
*After Life*

*The Saints of Russian and Greek Orthodoxy*
This exhibition explores the role hagiography - the narrative accounts of the lives of saints - played in the creation of religious artwork, the practice of saint veneration, and the tools of divine intercession through icons, manuscripts, and other religious objects predominantly from Eastern Christian Orthodoxy. Christianity is one of many religious practices that recognizes saintly figures. The process of sanctification posthumously recognizes the special relationship that an individual had with God during their mortal life. Christian saints also had other supernatural qualities, such as the ability to perform miracles, a willingness to suffer torture and death for their beliefs, and particular adherence to the pious behavior set by Jesus. One or more of these qualities guaranteed them a privileged place in heaven, and they therefore serve as intercessors between humanity and God post-mortem. After their death or martyrdom, the body, associated objects, religious buildings in their name, and images of the saints were used as tools to facilitate communication with God through the saint. The corporeal remains of saints continued to perform miracles and act as conduits for God’s power. Saints may be as renowned as Saint John the Apostle or culturally specific, such as the Russian saint Sergius of Radonezh.

The hagiography of a saint played a crucial role in the development of Christianity, particularly during the Middle Ages (generally accepted as beginning in the 5th century and last in parts of Europe as late as the 16th century). The hagiography could inspire an entire set of rules for worship, such as with Saint Benedict and the Benedictine monastic order, or be used as teaching guides for Christian morals. Notable parts of the life of the saint, such as how they died or their secular occupation, supplied the symbols associated with their visual images. Saints are identifiable by the objects they hold, their settings, or what they wear. These visual symbols, or what Art Historians call iconography, not only allowed the viewer to identify the saint, but also served as a mnemonic device for recalling and remembering the hagiography and its lessons.
This tale from the end of the hagiography of Saint Gerasimus (d. 475) (alt. spelling Gerasim, Gerasimos) describes the famous story of him saving and befriending a lion. The tale goes that one day while Gerasimus was out fetching water with his donkey, he heard the sounds of an animal in anguish. A lion suddenly emerges out of the bushes, and while crying out to Gerasimus offers his paw. Gerasimus removes the thorn from the lion's paw, relieving him of his pain. In gratitude, the lion chooses to always remain by Gerasimus's side and lives with him and the rest of the monks in the monastery. Gerasimus names the lion Leo, and they remain inseparable even when Gerasimus passes. In this manuscript leaf, two monks block Leo from entering the structure where Gerasimus's soul, represented here as a naked child protruding out of his chest, is being escorted to heaven by an angel. Although Leo is blocked in this depiction, the original tale notes that the devoted lion remained by Gerasimus's grave until he too passed.

This story may sound familiar; there is a parallel tale in the hagiography of Saint Jerome. The two saints lived concurrently, so it is possible that early in the composition of their hagiography their exploits were confused, especially because Jerome’s Latin name is “Geronimus.” The tale of Gerasimus and the lion was widely known throughout the Christian world, so it is also possible that the names were confused in the oral retellings of their hagiographies.

Saint Gerasimus was born in Lycia (modern-day Turkey) in the late fourth – early fifth century CE. After completing monastic training, he settled and established a monastery in Jordan. Gerasimus established his own monastic Rule that prioritized asceticism as a means of worship: five days of the week were spent in solitude praying and only eating dry bread, roots, and water. On Saturday and Sunday, all gathered back at the monastery for the Divine Liturgy and nourished themselves before returning to their communal sleeping cells.
One of the most popular hagiographies of the medieval period, the story of Josephat and Barlaam is a Christian re-telling of Siddhartha Gautama before he became the Buddha. In the Christian version, Josephat is a prince of an Indian kingdom where his father, the king Abenner, persecutes the Christian Church in his realm. Astrologers predict that Josephat will become a Christian, and so Abenner keeps him locked away. Despite imprisonment, one day he meets an ascetic Christian hermit and saint named Barlaam. Barlaam convinces Josephat to convert to Christianity and live the ascetic life with him for some time. Upon returning to his kingdom, Josephat converts his family and lords to Christianity as well. His father, upon converting, gives the kingdom to Josephat and becomes a hermit. Josephat rules for some time, but eventually desires to find Barlaam and live a holy life alongside him. At the end of the tale, shown in this leaf, Josephat decides that he will leave his kingdom and hands it over to one of his lords, Barachie, whom he believes will rule in the same manner as himself. Barachie rules the kingdom in piety, and Josephat finds Barlaam in the desert, where they live the rest of their life as ascetic hermits.

