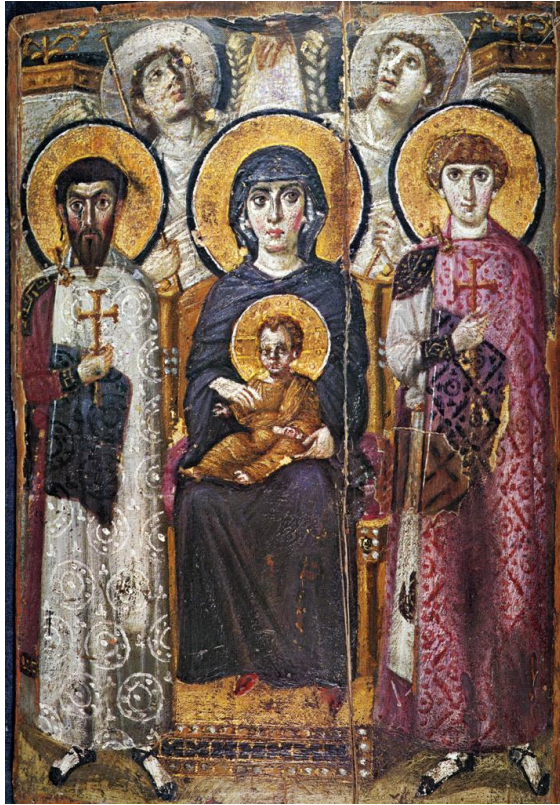


Teaching Sinai Module

Prepared by Charles Barber, Princeton University

Mother of God, Saints and Angels



Encaustic on wood

Later sixth century CE

26^{15/16} x 19^{9/16} in. (68.5 x 49.7 cm.)

Perhaps Constantinople or Alexandria

The Icon Museum at the Monastery

Brief description

The central figure in the panel is an enthroned Mother of God. She holds the Christ Child in her lap. Christ holds a scroll in His left hand and raises his right hand in a gesture of speech. Mary is dressed in blue, Christ in gold. Their gazes are directed towards the right-hand side of the panel. Positioned to either side of the throne and slightly in front of it are two male saints. They stand on the same pale ground as the throne. The saint to the left is dark haired and bearded. He wears a purple tunic that bears added purple elements. Over this is a long silver cloak held by a golden clasp. The cloak bears a repeating design that continues into the purple tablion. The saint carries a golden cross in his right hand. The saint to the right has reddish hair and is beardless. He wears a white tunic that bears purple patches. His tunic is mauve and has a repeating diamond-shaped pattern. The tablion is relatively pale. The saint holds a golden cross in his right hand. The two saints are wearing the court costume associated with military figures. Both saints look directly in front of them. The saints are commonly identified as Theodore and George, but they are not named on the panel. It is possible that the lost frame, indicated by the bare wood at the borders of the panel may have named the figures. In the upper portion of the panel are a pair of angels. A portion of their wings can be glimpsed above the haloes of the saints. The angels have white and pale grey haloes. Their

flesh tones and haloes are worked with the same colors. Some details are colored: their lips, nostrils, hair, and eyes. They carry staffs and may also, with some difficulty, be the bearers of the fronds that can be seen between them. The angels look up toward the image of the hand of God that can be seen within those fronds. The hand emerges from a semi-circle of dark blue and sits within a ray of white light that reaches from the semi-circle down to the halo of the Mother of God. The semi-circle is set within a slightly lighter band of blue. The whiter area in the upper section of the angels' halos underscores this color distinction. To either side of the angels are the front elements of an apsidal architectural form. Gold is used for highlights in many areas of the panel.

Teaching exercise

Ask your students, undergraduate, to consider the implications of where the figures in the icon are directing their gaze. The saints are the ones that look out at us. Christ and the Mother of God look to the right. The angels look up to the hand of God. Introduce the function of the icon as a focus of prayer and intercession. The saints are our entry into the image. They will bring the viewer's prayer to the Mother of God and Christ. Christ's gesture with his right hand indicates that He is answering the prayer.

The angels look up to the hand of God. This is a symbolic form that indicates utterance. Angels are intermediary and symbolic figures connecting the heavenly and earthly realms.

Invite your students to consider the use of color. At the top of the panel the hand of God is set within a lighter strip. The angels are set within an area in which variations on white predominate. The ray of light keys this, but it continues into the treatments of the angelic bodies. Note: angels are technically bodiless; making them akin to the ray of light underscores their incorporeal and intermediary nature. The Mother of God and the saints are fully and variously colored. This places an emphasis upon their terrestrial and fully perceptible nature. The use of color seen here distinguishes the earthly and heavenly realms.

The icon offers a brief theological account of Christ's divine and human nature. He is fully in the flesh, like the Mother of God and saints, but has His origins in the invisible divine nature. The ray of light and the angels connect these domains. The icon also introduces the viewer to the hierarchy of intercession. Prayer passes from the saints to the Mother of God and Christ. It is Christ who answers the prayer.

Further Reading

- Anderson, Benjamin. "Images in Byzantine Thought and Practice, ca. 500–700." In *A Companion to Byzantine Iconoclasm*, edited by Mike Humphreys, 144–87. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2021.
- Barber, Charles. "Early Representations of the Mother of God." In *The Mother of God: Representations of the Virgin in Byzantine Art*, edited by Maria Vassilaki, 252–61. Milan: Skira; Athens: Benaki Museum, 2000.
- Weitzmann, Kurt. *The Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai: The Icons*. Vol. 1, *From the Sixth to the Tenth Century*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976. pp. 18–21.