

VATICAN MUSEUMS

PINACOTECA VATICANA

ROOM XVIII

# THE ROOM OF THE ICONS

The icons of the Vatican Museums are an important collection of sacred images. They are an expression of the theology, faith and aesthetic canons of the Christianity of the East.

The paintings forming part of the collection entered the papal collections after 1762, as part of Sacred Museum, established by Pope Benedict XIV within the Vatican Library.

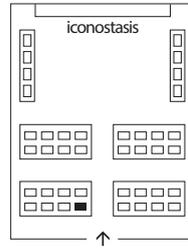
The icons exhibited here are a selection of the more significant ones in the collection, chosen on the basis of their iconographic types and cultural areas. Dating from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they come from post-Byzantine Greece, the Balkan and Slav countries, Russia, the area formerly under Venetian rule, the Adriatic and the Near East. These territories were always linked to the world of Byzantium in which was developed, ever since the first centuries of the Christian

era, the peculiar symbiosis between theological doctrine and art that gave form and content to the sacred images we now call icons.

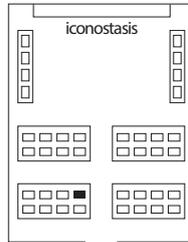
The most frequent type in the collections of the Vatican Museums is that of the devotional icon.

These were images, generally of small format, produced for private and domestic prayer.

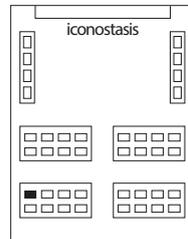
Although they differ in size from the larger icons for display in churches, they represent similar iconographic themes: images of Christ and of the Mother of God, the Saints and liturgical feasts.



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1 *Saint John the Baptist "Aligero"*

Russian Art, late 15<sup>th</sup> cent. - early 16<sup>th</sup> cent.

John, the angel of the desert, the messenger who prepared the way of the Lord according to the prophecy of Malachi (3: 1), lived in the wilderness and preached the coming of Christ. He is represented as an ascetic, wearing a camel's hair raiment with a mantle (*himation*) draped over it. Imprisoned by Herod, he was decapitated on Herod's orders to please Salome, daughter of his concubine Herodias. John is shown supporting a charger containing the severed head, below which is a scroll with the quotation from John (1: 29): "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world". At his feet are a tree and an axe alluding to the Baptist's warning: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand [...]. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees: every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire". (Mt 3: 1, 10).

2 *Virgin with Child,*

so-called *Madonna of the Sign*

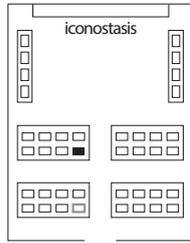
Russian Art, 18<sup>th</sup> cent. (?)

The icon represents the Mother of God in the pose of the orant, arms raised, palms exposed. She bears before her a circular aureole with the image of the blessing Christ Emanuel. This type of Madonna is of ancient Byzantine origin. It is known as the Virgin *Platytera*, the "Virgin more spacious than the heavens". The epithet derives from the liturgy of Saint Basil; it alludes to the fact that the Virgin gave birth to the Almighty who is greater and more spacious than all the Heavens, referring to the dogma of the Incarnation of Christ.

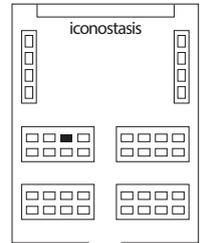
3 *Deesis*

Russian Art (Moscow), 17<sup>th</sup> cent.

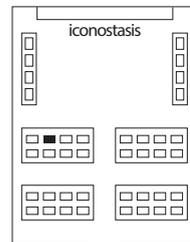
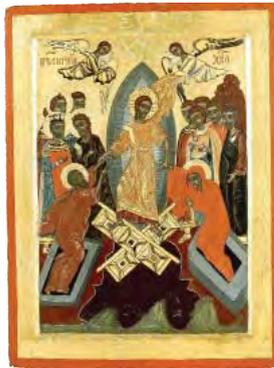
The *Deesis* (from the Greek word meaning intercession or prayer) is one of the most popular images of Byzantine and Orthodox art, frequent both in icons for private devotion and on a more monumental scale in iconostases (icon screens). Christ enthroned is flanked by the first and most important intercessors with their hands opened in the gesture of supplication: to his right is the Virgin Mary, to his left John the Baptist. The iconography is very ancient and was varied with the addition of other figures such as archangels, apostles and saints. In the present icon, we see, kneeling in the foreground, the two "fools-for-Christ" Basil and Maximus of Moscow, two of the best loved saints in the capital of the Russian empire. They exemplify those ascetics who, in embracing the "foolishness" of the Cross, voluntarily chose a life of abnegation and prayer in a kind of martyrdom in life.



