

Iconography of Saint Catherine in the Collection of the Monastery of the Same Name in Sinai

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Abstract: The article examines the iconography of Saint Catherine of Alexandria as represented in the collection of the Monastery of Saint Catherine on the Sinai Peninsula. The study focuses on the principal iconographic types of the Saint preserved in the monastery, their visual attributes, compositional structures, and symbolic meanings. Particular attention is paid to the differentiation between Byzantine and Latin traditions, including the Alexandrian and Great Martyr iconographic types, as well as to narrative compositions with hagiographic cycles. The article analyses the evolution of Catherine's iconography from the Early Middle Ages to the modern period, considering stylistic transformations, the introduction of specific attributes of martyrdom, and the role of symbolic objects within the sacred space of the icon. Special emphasis is placed on the interaction between painting and textile media, including embroidered and tapestry icons executed in silk with gold and silver threads, which constitute a distinctive and understudied part of the Sinai collection. By contextualizing the images within theological, historical, and artistic frameworks, the study demonstrates the uniqueness of the Sinai corpus and its significance for the development of Christian iconography.

Keywords: Byzantine canon, composition, plot, iconography, stylistics, painting, fine arts, decorative arts, artistic features, silk embroidery.

The relevance of the problem.

At present, the issue of identifying and systematizing the principal iconographic types within the iconography of the image of Saint Catherine from the Monastery of Saint Catherine in Egypt remains insufficiently defined. A particular focus of the present study is the analysis of the artistic characteristics of those icons that are currently preserved at Sinai, which

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constitute a unique and highly valuable corpus of early Christian and Byzantine visual culture.

Analysis of research and publications.

Among the first scholars to undertake a systematic study of the Monastery of Saint Catherine in Egypt were K. Weitzmann and G. Gale, who in the mid to late 1970s initiated scholarly examination of the earliest artistic heritage of this monastic complex, dating from the 6th to the 10th centuries. In the concise monograph *The Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai. Icons* (vol. 1), published in Princeton, USA, in 1976, the authors addressed the cataloguing of the monastery's art collection. The publication includes up to 160 color and black-and-white illustrations, accompanied by descriptions of saints' vitae, interpretations of iconic representations of Saint Catherine the Great Martyr, and depictions of episodes from her life.¹

Two years later, the first of the aforementioned authors published in New York a chronologically broader catalogue entitled *Holy Images of the Sixth to the Fourteenth Centuries*, which presents an overview of Orthodox iconographic types of Saint Catherine that had become canonical by the Byzantine period, juxtaposed with their Catholic counterparts². Particular attention in the illustrative corpus of the publication is devoted to Vita icons – narrative panels with marginal scenes depicting the life of Catherine of Alexandria in symbolic compositions – as well as to visualizations of her trials, in which the saint's unwavering spirit and steadfast adherence to the tenets of faith are emphatically articulated.

Two years later, in 1980, G. Gale, J. Forsyth, and K. Weitzmann published in Givataim, Israel, the volume *Sinai and the Monastery of Saint Catherine*, in which, across 191 pages, they presented a thorough art-historical survey of the monastery's collection based on detailed visual documentation. The scholars analyzed Christological images and representations of saints, as well as the narrative content of individual icons, including those with hagiographic cycles. At the same time, an attempt was made to systematize the images of the Great Martyr Saint Catherine preserved in the Museum of the Monastery of Saint Catherine according to typological criteria.³

Subsequently, a decade later, further developing and expanding the scholarly achievements of her predecessors, Konstantinos Manafis published

¹ Kurt Weitzmann and John Gale, *The Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai: The icons. Vol. 1: From the sixth to the tenth century*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, XVII, 1976. 107 pp.; 38 colour plates; 122 b&w photos [in English].

² Kurt Weitzmann, *The Icon: Holy Images – Sixth to Fourteenth Century*. New York: George Braziller, 1978. 134 p.: ill. (some color) [in English].

³ John Gale, *Sinai and the Monastery of St. Catherine*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1980. 191 p. ill., map. [in English].

in Athens in 1990 the significant monograph *Sinai: Treasures of the Monastery of Saint Catherine*. In this volume of 440 pages, the author succeeded in compiling a detailed catalogue of the collection of the monastery museum. The publication includes substantial visual material accompanied by textual commentaries on icons and their narrative subjects associated with the cults of individual saints, foremost among them Saint Catherine⁴. Six years later, the outlined issues also attracted the attention of K. Muir, who presented a paper entitled “*Researching Iconography: Saint Catherine of Alexandria*” at an international conference in Australia. In her presentation, she focused on the iconographic schemes of the hagiographic scenes of the Great Martyr Saint Catherine⁵.