In the original version, Siddhartha Gautama was born to a royal family in present-day Nepal, where his privileged life shielded him from the sufferings of existence. During his adult life, Siddhartha had various encounters that demonstrated the cruelty and suffering of the world outside of his royal protection. One day, he encounters an Indian ascetic monk who encourages him to follow the ascetic lifestyle of self-denial and discipline. After six years of extreme asceticism, Siddhartha sat under a tree and became deeply absorbed in meditation. He achieved Enlightenment during this meditative state and became the Buddha.

The name Josephat comes from a misreading of the Arabic spelling for bodhisattva (a person who is able to reach nirvana but delays doing so): when in a word, the letters ba and ya are only differentiated by a dot. Therefore, someone read bodhisattva as yodisattva, leading to Josephat.
The smallest icon in the exhibition depicts the Protection of Theotokos (Virgin Mary) over the Church of Blachernae, and the notable saints associated with Blachernae. Top register starting from left: Jesus, the Virgin Mary with the omophorion (protective veil) draped over her arms, and two unidentifiable figures (hypothesized to be Saint John the Evangelist and Saint John the Baptist). The three left figures are Bishop Tarasios (730-806), Saint Andrew the Fool-for-Christ (860-936), and Saint Andrew’s disciple, Epiphanius. The two right figures are Emperor Leo VI the Wise (866-912) and his fourth wife, Empress Zoe Karbonopsina (d. 919). The central figure is Saint Roman the Melodist (late 5th – mid-6th century). The artist of this icon was originally attributed to Zinaida Nikolaevna Shatilova (1817-1883), since her name is written on the back. However, iconographers often were anonymous and rarely signed their work. Additionally, Shatilova came from a royal family; it is more likely that this icon was gifted to her.

The Church of Blachernae was built during the fifth century CE in Constantinople. The church held the relic of Mary’s omophorion and her belt. Miracles surrounding the church and its relics began with Saint Roman the Melodist, the central figure in the sixth century. The hagiography of Roman dictates that in 518, Saint Roman was tasked with reading verses from the Psalms, but did so poorly that he was humiliated and ridiculed by the clergy. He prayed all night to the omophorion until he fell asleep. The Virgin Mary came to him in his dream, gave him a scroll, and ordered him to eat it. When he woke in the morning, he not only could recite and sing beautifully, but he also could compose beautiful hymns.

The most famous miracle surrounding this church, an event that is commemorated with its own feast day in October, is Mary’s protection during the siege of Constantinople in the tenth century, instigated by Saint Andrew the Fool-for-Christ. A fool in this context departs from our modern definition of the term; to be a Fool-for-Christ is a form of asceticism where a person feigns madness in order to mask their sainthood and utter devotion to God. During the siege, it is said that when he prayed, he and his disciple Epiphanius witnessed Mary kneeling down, praying for the Christians under attack, and spreading the omophorion over all the Christians in the temple for protection. Saint John the Evangelist and Saint John the Baptist were also said to be present alongside Mary. Miraculously, the Church of Blachernae and its inhabitants remained unharmed.

The most curious figures are Leo VI, Zoe, and Bishop Tarasios. While they are not canonically saints, rulers of Constantinople were considered from holy descent which is why they have halos. It is hypothesized that they are present in this icon because they ruled during the siege of Constantinople. Bishop Tarasios was known for defending the use of icons during the iconoclasm in Byzantium in the seventh century. It is possible that one of the icons he venerably defended was the original icon of Theotokos of Blachernae.
The Nativity of Mary and the Nativity of Saint John the Baptist are compositionally and almost chromatically identical. In the Nativity of Mary, her mother Anne receives gifts from three attendants while her husband Joachim looks on from the upper right. Two figures below prepare Mary for her bath. In the Nativity of Saint John the Baptist, his mother Elizabeth also receives gifts from three attendants. Below, two figures prepare Saint John for his bath. The only didactic difference between these two scenes is the action of the father of the saint. While Joachim only looks on, Saint John’s father Zechariah writes the name of his son as described in the Gospel of Luke, 1:63. While Saint John’s birth is recorded in the New Testament, the birth of Mary is not recorded in the Christian bible at all.

