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Iconostasis versus the Church

Centered on a Christian society based in Constantinople, art produced in Byzantium focused solely on religious messages. From the 3rd century CE onwards, images of holy persons were a very important part of the Eastern Orthodox church during the Byzantine empire. Derived from the Greek word *eikon* which loosely is translated to “image,” icon is a term that is applied to representations of a holy figure in Byzantium. Icons were regarded with great respect; they were believed to have protective properties, thus, were displayed in public places and private homes in hopes to serve as a communication tool. However, the veneration of the icon soon developed dispute among those in the church. During the 8th and 9th century CE, two opposing parties developed— those who were for the production of icons and those who were against. This situation led to the obliteration of many icons and a persecution of those who worshiped the images of the holy. Regardless of how icons were once seen, the role they played in Byzantium was a major impact for society and the church.

Wanting to simply depict religious images, the icons primary concern was the message rather than producing for art’s sake. They were designed for devotional purposes and to help others understand the figures they were praying to in order to bridge the gap between humanity

and the divine.¹ In Byzantine theology, the contemplations of icons allowed its viewer to have direct contact with the divine through the sacred figure represented. All individual prayers were addressed directly to the figure, whether it was a saint or Mary, to petition miraculous healings and good fate.² The icons ranged from size and medium—some were crafted in marble, ivory, metal, mosaic and frescos from the miniature to the monumental. No matter the size or medium, the iconic images lacked naturalistic representations. However, the Byzantine responded to these images to be “life-like”; they were not life-like in the sense that they aesthetically fit under the category of naturalistic, but they were life-like because they were “alive”.³ An example is the Virgin and Child from the Apse in Hagia Sophia, 867 CE (Figure 1).

Though many icons were destroyed during the Byzantine Empire, the Hagia Sophia is home to many of icons produced post-iconoclasm that are conserved close to its original state. The apse mosaic of the Virgin and Child was one out of many icons in the Hagia Sophia that was created for worship as a prototype to get through to the divine. The icon served as a resurgence from the emperor and the patrons wanting to be done with the destruction of icons during the iconoclasm. The Virgin and Child is an example of the reaffirmation of the importance of images in Byzantium Eastern Orthodox churches. It was about the power of the image that was created to move one emotionally and spiritually to teach the word of God. Like the Virgin and Child Enthroned, St. Catherines Monastery, Mount Sinai, 6th century, the two figures are centered and

¹ Sarah Brooks, “Icons and Iconoclasm in Byzantium.” In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/icon/hd_icon.htm (originally published October 2001, last revised August 2009)

² Mark Cartwright. "Byzantine Icons." *Ancient History Encyclopedia*. Last modified December 08, 2017. <https://www.ancient.eu/article/1161/>.

³ Robert S. Nelson, “To Say and To See: Ekphrasis and Vision in Byzantium”, *Visuality Before and Beyond Renaissance: Seeing as Others Saw* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 143-145

seated in throne. However, the Virgin and Child Enthroned was produced pre-iconoclasm, both representations of the Virgin and Child are portrayed stern and frontal which can emulate the Byzantine stylization of depicting religious figures two-dimensional. They both played a key role of the church wanting to simply depict the religious message to coincide with liturgical functions.

During services of the church, the icons were an integral part of the process. Because the Virgin and Child in Hagia Sophia and Mount Sinai are located in the center of an apse or merely presenting holiness through iconography like nimbuses, the Byzantines were believers in the value of representational art to depict iconic images of the holy. Though one would assume Christ to be the favored icon, the most revered of all icons were those who represented the Virgin Mary in a pose where she holds the infant Jesus, known as Theotokos.⁴ Regardless of the Child being deemed the most important of the pair, the early Christians preferred to focus on the mystery of the Incarnation—the appearance of God in human flesh. Thus, the infant child conveyed the image of God through the Child on his mother's lap in order to translate the veneration of the Mother of God.⁵ These icons were important because of the symbolism that lied before them. Usually depicted with emotionless eyes and embellished with gold surrounding them, the theological images assisted the viewer to understand that they were a vehicle of prayer. It was not simply a mother holding her son, it was the relationship between the icon and the

⁴ Thomas Mathews, *Early Icons of the Holy Monastery*, "Holy Image, Hallowed Ground: Icons from Sinai" (Getty Trust Publications: J. Paul Getty Museum 2007), 47-49.

⁵ Ibid.

stylization that was complex. In them, it encouraged the eye to linger and contemplate about the humanity and divinity of Christ.⁶

In Byzantium, the images come alive to comfort and speak to the viewer; they were used to pray directly to saints for miraculous help but also as a way for the saints to intercede with Christ to forgive sins. Icons could protect those who believed and were seen to have possessed powers from the divine. Though the emperor Leo III believed them to be bad and images of worship, the Byzantine viewers thought of the iconic images to be art used both to evoke and portray holy events in order to encourage prayer and empathy. The intricate metalwork of enamel and setting of gems in mosaics are more than just images of divinity, they allow the holy image to act as a spiritual shield for those who pray to them. Regardless of how icons were destroyed during the time of iconoclasm, the role the holy image played in Byzantium was a major impact for society and the church in ways they are still practiced in modern times. The icons operates as a site of worship; whether it is in prayer to a saint or a fresco in a holy space, the icon is merely a vehicle of prayer rather than an object to worship.

⁶ Anthony Eastmond, "The Experience of Byzantine Art", *The Glory of Byzantium and Early Christendom*, (Phaidon Press, 2013), 7-10.

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Left (Figure 1) The apse mosaic of the Virgin and Child, Hagia Sophia

(Right) Icon of the enthroned Virgin and Child with saints and angels, 6th century

