

The Parkville Frame Gallery

Newsletter

2022 Newsletter #22-1

Subject: Religious Icons



Virgin and Child (9th Century)
Hagia Sophia (Mosaic)
Istanbul, Turkey

Icons (Greek for “images”) refers to the religious images of Byzantium. Those images, like icons today, were made from a variety of materials and depict holy figures and events.

Iconoclasm refers to the destruction of images (icons), and includes the important Byzantine Iconoclastic Controversy from the eighth and ninth centuries C.E.

Iconoclasts (Greek for “breakers of images”) refers to those who opposed religious icons.

The period following the reign of Justinian I (527–565 C.E.) the Emperor of the Eastern Roman Empire witnessed a significant increase in the use and veneration of religious images (icons). Those practices contributed to a religious and political crisis in the Empire. Opposition to the use of religious images grew, culminating in two periods of iconoclasm which brought the Early Byzantine period to an end. Byzantine Iconoclasm constituted a ban on religious images by Emperor Leo III and continued under his successors.

After the death of the last Iconoclast emperor Theophilus, his young son Michael III, along with his mother the regent Theodora, and Patriarch Methodios, summoned the Synod of Constantinople in 843 to help restore peace to the Church. At the end of the synod’s first session, and on the first day of Lent, they made a triumphal procession from the Church of Saint Mary of Blachernae to Hagia Sophia in Constantinople (Istanbul today) to restore the practice of using icons in the church. That event was known as the *Feast of Orthodoxy*.

Imagery, it was decided, was an integral part of religious faith and devotion, making present to the believer the person or event depicted in the imagery. However, the Orthodox make a clear doctrinal distinction between the veneration paid to icons and the worship which is due to God alone.

Since Iconoclasm was the last of the great Byzantine Christological controversies to trouble the Church, its defeat is considered to be the final triumph of the Church over heresy. When the Iconoclasm controversy came to an end in 843, Byzantine religious art underwent a renewal.

Following the Triumph of Orthodoxy, the Byzantines installed a new mosaic of the Virgin and Child in the apse of Constantinople's enormous Christian basilica Hagia Sophia (today it is a mosque). The image was accompanied by an inscription (now partially destroyed), which framed the image as a response to Iconoclasm: "The images which the imposters (the iconoclasts) had cast down here pious emperors have again set up."

In 867, patriarch Photios, the highest-ranking Church official in Constantinople, preached a homily (a religious discourse) in Hagia Sophia on the dedication of the new mosaic. Photios condemned the iconoclasts for "Stripping the Church, Christ's bride, of her own ornaments (images), and wantonly inflicting bitter wounds on her, wherewith her face was scarred. . . ." He went on to speak of the restoration of images.

Russian Icons

Making and using icons entered Ancient Rus' (Russia) following its conversion to Orthodox Christianity in 988 C.E. As a general rule, those icons strictly followed models and formulas hallowed by Byzantine art, led from the capital in Constantinople. As time passed, Russians widened their vocabulary of the types and styles of icons far beyond anything found elsewhere in the Orthodox world. Russian icons are typically painted on wood. They are often small, though some in churches and monasteries may be quite large. The *Holy Trinity* was painted in the 15th Century by Andrei Rublev.



Holy Trinity (ca. 1411)
Andrei Rublev
Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

Many religious homes in Russia have icons hanging on the wall in the *krasny ugol*, the "red" or "beautiful" corner. There is a rich history and elaborate religious symbolism associated with icons. In Russian churches, the nave is typically separated from the sanctuary by an iconostasis (Russian *ikonostas*, иконостас), or icon-screen, a wall of icons with double doors in the center.

Russians sometimes speak of an icon as having been "written", that is because in the Russian language (like Greek, but unlike English) the same word (*pisat'*, писать in Russian) means both to paint and to write. Icons are considered to be the Gospel in paint, therefore careful attention is paid to ensure that the Gospel is faithfully and accurately conveyed. Icons considered miraculous were said to "appear." A true icon is one that has 'appeared', a gift from above, one able to perform miracles".

Talk to our ***Art Advisor*** to learn more about icons. They make great gifts.

Enjoy fine art--well framed