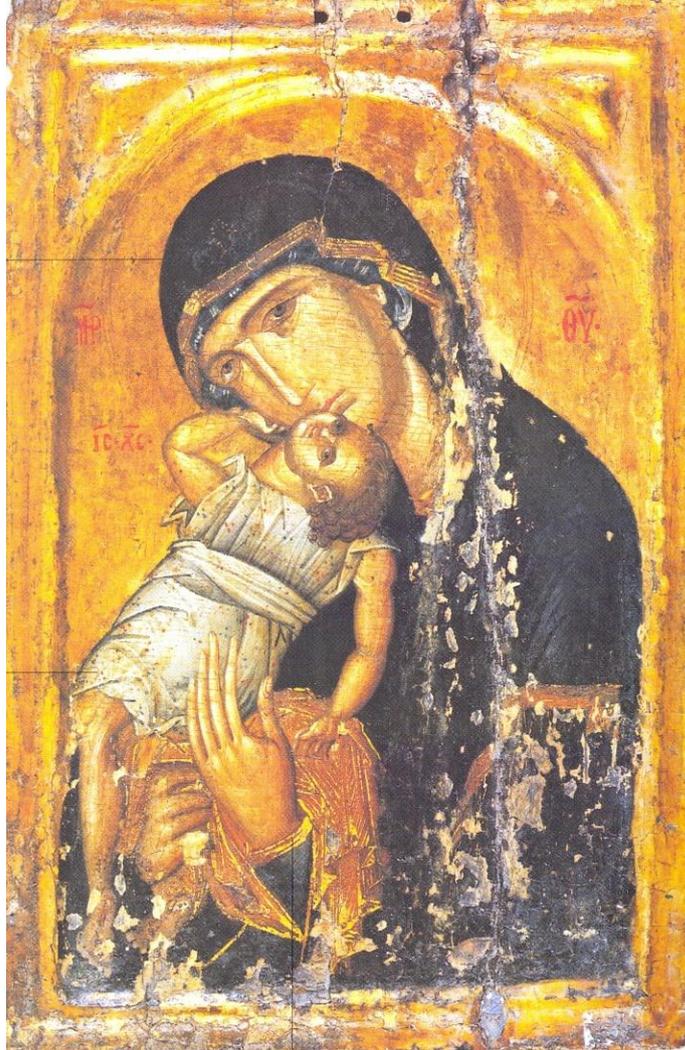


Art and Meditation – Archive

December 2015 - *The Virgin with the Playing Child* or “*Pelagonitissa*”,



Anonymous, *The Virgin with the Playing Child* or “*Pelagonitissa*”, early 15th century, tempered on panel, Mt. Sinai, St. Catherine Monastery.

The expressiveness of this icon is surprising as it is far from the typical solemnity of the Byzantine Virgins. The Child is not enthroned in the arms of the Virgin but is instead facing her, caressing her with his left hand, whilst his head is back and in such a way it seems even his eyes, like those of the Mother, are watching us.

The Russian iconographers call this kind of icon “the playing child” and they developed from the end of the 12th century. This Virgin is also called “*Pelagonitissa*” most likely making reference to the Pelagonia region in today’s Macedonia where it saw a notable diffusion.

The baby Jesus, portrayed just like any other child playing, wears a chiton, a short and light tunic which leaves his arms and legs uncovered and which was the most common tunic to be found in Ancient Greece. However, we do not find ourselves in looking at any other child and this

evidenced by the *himation* – the cloak rolled up and held in the Virgin’s left hand – woven with gold *assits*.

The left hand of the Virgin is beautiful, well defined and with long, elegant fingers. It seems to be a banister that stops the child from falling and holds him securely which allows him to move erratically: perhaps this is why the right hand of the baby Jesus is looking for his mother’s hand.

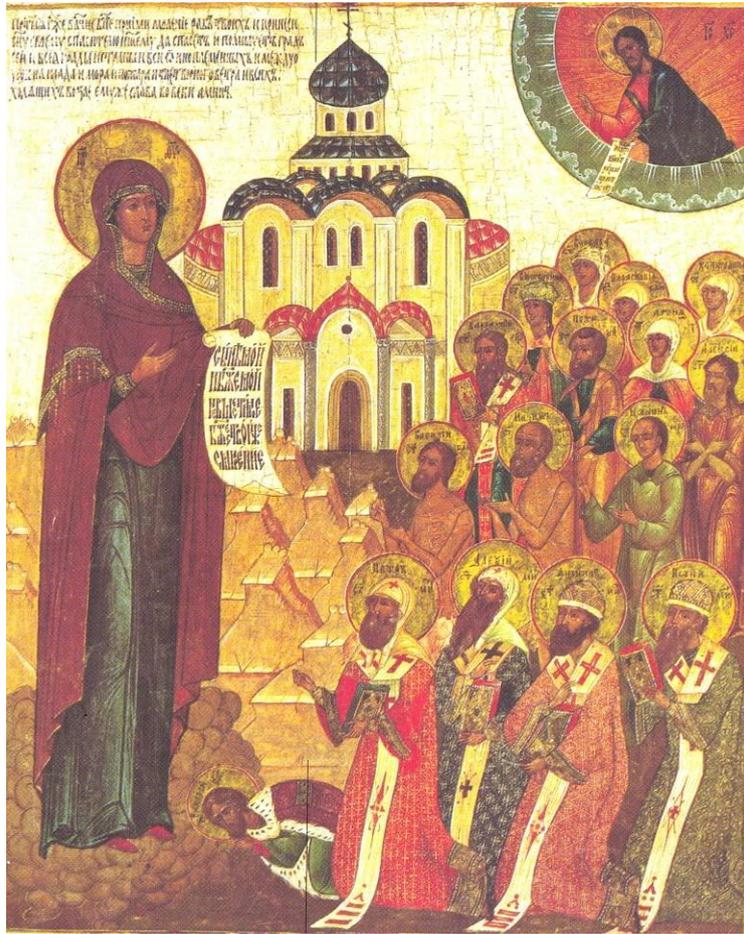
Another striking aspect is the Mary’s gaze. Although the subject is in some ways almost playful, the Mother’s eyes seem to express an infinite sadness. In every moment there is the premonition of the Passion and the Death of the Son, the Mother seems to constantly bear in mind the prediction of the aged Simeon who, on the day Jesus is Presented in the Temple, reminded Mary that a sword would pierce her soul (cf. Luke 2, 35).

