



UNION

Religious Worlds of New York • *Curriculum Development Project*

Veneration of the Virgin: The Art of Icons in Greek Orthodox Theology

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Abstract

This project demonstrates the importance of religious art, especially icons, in Orthodox theology, by using the *Virgin (Theotokos) and Child between Saints Theodore and George*, along with the structure and framework of the AP Art History curriculum. The lesson can be done in a 40-minute class period, along with an out of school site visit to a local Greek Orthodox Church. The site visit component is vital for students to understand these artworks as functional and devotional items by believers. Additionally, the site visit should include either an observation of a service, discussion with an icon artist and/or a priest to fully understand icons.

Context

Lake Mary High School is set in a suburban neighborhood outside Orlando, FL. This particular activity is made for an AP Art History class which is an elective arts course, consisting of sophomores to seniors; however, it can certainly be translated to a World History or Humanities class. This lesson coincides with a larger unit on the Art of World Religions, specifically within the theme of Icons and Iconoclasm. However, this lesson can also fall into other units, such as Medieval Europe or the Byzantine Empire, depending on the structure of the course.

Goals

1. Students will be able to describe the stylistic avoidance of naturalism in religious subject matter in Byzantine Orthodox icons.
2. Students will be able analyze how Orthodox icons could facilitate a connection with the divine through their iconography and religious function for believers.

Set Up

This lesson serves as an introduction to Christian religious imagery in various cultures and time periods (Byzantine, Western Medieval, Renaissance, New Spain, etc.). Therefore, students do not already have a background in iconography, narrative, formal qualities, or function of Christian artwork. This lesson is also a platform to compare and contrast other images of the Virgin Mary later in the course.

As in any AP course, students are expected to have already completed introductory reading before class begins. The work expected of students before reporting to class for this lesson includes:

- *Gardner's Art Through the Ages: A Global View*, 15th edition, pages pgs. 270-272 (Icons, Art and Society: Icons and Iconoclasm, & Iconoclasm)
- Khan Academy, Virgin (Theotokos) and Child between Saints Theodore and George.
<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/medieval-world/byzantine1/constantinople-east/a/virgin-theotokos-and-child-between-saints-theodore-and-george>

These two sources will give students an introduction to the function of icons in the general setting of Orthodox theology while also discussing the stylistic restrictions and influences of icons. The in class discussion will further the understanding of how religious believers interact with and view the icons and the afterschool site visit will further their analysis of these icons set in the larger context of Orthodox worship and theology.

Execution

Part I

The first part of this lesson is an in-class discussion on Byzantine icons, specifically using the *Virgin (Theotokos) and Child between Saints Theodore and George* (image below). The discussion is easily structured around the AP Art History structure of form, function, content, and context. See the points below for the main items to consider for an in class discussion.



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Form

- The image of the Virgin seen here in *Virgin (Theotokos) and Child between Saints Theodore and George* is based on the Virgin *Hodegetria* (“the guide”) in which the Virgin holds the Christ Child in her left arm and points to him with her right. The original image was attributed to the evangelist St. Luke.
- *Theotokos* means “God bearer” and so it serves as a general title for the Virgin Mary.
- Most (if not all) icons are based on this formulaic style in which naturalization of the figures is avoided. However, this painting shows some elements of the naturalism used in Ancient Rome, such as the sense of depth (albeit shallow) and facial modeling with shadowing.
- This icon is an *encaustic* painting, which is a technique that uses wax as a medium to carry the color.

Function

- Icons are seen as the “touchstone of [the] Orthodox experience” (*The Orthodox Church*, pg. 354) in which believers will touch and pray before the image. The act of touching can be typically seen with wear along the edges of icons or the hands of the saints.
- The function of an icon is to connect the believer with God, through the saints or the Virgin; this is an act of veneration, not worship of the saints. Two Greek words to include here may be *proskynesis* (“bowing in reverence”) and *douleia* (“reverence”), while English typically does not distinguish between reverence, worship, and veneration.
- When the believer approaches the icon it is a way of evoking “the presence of the Lord (or Virgin or saint it depicts)” (*The Orthodox Church*, pg. 354-356). The actions of the believer, charge the image with this spiritual quality.

