



## Virgin Hodegetria Dexiokratousa

In Greek, *Hodegetria* means “she who shows the way” and is a genre usually interpreted as Mary pointing to the Christ Child as the salvation of the world. *Dexiokratousa* indicates that Mary holds the Christ Child in her right hand while gesturing with her left, the reverse of the usual Hodegetria pose.

In this genre, Mary’s head is subtly and humbly tilted to face the Christ, pointing the way to God. Her right hand guides the viewer to the Child even as it offers the prayers of the faithful to him. The visible naked soles of the Child’s feet are indications of Christ’s humanity and, along with the direction and nature of the blessing He offers with His right hand, anticipate His crucifixion. In contrast to icons of the Mother and Child in which He blesses the viewer, here, Christ offers His mother a blessing, which can be seen as an acknowledgement of her profound sacrifice as well as of the prayers she presents. In His outstretched left hand, He holds a scroll, traditionally representing the Gospel of John or Christian Testament more broadly. Thus, not only is He the Word made flesh, but He likewise presents the written record of that Word to Mary and, by extension, all of us through the sacred text.

The prototype icon from Saint Catherine’s Monastery at Mt. Sinai is almost the same height as this icon, a size indicating it was likely created for personal devotion. Constructed of thousands of micro tesserae set in wax, the prototype is among the few surviving examples of a micromosaic and is considered an exceptionally fine and unique example of such work. One can only imagine the sense of movement created by flickering candlelight or by the sunlight falling on the mosaic at different times of day, bringing it to life. I was privileged to see the original, which was part of the *Africa and Byzantium* exhibition, at the Cleveland Museum of Art in 2024.

Art historians agree that the mosaic was likely produced in a workshop in Constantinople in the first quarter of the 13<sup>th</sup> century by craftsmen who were familiar with the cloisonné enamel icons of Cyprus and Crusader centers in the Eastern Byzantine world, and who had some familiarity with European art of the period. Part of the appeal and beauty of this icon for me is the way it embodies the syncretic traditions of the Byzantine world and the history of Christianity more broadly.

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