*Wishing to save the world,
to this end did the Ruler of all come of His own will;
and, though as God He is the Shepherd,
for us He appeared as a Man like us;
for by this likeness He called those of like kind,
yet as God He hears:
Alleluia!*

*You are a fortress protecting all virgins,
O Theotokos and Virgin;
for the Master of heaven and earth prepared you,
O Immaculate One,
and dwelt in your womb,
and taught all to cry out to you,*

Akathistos Hymn (stanzas 18 and 19)

November 2015 – Mother of God Bogoljubovo



Anonymous, *Mother of God Bogoljubovo*, around 1700, tempered on panel, Germany, private collection

This peculiar iconography of the Virgin originates from an icon that was worshipped in the Church of 'chalkopratiya' (copper market square) built in the 4th century in Constantinople under the Empress Pulcheria. The Mother of God, standing, is turned slightly to the left with her right hand stretched forward while the left is raised intervening for the sinners, invoking upon them the salvation that comes from Jesus, her Son.

This kind of iconography developed in Russia and this icon demonstrates this. It takes its name from Prince Andrej Bogoljubskij to whom the Virgin appeared in a dream making a gesture of supplication to Christ, holding in her hands a scroll on which there was written a prayer. The Prince had an icon that resembled his dream painted and founded a monastery in the place of the apparition, the Bogoljubovo Monastery, which still exists today in spite of the many historical events that have taken place in Russia over the centuries.

This monastery is in the background of the icon which is presented to us this month and in this, next to Prince Andrej, who is humbly at Mary's feet, we see, kneeling in the foreground, the metropolitans of Moscow Pyotr, Alexy, Philipp and Iona. In the background we recognise Peter and a host of martyrs, saints and blessed. Over everything, there is Mary, standing firmly on a rock, holding in her hand a scroll on which is written the prayer that was recited on the 18th June,

the feast day of the Mother of God Bogoljubskaja. Her gaze is not, however, focused on those who are praying but is instead aimed towards her Jesus, her son, who appears in the sky in the top right hand corner. The petition is addressed to him and the Virgin is awaiting his response. There is no need to wait for the response, however, as it is given immediately; we can read it on the scroll that Jesus is holding: "O my Mother and my creation, because this is your will".

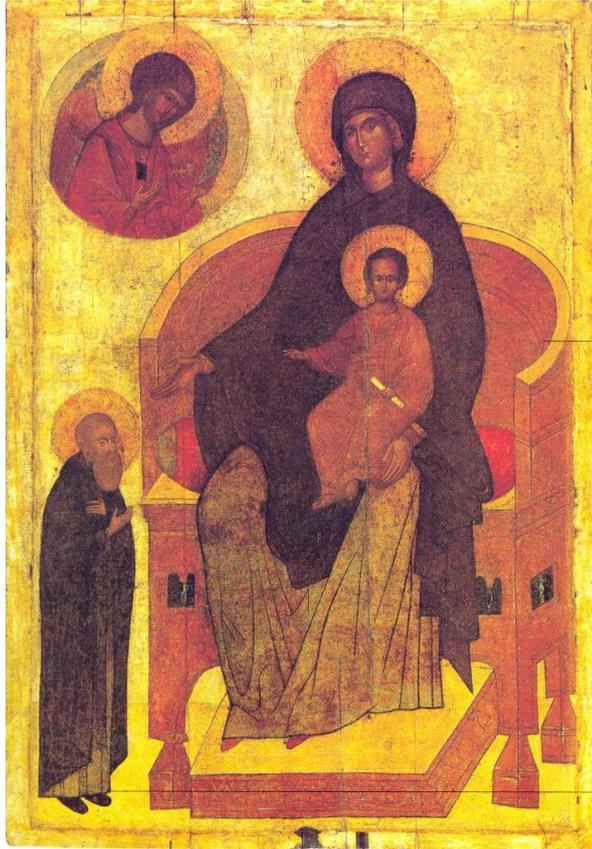
Once again the Virgin has got what she asked for, as in Cana of Galilee, when the spouses were left without wine.

