



School of Moscow with Northern influences, *Dormition of the Most Holy Mother of God*, second half of 16th century, tempera and gold on panel, 70.1 x 60.5 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

The term “Dormition,” from the Latin *dormitio* meaning “eternal sleep,” refers to the Virgin Mary’s death, resurrection and ascension into heaven. The Dormition of the Virgin Mary became the ideal death for saints and pious believers, and was often depicted in Orthodox Christian imagery of eastern European and middle eastern communities. In this tempera and gold panel by the School of Moscow with Northern influences, the Virgin Mary, serene and immobile, lies on her deathbed without having suffered pain or aging, as she has died happily of pure love.

After the second coming of Christ, the Virgin became the support of the apostles and of the newly founded Church of Christ. In the expanded version of her life, the Archangel Gabriel, who is shown in front of the coffin with gilded wings, visited her three days before her death and told her of her imminent ascension to heaven. The Holy Spirit, embodied in the form of a seraphim in this work, gathered all the apostles in Gethsemane, Jerusalem, so that the Virgin Mary could give her last blessings to them and urge them to pursue Christianity's good conquest. The architectural elements in the background represent the Holy City. The pious believers surrounding Mary mourn her death but at the same time envy her destiny. The haloed figure watching over her beneath the Holy Spirit is Jesus Christ. Crucified eleven years before Mary's death at the age of fifty-nine, Jesus has returned to take his mother's soul back to heaven in the shape of a newborn baby—a reversal in their respective roles. This panel illustrates the happy fulfillment of the Virgin Mary's role on earth not only as a saint, but also as a woman—a proud mother and the head of her household, the Church.

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