Content

- The main figure depicted here is the Virgin Mary who is seen as the mediator between mankind and God. As the *immaculate* (“born without sin”) Mother of God, she is widely venerated. Her role as mediator is reinforced by showing her holding her son, Jesus.
- Next to the Virgin Mary are the saints Theodore and George, two warrior saints. Above these two saints are angels looking up at the hands of God, coming in through the top of the painting.

Context

- This particular icon, *Virgin (Theotokos) and Child between Saints Theodore and George*, like many made in the 6th or 7th century, was particularly at risk of the waves of *iconoclasm* (“breaking of images,” destruction of religious imagery) during the years 726–787 CE and 815–843 CE. Very few early Byzantine icons survived these Iconoclastic periods; notable exceptions were the icons preserved at the Monastery of Saint Catherine on Mount Sinai, Egypt (“Icons and Iconoclasm”).

Part II

If field trips are allowed in your school, the ideal would be to have students attend a field trip to a local Orthodox Church (Greek, Russian, Armenian, etc.) after the in-class discussion of the icon art. For schools that restrict field trips, an afterschool or weekend trip is recommended to complete this portion. In the Lake Mary community, the Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church of Greater Orlando (<http://www.htgocorlando.org/>) is the site visit location.



During the site visit students will focus on the creation, display, and function of religious icons in their religious settings. An interview with an icon artist will allow students to understand not only the display and use of art but the unique rules for creating icons (remembering their strict stylization instead of naturalism). The following questions may be used to structure student observations, questions and interactions with practitioners:

- What is the training like for an Orthodox icon artist?
- Describe the process of creating an icon.
- Why do icons follow specific rules for depicting the human form?
- What drew you to create icons over, or in addition to, other forms of artistic expression?
- How do you interact with an icon as a believer?
- How are icons kept/preserved when not in use by the congregation?
- Are certain icons used at specific times of the year/week?
- Why are certain saints chosen for icons?
- What are some of the symbols behind saint iconography?

In addition to the icons themselves, students should also note how they are displayed in the larger space of the church. Ideally students will be able to attend a service in which icons are actively venerated by practitioners, but if that is not possible, an interview with an icon artist or priest is acceptable.

Debrief

When both the lesson and site visit are complete, it is expected to do a short in-class debrief of the students' reactions to the icons in the Orthodox tradition. This is especially important for students who come from a religious tradition that has less ostentation religious décor or strictly forbids

religious figural art (many Protestant traditions or Islam, for example). The key point to make when debriefing with students is to note that the use of icons is an act of *veneration*, not *worship*, of the physical object. Idolatry is detested in Orthodox theology as it is in Protestant Christianity, but the uninformed viewer may see icon veneration as idolatry.

Assessment

The essay below is the ideal way to assess student's understanding of the art form, function, and religious context of this Byzantine icon. (**Disclaimer, this essay is my own creation and is no way intended to resemble an essay in the past or future created by College Board for the AP Art History exam.)

The work shown is the *Virgin (Theotokos) and Child between Saints Theodore and George*.

Identify the culture in which the work was made.

Explain the purpose of an icon's restricted form.

Analyze the function of icons and the theological understanding of icons in their original religious tradition.

AP Art History Essential Knowledge (Standards)

- Essential Knowledge 3-2c. Medieval figurative and aniconic two- and three-dimensional works of art are characterized by stylistic variety, avoidance of naturalism, primarily religious or courtly subject matter, and the incorporation of text.
- Essential Knowledge 3-2d. Periodic rejections of figural imagery on religious structures or objects on theological grounds were common to all three major medieval religions. These artworks could facilitate a connection with the divine through their iconography (icons) or contents (reliquaries).

Alternative Assignment

If students are unable to go on the site visit portion of the lesson, they are to fill out a Q&A sheet based on the discussion questions provided above. They need to interview two different students who attended the trip to get an understanding of the discussion and observances during the site visit. Ideally, that student would also visit the church on their own time to get a "first-hand" feel of the religious context.

References and Resources

Print

Kleiner, Fred S. *Gardner's Art Through the Ages: A Global View*. Boston: Cengage Learner, 2016.

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