Blessed lady and sovereign,
accept the prayer of your servants,
and present it to your Son, our Saviour,
that he may save and have mercy
on this city and all cities and countries.
(Prayer to Mother of God Bogoljubskaja)

This maternity of Mary in the order of grace began with the consent which she gave in faith at the Annunciation and which she sustained without wavering beneath the cross, and lasts until the eternal fulfillment of all the elect. Taken up to heaven she did not lay aside this salvific duty, but by her constant intercession continued to bring us the gifts of eternal salvation.(15*) By her maternal charity, she cares for the brethren of her Son, who still journey on earth surrounded by dangers and cultics, until they are led into the happiness of their true home. Therefore the Blessed Virgin is invoked by the Church under the titles of Advocate, Auxiliatrix, Adjutrix, and Mediatrix.

(Vatican Council II, dogmatic constitution of the Church *Lumen Gentium* 62)

October 2015 - *Mother of God on the throne with Saint Sergius of Radonež*



Anonymous, *Mother of God on the throne with Saint Sergius of Radonež*, beginning of XV century, tempered on panel, Moscow, State Historical Museum

The Council of Ephesus on the 11th October 431, solemnly declared that Mary was Θεοτόκος, the Mother of God. Soon after, to bring this truth to life 'iconographically', the Virgin is represented on a throne, likened to the representation of the maternal deities of the Egyptians, Greeks and Romans. The front view also gives this solemn representation. This is a clear reference to the Byzantine era (think of the mosaics of Ravenna at St. Vitale)

Often the Virgin on the throne is accompanied and almost 'crowned' by the presents of Saints – as in this case with St. Sergius, hermit and founder of the famous Trinity Monastery in what is now the city of Sergiev Posad, about 70km outside of Moscow, who seems much smaller to stress the distance the between him and the Virgin – or the Angels – as always in our icons, appearing in a celestial sphere is Gabriel, the angel of the Annunciation, who has manifested to Mary God's will and which may be the foundation, on behalf of St. Sergius, for a Monastery of the Annunciation at Kiržač – but there is still no doubt that the focal point of the piece is still the Virgin with her Son, which seem almost to become one with the throne.

We look to the throne: it is similar to a temple, with windows and a column, while the exedra of the spine seems to recall the apse of a church. The dais on which the Virgin is resting her feet seems to slide out from under the throne like a drawer. The perspective and its semicircular shape are not front facing in this case, but orient the composition to the left, because the Virgin reaches

out with the right hand towards St. Sergius, almost as if to bless his intention to found the monastery of the Annunciation.

This throne, with its rich symbolism is such a clear metaphor of the Virgin herself, who is the true temple and indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

Her hands hold the Eternal and her knees are a throne more sublime than the cherubim. Thou are the royal throne which angels surround, seeing upon it their very King and Lord. (St. John of Damascus)

*For by the grace of the Holy Spirit
You purify our hearts by light
And sanctify them with your presence,
So that they become the dwelling-place of your glory.*

*But because of her obedience of faith
And the mystery of the Incarnation
You made the Blessed Virgin your temple without compare:
A house of gold adorned by the Spirit
With every kind of virtue,
A royal palace resplendent
With the presence of the One who is the Truth,
The holy city, rejoicing in its streams of grace,
The ark of the New Covenant
Enshrining the author of the New Law,
Jesus Christ our Lord.
(Preface of Mary, Temple of the Lord)*

September 2015 – *Our Lady of the Passion*



Unknown Icon painter of the XVI century, *Our Lady of the Passion* (copy of an original by Andreas Ritsos), 1579, tempera on panel, Sinai, St Catherine Monastery

The name of the icon draws explicitly on the presence, on either side of the halo of the Virgin, of the two angels who hold in their hands the instruments of the Passion: the reed with the sponge at the end soaked in vinegar and the spear (on the left), the cross and three nails (on the right). Their hands are gloved, thus the instruments, as a sign of respect in that they are “instruments of salvation”, are not touched directly by the angels. It is worth noting that the only evangelist who presents – directly or indirectly as is the case with the nails – all four of the symbols that appear in the icon is John, in Chapter 17. The Synoptics, however, do not speak of the centurion’s spear that pierces the side of Jesus (cf Matthew 27, Marco 15 and Luke 23).

