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Christ the Pantocrator, Encaustic icon, 6C, Monastery of St. Catherine, Mount Sinai

INTRODUCTION

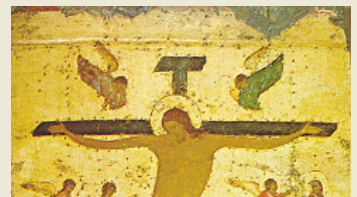
The icon, from the Greek word for image, is a particular type of church art which is indispensable to Eastern Christian spirituality. The two dimensional art pieces which grew out of the culture of the Byzantine Empire, portray only religious themes--The Trinity, angels, sacred events, or the transfigured humanity of Jesus, the Mother of God (*Theotokos*), and saints. They are found in churches, at wayside shrines, and in homes; they are used for liturgy or private devotion.

As liturgical art, icons are not just decoration, but a visual aid for worship and part of the liturgy. Rather than personal works of art that seek to express an individual artist's view, the icon expresses the historical church, its traditions, and Scripture. They are made and used in an atmosphere of prayer, bringing the people of God into an encounter with his presence. The artist is not so concerned about exterior resemblance to the subject, as to capturing the essence and spirit of the person or event portrayed. Strict rules of subject and technique secure a timeless and universal quality of the icon which expresses the mystery of the divine. Since authenticity is essential in an icon, there are a few classic forms which are repeated, and yet one cannot claim that icons are only copies. They seek to express the one and only revelation of God, inviting the viewer to adapt to God's manifestation of beauty rather than a human interpretation of it. The process of development is not how to be different, but how to be better.

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.THEOLOGY OF ICONS

Theology, the study of God in words, and iconography, the study of God in images, are two major expressions of one single faith, or we might say that an icon is a visible gospel. Eastern Christians do not emphasize the "word" as much as Western Christians do, but experience God as BEAUTY which reveals divine order. In making icons, therefore, the artist attempts to show



this beauty and glory of God in relation to the human person, and human life immersed in God transfigured by his presence.

The theology of the icon is based on the Incarnation, the revelation of the Image of God in the human form of Jesus Christ. This first icon was one made without human hands and revealed in the temple of Christ's body. By imitating the divine artist, the iconographer not only participates in sacred creation, but theologically asserts the reality of Jesus' humanity.

The icon of God likewise exists in each of us, for we, too, are made in God's image. This gives man the ability to communicate with God, to be transformed by his presence, and become like God, participating in his divine character. As a bridge of prayer between God and the human person, an icon gives the viewer the occasion to commune with the divine.

Icons of the sacred not only set an atmosphere for prayer, but by contemplating the holiness of the person represented in the icon, one can experience the presence of God which is "contagious." One becomes aware of praying and worshipping in the presence of angels and saints. Icons are used to enhance the beauty of the church, but also to teach us about our faith initially and then to remind us of this teaching. By bringing us in contact with holy persons, we are enthused to imitate them, helping to transform and sanctify us. Ultimately the icon is a means of worshipping God and venerating his saints.

The painted wood or wall has no value in itself if the believer is not put in a relationship with God. The icon is not just a symbol or reminder of a holy person, but has the character of an epiphany, manifesting the presence of God through the transfigured subject of the icon who is shown as redeemed and participating in God's light. These people revealed the image of God in their lives in an eminent way. Now they invite the viewer into a communion with them and through them with God. Bringing us into living encounter with the person represented, an icon becomes a door to sacred time and space.

An iconographer by definition is Christian, for he attempts to portray the dogmas of his faith. Because the artist does not reproduce what he sees but what he understands about the essence of life, he has to be a person

transformed by prayer in order to perceive a universe that has been transfigured through Christ. God is asked to inspire the artist and guide his hand. Because God is the true artist, icons are not signed by the iconographer.

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HISTORY

According to legend, Jesus himself produced the first icon. King Abgar of



*The Crucifixion,
Master Dionysius, 15C.*



*The Myrrh-bearing
Women at the Tomb,
End of the 15C*

According to legend, a leper, heard of Jesus' healing powers, and sent a messenger to bring Jesus back to heal him. Along with a letter declining the invitation because of his pressing mission, Jesus sent the *MANDILION*, a cloth on which the image of his face was miraculously reproduced.



Through this icon Agbar was cured.



*Christ the Pantocrator,
Unknown Origin: Possibly
Russian,
Possibly 18C.*



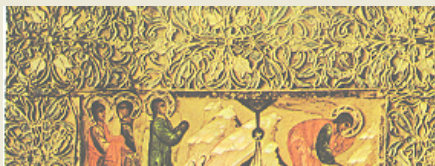
*The Vladimir Mother of God,
Byzantine Icon of the 11 or 12C.*

The second icon is attributed to St. Luke who portrayed the Mother of God holding her son. It is significant that this first icon of a saint was made from a model, not from the artist's imagination, so that it is an authentic image of the holy persons. There are even icons of this event that show Mary and Jesus posing for Luke as he paints.

The icon became most developed and established in Constantinople, but there is evidence of icons from the second century. Because of the iconoclastic struggle most icons before the ninth century were destroyed and now the earliest ones we have are from the fifth century. The icons combined Greek, Roman and Middle Eastern influences, quickly becoming an abstract, stylized form of art.

A combination of theological, political, and cultural elements contributed to the eighth century controversy over the veneration of icons. Emperor Leo III issued an edict in 730 ordering the destruction of icons, bringing into full blossom the iconoclastic movement. The

iconoclasts, who wanted to destroy the icons on the charge that they were idols, were in fact Docetists who denied the reality of the incarnation. Germanus, Patriarch of Constantinople, and St. John Damascene were among the famous defendants of the veneration of icons. In the west Pope Gregory II called a synod in Rome which denounced Leo, and Pope Gregory IV established the feast of All Saints to underscore the importance of venerating holy persons who revealed the image of God. In defending the icons, the Church was defending the very foundation of the Christian faith.



In 787 the Seventh Ecumenical Council, the second council held at Nicea, made an important distinction between the worship we give to God and the veneration we give to saints and sacred objects. Finally,



God and the veneration we give to saints and sacred objects. Finally through the empress Theodora, the veneration of icons was publicly re-established in 843. In memory of this event the Orthodox Church celebrates the feast of Orthodoxy every year on the first Sunday of Lent.

The Nativity, Novgorodian School, 16C

It took a while to recover from the iconoclastic persecution, so the development of icons was steady but slow in the ninth century. From the tenth century when Russia became Christian, it became the center of traditional iconography. Byzantine artists traveled to Russia to share the treasure of icons, but it quickly developed its own distinctive schools, including those of Pskov, Novgorod, Moscow, and Tver. Andrei Rublev (1360/70-1430), who studied under the Byzantine master Theophanes the Greek, is the greatest of the Russian artists.



*Andrei Rublev,
Icon of the Holy Trinity, 15C*

The three periods of greatest development in iconography are:

- 1) The Justinian era of the sixth century;
- 2) The First Byzantine Renaissance in the tenth to twelfth centuries under the Macedonian and Comnenian dynasties, during which iconography began in Russia; and
- 3) The Second Byzantine renaissance of the fourteenth century under the Palaeologan dynasty, which is the Golden Age of Icons. With Greek, Russian, Romanian, Serbian, and Bulgarian monasteries, Mount Athos is the place today to experience the variety of schools of icons.



The Transfiguration, End of the 14C, Theophane the Greek

This article was written by Sr. Marcia Vinje for a Mariology course at IMRI.

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