

Icons and Iconoclasm

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

There was once a period in time when the veneration of Christian images was banned, and religious images or icons were literally destroyed. Several influences led to the destruction of icons. This lesson covers:

1. Time Period and Location: Icons and Iconoclasm
2. Virgin and Child with Saints and Angels
3. Transfiguration of Christ
4. Iconoclasm
5. Virgin (Theotokos) of Vladimir



BIG IDEA

Byzantine iconoclasm refers to a time when the veneration of Christian images was banned, and religious images or icons were literally destroyed.

1. Time Period and Location: Icons and Iconoclasm

One of the aspects that makes the study of Byzantine art especially challenging was the iconoclastic movement, which lasted from 726–843.

The use of icons in Byzantine ritual was particularly problematic. Icons became popular aspects of personal and group devotion and blurred the line between idolatry (worshiping the image itself) and veneration (using the image to aid meditation and prayer). The number of saints depicted in icons dwindled to just a few, along with the Virgin and Child, including the Virgin as Theotokos, or bearer of God. Some icons were thought to have magical powers and to have saved people from famine, defeat in war, etc.

Iconoclasm was heavily influenced by wars with the Sassanid Persians, who conquered up to two-thirds of the former Eastern Roman Empire. Emperor Leo III (717–741) believed that this overwhelming defeat was punishment for the idolatry of the iconophiles (people who like icons). He prohibited the use of images in ritual,

and for a time, many existing images were destroyed, and no new images were produced for about 100 years. One text describes iconoclasm in 754 in the following way:

“In every village and town, one could witness the weeping and lamentation of the pious, whereas, on the part of the impious, [one] sacred things trodden upon, [liturgical] vessels turned to other use, churches scraped down and smeared with ashes because they contained holy images. And wherever there were venerable images of Christ or the Mother of God or the saints, these were consigned to the flames or were gouged out and smeared over.”

In 843, under a new line of emperors, iconoclasm was declared to be heresy and the policy against icons was reversed.

The Byzantine Empire is broken into three main eras:

- Early Byzantine
- Middle Byzantine
- Late Byzantine

The artwork in this lesson falls within the early and middle periods. The geographical region covered in this lesson is the Sinai Peninsula and the monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai. According to the Book of Exodus, this is the biblical location where Moses received the Ten Commandments from God. This monastery was in such a remote location that its art was not destroyed during iconoclasm.