The Nativity of Jesus is the only one in an outdoor setting. Against a jagged, rocky landscape, two scenes occur simultaneously. Above, Jesus lies in a crib within a cave, while Mary rests on a mandorla (full-body halo)-like mattress outside. On the other side of the crib, the three Magi offer gifts to the Christ child. To the other side of Mary is the Annunciation of the birth of Jesus to a shepherd. Below this scene, starting from the left, Jesus’s father Joseph hears doubts of the Christ child’s holiness from an old shepherd; in the cave to the right, a female figure prepares Jesus for a bath.

While the nativity of Saint Nicholas is indoors, it is compositionally different from the Nativities of Mary and Saint John. The Holy Bishop Saint Nicholas of Myra (270-343) is revered in the Eastern Orthodox Church as the Miracle-Worker and serves as the patron saint of Russia. Although he left neither theological works nor writings, his hagiography defines his characteristic feature as living not for oneself, but for others. In his nativity, Saint Nicholas is carried by a female attendant to his mother Nonna in bed, while his father Theophanes looks on. Saint Nicholas was miraculously born after the couple had tried to conceive for as much as thirty years. It is said that his first miracle was curing Nonna’s infertility immediately after being born.
Saint Victor of Damascus (d. c. 170) was a soldier serving emperor Marcus Aurelius (r. 161-180). When Victor refused to worship the pagan gods during persecution against Christians, he was tortured, including having his eyes gouged out, being fed poisoned meat, and having his fingers and toes broken. Victor endured the torture and was unharmed by the poison. Before he was beheaded, Victor correctly prophesized that his executioners would die in 12 days and their commander imprisoned in 24.

Before Mary Magdalene encountered Jesus, she lived a sinful and possibly wealthy life. When Jesus met her, he expelled seven devils from her (Luke 8:2). From then on, she lived a pious life and traveled with Jesus as one of his followers. According to the canonical gospels of the New Testament, she witnessed both the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus.

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Saint Basil the Great, Bishop of Pariah (330-379) was an influential theologian and considered the father of communal monasticism. His monastic rules include prayer and contemplation alternated with physical labor, charity to the surrounding community, and educating children, rather than asceticism. Additionally, he composed many liturgies, or forms of worship, the most important being his treatise on the Holy Spirit.

Saint Lydia of Illyria (d. 121) was the wife of Saint Philetus, a dignitary at the Roman court during the reign of Emperor Hadrian (r. 117-138). Philetus openly confessed his Christian faith, and consequently he, Lydia, and their sons, Macedonius and Theoprepius, were sentenced to Illyria to be tortured by the military governor, Amphilochius. Despite the various methods of torture, the family persevered. They were eventually sentenced to death by being plunged into boiling oil, but the moment before they hit the oil, it suddenly hardened and cooled. Upon hearing this, Emperor Hadrian travelled to Illyria, witnessed the miracle, and promptly left Illyria in embarrassment. The family gave thanks to God and died from their previous wounds. (cont. on next page)
Saint Cosmas the Hymnographer, Bishop of Maiuma (eighth century) was adopted by the parents of Saint John of Damascus. He and Saint John received an excellent education and went on to defend Church icons from iconoclasm. Saint Cosmas wrote poems and commentaries, but he is renowned for the hymns he wrote, called canons. He wrote many of the canons for various feast days, the Holy Week, and for Christmas, all of which are still used in Orthodox liturgy today.

Saint Tsarevich Dmitry (1582-1591) was the youngest son of Tsar Ivan IV ("Ivan the Terrible") and died at the young age of eight under unknown circumstances; much of the population believed that he was assassinated by his older brother. Shortly after his death, three separate pretenders came forward claiming to be the Tsarevich. In 1606, Dmitry was glorified in the Russian church to stop further imposters from claiming the throne and tarnishing his name. His relics, now in the Arkhangelsk Cathedral in the Kremlin, caused many miraculous healings.

Saint Elizabeth is the mother of Saint John the Baptist, relative of the Virgin Mary, and the patron saint of childbirth. She and her husband, Zechariah, had been barren before the birth of Saint John. In the Gospel of Luke, it is said that the archangel Gabriel pronounced the child as the forerunner to the messiah and gave the name John to Zechariah.

Saint Hope and her sisters, Saints Love and Charity, are the daughters of Saint Sophia. While it is known that all four were martyred for their Christian beliefs, it is debatable whether they died during the second or fourth century CE. It is uncertain why Hope stands alone in this icon, without her sisters or mother.