Another decade later, the collection attracted the attention of the research tandem R. S. Nelson and K. M. Collins, who in 2006 published in Los Angeles the illustrated 304-page monograph *Holy Images, Hallowed Ground: Icons from Sinai*. This collaborative work, devoted to a selection of the finest objects from the collection of the Museum of the Monastery of Saint Catherine, foregrounded a range of previously underexplored issues, including the symbolism of specific images and the interpretation of the historical contexts of the depicted figures particularly within the framework of the development of Byzantine iconographic traditions and later artistic periods⁶.

In 2007, a concise study addressing the outlined topic was published in the journal *Muzeinyi Provulok* by Inna Parkhomenko, a staff member of the National Art Museum of Ukraine, who focused on the collection of the institution she represented⁷.

Specific aspects of the iconography of the saint were addressed in 2011 in a short study by I. Sydor entitled “*The Commemoration of Saint Catherine of Alexandria, the Great Martyr*”⁸, as well as in the 376-page monograph by the diasporic scholar N. P. Shevchenko, *The Monastery of Mount Sinai and the*

⁴ Konstantinos Manafis, (Ed.), *Sinai: Treasures of the Monastery of Saint Catherine*. Publisher: Ekdotike Athenon, 1990. 399 p. [in English].

⁵ Carolyn Muir, “*A Study in Iconography: St. Catherine of Alexandria*.” / Department of Fine Arts, University of Hong Kong. *Religion, Literature and the Arts Project: Conference Proceedings of the Australian International Conference*. 1996. P. 272–280. [in English].

⁶ Robert S. Nelson and Kristen M. Collins, eds., *Holy Image, Hallowed Ground: Icons from Sinai*. Los Angeles: Getty Publications. XVI, 2006. 304 p.: ill. [in English].

⁷ Inna Parkhomenko, “V istyni Khrystovii. Sviata velykomuchenytzia Kateryna [In the Truth of Christ. Holy Great Martyr Catherine].” *Muzeinyi provulok*. 2007. №7 (sichen-cherven). [Museum Lane. 2007. No. 7 (January-June)]. URL: <https://www.facebook.com/namu.museum/posts> (date of access: 15.01.2026) [in Ukrainian].

⁸ Ivan Sydor, “Pamiat sviatoi velykomuchenytzi Kateryny Oleksandriiskoi. [Memory of St. Great Martyr Catherine of Alexandria].” 2011. URL: <https://kpba.edu.ua/novyny/publikatsii/pamiat-sviatoi-velykomuchenytzi-kateryny-oleksandriiskoi/> (date of access: 14.01.2026) [in Ukrainian].

Cult of Saint Catherine, published in 2013 in Burlington, Canada⁹. In the latter work, the author offers a historical and cultural analysis of the emergence and development of the cult of Saint Catherine of Alexandria, interpreting aspects of the Great Martyr's hagiography (Vita icon) in relation to her iconography.

Concluding the review of scholarly publications devoted to the outlined topic, it is necessary to mention the specialized article by M. Zhivkovich entitled "On the Icons of the Sinai and Raithu Martyrs in the Monastery of Saint Catherine at Sinai, with an Overview of the Cult and Iconography of These Saints in Eastern Christian Art." This publication was issued in 2020 at Zographou, the Bulgarian Orthodox male monastery of monks on Mount Athos. The author focuses on the principles governing the selection of saints' figures for the upper registers of group compositions, examines the established canonical features of the image of Saint Catherine, and compares them with the characteristics and attributes of other Sinai saints.¹⁰

In 2020, a Greek-language monograph originally published in 2015 was republished in Thessaloniki in an English translation under the title *The Monastery on Mount Sinai and Its Shrines*, edited by G. Foustieris¹¹. This volume brings together the most valuable painted and printed works, as well as icons of Saint Catherine incorporated into ensembles of decorative and applied art from the Monastery of Saint Catherine at Sinai. Certain aspects of this publication, along with those of the previously mentioned studies, are also addressed in the works *The Life of Saint Catherine of Alexandria*¹², *the Great Martyr* and *The Iconography of Saint Catherine*¹³.

Results.

The key primary sources for the study of the life of Catherine of Alexandria are the records attributed to Athanasius (Anastasius), who is said

⁹ Nancy P. Ševčenko, *The Monastery of Mount Sinai and the Cult of Saint Catherine*. In: Ševčenko Nancy P. *The Celebration of the Saints on Byzantine Art and Liturgy*. Burlington: Routledge, 2013. 376 p. [in English].

