icons in religious veneration, and the precise relationship between the sacred personage and his/her image. Fear that the viewer misdirected his/her veneration toward the image rather than to the holy person represented in the image lay at the heart of this controversy. Old Testament prohibitions against worshipping graven images (Exodus 20:4) provided one of the most important precedents for Byzantine Iconoclasm. The immediate causes for this crisis have been hotly contested by scholars. Among the many suggested causes are the rise of Islam and the emperor’s desire to usurp religious authority and funds.

Icons after Iconoclasm

The Iconoclastic controversy had a profound effect on the production of Byzantine images after their reintroduction in 843. Changes shaped by the Iconoclastic debate included the evolution of distinct portrait types for individual saints; the development of more standardized programs of church wall decoration in mosaic and fresco; and the growing popularity of certain subjects such as Christ’s Anastasis or the “Harrowing of Hell” and the Koimesis or the “Falling Asleep” of the Virgin.

In the Middle and Late Byzantine periods, venerable icon types from earlier centuries continued to be copied, while new icon compositions also developed. One example is the biographical icon, with scenes from a saint’s life added around the periphery of an icon portraying the saint at center. A second new form is the icon in miniature mosaic, as seen for example in the Metropolitan’s Virgin and Child icon. The addition of precious metal revetments, or sculpted covers, to icons was also increasingly popular in the Middle and Late Byzantine periods.

“Relics and Reliquaries in Medieval Christianity”

By Barbara Drake Boehm, Department of Medieval Art and The Cloisters, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, originally published October 2001, last revised April 2011.

https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/relic/hd_relic.htm

Christian belief in the power of relics, the physical remains of a holy site or holy person, or objects with which they had contact, is as old as the faith itself and developed alongside it. Relics were more than mementos. The New Testament refers to the healing power of objects that were touched by Christ or his apostles. The body of the saint provided a spiritual link between life and death, between man and God: “Because of the grace remaining in the martyr, they were an inestimable treasure for the holy congregation of the faithful.” Fueled by the Christian belief in the afterlife and resurrection, in the power of the soul, and in the role of saints as advocates for humankind in heaven, the veneration of relics in the Middle Ages came to rival the sacraments in the daily life of the medieval church. Indeed, from the time of Charlemagne, it was obligatory that every altar contain a relic.

The holiest of relics were those associated with Christ and his mother. Because of the belief in the resurrection of Christ and the bodily assumption of the Virgin into heaven, physical relics of Christ and the Virgin were—with a few rare exceptions, like the baby teeth of Jesus or the Virgin’s milk—usually objects that they touched in their lifetime, such as the wood from the True Cross; or pieces of the Virgin’s veil. The most common relics are associated with the apostles and those local saints renowned for the working of miracles across Europe. All relics bestowed honor and privileges upon the possessor; monasteries and cathedrals sought to obtain the prestigious relics, and when they succeeded, their proud accomplishment is sometimes celebrated in the decoration of their sanctuaries. Some relics were even stolen from one church, only to find a new home in another, those of Saint Mark in Venice, Saint Nicholas in Bari on the Adriatic coast, or Saint Foy at Conques being among the most famous examples.

Reliquaries

Reliquaries are the containers that store and display relics. Since the relics themselves were considered “more valuable than precious stones and more to be esteemed than gold,” it was considered only appropriate that they be enshrined in vessels, or reliquaries, crafted of or covered by gold, silver, ivory, gems, and enamel. These precious objects constituted a major form of artistic production across Europe and Byzantium throughout the Middle Ages.

Medieval reliquaries frequently assume the form of caskets (chasses), but complex containers in the form of parts of the body, usually mimicking the relics they enshrined, are one of the most remarkable art forms created in the Middle Ages for the precious remains of saints. Reliquaries were often covered with narrative scenes from the life of saints, whose remains may have been contained within. Sometimes the decoration of chasses was not specific to any given saint or community but rather reflected common Christian themes, making them appropriate to the use of any community. Reliquaries were also fashioned into full-body statues, or more abbreviated, but still imposing, bust-length images of saints, often those with local reputations of great authority, including revered women saints. Set on an altar and carried in procession, their arrival sometimes heralded by the sounding of ivory horns, these highly decorated works of art made an indelible impression on the faithful. The distinction between the meaning of an image such as the famous Reliquary Statue of Sainte-Foy, still preserved at the monastery of Conques in France, and pagan idols was clearly articulated in an important chronicle written by Bernard of Angers in the eleventh century: "It is not an impure idol that receives the worship of an oracle or of sacrifice, it is a pious memorial, before which the faithful heart feels more easily and more strongly touched by solemnity, and implores more fervently the powerful intercession of the saint for its sins." By the end of the Middle Ages, image reliquaries, which traditionally were meant to suggest a saint's heavenly form and visage, came to mirror contemporary ideas of beauty. Meanwhile, the relics themselves, once hidden within the container, could be glimpsed through apertures or vials of rock crystal. Reliquaries were sometimes created expressly for privileged individuals or purchased by them. The faithful of humble means might still acquire a souvenir badge at the shrines of saints that called to mind the precious works of art associated with them. Whether created for a church or for a private individual, medieval reliquaries have been subject to widespread destruction during times of religious and political strife. Those that survive bear precious witness to exceptional artistic creativity inspired by contemporary faith.