

Icons in Antiquity: The Symphony of the Gods
(The Lane C. McGaughy Lectureship in Ancient Studies)

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Hallie Ford Museum of Art
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Icons, that is panel paintings of sacred subjects intended for cult, are the most characteristic genre of art of Orthodox Christianity. The earliest surviving examples belong to the sixth century. Currently accepted theories trace the origin of the Christian practice of icon cult to the Roman cult of the imperial image, or to the use of funeral portraits. No one ever suspected that a fully developed religious cult of icons already existed in Antiquity. A new interdisciplinary project headed by Mathews has uncovered fresh evidence of the icon phenomenon from Egypt in Roman times that may upset previous hypotheses. The project team consists of Egyptologist Vincent Rondot (Directeur, Section Française des Antiquités du Soudan), paintings conservator Norman Muller (Princeton University), and Mathews, an historian of early Christian art. Some sixty panel paintings of the 1st-3rd centuries are under study, which in their construction, composition, iconography, and use bear strong resemblances to the Christian icons that followed them. The paintings constitute an important bridge between “pagan” Antiquity and Christianity, of interest to historians of religion as well as historians of art.