

**THE ICON AND ABSTRACTION:
How icons manifest and veil the invisible**
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Thanks

First, I would like to thank those who have invited me to give this talk: St Marys College and its Institute for Theology, Imagination and the Arts; Sterling Yates of the St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology; and Natalia Nikitin for introducing me to them in the first place.

INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS THE ICON TRADITION?

Our title today is *The Icon and Abstraction: How icons manifest and veil the invisible*. In general, what I want to explore with you this afternoon is the metaphysical profundity of the icon tradition. I want to show how it challenges so many of our contemporary perceptions of art, and at the same time how its forms predate and have inspired many modern art movements, movements whose features are often erroneously thought to be novel and original.

But before we progress further, just what do I mean by the icon tradition? Historically, it is the liturgical art of Eastern Christendom of the past two millennia, and of the West until around the thirteenth or fourteenth century. From that time, new world views began to arise that led to profound changes in Western art.

After centuries of absence from Western Europe, from beginning of the twentieth century icons have enjoyed a resurgence of interest, both within non-Orthodox churches and in the world of gallery art. The great exponent of early modernism, Roger Fry, even described as neo-Byzantine such great artists as Cezanne, Van Gogh, and Gauguin. Why neo-Byzantine? Because he saw they shared with the icon such qualities of truth to the flatness of the picture plane, abstraction as a manifestation of reality, and an emphasis on art as reflecting *how* we see and not only *what* we see.

Three things are central to understanding the icon tradition: it has a liturgical function; it mediates; it transforms. Let us look at these three things in turn.

1.Liturgy.

Icons are liturgical, that is, they are there to do a job, to work (*leitourgia/λειτουργία* is Greek for 'public work'). They have a practical function within the community. An icon does not hang alone on a gallery wall but is an integral part of a sacred drama. This drama is multi-sensual and runs through time. In Orthodox worship we experience divine things not only through the spoken word, but also through incense smelt, icons touched and seen, Holy Communion eaten and drunk. The icon is a participant in the yearly rhythm

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feasts and fasts, of saints' days, processions, censings, and veneration. The liturgical arts operate as a door, not just as instruments of private aesthetic delectation. They are used, not just looked at. They are literally 'loved to bits'.

2.Mediation.

Eikon is the Greek word for image. An image presupposes three realities: the image; the subject imaged; and the viewer of the image. Holy icons are therefore, above all else, mediators. They exist to bring people into personal relationship with their holy subject, be it Christ, a saint, an angel, or a sacred event. In a very real sense, the aim of liturgical art denotes the highest calling of art, a word whose etymology means 'to fitly join together'. On entering a church, an Orthodox Christian will kiss icons as a means of greeting and honouring the people whom they depict. In the words of St Basil the Great and quoted in the edicts of The Seventh Ecumenical Council of 787AD that defended icons against iconoclasm, 'the honour paid to the image passes to the prototype'.

3.Transformation.

The form or style of icons encourages a transformation of our world view to help see what we don't see. *How* icons depict things is almost as important as *what* they depict. The style of icons show saints and the whole material world in their transfigured state. Icons are thus eschatological, a taste of the age to come. As well as affirming past events, such as the Incarnation of God, icons give a glimpse of the age to come as it breaks through into our present, like sun rays through spring clouds.

One way to illustrate this vision is to consider the story of the bush seen by Moses that burnt without being consumed. The fire he saw was none other than the flame of the divine presence within the bush. This fire is present within everything, from stone to angel, and only the purified see it. The Scriptural book of Hebrews says that 'the Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, *sustaining all things by his powerful word*' (Hebrews 1.3). The writer is saying here that God the Word or Logos not only created everything but continues to sustain and direct everything by His logoi. The word translated here as powerful 'word' is *rhemati* in the Greek, which denotes the spoken and living word. This living word is the fire in the bush. It is the origin of an icon's abstraction.