¹⁰ Miloš Živković, "On the icons of Sinai and Raithou martyrs in Saint Catherine's monastery at Sinai, with an overview of the cult and iconography of these saints in East Christian art." *Zograf*, 2020. 44, 101–125. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2298/ZOG2044101Z> [in English].

¹¹ George Galavaris, Makarios Myriantheos, and Georgios Foustieris, eds., *The Monastery of Mount Sinai and its Sacristy*. Thessaloniki: HolyMonastery of the God-Trodden mount Sinai, 2020. 257 p.: ill. [in English].

¹² Zhytiie Sv. velykomuchenysi Kateryny Oleksandriiskoi [Life of St. Great Martyr Catherine of Alexandria]. URL: <https://afanasiy.net/sviataia-velykomuchenycy-ekateryna> (date of access: 12.01.2026) [in Ukrainian].

¹³ Ikonohrafiia sviatoi Kateryny [Iconography of St. Catherine]. URL: <https://hram.lviv.ua/3232-konohrafiya-svyatoyi-katerini.html> (date of access: 14.01.2026) [in Ukrainian].

to have served as the saint's stenographer. Prosopographical sources describing the circumstances of her life also include the testimonies of Symeon Metaphrastes and the work *Encomium to Catherine* by Anastasius Protasikrites. The earliest of these texts is dated to the late sixth–early seventh century. Subsequently, the data concerning her vita were collected, systematized, and interpreted by a wide range of hagiographers, theologians, and art historians^{14 15}.

According to these testimonies, the Great Martyr, who embraced Christianity in 304, and who in time became the patron saint of one of the world's oldest Orthodox monastic complexes, was executed in 307 by beheading. Catherine, whose name is translated as “pure,” originated from a noble and affluent Alexandrian family – her father being Consta, the ruler of the city and received the finest education available in her era.

Veneration of her as a Great Martyr began as early as the fourth century, when her relics – reverently transferred by angels to Mount Sinai were believed to have become incorrupt and to have emitted a miraculous fragrance. Between 527 and 557, by order of the Byzantine Emperor Justinian the Great, the Church of the Transfiguration was erected on Mount Sinai to safeguard these relics. Over time, a monastery developed around this sanctuary, and the ensemble together with the Well of Moses and the Burning Bush was inscribed in 2002 on the UNESCO World Heritage List as a site of outstanding universal cultural value.¹⁶

According to a sixth-century revelation, the venerable head and left hand of the Great Martyr were discovered and solemnly transferred to the newly constructed church of the Sinai Monastery in Egypt. Today, these relics are preserved in a marble reliquary in the monastery's principal church, dedicated to the Transfiguration of the Lord. The holy head of the Bride of Christ is crowned with a golden diadem, while an ornate ring adorns the finger of her right hand, commemorating her mystical betrothal.

Taking into account the uninterrupted flow of pilgrims, the Monastery of Saint Catherine at Sinai has maintained continuous liturgical service throughout its entire existence, without interruption even for a single day. Owing to this unbroken tradition, it is regarded as one of the most venerated holy sites in the world, a place where countless pilgrims find spiritual

¹⁴ Carolyn Muir, “*A Study in Iconography: St. Catherine of Alexandria.*” / Department of Fine Arts, University of Hong Kong. *Religion, Literature and the Arts Project: Conference Proceedings of the Australian International Conference.* 1996. P. 272–280. [in English].

¹⁵ Nancy P. Ševčenko, *The Monastery of Mount Sinai and the Cult of Saint Catherine.* In: Ševcenko Nancy P. *The Celebration of the Saints on Byzantine Art and Liturgy.* Burlington: Routledge, 2013. 376 p. [in English].

¹⁶ George Galavaris, Makarios Myriantheos, and Georgios Fouteris, eds., *The Monastery of Mount Sinai and its Sacristy.* Thessaloniki: HolyMonastery of the God-Trodden mount Sinai, 2020. 257 p.: ill. [in English].

consolation. The Alexandrian virgin became the patron saint of learning and scholarship; believers also revere her as a saint who grants hope to unmarried women seeking to find their true destined partner and to establish a family.

It is generally believed that the earliest representations of Saint Catherine emerged in the pre-Iconoclastic period, around the sixth–seventh centuries. From the eighth to the ninth century, the first images of the saint that have come down to us were produced, surviving primarily in later copies dating from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries. The hymnography dedicated to the Great Martyr developed in the ninth century, when Saint Theophanes of Nicaea and the monk Babylas composed several poetic hymns in honor of Catherine of Alexandria, which are still performed on the anniversary of her repose (7 December, New Style).