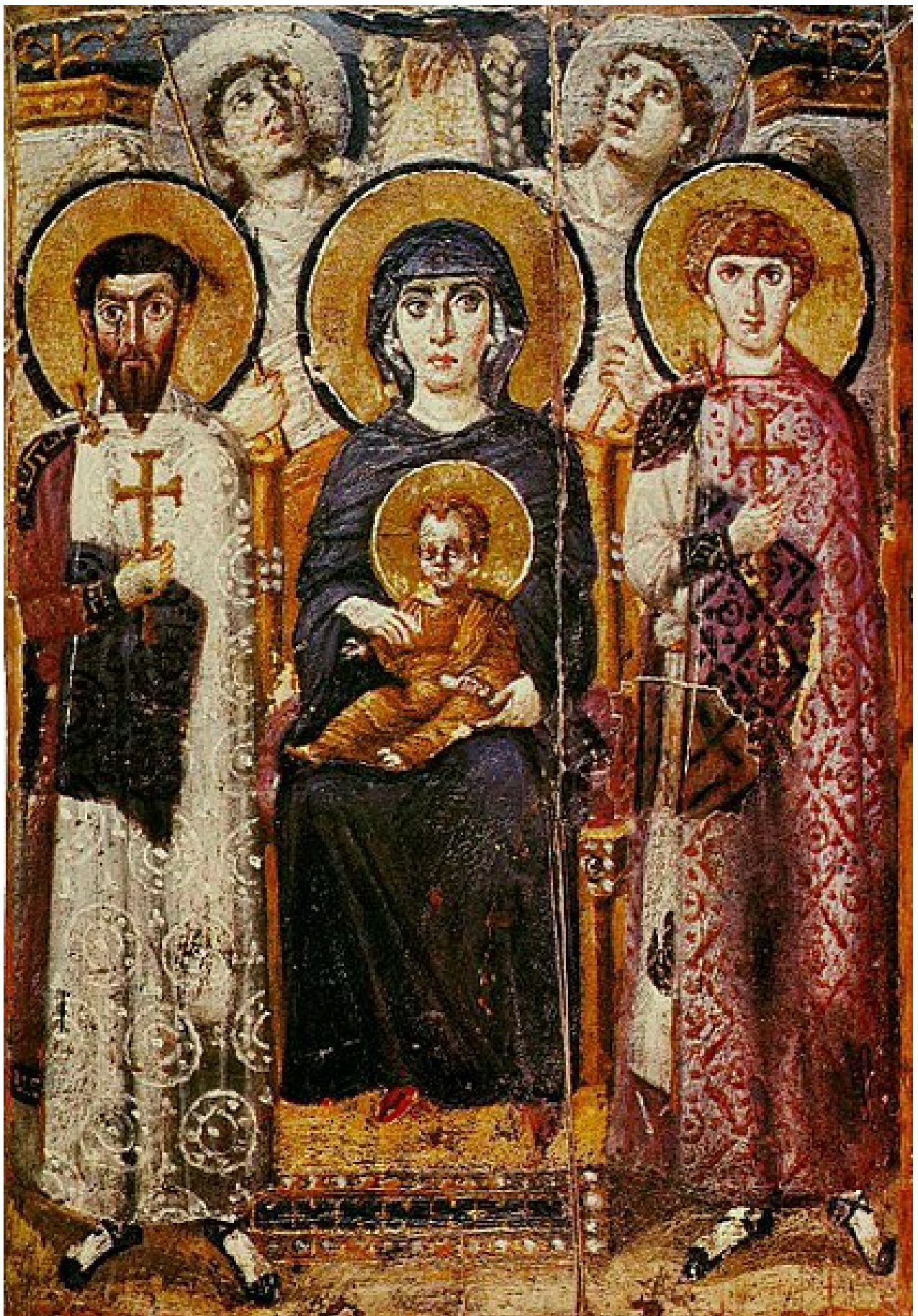
DID YOU KNOW

A monastery is a collection of buildings that are cared for and lived in by religious monks.

2. Virgin and Child with Saints and Angels

According to the Christian church, religious icons are not the same as idols. In fact, idol worship was forbidden according to Jewish law. Many adherents to Christianity, which has its roots in Judaism, were uncomfortable with the veneration of images in the early centuries of Christianity. They thought of it as a form of idolatry. At some point, however, the distinction was made between the veneration of images and use of images for prayer and meditation versus worshipping the idols themselves.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Take a look at this example of Christian iconography from the sixth century CE:



Virgin and Child with Saints and Angels at the Monastery of St. Catherine

Mount Sinai, Egypt

Second half of 6th century

Encaustic on wood panel

This above painting of the **Theotokos**, or Virgin Mary, and the child Jesus with saints and angels is located at the Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai. It is an encaustic painting, which means the paint is made of a pigment suspended in a beeswax binder. Unlike tempera paint, which is limited in its blending capabilities, encaustic paint can be blended together more easily to create greater variations in color.

Mary is the central figure of this image and functions as a sort of throne for the baby Jesus. Jesus is known by Christians as the King of Kings. He and his mother are flanked by two saints, Theodore and George, both warrior saints who are said to have killed dragons, which is likely symbolism for Jesus conquering evil. Even though there is no hieratic scale in this image, the arrangement of figures suggests hierarchy, with Mary and Jesus in the middle flanked by the saints, and the angels positioned behind them. There is little attempt to make this space look three-dimensional or naturalistic.

Notice how Mary, Jesus, and the angels in the background are rendered in a way that hints at depth and volume, while the saints are rather flat in their appearance, despite the very detailed and rather realistic-looking robes. All figures have halos surrounding their heads, but only the four in front have golden halos, which perhaps is an indication of their status with respect to the angels behind them. This image blends the naturalism associated with Greco-Roman art with the stiffness and solemn facial expressions associated with Byzantine art.