Christian belief in the divine presence in all things is not pantheism but pan-entheism: not God *is* all things, but God *in* all things. Icons embody this vision of the world as theophany, a vision which explains their abstract qualities.

Many great artists outside the icon tradition have of course also intuited this sense of the numinous. We have the famous lines from Willaim Blake's *Auguries of Innocence*:

*To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,*

*Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.*

And the painter Samuel Palmer:

I cannot think it [creation] as other than the veil of Heaven, through which her divine features are dimly smiling; the setting of the table before the feast; the symphony before the tune; the prologue of the drama, a dream, and antepast, and proscenium of eternity.

(Letter to John Linnell, 21 December 1828)

In ancient times men saw God everywhere. The sun was a burning witness; the moon was a mystic lamp; the stars sang together, and all the winds were the breathings of His mouth.

Palmer saw the Kent countryside as a theophany:

The fields and the sky were not merely pleasant but sacred: hedgerows became aisles, and hayricks, altars.

In the summary, the basis of the icon tradition is the Orthodox teaching that mankind is created for relationship, for love. This is what underlies these three roles of liturgy, mediation, and transformation. Church Fathers have interpreted the phrase from Genesis: 'Let us make man in our image' as the Holy Trinity: 'Let us' in the plural. To be in God's image is therefore to be in the image of the communal Trinity. Art exists to foster this relationship, to 'fitly join together'.

GALLERY ART AND LITURGICAL ART

To bring the icon tradition into the context of contemporary art I thought it would be useful to walk through some of the modern assumptions about art that are so prevalent that we don't think to question their validity. I want to compare each of these presuppositions with the icon's metaphysics of the image. I aim to show that they are not at all universal but are quite recent, and I would say, often quite shallow and not worthy of art. I want to be an iconoclast of such ideas, and see them replaced with a more empowering, authentic, and fruitful vision that has been tested and refined over many centuries. This world view can be seen to various degrees within many other traditions, such as traditional Chinese brush painting.

In setting this aim I do understand that the role of liturgical art is different from that of gallery art, and that therefore it is perhaps unfair to compare them; the former is for use in worship while the latter is not. However, gallery art might be described as a philosophical quest, an investigation into the nature of things and therefore by its nature is at least quasi-religious.

Also, although icons have a clearly religious and ceremonial role, they are nonetheless a form of art, and as we shall see, a very profound one. The icon tradition has been around for two thousand years and so we ignore what it has to say at our peril. And a study of the icon tradition need not be a study of some obscure and distant past, for it has influenced a great deal of modern art, from Kandinsky to Andy Warhol. Many elements of this more ancient way of seeing inspired the formal innovations of the founders of modern

abstractionism, namely: Constantin Brancusi, the father of modern abstract sculpture; Wassily Kandinsky, the father of modern abstract painting, followed by Kazimir Malevich; and Igor Stravinsky, a pivotal composer in modernist music. It is not by chance that all these four founders of modernism came from traditionally Orthodox countries and were open about the influence of the Orthodox Church and its art on their 'innovations'.

So, let us begin our iconoclasm!

Originality means to be different from everything else.

False. Originality is to tap into the origin of things, which means, ultimately, the divine origin of things. Because the divine is infinite and humans are finite, each artist will naturally reflect a different feature of this infinite reality, but novelty is not their aim. It is this quest to depict the infinite that produces works of genuine newness and freshness, and not a deliberate attempt to be different and novel.

This explains why iconographers do not usually sign their work; they do not seek to impose their novelty on the viewer. They seek only to create paths for them that will open vistas. The emphasis in the icon tradition is not therefore on the image/icon, let alone its novelty, but on its holy subject, on bringing together the viewer with the sacred person depicted. The holy subject is the origin of the sacred artist's originality. And originality does thrive within the tradition. An experienced eye can usually date an icon by its style alone and determine in which region of a country it was made.

Realism is equivalent to representationalism.