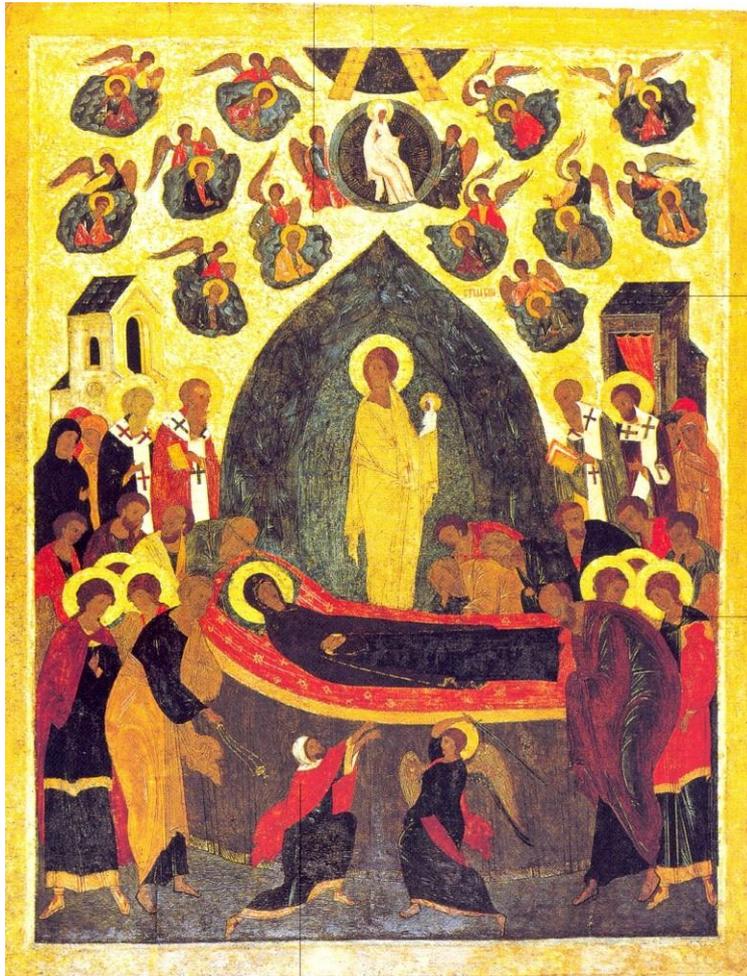
Jesus’ gaze, which seems astray, rests on the angel on the right, because these gifts are, in effect, being presented to Him. And, seemingly spontaneously, the little one clings to the thumb of the Mother’s right hand with His little hands. Even the right foot of Jesus which is agitating the left, shows the emotional torment that the little one is living, here the mission which awaits Him on earth is envisaged.

Mary, who takes the prime place of the icon, with the right hand stretched out, is represented in the typical ‘Hodegetria’ style, is the one who shows the way, the way being Jesus. Her face,

however, is serious because even She knew of her son's destiny shortly after His birth and therefore her heart is grieved and suffering.

Well suited to the scene are some words written by Jacopone da Todi in the famous hymn 'Stabat mater': we will make them ours, praying before the icon.

August 2015 – *The Dormition of Mary*



Dinosij, *The Dormition of Mary*, the late fifteenth century, tempera on panel, Moscow, Andrei Rublev Museum

The feast of the Dormition is the most important of the Marian feasts in Eastern Europe and corresponds to the equally popular Assumption of Mary in the West. It is celebrated on August 15.

We contemplate the icon and the wealth of iconography, which is borrowed from the apocryphal Gospels, where in fact it is said also to be the place of Mary's death.

Actually Mary, preserved from original sin, cannot have known the corruption of death, and for this she fell asleep. We find her at the center of the icon, lying on the death bed in her home (Mount of Olives), where all of the Apostles arrived to assist in her transit. Peter is on the left with the censer, Paul at the foot of her bed in prayer. In this icon, other than the apostles, there are also the angels, the bishops, the fathers of the Church, and the holy women.

Along the horizontal line which is the body of Mary, wrapped in a dark cloak, stands the vertical line of Christ, surrounded by a snow-white coat and in her arms, like a child in swaddling clothes, the soul of Mary.

At the top of the icon, which only started to appear in the fifteenth century in Russia, to the main subject of the "Dormition" we can add a double movement: one that leads from the top to the bottom where the apostles are called, by Mary before her death, towards Jerusalem and towards Christ, each accompanied by an angel and surrounded by a cloud that looks like a shell. And from the bottom to top, where Mary is placed to rest on a cloth, carried by two angels, to Heaven, whose doors are open at the centre of the upper part of the icon.

"You fell asleep, yes,
but not to die;
you are assumed ,
but do not stop to protect the human race "
(Theodore the Studite)

