We are all familiar with the term “icon.” The word refers to the *sine qua non* for digital access, that little symbol which, when clicked, opens onto a wider virtual world. The term also conjures visions of cultural heroes: Marilyn Monroe and James Dean are “iconic,” a designation implying mythic status and a kind of immortality. Where do such ideas originate? The short answer is early Christianity. The long answer is the subject of this course.

Derived from the Greek word *eikon*, or image, the Christian icon exists as a kind of portrait, a likeness of one of the protagonists of Christian history or a depiction of one of that history’s great events. Whether large or small, painted or sculptured, their purpose is to make the absent present, and they do so quite literally. To stand before an icon is to come into its subject’s company and the experience of a direct and living encounter with the sacred. This course will examine the history of the Christian icon, beginning in the second century with the first reports of icon use and ending in the ninth century, when the Byzantine church introduced formal legislation banning the use of religious images. We will consider issues of origin, religious use, social context, presentation, together with the aesthetic strategies deployed in the thorny project of envisioning the divine. No prior knowledge of late antique or early Byzantine art is required.