False. The reality of the burning bush that Moses encountered was not only the bush but also the divine fire. A 'realistic' image of this bush would therefore use abstract means to indicate the fire as well as the material bush. Of course, being divine, this fire cannot be adequately depicted in mere paint, but the fact of its existence can be. A wise artist will not depict such fire like any earthly fire but will use abstract means to reflect the peculiarity of this fire. Straight naturalism is not realism, it is the shell of the real.

This leads us to our third point: abstraction.

Abstractionism is departure from reality

False. The word abstract means to draw out, and so authentic abstraction is the discernment and manifestation of some objective reality, something that does exist. An abstract in academia is a summary or distillation of a longer paper. It is simpler than the whole complex paper but captures its essence. In the words of Constantin Brancusi, 'simplicity is complexity distilled'. He railed against those who thought his sculptures departed from reality, that they were 'abstract' in the pejorative sense of the word:

They are imbeciles who call my work abstract; that which they call abstract is the most realist, because what is real is not the exterior form but the idea, the essence of things.²

This more original meaning of abstraction explains the simplification that one sees in icons. Here are three examples:

² C. Brancusi, Aphorisms (c. 1957), 'Propos de Brancusi' (collected by C.G. Guilbert), Prisme des Artes (Paris) 12 (May 1957), p. 6; trans. from H. B. Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art*, p. 365.

1. Flatness of the picture plane. The icon acknowledges that it is but an image; it doesn't attempt to replace the prototype through hyper-naturalism. It does not represent so much as *re-present*. It therefore remains true to its imageness by not attempting to surpass the flatness of its material reality. It is a painting on a two-dimensional surface and does not attempt to create the illusion of three-dimensional space, as for example did the Italian Renaissance painters.

2. Free from the restrictions of depth perspective, this flatness gives to the artist much greater freedom to maximally express the theological and spiritual essence of the event or person. The otherworldly nature of the icon's two dimensionality, its strangeness, also helps awaken the viewer to the existence of a different mode of seeing. Mathematicians can express a fourth or higher dimension in a graph by collapsing two of the other dimensions into one, thus freeing a space for this fourth dimension. A sacrifice is needed.

3. Icons adjust proportions to express the inner spiritual state of the holy person. For example, the organs of *reception* such as the eyes and nose are slightly enlarged or elongated to emphasize that the saint is above all a contemplator of God and smells the fragrance of paradise. By contrast, their organs of *expression*, like lips and gestures, are reduced because the saint is so full of divine power and wisdom that their words and actions are potent; a little is of great effect.

Tradition and skill stifle creativity

This is blatantly false in other areas of life, and there is no reason to believe it should be otherwise in art. Tradition means in both Latin and Greek to 'hand on'. Great scientific discoveries, such as the theory of relativity and quantum mechanics, may have the appearance of spontaneous flashes of genius. In reality, they were the final stage in a long journey that consisted of earlier discoveries which were 'handed on'. Einstein first read and digested the discoveries handed him by earlier scientists, saw the patterns, and then derived his laws of relativity from these patterns. A genius does not invent something from nothing, but something from something. Each of us present today are, after all, the result of tradition: our parents handed on their chromosomes, which combined to form a unique pattern and person. Tradition produces variety; it does not quell it.

Tradition does indeed limit lateral freedoms, but it also opens vertical vistas. It is more like the guiding banks of a river than a damn. An iconographer's function is to create portals between a higher world and this world. This is an aim that certainly limits the artist's *lateral* freedom, but it is a very high aim, and one with great vertical freedom. It is akin to the portrait painter who is restricted laterally by the need to make a likeness of the person before them. But this very limitation is the key to originality. They must muster all their creative skills to do justice to this profound mystery of the human person before them, and they will do this differently to another portraitist.

The liturgical function of a particular icon also limits what medium they will use. But this limitation opens more doors than it closes. For example, I was commissioned by King

Charles to design and oversee the making of the Anointing Screen to use in his Coronation. Practicalities of its function determined that it had to be fabric. Time limitations also meant that it needed to be mainly embroidered rather than tapestry, and that parts of it be in applique to ensure it was made on time. These very limitations compelled creative solutions.