In documentary sources, the name of the Saint is mentioned in the Typikon of the Great Church, dated to the ninth–eleventh centuries.¹⁷ The cult of this Great Martyr, which had taken shape in the former territories of Byzantium conquered by the Arabs from the sixth century onward, remained an integral part of Christian life within the Greek and Coptic Churches. From the period of the Crusades, the cult of Catherine of Alexandria, revered for her steadfastness and devotion to the faith, began to receive particularly strong veneration in Italy, most notably in Venice.

Here, her image adorned the Basilica of Saint Elias, was immortalized in the mosaics of Saint Mark's Cathedral, and appeared on the seal of the Norman count and diplomat at the court of the Byzantine Emperor Manuel I Komnenos (1143–1180), Alexander Gravina. Such widespread popularity of the image of the Great Martyr led to her special veneration in the cathedrals of Western Europe and stimulated sustained interest in the development of her iconography among artists of the Renaissance, Mannerism, and Baroque periods.

Accordingly, in icons of the Eastern Christian rite of the Early (up to the mid-ninth century) and Mature (up to the mid-fourteenth century) Middle Ages, Catherine of Alexandria in Egypt began to be depicted as one anointed by the Lord, endowed with divine power – clad in sumptuous royal garments, wearing a crown or diadem, and holding a cross in her right hand. From the Late Middle Ages (from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries), she is most often shown leaning on the symbol of her torments – the wheel – while another attribute of the saint, the palm branch, appears in her hand as a sign of martyrdom and victory¹⁸.

¹⁷ Kurt Weitzmann and John Galey, *The Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai: The Icons. Vol. 1, From the Sixth to the Tenth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976); 107 pp.; 38 colour plates; 122 b&w photos [in English].

¹⁸ Ivan Sydor, "Pamiat sviatoi velykomuchenytzi Kateryny Oleksandriiskoi. [Memory of St. Great Martyr Catherine of Alexandria]." 2011. URL:

Concurrently, throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, within the Catholic tradition of Italy and the regions of the Northern Renaissance and Mannerism, another iconographic type gained widespread popularity known as the “Mystical Marriage of Saint Catherine” or simply the “Marriage of Saint Catherine” gained widespread popularity. This subject became especially prominent in the works of leading European artists, including Fra Angelico (Madonna and Child with Saints Dominic and Catherine of Alexandria, c. 1435), Giovanni di Paolo (The Mystical Marriage of Saint Catherine, 1460), Sandro Botticelli (Saint Catherine, 1487), Ambrogio Bergognone (The Mystical Marriage of Saint Catherine of Alexandria, 1490), Piero di Cosimo (The Mystical Marriage of Saint Catherine of Alexandria, 1493), Hans Memling (The Mystical Marriage of Saint Catherine, 1479), Pinturicchio (The Mystical Marriage of Saint Catherine of Alexandria, 1492–1496), Gerard David (The Mystical Marriage of Saint Catherine, 1505), Lucas Cranach the Elder (Altarpiece of Saint Catherine, 1506; The Martyrdom of Saint Catherine, 1515), Fra Bartolomeo (The Mystical Marriage of Saint Catherine of Alexandria, 1512), Lorenzo Lotto (The Mystical Marriage of Saint Catherine of Alexandria, 1524), Correggio (The Mystical Marriage of Saint Catherine of Alexandria, 1526–1527), Parmigianino (Saint Catherine, 1524; The Mystical Marriage of Saint Catherine, c. 1527–1531; c. 1529), Paolo Veronese (The Mystical Marriage of Saint Catherine, c. 1575), Jusepe de Ribera (The Holy Family with Saints Anne and Catherine, 1648; The Mystical Marriage of Saint Catherine, 1648), and Anthony van Dyck (The Mystical Marriage of Saint Catherine of Alexandria, 1618–1620).

Within a new iconographic variant emphasizing the theme of the Great Martyr, works were created by Raphael Santi (Saint Catherine of Alexandria, 1507), Gaudenzio Ferrari (The Martyrdom of Saint Catherine, 1541–1543), and Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (Saint Catherine of Alexandria, 1598–1599). In these paintings and frescoes, the artists incorporated instruments of torture and symbols of spiritual fortitude, thereby underscoring the steadfastness and inner strength of the Saint.



Fig. 1. Giovanni di Paolo, *The Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, c. 1460. Photo source: Wikimedia Commons.



Fig. 2. Hans Memling, *The Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine*, Bruges, 1479. Photo source: Wikimedia Commons.



Fig. 3. Paolo Veronese, *The Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine*, c. 1575, Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice. Photo source: Wikimedia Commons.



Fig. 4. Raphael (Raffaello Sanzio), *Saint Catherine of Alexandria*, c. 1507, National Gallery, London. Photo source: Wikimedia Commons.