TERM TO KNOW

Theotokos

The Greek title of the Christian Virgin Mary as the Mother of God.

3. Transfiguration of Christ

Transfiguration refers to the moment when a person changes from mortal to divine. Here, this is in reference to Jesus's prophesized rise from the dead.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Take a look at this image of the transfiguration of Jesus, also located in the monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai from 554–565 CE:



Transfiguration of Jesus at the Monastery of St. Catherine

Mount Sinai, Egypt

548–565 CE

Mosaic

This above image is an interesting depiction in a number of ways. First, Christ, who is shown radiating light, is surrounded by a dark blue **mandorla**, as opposed to the usual gold coloring. Instead, the artist chose to color the entire background gold, opting not to include any type of landscape or indication of depth and space. For example, there are no shadows cast, even in the presence of all that light.

Some scholars have suggested that this was intended, due to its use as an icon meant to evoke a quality that has no connection to a physical time or place.

The heavenly images of Christ and the prophets Elijah and Moses that flank him are rather serene and composed compared to the disciples John, Peter, and James, who appear to be very scared.

Notice the way in which the ground line appears. Generally speaking, the ground line is an element that sort of defines the edge of a picture. But if you look carefully, you can see how some of the figures are behind it. The two prophets, however, are stepping over it. The central disciple is actually straddling it.



TERM TO KNOW

Mandorla

An area of radiance or luminous glow in paintings that are sacred; usually appears as a disk or halo but can extend to include the whole body.

4. Iconoclasm

During the eighth century, a ban on religious imagery was enacted under the reign of Emperor Leo III. **Iconoclasm** refers to the destruction or deconstruction of religious imagery and **icons**. Examples of iconoclasm can be found throughout history. The Byzantine Empire experienced two periods of iconoclasm, the first in the eighth century and the second during the ninth century. The end of the second period of iconoclasm in Byzantium marked the beginning of the middle Byzantine period in 843 CE.



TERMS TO KNOW

Iconoclasm

The intentional deconstruction of religious or political icons, symbols, or monuments.