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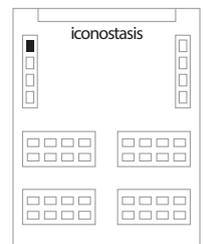
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4 *Christ of the Fiery Eye*  
Russian Art, late 18<sup>th</sup> cent.

The icon representing the Saviour is based on the dogma of the Incarnation and expresses in tangible form the union of the two natures of Christ: human and divine. The severity of the gaze of the Lord of the Universe, who is both Creator and Judge, cannot be divorced from His mercy to man.

5 *Dormition of the Virgin (Koimesis) and the Sacrilege of Jephronias*  
Russian Art (Novgorod?), c. 1500

The Western feast of the Assumption was recognized in the Eastern Church as early as the 6<sup>th</sup> century and called *Koimesis*, meaning *Dormition* (“Falling Asleep”). For the Orthodox believe that Mary, assumed body and soul into heaven, did not die but fell asleep. In this icon we see, at the centre, Christ welcoming the soul of his Mother, portrayed as an infant in swaddling clothes. The sleeping body of Mary lies prostrate on its bier. To its sides are the weeping and praying Apostles. The buildings shown on both sides in the background represent the points of departure and arrival of the funeral procession: the house of Mary and the Temple of Jerusalem. In the foreground, in smaller scale, is represented the episode of the non-believer Jephronias who, in the act of desecrating the holy bier, has his hands cut off by the sword of an angel.

6 *Descent of Christ into Hell (Anastasis)*  
Slav Art, 18<sup>th</sup> cent.

It is the icon of Easter. The image corresponds to that of the Resurrection of Christ in the West. He is victorious and resplendent not so much over His empty tomb as over the kingdom of hell. The gates of hell are flung to the ground: Christ rises over them. He grasps by the hand Adam and Eve, the first to live

and the first to be resurrected, drawing them upwards from their tombs. The Kings, Prophets and Righteous witness the Triumph over death. This iconography is derived not from the evangelical texts, but from the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus and from various hymns, including the *Akatisto* Hymn.

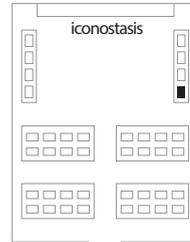
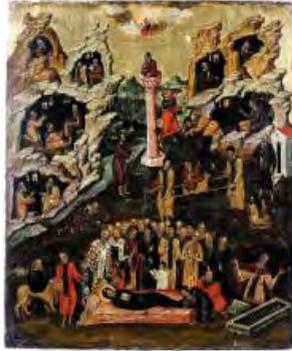
7 *Sacred Calendar or Menology*  
Russian Art, 17<sup>th</sup> cent.

This “calendar of sainthood” presents, round the central nucleus with Christ in Glory, the feast-days of the Saints, as established in the Orthodox calendar, which begins on the first of September. Called *menologion*, meaning annual calendar (but there also exists the *synaxarion* or monthly calendar), these icons derived their iconography from the miniatures that illustrated the texts containing the first collections of lives of the saints. They were displayed in churches on a special lectern called *analogion*.

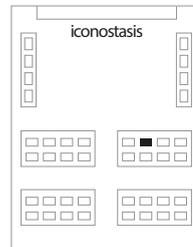
8 *Saint Nicholas and stories of his life*  
Russian Art (Novgorod?),  
early 16<sup>th</sup> cent.

Saint Nicholas is highly venerated both in Western Europe and in the Slav Greek Orthodox world. Born in Patara in c. 270, he was Bishop of Myra in Lycia where he died between 345 and 352. Defender of orthodoxy at the Council of Nicaea, where he opposed the heretic Arius, he was imprisoned and deprived of sacred insignia. Thanks to the miraculous apparition of Christ and the Virgin Mary, he regained his freedom and was restored to his episcopal rank. In contrast to the earlier Byzantine icons, the Russian ones are enriched with biographical episodes and the miracles worked by the Saint. The image of the Saint is immediately recognizable: that of an elderly man in episcopal vestments, severe in expression, his high forehead furrowed, his beard short. With one hand he makes the gesture of blessing, with the other he holds the Gospel.

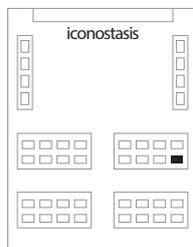
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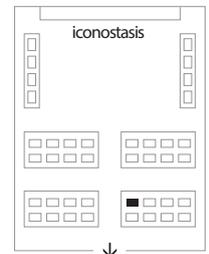
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9 *Death of Saint Ephrem the Syrian*  
Emmanuel Zanafurnari  
(doc. 1595 -1631)

Ephrem the Syrian, Doctor of the Church, theologian and poet (born at Nisibis in 306-307, died at Edessa in 373), was a prolific author of religious hymns and commentaries on Scriptures, and was also the first to introduce female liturgical chant; he was nicknamed the “harp of God”. He affirmed that three harps had been ordained by God to make us hear His voice: the harp of Moses, that of Christ and that of Nature. The most frequent representation of Ephrem describes the scene of his funeral in the desert of Thebes and the many ascetics who flock to attend the ceremony. The old and the sick are transported by young companions. The arid rocky landscape is pitted with the caves which the monks have turned into their cells and where they perform their daily activities of prayer and work. A stylite saint (a hermit who has voluntarily chosen to be confined to the top of a tall column, in Greek *stylos*), while receiving food from a companion, sees an angel who is bearing Saint Ephrem’s soul to heaven.