By contrast, within the Orthodox tradition of the modern period, two principal iconographic types of Catherine of Egypt became the most widely established: Catherine of Alexandria and the Great Martyr. The first type is represented by a rather ascetic and static image of the Saint, executed within the framework of the Greek–Byzantine tradition. The earliest examples of this iconographic type include the eleventh-century icon Saint Catherine and Marina from the collection of the Museum of the Monastery of Saint Catherine at Sinai (Fig. 5), as well as a thirteenth-century replica based on prototypes of the tenth–eleventh centuries – Saint Catherine (with a Blessing Hand) and the Virgin Mary “The Burning Bush” with the Christ Child and Moses from the same collection (Fig. 6).

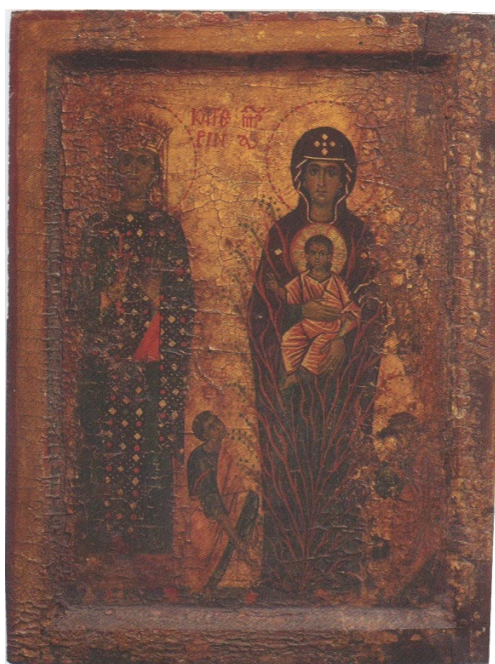


Fig. 6. *St Catherine (with a blessing hand) and the Virgin Mary “The Burning Bush” with the Christ Child and Moses*, pilgrim icon, tempera on wood, thirteenth century. Replica of an image of St Catherine dating to the tenth–eleventh centuries, from the period of the Macedonian and Komnenian dynasties.¹⁹

¹⁹ Nancy P. Ševčenko, *The Monastery of Mount Sinai and the Cult of Saint Catherine*. In: Sevcenko Nancy P. *The Celebration of the Saints on Byzantine Art and Liturgy*. Burlington: Routledge, 2013. 376 p. [in English].



Fig. 5. *St Catherine and St Marina*, Eastern iconographic tradition, tempera on wood, eleventh century.

These works were created in accordance with the canonical parameters of Byzantine icon painting characteristic of the periods of the Macedonian dynasty and the Komnenian dynasty. Among the distinctive attributes of the Great Martyr in these images, only a flared, trumpet-shaped Byzantine-type crown without crenellations is present – an element that remained common in the iconography of Catherine of Alexandria until the thirteenth century, when hagiographic icon types began to emerge while in the second example, an additional feature is the blessing gesture of the left hand, turned toward the viewer.

More rarely, the icon of the Saint includes a sword as an attribute – an instrument of execution by which her head was severed after the breaking of the wheel. In her right hand, this sword resembles a spear, an object that, within the Byzantine tradition, was held in icons from the eleventh century onward by female members of imperial Byzantine families, notably Zoe and Theodora²⁰.

At the same time, alongside the cross, a book or a ring serves as a sign of the Saint's mystical betrothal to Christ, reinforcing the image of a young

²⁰ Nancy P. Ševčenko, *The Monastery of Mount Sinai and the Cult of Saint Catherine*. In: Ševčenko Nancy P. *The Celebration of the Saints on Byzantine Art and Liturgy*. Burlington: Routledge, 2013. 376 p. [in English].

and beautiful maiden sometimes depicted with a wreath of roses on her head as a symbol of the Virgin Mary's love – yet a girl endowed with wisdom and intellect far beyond her years.²¹

As the monastery lay outside the jurisdiction of Byzantium from the seventh century, it preserved twelve encaustic icons painted in the sixth century, which rank among the oldest surviving icons in the world. In the mid-nineteenth century, part of the collection of encaustic icons was removed by Archimandrite Porphyrius and transferred to Ukrainian collections; today, these works are housed in the Khanenko Museum in Kyiv.

The creators of many works in the Sinai collection from the Early Byzantine period up to the thirteenth century including the Syriac-Palestinian heritage of the eighth–ninth centuries were Greek, Syriac, Georgian, and Coptic masters. As a result, a distinctive synthesis of Eastern Christian artistic traditions emerged, whereby certain iconographic types within the collection featuring Saint Catherine display notable stylistic affinities (a characteristic example being the icon known as *The Radiant Georgians*) (Fig. 7).