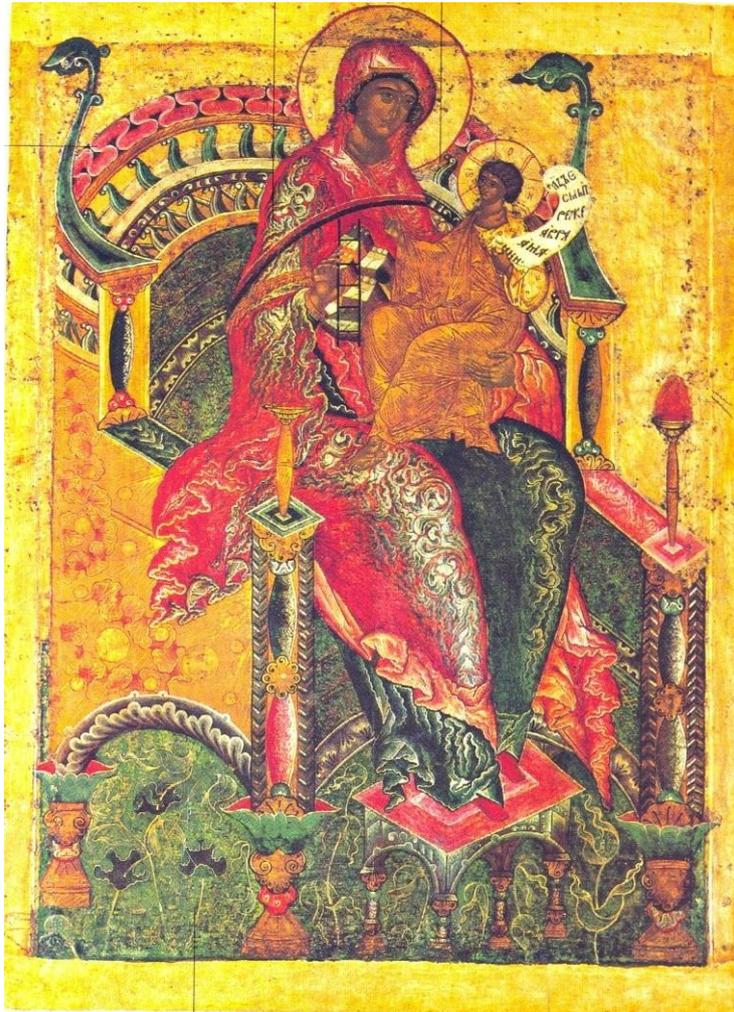
Troparion

"In your maternity, you have kept your virginity,
in your Dormition you did not abandoned the world, O Mother of God.
You are passed to life, you who are the Mother of Life
Intercede for us and free our souls from death "

Kondakion

Mother of God, our unwavering hope,
You do not cease to pray for us.
The tomb and death have not withheld you,
because the one who lived in your virginal womb
returned you to life, you who are the Mother of Life!
(From the Byzantine liturgy)

July 2015 – *Mary mountain uncut by human hands*



Unknown icon painter, *Mary mountain uncut by human hands*, 1560s, tempera on panel, Moscow, Kolomenskoye Museum

This iconography comes from the oldest one called "Jacob's Ladder" - still present in the ladder that Mary holds - through which the Savior "comes down" to the earth. This icon goes back to the prophecy of Daniel that interprets the dream of Nebuchadnezzar: "While you were watching, a rock was cut out, but not by hands, and went on to beat against the foot of the statue, which were of iron and clay, and he broke them in pieces" (Dn 2, 34). The stone that shatters the statue is Christ, the mountain is Mary.

Let's contemplate the icon and the richness of its symbolism.

Mary is wrapped in a floating cloak evoking the clouds of heaven, because she is "the greatest of the skies", having carried Christ in her womb.

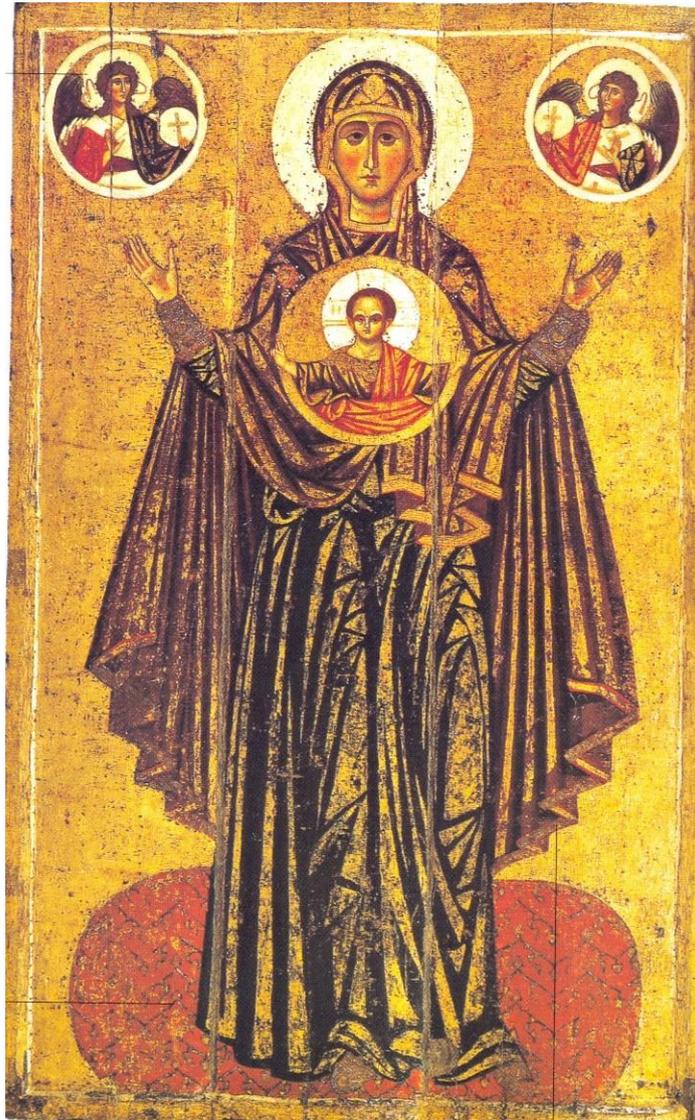
Next to Christ, bearing a scroll with the words: "Before Abraham was, I am", we note, as resting on his mother Mary, the symbols: the stone that broke away from the mountain (hence the name of

the icon) , Jacob's ladder that unites the earth to the sky and the rainbow running through the mantle of Mary.