Saint Antonina of Nicaea (d. late third-early fourth century) was martyred during the reign of Roman Emperor Maximilian (r. 284-305). When she was thrown in prison before her execution, angels appeared to her and frightened the executioners. She remained unscathed throughout her torture and was ultimately executed by forced drowning.

Holy Virgin Martyr Saint Valentina (d. 308) was born in present-day Palestine and executed during the reign of Roman Emperor Maximilian II Galerius (r. 305-311). Accused of not worshipping the pagan gods, Valentina was escorted to a temple to offer a sacrifice; instead of the offering, she hurled a stone at the sacrifice. She was beaten for her transgressions and eventually beheaded.

Virgin Martyr Saint Alexandra (d. 310) was one of seven virgin martyrs who were executed during the reign of Roman Emperor Maximilian II Galerius.
Orthodoxy and heterodoxy are found within all major religious traditions. Orthodoxy means correct or sound belief according to an authoritative norm, and heterodoxy refers to belief in a doctrine differing from the norm.

While the core beliefs of Eastern Christian Orthodoxy follow most of those of Catholicism, there are some key differences. Eastern Orthodoxy, as demonstrated in this exhibition, places more emphasis on saints as a means of communicating with God on our behalf. Like other non-Catholic sects of Christianity, they do not recognize the Pope as Christ’s representative on earth, but rather as the bishop of Rome with no apostolic succession. Eastern Orthodoxy rejects the concept of original sin that is passed in each generation, beginning with Eve and the apple. Finally, the concept of salvation is achieved through the lifelong effort to lead a holy life and to become closer to God, rather than doing specific acts to “earn” salvation. The pious acts in hagiography aid in this effort by setting clear examples of a holy life.
Beginning around the end of the fifth century until the Protestant Reformation in 1517, the pious devotion to saints (often referred to as the “cult of saints”) incorporated a variety of objects. The most important objects were relics, the corporeal remains of saints or other objects that came into direct contact with a saint’s body. Medieval Christians believed because the body and soul would reunite at the end of days, that saints in heaven retained a connection to their relics, and therefore could help facilitate one’s prayers. Relics were typically housed in special containers made of precious metals and gems, known as reliquaries. Certain relics were renowned for their miraculous powers, such as curing blindness or other ailments, and would be sought out by pilgrims from near and far. These Christian pilgrimages contributed to the economic fortunes of the churches and towns they visited and to the security of the roads they traveled.

The objects in these cases reflect the diverse arts of Christian devotion in western Europe from the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries. The use of costly materials, including ivory and gold-covered copper, to create beautiful objects for religious practice glorified God and the saints. These objects would have been used in churches or in homes for public or private devotion. The copper container, called a reliquary, would have held the relic. The censer is shaped like a shrine or church. This container for burning incense would have been swung from its chain during religious processions, causing the smoke to waft out of the arched openings. Other objects depicted holy figures, such as Jesus and his mother Mary. The owner of the ivory diptych would have held it like a book, using the carved images to remember the stories from Jesus’s life. Statues of the Virgin and Child were among the most popular sculptural forms of the late Middle Ages, and the stone and ivory versions shown here represent two different types of this motif. Both sculptures capture the loving relationship between mother and son, emphasizing the humanity of Jesus as well as his divinity.

The JSMA is grateful to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York for making these precious objects available on long-term loan. Support has been provided by the JSMA Academic Support Grant, the Department of the History of Art & Architecture, the Office of the Dean of the School of Architecture and Allied Arts, the Oregon Humanities Center, the Medieval Studies Program, the Giustina Professorship of Italian Languages and Literatures, and the Department of Romance Languages.
On loan from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Cloisters.

Unknown, *Diptych with Scenes of the Life of Christ*, 14th century, French. Ivory with traces of polychromy and metal mounts.
On loan from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Cloisters.
Unknown, Censer, 15th century, Italian. Copper-gilt, champlevé enamel. On loan from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Cloisters

Unknown, Reliquary, late 16th century, Italy. Copper-gilt. On loan from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Cloisters.
The earliest imagery associated with the veneration of saints are icons, holy images that represent Jesus, Mary, Christian saints, or stories from their lives, in the increasingly Christian Eastern Roman Empire. Icons became especially important in the Byzantine Empire in the Eastern Mediterranean. Inspired by painted wooden tomb portraits from Egypt, the icon (from the Greek word *eikon*, or image) became one of the first tools to aid in divine Christian intercession. They can be made from a variety of media, including paint, metal, fresco, mosaic, textiles, or even gems. In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, icons are considered windows to heaven, and are used as focal points for devotion and as conduits for prayer. Like relics, legends tell of the miraculous powers of icons to answer prayers, heal the sick, protect warriors in battle, and more.

