

THE ICON¹

by Aidan Hart

The last decades have seen a remarkable growth of interest in Byzantine and Russian icons. What are these icons, how are they used, and how do they relate to the world of art?

The word icon is Greek and means image. The emphasis of an icon is therefore on the subject rather than the image itself, the image acting as a mediator between viewer and subject. As we shall see, the fact that Orthodox icons depict people a world radiant with light has a profound effect on how they are painted and used.

The etymology of the word "art" resonates with that of icon, and suggests art's spiritual roots. The Latin, *ars artis*, stems from two Proto-Indo-European words meaning "to fitly join". The primitive aim of art is to join things together. Anthropologists agree that most ancient art fulfilled a religious function, and so this joining was not just to create harmonies of line, form or colour, but to help unite people with another realm, a higher realm. Indeed, the word religion means to bind together, and culture is an expression of a society's cult, of what it worships.

Orthodox icons fulfil two main functions, one liturgical, to do with their use, and the other initiatory, to do with their painterly style. The faithful pray in front of icons, and kiss them as a means of expressing their love for the holy persons depicted. They carry icons in procession, and hang them in all manner of places as reminders that all places are holy and suitable for prayer. They consider icons as prayer expressed in colour rather than word, and as one means of embracing the physical world as an integral part of spiritual life.

A second function of icons is to initiate the viewer into a deeper, more spiritual way of seeing the world. Icon painters attempt to depict the world transfigured, radiant with the light of God's presence. They do not therefore use chiaroscuro because their subjects are bathed in and radiant with divine light. Unusual forms of perspective are employed in order to compel the viewer to see beyond what the rational faculty can comprehend. With inverse perspective lines converge not in a point on the horizon but in the viewer, passing not through a fictitious space but through the actual space between icon and viewer. In multi-view perspective objects are depicted as though viewed from many angles at once, seen as they are in God and not from a limited human perspective. These and the many other techniques employed are thus not the result of ignorance, but are the expression of a highly developed world view.

Technique

Because panel icons are handled and touched they need to be robust. This explains why they are painted on wood rather than canvas.

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The preferred medium until around the eighth century was encaustic, in which pigment is mixed with either hot wax or a wax emulsion. Examples of 6th and 7th century encaustic icons can be found in the monastery of St Catherine's, Sinai.

For reasons we can only speculate upon, encaustic was then replaced with egg tempera. In this method egg yolk is mixed with pigment and painted onto a gessoed surface. Gesso is a mixture of an animal glue and an inert fine white powder, such as marble dust or chalk. Usually a layer of open weave cloth is glued to the panel first, to give the gesso greater stability. The gesso is then applied in ten or more thin layers and sanded to produce a smooth and absorbent surface. The areas not to be painted are then gilded. If the gold is to be burnished a method called water gilding is used. First about six layers of glue mixed with a red clay called bole are brushed on, then sanded. Water mixed with alcohol is applied an area at a time, and the gold leaf laid down. After about an hour the gold is polished with an agate or hæmatite burnisher.

The main pigments used for the painting process are earths - notably the ochres, umbers, sienna's and terre verte. For the more brilliant colours, ground stones such as azurite, malachite, lapis lazuli and cinnabar are utilized. A limited number of artificial pigments have been used in the past, notably lead white and vermilion. Although some contemporary iconographers paint with modern pigments such as cadmiums, these generally appear garish and out of keeping with the harmony required of an icon.

Unlike oil paint, egg tempera dries very quickly, which allows translucent layers to be built up rapidly. When the paint is applied thinly enough the gesso gives brilliance to the image: light penetrates the paint layers, then reflects back out from the white base.

There are two main methods used to build up the paint layers. Probably the oldest is the "membrane" technique, described in the work *On Diverse Arts* written around 1122 by Theophilus, a German monk craftsman describing Byzantine techniques. In this process the image is first painted in dark monochrome and then covered by semi-transparent glazes of the mid-tone (or the monochrome is sometimes painted on top of the mid-tone). Thereafter the lights are built up, shades reinforced, and warm tones blended in. This method has been revived among some iconographers in the last twenty years, in large part through the work of the Russian icon painter, Father Zenon (Theodor).

In the second method, the proplasmos technique, the darkest shade of each colour is first laid down as a flat area. Thereafter, layers of increasing lightness are built up. The painting thereby progresses from dark to light.

History

Although the icon tradition is now associated with Byzantium and Slavic nations, it was until the Renaissance shared by Western Europe in such forms as Roman, Celtic, Anglo Saxon, Carolingian and Romanesque art. All these cultures expressed the same theocentric world view but each in their unique way.

The stylistic history of icons falls broadly into five periods. From the first to the fourth century Christian images did not greatly differ stylistically from contemporary pagan art. Among the earliest Christian images are catacomb paintings and stone sarcophagi. Although more cursory than Pompeii frescoes, the Christian catacomb paintings diverge little from their neighbouring pagan tombs; only the subject matter - often mythological subjects alluding to Christian truths - betrays their Christian origins.

From the fifth century to the beginning of the iconoclastic controversy in 726 more abstraction is introduced in an attempt to suggest spiritual realities. Eyes are enlarged somewhat, figures are more frontal, and drapery simplified. However, in comparison with contemporary mosaics, panel icons still retain a reasonably strong link with the naturalism of the Romano-Hellenistic tradition. The oldest extant panel icons, dating from the sixth century, are stylistically akin to Romano-Egyptian funerary portraits of the first and second centuries, and like them are painted in encaustic. In the illustrated work of the Virgin and Child seated between St. Theodore and St. George, we find Hellenistic and iconographic styles side by side. The angels are rendered quite naturalistically and dynamically, whereas the Virgin and two martyrs - where personal encounter is clearly the aim - are more frontal, abstracted, and simplified.

From the final resolution of iconoclasm in 843 until around the seventeenth century, Byzantine, Coptic, Georgian and then Russian iconography refine the forms we now view as characteristic of icons, such as a flattened picture plane, a variety of perspective systems within the one image, and altered proportions. Drapery folds are transformed either into straight lines, or by contrast, accentuated into 'wet fold' forms, a style found not only in eastern but also in western art, most notably in Romanesque work.

The fourth period - one of decline into naturalism or sentimentality from the icon tradition's point of view - begins in the West with the humanist Renaissance, in Byzantium with the fall of Constantinople in 1453, and in Russia with the secularizing policies of Tsar Peter the Great (reigning from 1682-1725).

The fifth period begins around the beginning of the twentieth century, when we see a revival of traditional iconography in Orthodox countries and a growing interest in icons in the West. The revival in Russia began in large part with the cleaning of old icons to reveal their full brilliance, and the writings of such scholars as Pavel Florensky. In Greece the writer and iconographer Photius Kontoglou almost single-handedly initiated the change. In the West, interest was stimulated with early modernists such as Matisse and Kandinsky affirming the power of icons, and then with exhibitions in major museums, scholarly publications, and the immigration of iconographers. Numerous icon courses are now held in Europe and America, and a great many churches and cathedrals - Catholic and Anglican as well as Orthodox - are commissioning new icons and frescoes. A major challenge ahead of western iconographers is how to foster an indigenous form of iconography, on a par with past masterpieces such as the Bury St Edmund's Bible.