A particular solemnity can be seen in the reproduction of the throne. Its columns, finely carved, rest on a lush garden, filled with flowers, a clear reference to the earthly paradise, as if Mary, the new Eve, is returned to humanity, who at the time was expelled from it because of the original sin . Then, from the back of the throne there are two green shoots, which remind us of more readings from the Scriptures (again the garden in Eden, but also Psalm 1 or the garden of which the Song of Songs is spoken about repeatedly). Finally, on the arms of the throne, there are two lit chandeliers, a clear reference to the burning bush, burning without going out, the place where God manifests himself, as he did in Mary, Virgin and Mother, the most holy.

Rejoice, You guide to the supernal advice;
Rejoice, You proof of arcane mystery.
Rejoice, You first miracle of Christ;
Ave, compendium of its truth.
Rejoice, heavenly ladder
that brought down the Lord;
Hail bridge that leads men to heaven.
(Hymn Akathistos, part 3)

June 2015 – *Praying Virgin 'Blachernitissa'*



Unknown icon painter, *Praying Virgin 'Blachernitissa'*, first half of the 13th Century, tempered on panel, cm 193,2 x 120,5, Moscow, Tretyakov Gallery

The icon is commonly known as the 'Praying Virgin' due to the typical gesture of raising the arms toward Heaven. Actually, the image of Jesus on the medallion on her chest, tells us that it is an icon of Mary 'Panaghia platyera' (in Greek πανάγια = all holy and πλατύτερα = the largest). The liturgy of St. Basil exclaims: "Oh Virgin, above the cherubim and seraphim, largest of heaven and earth, thou art appeared superior, no comparison, in all creation visible and invisible". The profusion of the gold robe and mantle precisely emphasizes this royal dignity, as does the deep red cushion on which she rests.

With the medallion of Christ, there are two other medallions, one on the high left and the other on the high right of the image inside each of which is an angel. They bear the sphere of the cosmos marked by a cross. These images represent Gabriel and Michael. In the early Christian basilicas they were placed on either side of the chancel arc to recall the two 'passages' of the life of Christ: incarnation (Gabriel is the angel of the Annunciation) and Easter (Michael symbolises the Easter

victory). We should note finally that bringing all the medallions together (there is a fourth made from the halo of Mary) we can see an equilateral triangle and now our minds think of the Holy Trinity.

Looking now to Jesus: he is not a newborn but rather a boy, at times he can be represented already as an adult. This is in effect the Eternal Word of the Father, which exists before all other creatures. With his right hand he makes a gesture of blessing, which is also the gesture of the orator when he speaks. He is precisely the Word made flesh.

During the siege of the city by Avars (626), Emperor Heraclius took the icon of Blachernitissa in procession along the ramparts of the city and obtained the aid of the Virgin. To this event is linked the famous celebrant of the Mother of God, the Akathist hymn, still sung today in the Churches of Byzantine origins. On another occasion, while an Arab fleet blocked the city (717), their ships were destroyed by a miraculous intervention by the Virgin. The same thing happened in 822, when a Slav fleet appeared before the capital.

“By singing praise to your maternity, we all exalt you
as a spiritual temple, Mother of God! For the One
Who Dwelt Within Your Womb, the Lord Who
Holds All Things in His Hands, sanctified you,
glorified you, and taught all men to sing
to you.”

(*Akathist*, stanza 23)

May 2015 – *Virgin Odigitria*



Dionisi, *Virgin Odigitria*, 1482, temper on canvas, cm 135x111, Moscow, Tretyakov Gallery

The image of *Odigitria* takes a privileged place in the iconography of the Mother of God because it is known to both the East and the West, and is among one of the most famous icons of the images of the Mother of God.

The name derives from the Greek οδηγός (odegós) which can be translated as ‘*guide, leader*,’, hence the contemporary meaning of “*She who leads the way*”; and the way is indeed Christ, indicated by the right hand of Mary.

The name comes from the sanctuary of Constantinople where the image was kept, known as “*odigoï*” or “*the guides*”, named after the monks who looked after the sanctuary and who were guides to those persons, the majority of which were blind, who visited the shrine seeking the healing of the Virgin. According to the tradition, the Mother of God appeared before two blind people, led them to her sanctuary and restored their sight to them. Since then, the blind and those who suffer from eye conditions, went to the spring that flowed by the Church to wash their eyes in the hope of being healed.

Overtime the name was given to the same Mother of God and her icon which, in the feminine form ‘*Odigitria*’, became its proper name.

