



TWO HOLY ICONS  
OF OUR VENERABLE MOTHER  
MARY OF EGYPT

A. HISTORICAL RETROSPECTION

B. THE FIRST HOLY ICON

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1. THE NARRATIVE ASPECT

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AND ITS TECHNICAL EXPRESSION



FROM THE ICON STUDIO OF THE  
HOLY MONASTERY OF STS. CYPRIAN AND JUSTINA  
FILI, ATTIKA  
2006

## A. HISTORICAL RETROSPECTION



The history of our monastery's Icon Studio begins in 1961—the same year, that is, in which the monastery was established by His Eminence, Metropolitan Cyprian of Oropos and Fili, its Abbot and founder, in honor of the glorious Holy Martyrs Cyprian and Justina.

The then Monk Cyprian's first obedience was Iconography, that blessed art of our Church Tradition.

He received especial spiritual pleasure and was moved to compunction when painting the Icon of Christ our Savior, Whom he worshipped and to Whose glory he had dedicated himself from his youth.

Likewise, it was with deep piety and holy zeal that he would paint the Mother of Christ, the Immaculate *Theotokos*, as well as the Angels and the Saints; that is, the friends and brethren of the Lord.

The few Icons that His Eminence painted during this period constitute the blessed first fruits of our monastery's Icon Studio.

## B. THE FIRST HOLY ICON

One of these Holy Icons is that of our Venerable Mother Mary of Egypt. It is the most distinctive of the Icons and, at the same time, is greatly expressive of His Eminence's Christian love for the "great wound" that is man.

Simplicity and profound spirituality are the two main qualities that one immediately discerns upon gazing at the ascetic figure of the Saint.

Her eyes are turned to the Heavens, while her bony hands are raised in supplication to our Compassionate Father.

The composition is perfectly balanced and the overall *schematization* marvelously underscores the supernatural life of this heroine of the desert.

The simplicity in the choice of colors, the similar way in which they are employed, and the intense green background—which successfully makes up for an absence of gold—are suggestive of the climate of the blessed desert.

One conversant in such matters is literally astonished by the perfect balance of light distribution in the various elements of the Icon. The *transitions* are clear and clean. The overall brightness given off by the Icon approaches the desired outcome; that is, the brightness of the *medium grey!*



## C. THE SECOND HOLY ICON



"BURY, O ABBA ZOSIMAS, IN THIS PLACE,  
THE BODY OF THE HUMBLE MARY,  
RENDER DUST TO DUST.  
SHE REPOSED AFTER PARTAKING  
OF THE DIVINE AND MYSTICAL SUPPER."

**T**his Icon, painted at the monastery Icon Studio in the year of salvation 2005, portrays the "Burial of our Venerable Mother Mary of Egypt by St. Zosimas in the desert beyond the Jordan River."

As to its subject, the Holy Icon belongs among the *narrative Icons*, while retaining the main *theological attributes* that must be expressed by every Icon of our Orthodox Tradition (the Uncreated and the created, the doctrine of the Trinity, Christology).

In what follows, we will describe both the *narrative* and *theological aspects* of the Icon of the Burial of the Venerable Mary, as well as its *technical expression*.

• See also the special iconological study on the Synod website:  
[www.synodinresistance.org/Theology/Studies/Iconology/The Holy Icon of All Saints: An Attempt at a New Approach](http://www.synodinresistance.org/Theology/Studies/Iconology/The Holy Icon of All Saints: An Attempt at a New Approach).

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## 1. THE NARRATIVE ASPECT



**F**aithful to St. Zosimas' narrative, which was preserved by St. Sophronios of Jerusalem, the Holy Icon portrays the event of the burial of the Saint's body by the Abba.

The setting is the dwelling-place of the Baptist, "beyond the Jordan River," where the Saint practiced a superhuman asceticism for forty-four years, at the instigation and under the protection of our Lady the *Theotokos*.

The land is desolate: ideal for ascetic struggles, which are, to be sure, inspired by a special gift of repentance.