The use of icons as methods of worship did not settle well with all Christians; in the mid-eighth century, iconoclasm—the destruction of icons—swept through the Byzantine Empire under the notion that worshippers were praying not to the saint, Jesus, or Mary, but rather to the physical, and mortally made, image of the being. Regardless of the iconoclasm, icons continued to be used throughout the Byzantine Empire and into Eastern European Orthodoxy. In contrast, relics became more popular for saint veneration than icons in Western Europe.

Unlike relics, icons are used for congregational and personal devotion. Eastern Orthodox churches separate the space reserved for the clergy from the space used for the congregation with a wall or screen of icons called an iconostasis. For personal devotion, icons can be displayed in each room of the house, such as in Greek Orthodoxy, or, in the context of Russian Orthodoxy, placed in a special corner known as the krasnyi ugol (literally, “red corner,” but also known as the “beautiful corner”).

Icon painters often base their images on well-known models dating back to the Byzantine Empire, imbuing their work with the sacredness of the miracle-working originals. In Russian Orthodoxy prior to the eighteenth century, icons had a mandatory set of iconographies.
The fourteenth-century monk Saint Sergius of Radonezh (1314-1392) rivals Saint Nicholas as one of the most revered saints in the Russian Orthodox Church. He founded the monastery of the Holy Trinity, the spiritual center of Russia. The icon shows the miraculous moment when the Virgin Mary and apostles Peter and John visited him and his disciple Saint Mikhei during prayer at the monastery. According to the legend, Mary blessed Sergius and told him that his monastery of the Holy Trinity would flourish. Sergius bows at the feet of the Virgin; his disciple and successor Saint Nicon stands directly beside him, while Saint Mikhei stands in the doorway, covering his eyes with his robe. At the top of the icon is the so-called Old Testament Trinity. The scene depicts a scene from the Book of Genesis, when three angels visited Abraham under the Oak of Mamre. The Old Testament Trinity is interpreted as a prefiguration—the idea that the stories of the Old Testament are prototypes of the New Testament—of the Christian belief that God is three parts: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
Unknown
Saint Chrysanthus, 19th century, Greece
Egg tempera on wood panel
Gift of Jacob B. Kolliner; 1987:169
The legend of Saint George slaying the dragon is the most famous part of his hagiography, but it was an eleventh-century addition to his hagiography from the fifth (Greek) or sixth (Latin) century. In his original hagiography, he was a soldier in the Roman army and sentenced to death by the Roman emperor Diocletian (284-305) for refusing to abandon his Christian faith.

The legend of George slaying the dragon is set in Silene, Libya around the year 287. In this town, the local pagan inhabitants worshipped a dragon as a deity. In order to prevent incurring the dragon’s wrath upon the town, the inhabitants began offering him two sheep per day. When the sheep were not enough for the dragon, the people were forced to sacrifice their children instead. When the time came that the daughter of the local king, Elisabeth, was to be sacrificed, Saint George appeared on a white horse. With the words, “in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,” George charged at the dragon. He struck him with a force great enough that he pinned the beast’s mouth to the ground, where it was trampled by his horse. The king was so grateful to George that he offered his riches to him, but George declined. Instead, he baptized twenty-five thousand people.

Saint George's riding companion, the youth of Mytilene, only appears in Greek and Russian icons. The youth’s rescue originally comes from George's Greek hagiography, but little is known about the youth. The youth of Mytilene was a Christian boy who had been taken from his family and forced to slavery by the Saracens. While he was offering a glass of wine to his masters, he was rescued by Saint George and carried home across the Aegean Sea.
Saint Simeon lived a life of extreme asceticism while in a Syrian monastery, before he lived atop a column. Upon first leaving the monastery, he shut himself in an enclosure, where he remained standing, fasting, and praying. His sanctity, cures, and other miracles produced by his prayer made his remote enclosure a pilgrim destination. In order to preserve his solitude without giving up providing for the needs of his disciples and visitors, Saint Simeon ascended a column where he remained upright for 37 years, until his death in 459. His hagiography was written during his lifetime, and stylitism became a common sight throughout the Christian Levant.
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