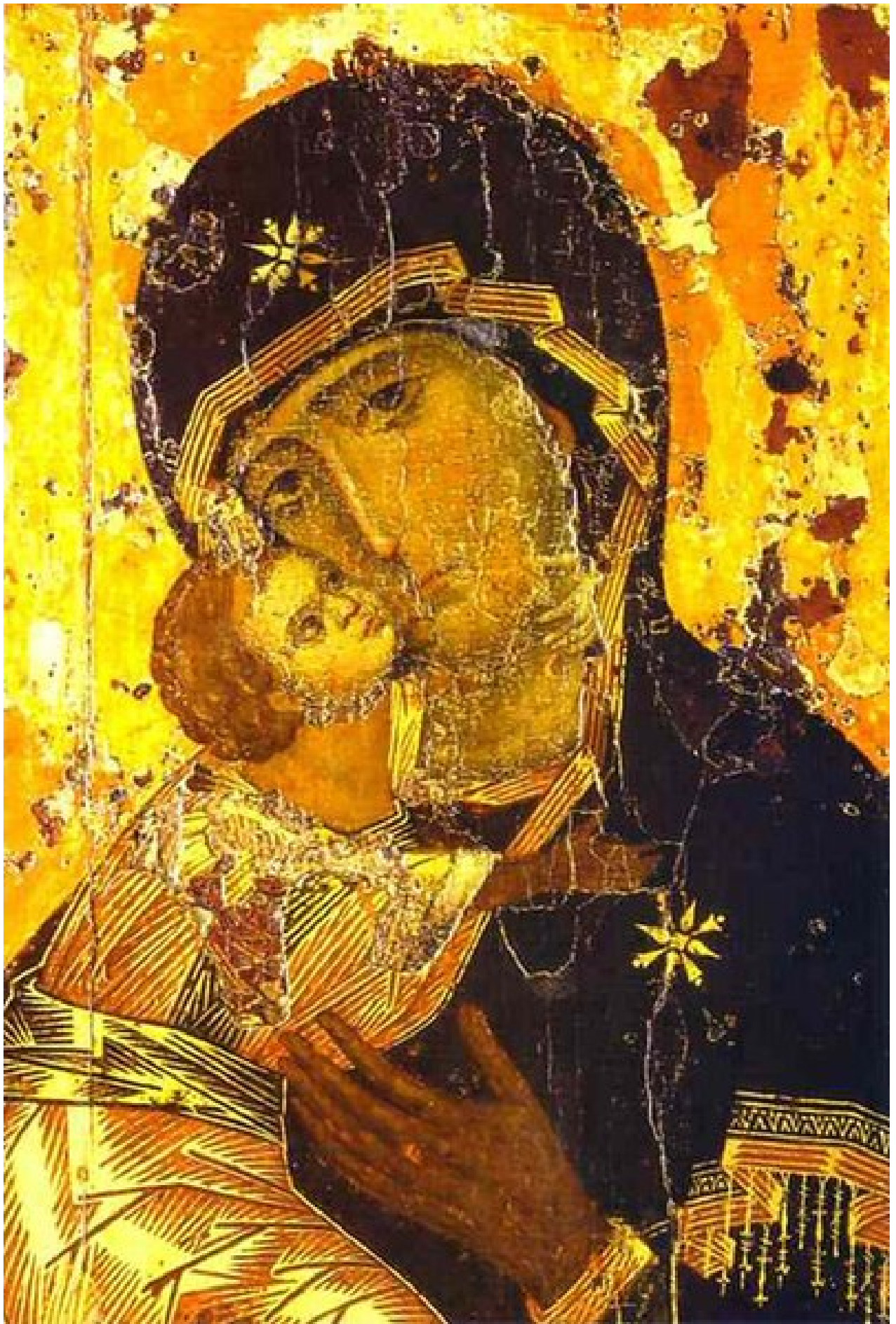
Icon

A religious image of an important person from Christianity, used as an aid to worship in the Byzantine tradition.

5. Virgin (Theotokos) of Vladimir

If we jump ahead towards the end of the middle Byzantine period, we can take a look at this next religious image.

➞ **EXAMPLE** This image is of the Virgin Mary and Child, called The Virgin of Vladimir due to it being located in Russia.



The Virgin of Vladimir (Virgin and Child)

Originally from Constantinople, now resides in Moscow, Russia

11th–12th century CE

Tempera on wood panel



DID YOU KNOW

Vladimir is a city, in this case, not a person.

This image of the Virgin Mary and Child was likely created in Constantinople, and it is an example of tempera paint on wood. Remember, tempera paint is limited in its ability to blend with other colors, so the tendency is to paint with tiny or smaller brush strokes. This can come across as flat in its appearance or lacking in the depth that is possible with other types of paint.

Compared to the **encaustic** painting from earlier in this lesson, this painting seems rather two-dimensional or flat. The theme of a tender scene between a mother and child is common in artwork. Notice the depiction of Jesus. Until the Renaissance, more often than not, Jesus is depicted as a tiny adult in appearance.

There are exceptions, of course. In fact, the encaustic painting from earlier depicts Jesus with a much more natural set of proportions, like those of a small child. It's an interesting stylistic choice, though, that you see returning again and again in religious imagery. It is believed to be an intentional Christian suggestion of Christ's inherent perfection, that even though he's a child, he's still the savior of mankind. Mary looks sad in this image because she is thinking about how Jesus will have to die later in life.

This particular icon was thought to have saved the city of Moscow from invasion by the Mongols, and the city of Kazan from Tatar invasions. Its paint has become darkened through exposure to smoke.



TERM TO KNOW

Encaustic

A type of painting that uses beeswax as a binder.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about Byzantine iconoclasm and its reference to a time when the veneration of Christian images was banned, and religious images or icons were literally destroyed. This lesson started off with a review of the **time period and location of icons and iconoclasm**.

Not only did this lesson explore **iconoclasm**, or the destruction or deconstruction of religious imagery and icons, you also looked at examples of icons found throughout history, including:

- **Virgin and Child with Saints and Angels**
- **The Transfiguration of Christ**
- **Virgin (Theotokos) of Vladimir**



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