



## Master of the Saints Cosmos and Damian Madonna Italy, 13<sup>th</sup> Century

The Italian city of Pisa, an important port, had commercial and cultural ties to Byzantium. Especially after the fall of Constantinople in 1204, painting there was strongly influenced by icons coming from the East. This original painting is based on Byzantine icons of the Eleusa or “maternal” Virgin, a portrait of the Virgin and Child believed to have been painted by Saint Luke. Images from the East were accorded a special status as having an aura of authenticity and authority. Through the thirteenth century, European artists reproduced these images, borrowing both their style and iconography, and were seen as working in the “maniera greca” — the Greek or Byzantine mode of painting. (Harvard, Fog Museum gallery description)

The “Master of the Saints Cosmos and Damian” was likely an anonymous Italian painter and some believe possibly even a workshop that operated under that name. The original icon (egg tempera on a wood panel) is at the Fog Museum, Harvard University. There are many copied versions.

Notice her headscarf, the roundness of her large eyes, and the continuous, rounded lines. In contrast, the pure Byzantine style creates roundness with broken straight lines, and the Theotokos is dressed in a traditional deep purple or blue maphorion. Unlike the other Marian images in this exhibition, this icon does not follow the strict Byzantine tradition of line, facial color, facial features & proportion, or even the vestiture of the Theotokos. It could be classified as Italianate “maniera greca” fashion, or Italo-Byzantine style with regional modifications.

The conventional Eleusa structure relies on an underlying S-shaped curved composition that brings mother and child into divine intimacy to express love and sorrow, while Mary gestures to Christ, the way, the truth and the life.



*Christine Thum Schlessler, Iconographer  
Executive Director, Classical Iconography Institute*