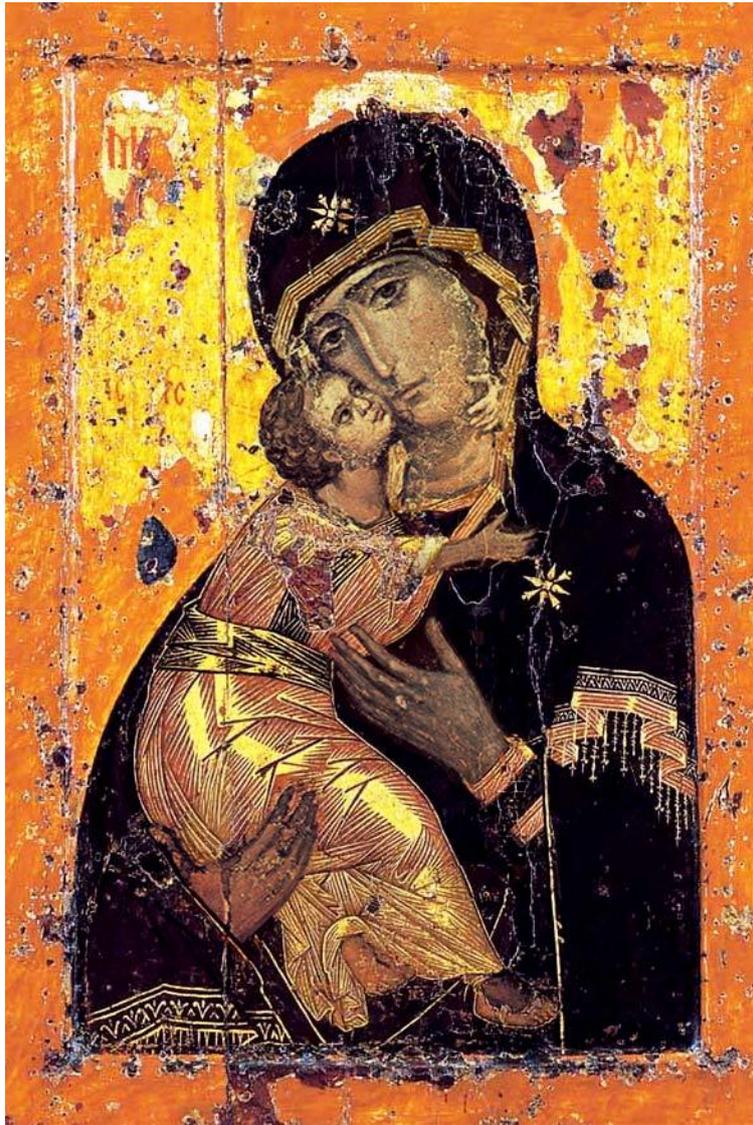
What added luster to the image was that it was rumoured to have been a portrait done in Jerusalem by the evangelist Luke while Mary was still alive.

The original icon was completely destroyed in a fire in 1482 and, according to legend, Dionisi was called on to repaint it identically on the same surface and in the same measurements.

In the image, Mary is in the foreground, facing us with her eyes fixed on us. The Child is not sitting on His mother's lap and is therefore at the same height as His Mother's shoulder. He is supported by the left arm of the Virgin which, according to tradition, is almost completely covered by the red *maphorian*, her hair is completely unseen, hidden by a kind of cap (*mitella*) under the tight veil. The Child is sitting on the arm, also facing us, with the right hand slightly raised in a blessing to the Greek, whilst the left is holding a scroll, a symbol of wisdom and knowledge, traditionally attributes of the prophets. He is both child and adult, He is Emmanuel with the attributes of divinity. The Virgin turns her hand towards the Child in a gesture to indicate him. It is this very gesture that calls to mind two passages from the scriptures, one referring to Mary when at Cana of Galilee where she says to the servants: "Do whatever he tells you" (John 2,5).

The second, still from the Gospel of John, is instead a reply from Jesus. Thomas who asks him: "Lord, we don't where you are going, so how can we know the way?" Jesus replies: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14, 5-6)

April 2015 – *Our Lady of Vladimir*



Anonymous, *Our Lady of Vladimir*, the first third of the twelfth century, tempera on panel, 104x69 cm, Moscow, Tretyakov Gallery

The story of this icon is very fascinating, one of the most famous and worshipped throughout the Christian East. It was painted in Constantinople and donated by the Patriarch of Constantinople to the Grand Duke of Kiev who placed it in Mezhyhirya Monastery where it remained until 1155, when the son of the Grand Duke took it into the city of Vladimir. According to the tradition, the horses carrying the icon stopped near the town and refused to go on. The people interpreted the episode as a sign that the *Theotokos* wanted to stay in Vladimir. To accommodate the image, the great Cathedral of the Dormition was built.

In 1395, during the invasion of Tamerlane, the icon was brought to Moscow. In the place where the people and the prince "met" the *Theotokos*, the Sretensky Monastery was built. Vasily I of Moscow spent a whole night in the monastery, weeping and praying over the image; the day after the Mongol army retreated. Muscovites refused to return the icon to Vladimir, and set it in the Cathedral of the Dormition in the Kremlin. After the communist revolution of 1917, the icon was

removed from the tabernacle of the cathedral, restored and later placed in the museum where it is still preserved. In December 1941, against the advance of the German army, Stalin gave orders to put the icon on a plane that flew over the capital several times. After a few days, the German army began to retreat.

