EARLY ICONS

OVERVIEW

Icon painting, as distinct from other forms of painting, emerged in the Early Byzantine period as an aid to religious devotion. Although today we tend to think of icons as images of the saints and other religious figures painted on a wood panel, in early Byzantium, these images could be woven into textiles, designed into enamelware jewelry, or embedded in a mosaic dome of a church. Whereas earlier Christian art relied more on allegory and symbolism (for example, earlier art might have featured a lamb representing Christ rather than Christ shown in human form), before long, religious figures were being depicted in their human form so as to emphasize their humanity as well as their spirituality. While this issue would be debated and challenged during the later iconoclastic period (which we’ll discuss later in this unit), for a time, images of the saints in icon paintings flourished.

THE VIRGIN AND CHILD ENTHRONED WITH SAINTS, 6TH CENTURY
(Please view the image below.)

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This sixth century icon is incredibly useful to the student of Byzantine art, since it is typical of icons from the Early Byzantine period. Moreover, it is exceptional for the fact that it survives, since most early icons were destroyed during the later iconoclastic period. This image is a fantastic example of both the style of Early Byzantine icon painting and the way in which icon painting could aid religious devotion. The image depicts the Virgin Mary (holding the Christ Child) enthroned in the center. On either side of the Virgin and Child stand Saints Theodore and George. Behind these figures are two angels who look up towards the heavens, where God's hand emerges. There is no event or story depicted here; instead, the icon's figures serve to remind the viewer of the heavenly realm and aid the viewer in coming a bit closer to it.

In terms of style, this image reveals an interesting combination of elements of both the older, classical tradition and the newer Byzantine symbolism that denies believable space. Take a look at the top edge of the painting. Here you can see that the artist has placed these figures in some sort of architectural setting. There seems to be an entablature running across the top edge of an undefined wall and it clearly recedes back, suggesting real space. Furthermore, the two angels behind the Virgin and Child seem to fully inhabit the architectural space. Light and shadow have been used to give their faces and heads a believable three-dimensionality. The artist has even gone so far as to twist these angels so that they look up towards the heavens, and the perspective is adjusted to foreshorten their faces, imitating the way we see figures in the real world. The Virgin and Child, while more frontal and flattened, do sit in the throne with a believable weightiness. The saints on either side of the Virgin and Child, however, bear virtually no trace of the Classical world's interest in space. They are flattened, with feet that seem to float rather than stand on firm ground. Their bodies have been reduced to two-dimensional fields of pattern. Whereas in the classical tradition, artists used drapery to define a sculptural form, this artist uses drapery to obscure mass in favor of two-dimensional pattern. Interestingly, they are the only figures in this image that make eye contact with the viewer, and they do so with stares that are intense and unwavering.

Much of this stylistic hybridity can be attributed to the icon's date; at the time of its creation, Byzantine art was still tied to the Classical world's artistic traditions and artists were still very much working in that idiom. That said, the combination of such disparate styles was clearly more than accidental or arbitrary. In fact, scholars agree that the gradual visual progression from the flattened, two-dimensional image of the saint, to the frontal, but more three-dimensional image of the Virgin, to the much more three-dimensional angels stylistically invite the viewer into the holy scene. The painting combines the "real" in the three-dimensional figures and the "unreal" in the flattened figures, just as this painting is both "unreal" in that it is an artifice, a man-made creation, and "real" in that there is an illusion of holy space, a space that the viewer can spiritually enter. The artist is constantly playing with this boundary between real and unreal, mortal and divine: the saints stare out at us, connecting us to the scene, while the Virgin looks to her side, thereby connecting us to her via the saint. God's hand and the saints behind the Virgin bring us even further toward
the spiritual level. The viewer then moves from the surface of the painting, emphasized by the flattened, two-dimensional figures towards an increasingly vivid world, suggested by the illusion of depth and space in the background of the image.

As this example shows, an icon was often much more than just an image to be looked at and admired. An icon had the power to transport the faithful into another world. This is an excellent example of the role of icons in Byzantine art; it tells us a great deal about the icons that do not survive from this period. It also, perhaps, can give us an idea of what the iconoclasts (“image breakers”) objected to in these images. They feared that people would begin to worship images rather than god, and this example illustrates the deliberately blurred line between image and god.