In addition to the Greek Orthodox clergy who conducted the liturgical services at the Monastery of Saint Catherine, the Saint gradually came to be venerated by Latins as well, in recognition of her unwavering steadfastness, purity, chastity, and wisdom. Over time, this broader devotion led to a convergence of iconographic traditions depicting the Saint across different Christian confessions, in a manner comparable to the iconographic type of Our Lady of the Seven Sorrows²².



Fig. 7. “*The Radiant Georgians*,” icon from the Monastery of St Catherine, fourteenth century. From left to right: Peter the Iberian, Hilarion the Iberian, Shio of Mgvime, John the Iberian, Euthymius the Iberian, George the Athonite, David of Gareja, St Constantine (?). Photo source: Wikimedia Commons.

However, it should be emphasized that the genre-based, narrative, and more sensuous and narrative compositions of Italian art and the Northern

²¹ Konstantinos Manafis, (Ed.), *Sinai: Treasures of the Monastery of Saint Catherine*. Publisher: Ekdotike Athenon, 1990. 399 p. [in English].

²² John Galey, *Sinai and the Monastery of St. Catherine*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1980. 191 p. ill., map. [in English].

Renaissance, dedicated to the glorification of Catherine of Alexandria such as the multi-figure works by Giovanni di Paolo, Hans Memling, and the “painterly” compositions of Paolo Veronese – did not gain currency among the iconographic types of this Great Martyr represented in the collection of the Sinai Monastery.

Thus, single-figure compositions, following the example of Martinus de Villanova’s work of 1387, inspired Raphael Santi’s Saint Catherine of Alexandria and the interpretations by Caravaggio, already incorporate the symbol characteristic of the Catholic variant of the Saint’s iconography – the wheel, an emblem of her torments. Nevertheless, a certain degree of ecstatic expressiveness in the works of one of the “Titans of the Renaissance” was typical of the Italian understanding of Catherine’s martyrdom.

In the collection of the aforementioned monastery, by contrast, there prevail stylistically more restrained images closer to the Byzantine tradition: single, rather ascetic representations of the Saint such as the Catalan altarpiece by Martinus de Villanova, executed in the Gothic–Renaissance period as well as narrative compositions of the Baroque era (Fig. 8).



Fig. 8. Martinus de Vilanova, Catalan altarpiece image of St Catherine, Catholic iconographic type, tempera on wood, 1387. Photo by O. Shkolna.

The key distinction of Orthodox iconographic types of Catherine of Alexandria, when comparing such images, lies in her static immobility; in some cases, a shield is introduced as a symbol of the Saint's unshakable faith in hagiographic icons of Greek-Byzantine origin (Fig. 9). According to the monuments preserved in the aforementioned monastery, this iconographic type remained widespread at least until the sixteenth century (Fig. 10). Subsequently, from the Baroque period, when heightened emotional expressiveness in imagery was increasingly valued, the iconographic type of the Great Martyr – depicted with the wheel – gained greater popularity in comparison with the Alexandrian type (Fig. 11).



Fig. 9. *The Life of Saint Catherine with Narrative Scenes (with a blessing hand), Sinai, Byzantine iconographic type, thirteenth century.*²³.

²³ Nancy P. Ševčenko, *The Monastery of Mount Sinai and the Cult of Saint Catherine*. In: Sevcenko Nancy P. *The Celebration of the Saints on Byzantine Art and Liturgy*. Burlington: Routledge, 2013. 376 p. (p. 34). [in English].



Fig. 10. *St Catherine*, Byzantine “*Alexandrian*” iconographic type, tempera on wood, second half of the sixteenth century. Photo by O. Shkolna.



Fig. 11. *Santa Catalina*, by Jeremias Palladas, seventeenth century, “*Great Martyr*” iconographic type. Photo source: Wikimedia Commons.

Considering that the Monastery of Saint Catherine (Fig. 12) became the center of the autonomous Orthodox Church of Mount Sinai and possessed a number of monastic complexes in different regions, the iconography of the icons that converged there was shaped accordingly. These complexes were located in Egypt, Greece, Cyprus, Lebanon, and Turkey, including Istanbul, and the particular influence of the Athos and Constantinopolitan schools proved decisive in this process.

From the Middle Ages onward, the cult of the monastery's patron saint enjoyed wide dissemination throughout Europe. The collection of icons of the Catherine cycle did not suffer during the period of Iconoclasm, as the monastery lay outside the boundaries of the Byzantine Empire from the seventh century onward.



Fig. 12. “Sinai and Its Holy Place,” icon depicting the Monastery of St Catherine, lacquered tempera on wood, early eighteenth century. Photo by O. Shkolna.