A sense of "tenderness" (in Greek "Eleousa") is highlighted by some elements: the two faces of Mary and Jesus, who hold each other with a sweet expression, the arms of the boy, whose right hand grasps his Mother, almost clinging to her and not wanting to leave, and whose left surrounds the neck of the Virgin. The beauty of the gown of Mary, worthy of a Byzantine empress, marks the kingship; the three stars on the mantle (the one we see on the left shoulder and one on the head, it is missing - because covered by little Jesus - the one on the right shoulder) mean the virginity of Mary "before", "during" and "after" the childbirth.

*Today, bright and beautiful, the glorious city of Moscow
welcomes as aurora your miraculous icon, o Sovereign.*

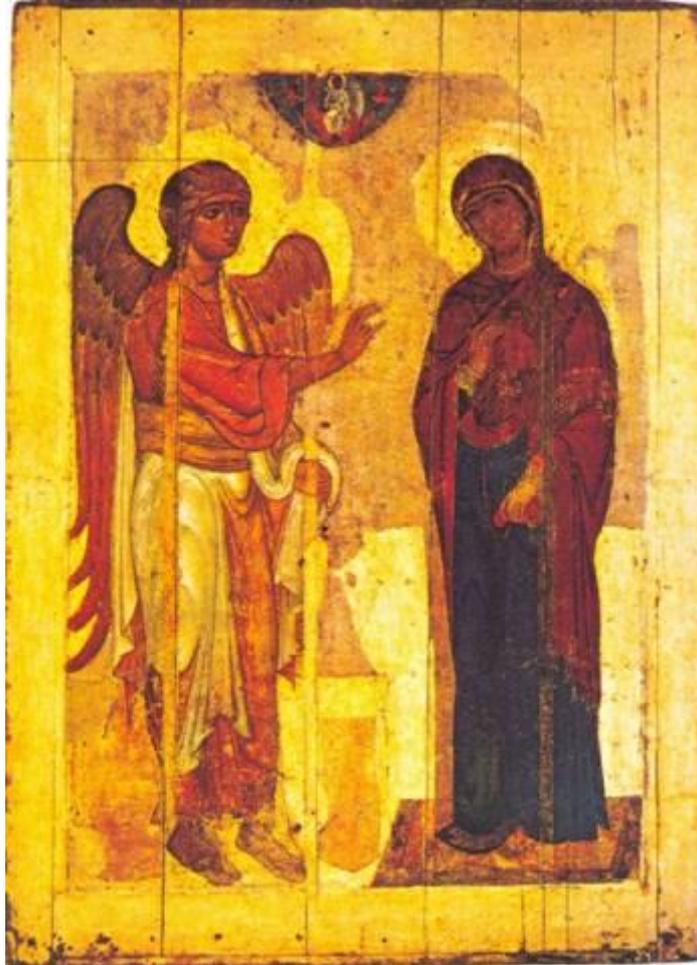
To it and we leap and supplicants invoke thee so:

*"O wonderful Queen, Mother of God, pray Christ, our God who took flesh in you,
to keep this city and all cities and Christian regions free from the snares of the enemy,
and to save, as the Merciful, our souls "*

(Invocation of the main *troparion* from the office of the feast of Our Lady of Vladimir)

March 2015 – *Annunciation*

The 'icons', the richness of the spirituality of the people from the East, accompany the journey of 'art and meditation' in this new period.



Anonymous, Annunciation, around 1130-1149, tempera on wood, 238x168 cm, Moscow, Tretyakov Gallery

The icon shows the two main characters of the Gospel scene. On the left, the archangel Gabriel, sweet and firm in the movement of the blessing arm. On the right, the Virgin Mary. Looking carefully, we can note some characteristic features of the representation.

Mary wears a green and blue tunic, blue is the color that indicates human nature. The mantle is instead red, representing the divine nature. It is therefore evident from the choice of colours that Mary is the woman (of human nature) that, meek before the work of the Spirit, was covered by the divinity. The small altar step on which Maria stands indicates her sacred and regal dimension.

Mary has her head down in an act of submission to God's will and with the right hand repeats the gesture of greeting of the angel and Jesus takes shape in her: he is symbolically represented in the folds of the mantle. In her left hand, Mary holds a strand of purple that she is spinning for the veil of the Temple: this veil is the body of Jesus that took flesh in her.

The iconography is very rich as usual, and repeats with very few variants the same characteristics. The icon (from the Greek word "eikon" image =) is the very presence of God, and the faithfulness of the copies to the original confirms its authenticity.

An archangel was sent from Heaven to say to the Theotokos: Rejoice! And beholding Thee, O Lord, taking bodily form, he was amazed and with his bodiless voice he stood crying to Her such things as these:

Rejoice, Thou through whom joy will shine forth:
Rejoice, Thou through whom the curse will cease!
Rejoice, recall of fallen Adam:
Rejoice, redemption of the tears of Eve!
Rejoice, height inaccessible to human thoughts:
Rejoice, depth undiscernible even for the eyes of angels!
Rejoice, for Thou art the throne of the King:
Rejoice, for Thou bearest Him Who beareth all!
Rejoice, star that causeth the Sun to appear:
Rejoice, womb of the Divine Incarnation!
Rejoice, Thou through whom creation is renewed:
Rejoice, Thou through whom we worship the Creator!
Rejoice, O Bride Unwedded!

First stanza from **Akathist to the Holy Virgin**