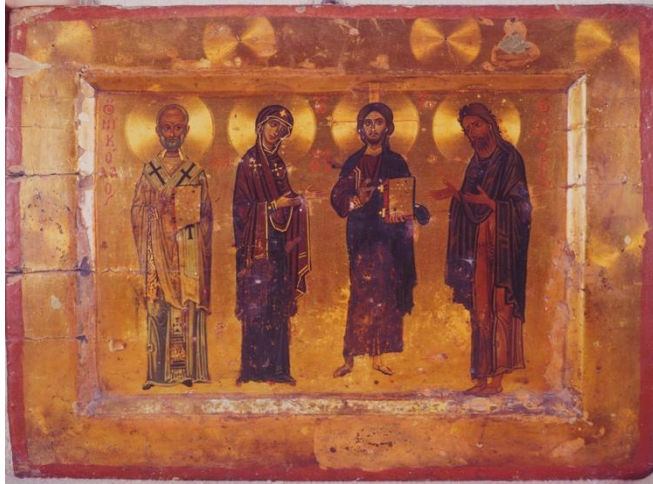


Teaching Sinai Module

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Icon of Deesis with St. Nicholas



Tempera on wooden panel

11th Century

25 cm x 33 cm

Treasury of St. Catherine's Monastery

Brief description

The icon is designed in a horizontal format. It depicts, from right to left, St. Nicholas, the Mother of God, Christ and John the Baptist. Each figure is rendered full-length. St. Nicholas faces out towards the viewer, whereas the Mother of God and John are turned inwards and gesture to Christ, who also faces outwards. Whereas the three other figures stand on a faint groundline, Christ stands on a plane deeper in pictorial space. The artist has burnished the circular haloes with a hard instrument and has added nimbi to the frame. Other than the inscriptions, which are written in ochre, the background consists of gold leaf, with a minimal degree of losses, but especially on the lower and upper edges and the cracks at the left side.

Teaching exercise

The goal of this exercise is twofold: First (i), to prompt students to reflect on how photographic archives mediate our relationship to works of art, and especially their impact on how we apprehend reflective surfaces such as gold leaf. Second (ii), to help students understand how reflective properties and geometric shapes, especially circular nimbi (or haloes), contributed to the icon's theological impact and symbolism.

1. Students are invited to peruse the various photos presenting the icon of "Deesis with St. Nicholas" on the Sinai Archive -- <https://www.sinaiarchive.org/s/mpa/item/6935#?c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=0&xywh=-886%2C0%2C5370%2C2646> They should be prepared to discuss how certain of the photos amplify the reflective qualities of the circular nimbi, or alternately downplay their impact or even altogether erase their visibility. How does the plurality of the photos curated by the archive enhance our understanding of the visual rhetoric of the icon, and what would be lost if we only had one or the other of the photos?

2. Students are invited to search for other icons in the collection of the Sinai Archive and to identify panels with significant nimbi. Potential candidates might stand out because of their shape or ornament, their splendor or reflective properties, their relation to other features of the imagery or border, and so on. They should be prepared to share their selections with their classmates and to explain why they chose them. How did the photo help them appreciate whichever qualities brought the icons to their attention.
3. Students are invited to read the aphorisms on nimbi by Theodore Pediasimos translated in Justin Willson, "Theodore Pediasimos's 'Theorems on the Nimbi of the Saints'," *Byzantinoslavica* 78 (2020): 203–39, at 226–32.
4. What facets of haloes does Pediasimos emphasize? What about the circular shape of nimbi does he find compelling, and what aspects of nimbi would he encourage us to overlook or deemphasize?

This exercise could be used at the undergraduate or graduate level.

Further Reading

- Frinta, Mojmir S. "Raised Gilded Adornment of the Cypriot Icons and the Occurrence of the Technique in the West." *Gesta* 20, no. 2 (1981): 333–47.
This study introduces the use of three-dimensional, plastic surfaces on late Byzantine icons, including in ornamental haloes.
- Manafis, Konstantinos A. *Sinai, Treasures of the Monastery of Saint Catherine*. Athens: Ekdotike Athenon, 1990.
This essay examines the icons held at Sinai from various periods. It can serve as a complement to the online perusing of the monastery's holdings in icons. (pp. 91–227)
- Schulz, Vera-Simone. "Intricate Letters and the Reification of Light: Prolegomena on the Pseudo-Inscribed Haloes in Giotto's *Madonna di San Giorgio alla Costa* and Masaccio's *San Giovenale Triptych*." *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz* 58, no. 1 (2016): 59–94.
Schulz builds on earlier scholars who argue that haloes in Western European art featuring Pseudo-Arabic are reflections of Islamic plates and trays which circulated in Spain, Italy, and France.
- Willson, Justin. "Theodore Pediasimos's 'Theorems on the Nimbi of the Saints'." *Byzantinoslavica* 78 (2020): 203–39.
This article introduces the author Theodore Pediasimos and situates his aphorisms on nimbi within the intellectual milieu of fourteenth-century Byzantium.