The presence of Western icons of Latin provenance in the monastery is limited and primarily associated with the era of the Crusades and the period of medieval Mamluk Egypt. In this context, Georgians of Orthodox origin – who formed a considerable portion of the Mamluk community – were forced to convert to Islam but retained sympathies toward Christianity and maintained

active commercial ties with Italians and other Europeans, as evidenced by the trade in Cairo-produced carpets of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.²⁴

Subsequently, the image of Catherine became more widely disseminated in the iconographic type of the “Great Martyr,” depicted with the Crucifix and a palm branch in her left hand, leaning against the wheel as an instrument of martyrdom. Certain icons of Greek origin, primarily from Mount Athos, from the Baroque period onward acquired additional attributes, including books introduced into the iconic space, which the highly educated saint was believed to have read during her lifetime, as well as the image of a circular black sphere representing the “Universe,” whose cosmological structure is permeated by rays of Divine energy.



Fig. 13. *Saint Catherine with scenes of her life and death*, executed in the Byzantine iconographic tradition, “Great Martyr” iconographic type, tempera on wood, 1755. Photo source: Wikimedia Commons.

The latter constitutes a symbolic, stylized form of the “Wheel of Ezekiel” (Ezek. 1; 10) the wheel within the wheel, an attribute of Divine providence and appears in images of Christ Pantocrator as well as in icons of

²⁴ Ulyana Belnaqita and Olga Shkolna, “Mamluk Carpets in European Painting of the 15th–16th Centuries as a Tribute to the Western and Central Asian Carpets Fashion,” *Paradigm of Knowledge*, no. 5 (69) (2025). P. 5–20. DOI 10.26886/2520-7474.5(69)2025.1 [in Ukrainian].

Sophia, the Divine Wisdom. The luminous intersecting lines within this form convey the idea of God's governance of the world against the backdrop of divine darkness and uncreated light and may be interpreted as Taboric Light and Divine revelation granted to humankind, surrounded by ignorance. As Scripture states: "The Lord said that he would dwell in thick darkness" (1 Kgs 8:12, NRSV) (Fig. 13).

At the same time, the iconographic type that gained popularity in Ukraine during the Baroque period depicting St Catherine in a paired image with St Barbara as two of the most venerated Christian saints was not adopted on Sinai (Fig. 14).



Fig. 14. *Saints Barbara and Catherine as Great Martyrs*, 1740s, Northern Left-Bank Ukraine, linden wood panel, gesso, engraving, tempera, oil, silvering, gilding. Collection of the National Art Museum of Ukraine (NAMU).

Photo source: National Art Museum of Ukraine (Facebook).

A distinct iconographic type within the Sinai collection of the Great Martyr is represented by the textile icon "The Epitaph of St Catherine with Hagiographic Scenes and Laudatory Inscriptions" (1805), executed in tapestry technique with silk, gold, and silver threads. This work constitutes a variant of the Dormition of the monastery's patron saint (Fig. 15). The iconography of

the saint crowned here resonates with the iconographic type of her image on the lid of the reliquary (Fig. 16) that houses the relics of Catherine of Alexandria. A distinguishing feature of the latter representation is the scroll held in the saint's hands, reminiscent of the Tablets of the Covenant and alluding to divine revelation mediated through Moses.



Fig. 15. The Epitaph of St Catherine with hagiographic scenes and laudatory inscriptions, textile icon (tapestry), Viennese production, silk with gold and silver threads, 1805.



Fig. 16. Master Prokopios, reliquary with the relics of St Catherine, Monastery of St Catherine, Sinai, eighteenth century. Photo source: Pravlife.org.

Conclusions.

Thus, based on the collection of the Museum of the Monastery of St Catherine, from the Early Middle Ages the saint was depicted as a wise royal maiden, adorned with a crown of roses (a symbol of purity and chastity and an attribute of the Marian cycle), or wearing a crown and imperial garments worthy of Byzantine emperors the anointed rulers on earth (eleventh century). Early iconographic types of Greek (Athonic) origin feature an ascetic, static figure whose sole attribute from the thirteenth century was a shield decorated with a cross, which for her embodied faith (within this image the principal figure is also endowed with a gesture of blessing, with one palm turned outward), while from the fourteenth century onward the sword appears as an attribute marking the end of the Great Martyr's earthly life. Overall, this iconographic type may be defined as the Alexandrian type.