Sadly, under the delusion of not wanting to stultify creativity, most art schools have ceased to teach drawing to any high standard, or even not teach it at all. The resultant lack of drawing skill has limited the poor students; they are deprived of a language to express themselves. I find this is the case with most of the fine art graduates whom I teach iconography. One would have hoped that three or more years of studying art full-time would have left them skilled in the basics of their craft. Alas, this is not usually the case. And this is not the students' fault; it is the fault of the art institution's delusion that craft limits creativity.

Art is self-expression

Although expression comes through the 'self' of the unique artist, the concept of art as primarily the expression of self, of the self as the source of the art, is a very recent concept. We can trace its emergence numerically, as it were. While acknowledging the perils of oversimplification, I think the following overview might be useful.

1. In most ancient cultures, including Western Europe up until the Italian Renaissance, art was understood as part of a threesome: a higher reality; the image; and the viewer. In this hierarchy, artists were the priestly, prophetic, and royal makers of mediatory objects. The artist's role was to create works that mediated between the heavenly and the earthly. This is why the great majority of old art that we see in museums is religious or ceremonial. Even the naturalistic Roman portraits—*imagines*—were in most cases made for rituals of ancestor worship. African masks were worn as part of religious rituals. Egyptian art largely served religious and ceremonial purposes.
2. A shift away from this triadic understanding occurred with the Italian Renaissance: man and the created realm rather than God was taken to be the measure of all things. For a while religion remained the ostensible subject matter, since the Church remained the main commissioner. However, in reality the artist's new role came to be the representation of this world and not the heavenly. The triad of heaven, image, earth, began to be reduced to a dyad of image and earth. Artists were therefore praised according to the verisimilitude of their art to the material world. This new aim led to the development of such mechanisms as the mathematical vanishing-point perspective system, greater naturalism, and later, chiaroscuro. The artist became the secular scientist. This trend accelerated as commissions increasingly came from the rising middle classes of Northern Europe and not from the church.
3. A further shift occurred in the late nineteenth century. Many artists were bored with the opacity of this hyper-scientific naturalism, by now epitomised in the Academies and Salons. Artists such as Paul Cezanne (1839-1906) and the Impressionists began to concentrate not so much on the *object* of vision as on how they *saw* the object. Vision itself is now a major theme, as much as the object of the vision. Looking at a Van Gogh

painting one sees the world through Van Gogh's eye, and it is a prism that intensifies every colour. Like Moses, our eyes are opened to see the fire and not just the bush. Or looking at a Monet, one sees light as much as object that this light illuminates. In the famous words of Cezanne, 'Monet is only an eye - but my God, what an eye!'

Over the following decades this greater self-awareness and rebellion against the shackles of hyper-naturalism bifurcated in two directions, one religious or quasi-religious (and thus, back to the three), and the other self-indulgent, and thus descending into the monadic.

We shall discuss the first path, the religious path of early modernism in a minute. For the self-centred path, the ultimate question that emerged was: what is the self? Does it exist for relationship, with God at the centre (the heliocentric approach), or is it me-centred (the geocentric approach)? For Freud the self was something fluid, not a fixed identity but influenced by subterranean currents of the unconscious. For the existentialists, it was something the individual could fashion according to their will.

Whatever the subtleties, from the point of the view of the icon tradition such a monadic and geocentric world view can lead only to death and misery. Mankind is created for relationship with the other, not for competition against the other. In both Greek and Latin, the words for person—*prosopon* and *persona*—are the same as face, and the face exists for relationship. This leads us to our next misconception...

