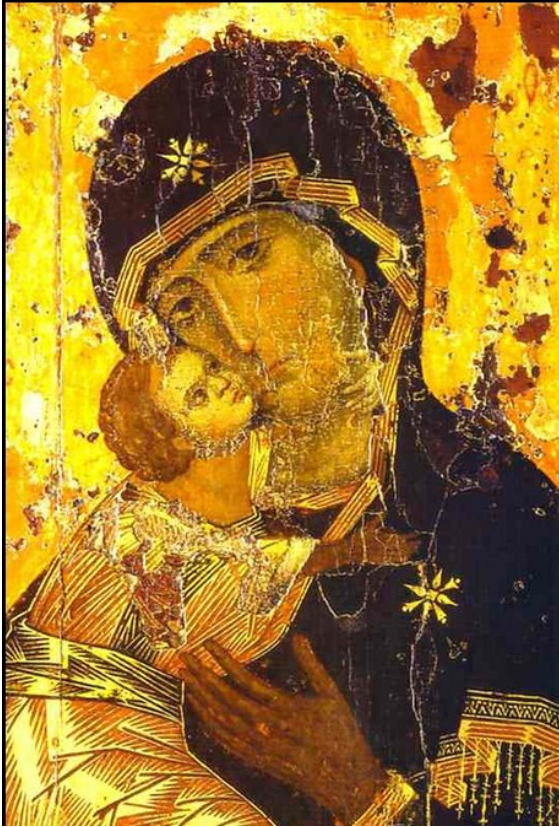


Two Versions of the Theotokos and Christ



Vladimir Mother of God

In the Vladimir Mother of God is a twelfth century Byzantine icon of the *Eleusa* type, which is a reference to the depiction of tenderness between Mother and Child. As in most Orthodox icons depicting the Virgin, she is pointing to her holy Child, drawing attention away from herself and onto the Savior. The infant Christ is fully dressed and does not have the physical proportions of a typical baby. The Theotokos' garment has three stars which represent her virginity (she was virgin before, during, and after the birth of Christ) and also the Holy Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.). The star which represents the Son is concealed by Christ Himself who, since He is present in the scene, does not need to be represented by a symbol. The Theotokos is depicted wearing a dark red outer garment trimmed in gold. The color red symbolizes divinity: *The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the Power of the Highest will overshadow you* (Luke 1:35). In many icons her inner garment is blue, which symbolizes her humanity. Typically, icons of Christ have these colors reversed: He is the Divine One who clothed Himself in humanity. However, in this icon, Christ is clothed in golden raiment, which also indicates His divinity. He is the King of Kings.

While Mary is beautiful, the purpose of this portrayal is not to demonstrate an earthly human beauty. She has a somber, serious, even sorrowful expression on her

face as she gazes upon the viewer, evoking a response. There are no shadows or examples of perspective which gives the icon the impression of not being of this world. The time for shadows has passed. The foretelling and typology – the shadows– of the Old Testament have been fulfilled in the Incarnation of Christ. The whole scene is other-worldly. There is no doubt who these individuals are and they cannot be mistaken for a portrait of a mother and child living in the house next door.



Madonna and Child with the Book, Raphael

This early sixteenth century painting by Raphael lacks many of the distinctions of the Orthodox icon. It is a well-painted scene of a lovely young woman (by Renaissance standards) and a very plump baby. She is handing the baby a book. The inscription in the book introduces the ninth hour, or Nones of the Canonical Offices, recited daily by Roman Catholic monastic communities and which commemorates the crucifixion and death of Christ. [2] In the Vladimir icon, the Theotokos simply points to her Son. There are no stars on her robe so nothing about the Trinity or her virginity can be deduced from this painting. There is an earthly background which plants the pair firmly on this planet. The Theotokos looks like any other young woman and there's nothing special about the baby, either. The expression on the mother's face lacks the somberness, serenity and other-worldliness of the Vladimir Mother of God. She does not look *transformed*. This could be a painting of any mother and child and there are no spiritual lessons to be

learned from gazing upon it. These figures, especially the corpulent baby, emphasize corporeality over spirituality. Raphael made considerable use of modeling and shadow to give the figures a rounded, fleshly appearance.

The Renaissance was a rebirth of the philosophy, literature and art of the dead classical age that glorified the human form. The ancient Greeks excelled in their sculpture of the human body and this was revived and copied by Christian artists of the Renaissance. Nudity was a hallmark of Greek art and unfortunately, Renaissance artists such as Raphael deemed this style appropriate for the depictions of Holy persons. To gain an understanding of human anatomy, some artists, including Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo, participated in human dissections, which would be unthinkable (and unnecessary) for an Orthodox iconographer.[2]

As always, when the emphasis is upon the creation instead of the Creator, there will be distortion. However, I don't know how religious art is used in western, especially Roman Catholic, churches. I have never seen people kiss or otherwise venerate works of art in a Catholic church. My local Catholic parish has almost no art at all, just a painting of Our Lady of Guadalupe on the wall but it is too high up for veneration. The Raphael painting is altogether too worldly (in my opinion) to inspire veneration, but probably it was never intended to be venerated? Possibly it was commissioned for decorative and educational purposes?

Our parish has a large oil painting of St. Seraphim kneeling on a large rock in the woods where he prayed for 1000 days. It lacks the fleshly humanistic shadowy roundness of a Renaissance painting but I am not sure it's an icon, either. Even so, I find it to be very inspirational in a way that I do not find in typical western oil painting of religious topics.

1. http://www.nortonsimon.org/collections/browse_title.php?id=M.1972.2.P
2. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/anat/hd_anat.htm