

# Christian Icons of St Catherine's Monastery



# Christian Icons of Saint Catherine's Monastery (Sinai, Egypt)

**Version 1.1**

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Approach Guides  
New York, NY  
[www.approachguides.com](http://www.approachguides.com)

ISBN: 978-1-936614-22-6

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# Introduction

## Previewing this book?

Please [check out our enhanced preview](#), which offers a deeper look at this guidebook.

Located on the site of God's famous revelation to Moses at the burning bush, Saint Catherine's monastery houses the greatest collection of Christian icon paintings in the world.

This Approach Guide affords insight into what makes this collection so special by providing following:

- A **background on icons in general**, including their origins, ecclesiastical function, and the nature of the beholder's ritualistic interaction with them.
- A look at the **history and influences of the Monastery's 6th century icon masterpieces**, the oldest in existence.
- A review of the **changes in iconography that occurred in the 12th century** as the Church recast itself as a Western Latin institution (as opposed to its original Eastern Orthodox orientation) in the wake of the Crusades' success in securing the Holy Land.
- Descriptions of the defining characteristics of the **Byzantine and Crusader artistic styles**.
- Detailed profiles — with high quality, zoom-in images — of **nine of the most impressive icons in the Monastery's collection**.

Finally, this Approach Guide concludes with the **history on the Monastery** and critical information for those considering a **hike up to the summit of Mount Sinai**, a.k.a. Moses Mountain.

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We hope this cultural guidebook offers you fresh insights into Saint Catherine's great icon collection and sets you on a path to making your own discoveries.

Have a great trip!



David and Jennifer Raezer  
Founders, Approach Guides

# What Is an Icon?

## A Sacred Image

- Icon — derived from “eikon” in Greek — means image. An icon is typically a painted image of a sacred person.
- **Icons are made from rectangular-shaped boards or panels about a half a centimeter thick**; these boards are fixed in grooved frames that interlocked at the corners. The prevailing painting media were encaustic and tempera.

## History

- While omnipresent throughout the Christian world from the earliest days of Christianity, the icon gained particular momentum under the auspices of the **Byzantine, Eastern Orthodox Church** based in Constantinople (present-day Istanbul).
- Christian **icons were first used in the homes of the faithful**; they entered churches and monasteries in the fourth century.

## A Ritual of Engagement

- Icons are representations of **sacred persons that are absent, through which a spiritual connection can be made**. Further, icons define a location — a holy space — where the **divine enters the profane realm of the beholder**.
- The icon is part of a **ritual of engagement**, as painted figures look outward and make **direct eye contact with the beholder**. Accordingly, as part of this ritual, the faithful pray with eyes open before icons, not with eyes closed or heads bowed.
- **Words are tightly integrated with the icon**, as inscriptions were often written on its field or frame. Inscriptions typically identify the represented figure and ask for him or her to grant blessing or salvation on the living. Further, as part of the ritual of engagement, they were often designed to prompt the faithful to speak a given phrase in time and space.

## Donors

- Icons were usually not commissioned by a church or monastery — rather, they were donated to the site by individuals. As a result, they often convey **very personal messages**: acknowledgements of graces received or petitions for graces to be bestowed.

## Placement

# 6th Century Icons - Survival and Influences

## The Oldest Icons in the World

### Escaped the Iconoclast Period's mass destructions

St Catherine has **the largest collection of 6th century icons in the world**. And these are the oldest icons in existence; although there were certainly icons made prior to the 6th century, none survive. Of the approximately **70 6th century icons in existence, 36 are at Saint Catherine's**.

It is fortuitous that Saint Catherine's 6th century icons have survived, despite the mass destruction of religious art that occurred during the Iconoclast Period (726-787). In the Iconoclast Period, under the orders of the Byzantine Emperor Leo III, the Eastern Orthodox Church destroyed all representations of religious figures. Note that a second period of Iconoclasm occurred in 814-842, but it was less widespread and severe.

The only reason that these icons survived is that Saint Catherine's Monastery — established as a Byzantine Eastern Orthodox institution — was no longer under the control of the Byzantine Empire following the Islamic conquests of the area in the 7th century. Ironically, then, the coming of **Islam to the Sinai saved these great Christian works of art**.

## Pagan Influences

The Byzantine practice of icon making was strongly influenced by pre-Christian secular and religious traditions; these influence are still discernible in St Catherine's 6th century icons. All of the following influences likely shaped the Byzantine icons that followed:

- **Egyptian burial depictions.** Egyptian “icons”, designed to represent the dead figures in communion with the divine, dating from the 1st-4th centuries CE bear a strong resemblance to early Byzantine images. Compare [Fig. 1](#) with [Fig. 2](#) and [Fig. 3](#) of Blessing Christ and Saint Peter (in the section entitled “Highlights from the Icon Collection”), respectively.
- **Egyptian divinity depictions** (with a subsequent Greek and Roman following). In particular, the very popular deity, Isis, holding her son, Horus, was likely used as an early proxy for the most common of icon subjects, the Virgin and Child.
- **Imperial Roman depictions.** Another likely inspiration was depictions of Roman imperial families that, once again, date from the 1st-4th centuries. The layout of the icon of Saint Peter ([Fig. 3](#) in the section entitled “Highlights from the Icon Collection”) demonstrates this influence.
- **Pagan Roman depictions.** There was an established pagan tradition of venerating savior gods with votive panel paintings. These depictions exhibit divinities in non-narrative front poses, holding the symbols of their power, with their heads ringed by halos, exhibiting otherworldly or distracted gazes. Once again, we see some elements of this tradition in the icon of

# 12th Century Icons - New Symbols for New Pilgrims

## Three Religious Figures

There are three key religious figures at the Monastery:

- **Moses** (his divine conversation being the inspiration behind the site of the Monastery).
- **Virgin Mary** (the original Justinian Period monastery was dedicated to her).
- **Saint Catherine** (the Monastery was later re-dedicated to her).