Religion confines art and reduces creativity

In fact, it is just the opposite. Religion inspires art because of its lofty subject. Directly and indirectly it helped beget the modernist abstractionist movements. Unfortunately, the secular nature of most of art history scholarship seems embarrassed by any sign of religious intent in modern art. Our art history books tend to gloss over the spiritual motivation behind much modernism and its predecessors. But it is undeniably there. Van Gogh, for example, wrote to his brother Theo that:

*I want to paint men and women with a touch of the eternal, whose symbol was once the halo, which we try to convey by the very radiance and vibrancy of our colouring.*³

And the founders of modern abstractionism aimed to manifest the spiritual essence of their subjects. The founder of modern abstract sculpture, Constantin Brancusi was a member of the Orthodox Church, and wrote that

*They are imbeciles who call my work abstract; that which they call abstract is the most realist, because what is real is not the exterior form but the idea, the essence of things.*⁴

³ Vincent van Gogh, Letter to Theo van Gogh, 3 September 1888, in *The Letters of Vincent Van Gogh*, p. 394.

⁴ C. Brancusi, *Aphorisms* (c. 1957), 'Propos de Brancusi' (collected by C.G. Guilbert), *Prisme des Artes* (Paris) 12 (May 1957), p. 6; trans. from H. B. Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art*, p. 365.

*Look at things until you really see them. Those who sit close to God have already done so.*⁵

Once when his friend Petre Pandrea was praising his sculpture, Brancusi retorted that all he had done was to set up in his Paris studio a branch office of his homeland's Tismana Orthodox Monastery.

Wassily Kandinsky, the founder of modern abstract painting, wrote his influential *On the Spiritual in Art*. Although his metaphysics were more esoteric and universalist, there is no doubting the role played by his homeland's Russian Orthodoxy—its spirituality, ritual, mysticism and iconography.

*The artist must train not only his eye, but his soul.*⁶

*The world sounds. It is a cosmos of spiritually affective beings. Thus, dead matter is living spirit.*⁷

We know from his book *Looks on the Past*, that Kandinsky was deeply moved by the shimmering colours he met when visiting Orthodox churches of his homeland, with their frescoes and multi-sensual worship. He felt he was inside a painting, an idea that was central to his later abstract work.

Other religious artistic influences of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries include Japanese prints and African masks, the former inspired by Shintoism and Buddhism, the latter made for religious rituals. We can also mention those artists influenced by the pseudo-mysticism of Theosophy, such as Piet Mondrian. Theosophy was a newly created hotch-potch of Orthodox mysticism, Neoplatonism, Gnosticism, and Eastern religions. Though short-lived and confused, Theosophy at least offered a contrast to the stale air of the Academies.

The self and the lonely artist

We mentioned earlier the nineteenth century shift of emphasis from subject matter to how we see the subject matter, and that this splits in two directions, one toward a more spiritual vision, the other in the direction of self-expression. The latter gives birth to the concept of the lonely artist, the artist *contra mundi*, the rebel, the artist in the garret, art as autobiography. This is a shift from triad to the monad.

Such a concept of art as self-expression begged the question: what is the self? Is it owned and determined by the individual, or is it a conglomeration of his or her past? Is it inherited? Is it a self-contained entity that looks out onto the world, like a cat sitting on a windowsill looking out on the world, or is it intertwined with that world? Is the self permanent, or is it fluid? Is relationship with others a person's garden or his enemy? This is perhaps *the* question of modern art. For the American 'sublime abstractionist' painter Barnett Newman the self was real, and mystical. 'The self, terrible and constant, is for

⁵ C. Brancusi, *Aphorisms*, trans. in Calinic Argatu, *Peace and Rejoicing with Constantin Brancusi*, p. 24.

⁶ W. Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, trans. M. T. H. Sadler, p. 56.

