

The Sancta Maria Salus Populi Romani Icon

History of the Icon

Sancta Maria Salus Populi Romani is the name given to an *icon* (portrait painting of a saint) in Rome of the Blessed Virgin Mary holding Her Son Jesus. The name of the icon can be translated into English as “Blessed Mary, Health of the People of Rome.” The painting dates to at least 590 AD, perhaps earlier. The artist is anonymous, but the icon is known as one of the “Miraculous Icons” attributed to St. Luke, who wrote the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts. St. Luke is the patron saint of artists.



Above: Left, before restoration; Right, after restoration; Pope Francis before the icon in the Basilica of Saint Mary Major.

According to most histories, in 590, the Eastern Roman Emperor Theodosius sent this icon of Mary and Jesus to Pope Gregory in Rome. It soon played an important role in the lives of the people of Rome.

In 593 the “Black Death” plague broke out in Rome, killing many thousands. Pope Gregory begged for the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary by leading a procession of her icon through the streets of Rome. The plague was so horrific, even some of those walking in the procession died on the way. On a bridge over the Tiber River, the Pope looked up at the Castel Sant Angelo, an ancient tomb of Roman emperors. Over the large building he saw a vision of an angel with a sword, wiping blood from the sword and placing the sword in its scabbard. The plague ended at that moment. Centuries later, a statue of an angel with a sword was erected on top of Castel Sant Angelo to commemorate Pope Gregory’s vision.

In 1837, Pope Gregory the XVI *venerated* (honored) the icon to protect Rome during a cholera epidemic. Many other times Popes have appealed to The Blessed Virgin through her icon for the protection of the city during plagues and threats from outside enemies. This is how the icon received its name – “Health of the Roman People.”

It is the favorite icon of Pope Francis, who commissioned it to be restored. Art restoration is the cleaning and repairing of the surface of a painting. In 2018, on January 28, the feast day in Rome of Sancta Maria Salus Populi Romani, the icon was presented to the Pope and placed in its setting in the Basilica of St. Mary Major.



Rochon, *Sancta Maria*, 2019

The word “icon” is from the Greek “eikon” meaning “image.” Icons are a major art form, or art *genre* (jzahn-reh,) in Churches of the Eastern tradition. Eastern Churches venerate icons in their Liturgies. The interiors of Eastern Catholic and Orthodox churches are often highly decorated with icons.

There are notable differences between an icon and a realistic portrait painting. The figures in icons appear flatter



Bouguereau, *Madonna and Child*, 1899

compared to the more rounded forms of realistic portraits. (Compare the two pictures above.) The faces in icons are stylized with enlarged eyes, long noses and tiny mouths. The backgrounds are often a flat field of gold. Gold symbolizes the eternal glory of the holy people in icons who are now with God in heaven. Icons can be thought of as “windows into heaven.”

Icons are not meant to show us an actual likeness of a person. Their purpose is to remind us of the *virtues* (holy qualities) of the saint shown. Icons inspire us to turn away from sin and live as the saints lived, so that we too may reach heaven.

How “*Sancta Maria Salus Populi Romani*” was made

This icon was painted on solid wood. It is about 48 inches tall x 30 inches wide. The wood was then covered with many layers of *gesso* (“jess-o”.) Gesso is a kind of thick paint made with glue and chalk, marble dust, or plaster. The layers of gesso are sanded to give a smooth, white surface for painting. Finally, the areas to be covered with gold are given an additional layer made of red clay and glue called *bole*. On my copy of the icon shown above, I have left the layers of bare wood, gesso, and bole exposed in the upper left corner.

Gold leaf is very finely hammered gold. To apply gold leaf to an icon, glue is brushed on the clay bole. The fragile, extremely thin sheets of gold leaf are carefully laid down on the glue. The gold is then rubbed smooth with an agate stone. After the gold is in place, the saint’s image can then be painted.

Most icons were painted with a *medium* called *egg tempera*. It is made, as you may have guessed, from chicken eggs. Dry *pigments* are mixed with the yolk of an egg and applied to the painting with a small brush. Egg tempera dries quickly and is not easy to blend on the painting’s surface. Many small brushstrokes are necessary to create shifts of color and shading. After the paint has dried for several weeks, it is permanent and can be buffed to a low sheen or varnished.

Icons have a long history in both the Greek (Eastern) and Latin (Western) Churches. They may look strange to us because we are used to photos and realistic art. But if we know the devotional purpose of icons, we can appreciate their symbolic meaning as “windows into heaven.”



Pope Francis retraces the steps of Pope Gregory the Great through Rome in the procession of 593.

The people of Rome have given another title to their beloved icon. She is now known also as, “Sancta Maria Salus Populi Mundi” – “Holy Mary, Health of the People of the Whole World.” As we go through this present uncertain time, let’s remember the suffering of the people of Italy. Let’s offer prayers for Italy and all those in the world who have already died, those suffering who have no one to care for them, and for those working to care for so many sick.



Sancta Maria Salus Populi Mundi - Ora Pro Nobis

“Holy Mary, Health of the People of the World – Pray for Us”