While Moses and the Virgin were linked to the Monastery from its founding in the early fourth century, Saint Catherine did not join until, most probably, the 12th century. We will explore the **rationale underlying Saint Catherine's addition** and the implications this had on the resident icons' symbols and subject matter.

## The Early Years: A Byzantine Constituency

The Monastery was originally **dedicated to the Virgin Mary** upon the site of Bible's famed "burning bush" revelation to Moses. Accordingly, the desire to **forge a linkage between the Virgin Mary and Moses — that is, a linkage between the dedication and the historical event — was immediate**, from the initial founding of the Monastery under the Roman Emperor Justinian.

Throughout its early history, the Monastery was Eastern Orthodox in orientation. And based on the teachings of the Eastern Orthodox faith, **the Virgin Mary was naturally seen as an analogy for the burning bush**. The rationale was this: Just as the bush remained whole (not consumed by flames) before, during, and after the fire, the Virgin Mary remained a virgin (pure) before, during, and after her pregnancy with Christ. When viewing artists' depictions of the burning bush, note that the green vines always remain, despite the flames of the fire, symbolic of its enduring, unchanging nature.

The linkage can be taken one step further, based on the theme of God exposing himself to man (theophany): Just as God revealed himself to Moses via the burning bush, God revealed himself to Mary via the incarnation (the conceiving of Christ within her).

**Given that the monastery's early constituency was Eastern Orthodox, early icon depictions simply showed a burning bush with Moses; despite the physical absence of the Virgin in the image, the aforementioned Mary-Moses linkage was implicit.**

## The Changing Pilgrimage Constituency

However, **everything began to change**, and quite quickly, with the establishment of Christian control of Jerusalem in 1099 as a result of the First Crusade. As of this date, **the Sinai experi-**

# Looking at an Icon

As you review Saint Catherine's icon collection, let this list serve as a quick reference checklist of many key features for which you might want to look. All of these checklist features have been discussed in earlier sections.

## Colors and Medium

- **Is the background in naturalistic colors or gold?** If in gold, it is mostly likely a Byzantine style icon from the 11th century or later.
- **Encaustic or tempera medium?** The encaustic medium is used in most Pre-Iconoclast Period icons; in later centuries, tempera became dominant.

## Interaction

### With beholder

- **Does the depicted figure look outward to make direct eye contact with the beholder?** Eye-to-eye was fundamental to the role of the icon under Byzantine Eastern Orthodox Christian tradition. Latin crusader icons, on the other hand, often do not look to engage the beholder, but rather engage each other and visually communicate a narrative.

### Among figures

- **Is there emotional warmth among figures?** A feeling of warmth and connection among the depicted figures signifies it as a Post-Iconoclast Period icon, either Late Byzantine or crusader.

## Angels

- **Do the angels interact with the beholder or are they merely attendants?** In Pre-Iconoclast Period icons, angels are active in helping the beholder interpret the divine events depicted; in Post-Iconoclast icons, angels serve chiefly as attendants for the divine and do not serve as intermediaries.

## Subject Matter

## Highlights from the Icon Collection

In this section, we profile nine highlight icons from the collection in chronological order.

# Blessing Christ

**Executed:** 1st half of the 6th century. See [Fig. 2](#).

**Style:** Byzantine (Pre-Iconoclast) Period.

**Medium:** Encaustic.

This is one of four icons in existence probably offered by Roman Emperor Justinian as a donation to the newly built Monastery in Sinai, and like the others, is probably based on a Zeus facial model.

In this depiction, Christ holds a jewel-encrusted Gospel book in his left hand and holds up two fingers on his right hand in the gesture of blessing.

As you would anticipate given its 6th century painting date, it reveals **pagan influences**. Accordingly, compared to those that would come later, this icon displays a **higher overall level of naturalism**: Christ exhibits a more human quality; the background consists of a natural range of colors (blues, whites, and yellows); and the background surroundings are confined to those of the real world, the world of the living (it appears that there is a city behind Christ, as building cornices are clearly visible).

It appears that the artist purposely tried to **unbalance the depiction of Christ, perhaps to symbolically highlight his dual nature, both divine and human at once**: the left side (when facing the icon) of Christ's face is "perfect" or divine, while the right side is "unbalanced" or human. Specifically note the following asymmetrical elements on the right, human side of Christ's face:

- The right side is in shadow, versus the left in light.
- The right side has an oversized pupil that appears as potentially bloodshot.
- The right eyebrow is unbalanced and this quality is highlighted in white.
- The right side of his moustache and lips is also unbalanced.
- The smooth curve of his hair as it meets his shoulder (paralleling the shape of the golden halo behind him), so perfect on the left, is broken on the right.

Finally, you will notice that Christ's facial hair appears to lean to the right side. This directional bias, coupled with the shadow on the right side, signifies that the artist might have sought to create **the appearance of movement**. It is almost as if Christ were turning his head to the right side of the painting, thereby exposing his divine side in profile.



Fig. 2. The Blessing Christ.

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