⁷ W. Kandinsky, 'On the Question of Form', trans. in W. Kandinsky, *Complete Writings on Art*, trans. K. C. Lindsey and P. Vergo, p. 240.

me the subject matter of painting' he wrote.⁸ For him, the stripping away of representationalism was not an experiment with form, but a quest for a union of the artist's self with form. For all his respect for Mondrian's abstractionism, Newman felt that this became a style that obscured metaphysical content. Newman sort a union of both, as did Mark Rothko (1903-1970). The point is that for both some form of religion or spirituality was key experiencing and reflecting this sublimity: 'Without monsters and gods, art cannot enact a drama'⁹ saif Rothko.

If the artist is willing to follow, this descent away from the three down towards the single will always lead to a door to the beyond. For Newman, this journey led him back to his Jewish roots, the Book of Genesis, the Talmud, and in particular, the mystic writings of the Kabbalah.

The idea of a self-existent point that is 'the end of the line' has been challenged in science as well. According to quantum mechanics, in the tiny world of the quanta the interaction between the observer and the system changes that system's properties. Before observation, quantum particles can exist in multiple states, but the act of observation forces them into a single, definite state. The very act of looking creates, or at least selects, the state of the object observed. The concept of a self-existent reality independent of the viewer is lost. Or to apply this insight from physics more positively, everything exists in relationship and depends on it for the manifestation of its identity. If we have not returned to the three, we have at least to the two: the observer and the observed.

'Hell is other people'

'Hell is other people.' In this much-quoted final line of the play *No Exit*, Jean-Paul Sartre was, according to Sarah Bakewell, asserting that

In life, we can still do something to manage the impression we make; in death, this freedom goes and we are left entombed in other people's memories and perceptions.
(From *At the Existentialist Cafe*, by Sarah Bakewell)

Since the human person is created for relationship, any artistic endeavour based on the expression of some isolated self is doomed to frustration and confusion. The self is not an isolated unit to be found, like a lost ring; it exists and thrives only in relationship. To thrive, art and the artist need to be characterised by relationship and love. Such love overcomes the slavery to the judging and isolating stare of others about which Sartre writes. Through love, the individual is no longer enslaved to the caricatures of others. Through love, other people are my heaven, not my hell.

We see this truth graphically expressed in Orthodox church interiors covered in wall paintings or mosaics. Through these images that totally surround them, the congregation, individual worshippers are given the lively sense of the communion of the saints, that they are citizens of the city, members of the Body of Christ. There is no battle between the self and others. Just as each saint depicted on the wall both bears a unique name and is in communion, so the worshipper's uniqueness is affirmed through membership of this divine-human community. Everyone, including Christ who created

⁸ Harold Rosenberg, *Barnett Newman*, New York, 1978, p.7.

⁹ Breslin, James E. B. (1993). *Mark Rothko: A Biography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

them, is looking at them. This gaze gives them life. A common prayer in the Old Testament is that God not turn his gaze away:

Hide not your face from me; do not turn your servant away in anger. (Psalm 27.9)
And hide not thy face from thy servant; for I am in trouble: hear me speedily. (Psalm 69.17)

So many of the concepts traditionally associated with art presuppose such relationship: the etymological root of the word 'art' means to 'fitly join together' (from the Proto-Indo-European *ar*); religion means to 'bind fast' one thing to another; person means face, and the face is an organ of communication and communion; tradition is to receive from another and to hand on to another; symbol is to throw together. At their most mature, all these principles are triadic. They are neither dyadic and therefore defined by opposition, nor monadic, defined by isolation.

HOW ICONS 'EXTRACT' REALITY THROUGH ABSTRACTION

Until now I have concentrated on the world view behind the icon rather than on its stylistic and artistic forms. So let's finish with a consideration of some of these forms, especially those more unusual 'abstract' elements that tend to catch people's attention.