10 *Three panels with the Last Judgement*  
Georgios Klontzas and assistants  
(Candia [Heraklion], doc. 1562 -1608)

The three panels attributed to an exponent of the Cretan school of painting, Georgios Klontzas, are part of a larger composition illustrating the Last Judgement. The panels are not entirely consistent in their representations, because in some points they have been arbitrarily juxtaposed or truncated. The representation begins with the Crucifixion which takes place in a highly dramatic context with a huge throng of onlookers, some wearing contemporary dress. At the foot of the Cross is the swooning Madonna, with a view of Jerusalem in the background.

The other two panels present both the scene of the Last Judgement proper, with Christ as Judge and the angels casting out the damned, and that of the saved: the hosts of the Blessed in the heavenly Jerusalem, in the act of adoring the Almighty.

11 *Saint Titus Bishop*  
Georgios Klontzas  
(Candia [Heraklion], doc. 1562 -1608)

Titus, Archbishop of Crete, as the inscription informs us, is shown wearing Latin liturgical vestments (cope and mitre). He is the patron saint of the island and much venerated also in Dalmatia. His biography tells us that he was a disciple of Saint Paul and helped him to establish the first Christian communities in Corinth and Jerusalem. His relics were preserved at Gortyn (in Crete) down to 1669, when they were transferred to Saint Mark’s Basilica in Venice. They were returned to the church of Heraklion in 1966. The signature of the Greek artist Georgios Klontzas is found on the back of the icon.

12 *Saint George and the Dragon*  
Angelo Bizamano  
(Crete, doc. 1482 -1539)

Of the life of Saint George, a martyr perhaps of Cappadocian origin, who died at Lydda in c. 303, few historical records survive. One of them is the *Golden Legend*, which draws on the narrative of the Saint’s martyrdom (the *Passio*), but also adds the famous episode of the combat against the dragon. The elegance of the figure on horseback, the impetus of his rearing white steed, lend particular fascination to this icon painted by the Greek artist Angelos Bizamanos who has left his signature on the back of the panel.

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# THE ICONOSTASIS



## *Iconostasis of Cephalonia*

School of Cephalonia, early 19<sup>th</sup> cent.  
Wooden structure, 18<sup>th</sup> cent.

The *iconostasis* is the screen incorporating the most popular icons of the Orthodox faith, and those most representative of the church and of the religious community: Christ, the Virgin Mary and the Saints. They are immediately visible; they can be comprehended in a single glance, as soon as one enters the church.

The imposing and elegant wooden screen is articulated with colonnettes that separate the Royal Doors, at the centre, and the deacons' doors, to the sides, The doors alternate with four rectangular spaces in which the major icons are lodged. In the upper part are two

superimposed decorative friezes and a further frieze at the top of the screen with a painted Crucifix rising over its centre.

The *iconostasis* in its current form combines icons and decorations from various structures that have come down to us in incomplete form. The aim has been to recreate, admittedly in a museum and not in a church, the aura of the Sacred that the Orthodox perceive when they stand in front of the precious screen that protects and conceals the sanctuary.

The large structure is made of pinewood, lavishly carved and gilded.

The panel with the *Decapitation of Saint Christopher* (fig. 9) also contains an inscription with the name of the man who commissioned the painting, Costantino da Farsa (1808).

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To a workshop stylistically close to the manner of the Perlinghi, a family of painters active in Cephalonia between the mid 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century is attributed the *Ecce Homo* (image of the scourged Christ) (fig. 5), and the two angels with instruments of the Passion (figs. 3, 7), as also the Crucifix that rises over the top of the screen (fig. 1).

To a different artist can be ascribed the fine horizontal frieze in which little medallions of the Apostles are inserted in a decoration of foliations and volutes (fig. 2).



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To yet another hand are attributable the *Madonna Platytera* (fig. 4), the *Christ the High Priest* (fig. 6) and *Saint John Aligero* (fig. 8); this latter icon is again by a different hand and different in quality.



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The decoration is completed with some panels containing quatrefoils with little scenes of the *Decapitation of Saint Christopher* (fig. 9), the *Virgin Source of Life* (fig. 10), the *Woman of Samaria at the Well* (fig. 11) and the *Decollation of the Baptist* (fig. 12).

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