Nature is in a state of total peace: the desert, bathed in Divine Grace; the Jordan, in the lower section of the Icon, flowing quietly—all things are honoring the dormition of the Saint with a mystical awe.

The lion, by Divine Providence, has already assisted in this wonderful Mystery of the desert with the opening of the Saint's grave; and now, like a rational being, he recognizes the prelapsarian glory of man and is inclining his head in reverence to the Holy Relics.

Abba Zosimas, his hands covered, dares to embrace only the Saint's holy feet, which he is sprinkling with the precious myrrh of his ascetic tears.

The incorrupt body of the Saint, though dead, makes up the center of the composition, which is why it has been painted in larger than natural size. It is decorously wrapped in Abba Zosima's *raison*, so that her nakedness for Christ's sake—intimated by her uncovered side—may be covered.

The Angels *in Heaven are rejoicing* over the formerly dissolute woman's decisive victory over sin and Satan, glorifying the God of the repentant, Christ our Savior, the Lover of mankind, and are putting forth the Saint as a model of repentance for the monks of the Monastery of the Venerable Forerunner, barely discernible in the background of the landscape.

Though a year in time separated the dormition of this heroine of the desert from her burial, the composition includes both of these events, in accordance with the customary practice of Orthodox Iconography, which thereby expresses the functional coexistence of past, present, and future within the Uncreated Glory of the Three-Sunned Godhead, which reveals, from on high, a reflection of the Eighth Day of the Kingdom of Heaven.

## 2. THE THEOLOGICAL ASPECT AND ITS TECHNICAL EXPRESSION

**T**he golden background, consistent as to its properties throughout the centuries, grants the Icon of the burial of the Holy Relics of St. Mary its kinship with the Icons of our Orthodox Church Tradition.

The gold, as a symbol of Christ and His Uncreated Grace, fills one half

of the composition freely with Grace and constitutes the guiding criterion for the elaboration of the other half. It has been left to the responsibility of the iconographer to *harmonize* and *assimilate* this other half, in a certain manner, with the golden background, through the appropriate use of his technical methods: *design*, *light*, and *color*.

In this way, by means of a stylistic process, the coöperation is expressed between the Uncreated (gold: Christ) and the created (color: man) in the sanctification, salvation, and deification of our fallen nature.

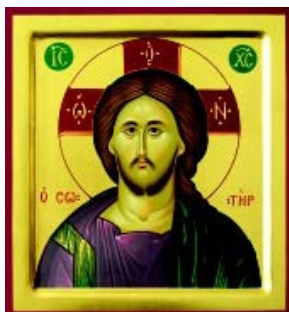
The *harmonization* and *assimilation* of all of the composition's elements with the gold background is achieved by the coloring of all of the elements of the painted portion of the Icon with appropriately selected hues, so that, in the first place, there will be a consistent and specific participation of the chromatic quality of the gold in the chromatic combination of the selected hues; and, secondly, so that this very light of the gold will be radiated by the hues in their totality.

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- The doctrine of the Trinity (a distinction of Persons and unity of Essence) in the present Icon is most clearly expressed, firstly by the consistent use of only three distinguishable surfaces (first layer, first light, and second light), in order that all of the painted elements of the Icon be conveyed; secondly, by the rendering in these three surfaces of such attributes as will suggest the common traits of the three distinct Divine Persons of the Godhead: consubstantiality, unity of Glory, unity of Throne, etc.

- The Christological doctrine (the unconfused and indivisible union of the Uncreated and the created in the one Person of the Divine Word), is suggested as much by the distribution of the golden *background* and *painted portions* into equal parts (unconfused union), as by their *harmonization* and *assimilation* (indivisible union), and also by the Christification of the Saints' faces and the renewal of all of creation by the use, in particular, of the chromatic quality of the gold in the flesh tones of the Saints.

1 April 2006 (Old Style)  
+ Our Venerable Mother  
Mary of Egypt





To Our All-Good  
Triune God, the Lover of Mankind,  
be glory, honor, worship,  
and thanksgiving.  
Amen!