In the Latin tradition, from the fourteenth century onward a more dynamic, Gothic–Renaissance representation of the saint became widespread. Its iconography derives from the image attributed to the Catalan school master Martinus de Vilanova (Fig. 9), in which the crown takes the form of a structure with sharp rays, while the left hand rests on the wheel – the symbol of endured torments holding the Crucifix. This iconographic type may be defined as the “Great Martyr.” It was further developed in the works of Raphael Santi and Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio. Its seventeenth-century subtype, represented by the work of the artist Santa Catalina, Jeremiah Palladas, preserved in the above-mentioned museum collection, additionally includes the sword and became the most canonical model for subsequent reproductions of the iconography of St Catherine.

Although in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries another iconographic type known as the “Mystic Marriage of St Catherine” or simply the “Marriage of St Catherine” gained wide popularity within the Catholic tradition of Italy and the regions of the Northern Renaissance and Mannerism, as attested in the works of leading European artists such as Fra Angelico, Giovanni di Paolo, Sandro Botticelli, Ambrogio Bergognone, Pinturicchio, Piero di Cosimo, Hans Memling, Gerard David, Lucas Cranach the Elder, Fra Bartolomeo, Lorenzo Lotto, Correggio, Parmigianino, Paolo Veronese, Jusepe de Ribera, and Anthony van Dyck, this iconographic type was not adopted on Sinai, most likely due to the overly hedonistic interpretation of the saint's image.

Instead, within the experimental pursuits of the Baroque period, artists from various European Christian schools developed new iconographic types in printed graphics, painting, and decorative and applied arts that ultimately did not achieve broad dissemination. A notable example is the iconographic composition Sts Barbara and Catherine as Great Martyrs (1740s), produced in the northern Left-Bank region of Ukraine (linden wood panel, gesso, engraving, tempera, oil, silvering, gilding) and preserved in the collection of the National Museum of Ukrainian Art. In this work, the saints hold a palm

branch and a cross in their left hands, without the wheel or the black sphere symbolizing the Universe and Divine Providence. In effect, the artist attempted to synthesize the two most widespread iconographic types of St Catherine – the Alexandrian (static, Orthodox) and the Great Martyr (dynamic, Catholic). However, such images are not represented in the Sinai collection.

By contrast, at the beginning of the nineteenth century the Sinai collection was enriched by the textile icon “The Epitaph of St Catherine,” woven in silk with gold and silver threads, featuring a central scene of the Dormition of Catherine surrounded by hagiographic scenes. This work resonates with the eighteenth-century creation of a new reliquary by the master Prokopios. In the latter, the principal figure depicted on the lid holds a scroll that resembles a testament addressed to future generations a motif consistent with the saint’s veneration by unmarried and childless women who believe in her intercession and assistance in forming a family, as well as by scholars and all those devoted to learning and the pursuit of knowledge.

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Fig. 1. Giovanni di Paolo, *The Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, c. 1460. Photo source: Wikimedia Commons.

Fig. 2. Hans Memling, *The Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine*, Bruges, 1479. Photo source: Wikimedia Commons.

Fig. 3. Paolo Veronese, *The Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine*, c. 1575, Gallerie dell’Accademia, Venice. Photo source: Wikimedia Commons.

Fig. 4. Raphael (Raffaello Sanzio), *Saint Catherine of Alexandria*, c. 1507, National Gallery, London. Photo source: Wikimedia Commons.

Fig. 5. St Catherine and St Marina, Eastern iconographic tradition, tempera on wood, eleventh century. Photo by O. Shkolna.

Fig. 6. St Catherine (with a blessing hand) and the Virgin Mary “The Burning Bush” with the Christ Child and Moses, pilgrim icon, tempera on wood, thirteenth century. Replica of an image of St Catherine dating to the tenth–eleventh centuries, Macedonian and Komnenian dynasties. Photo by O. Shkolna²⁵.

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Fig. 8. Martinus de Vilanova, Catalan altarpiece image of St Catherine, Catholic iconographic type, tempera on wood, 1387. Photo by O. Shkolna²⁶

Fig. 9. *The Life of Saint Catherine with Narrative Scenes (with a blessing hand)*, Sinai, Byzantine iconographic type, thirteenth century. Photo by O. Shkolna.

²⁵ Nancy P. Ševčenko, *The Monastery of Mount Sinai and the Cult of Saint Catherine*. In: Ševčenko Nancy P. *The Celebration of the Saints on Byzantine Art and Liturgy*. Burlington: Routledge, 2013. 376 p. (p. 34). [in English].

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

Fig. 10. St Catherine, Byzantine “Alexandrian” iconographic type, tempera on wood, second half of the sixteenth century. Photo by O. Shkolna.

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Fig. 15. The Epitaph of St Catherine with hagiographic scenes and laudatory inscriptions, textile icon (tapestry), Viennese production, silk with gold and silver threads, 1805.

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