Perspective systems

We have already mentioned the so-called inverse perspective system used in icons, but other systems are also employed. The turn of the twentieth century saw a number of Orthodox art historians who challenged linear, vanishing-point perspective as the arbiter of proper perspective, and explained the profound metaphysics behind these other perspective systems. Among these writers were Pavel Florensky¹⁰, Igor Grabar¹¹, and Pavel Muratov.¹²

1. Flatness

While affirming the goodness of the material world, icons do not attempt to create a great sense of depth. They use enough highlighting and perspective to affirm that the material world is real and good and part of the spiritual life. Nevertheless, things are kept somewhat more on a plane than in naturalistic painting. In a group icon, like that of Pentecost for example, people in the rear will be shown the same size, or sometimes even larger, than those closer. Every person is thus kept on an intimate level with the viewer. The mystery of the person overcomes the limits of physical space and distance.

Why else do icons retain this flatness? This deliberate imperfection of the image helps the viewer to pass through the icon to the persons and the events depicted. It is a door rather than a box. The aim of the icon is not to replace the subject, but to bring us into living relationship with that subject. This explains why statues are not used in the icon

¹⁰. Most notably in his lecture 'Reverse Perspective', delivered in 1920, available in English translation in *Florensky, Beyond Vision*

¹¹ Various essays, and in *The History of Russian Art (Istoriia russkogo iskusstva)*, a multi-volume work begun 1910s.

¹² He was the editor 1914–15 of the elite art journal *So*, and writer on icons in such works as *Thirty-Five Russian Primitives* (Paris: A La Vieille Russie, 1931).

tradition. Their three dimensionality makes them too self-contained. Sculpture is utilized, but it is base relief.

Flatness can also be seen as a deliberate imperfection that constantly reminds the viewer that the image is not the reality but a door to its prototype. As in the apophatic and kataphatic terminology of written theology, the style of icons remind us that the image is unlike its prototype as well as like it.

There is also an honesty to this flatness. It avoids the pretence of making the picture plane what it can never be, a three-dimensional object, let alone the real thing itself. This honesty to the picture plane is the same insight that inspired the American Colour Field painters, such as Morris Louis (1912-1962), Clyfford Still (1904-1980), and Barnett Newman (1905-1970)

Planarity also gives much greater freedom to arrange things according to their spiritual importance rather than limiting their position in three-dimensional space. It gives greater freedom to arrange figures according to invisible geometric structures shapes. Icons of Christ's birth, for example, often arrange figures in three bands to represent the heavenly, earthly and unitary realms. The earthly participants might be contained within a square at the bottom, while the heavenly participants such as the angels and the star are set within a semicircle at the top. In this icon, the Christ Child sits both in the centre of the circle and the centre of the top edge of the square. He unites heaven and earth. This symbolic arrangement would not be possible if the event were depicted naturalistically, with figures receding toward the distance.

2. Inverse perspective.

With inverse perspective the lines of a building do not converge at a point on the horizon, inside the painting, but instead they converge on us, the viewers. This serves to include us in the action depicted. As Gervase Mathews puts it:

In the Renaissance system of perspective the picture is conceived as a window opening on to a space beyond...The Byzantine mosaic or picture opens onto the space before it. The 'picture space' of Byzantine art was primarily that of the church or palace room in which it was placed, since art was considered a function of architecture.¹³

3. Multi-view perspective

Sometimes a building is shown as though seen simultaneously from left and right, below and above. This helps us to see things as God sees them, and to see them as they are in themselves and not merely as they appear from our single viewpoint.

The same multi-view perspective is sometimes applied to time, where the same person is depicted more than once in the same image, such as with Christ in the Nativity icon. The icon tradition can also place an important person in an event at which they were not historically present, but in which they later came to participate in spiritually. One such example is Saint Paul in the Pentecost icon. He was not even a believer at the time. He only converted some years later. In this way, the icon shows things viewed in divine time (*kairos* in Greek) and not merely chronological time (*kronos*).

¹³ Gervase Mathew, "Byzantine Aesthetics", (John Murray, London, 1963), page 30.

4. Isometry

In this approach the sides and edges of an object are depicted parallel, neither converging nor diverging. Isometry thereby affirms how a thing is in itself, rather than how it might *appear* to us. All things have been called into unity in Christ, and this unity preserves and strengthens the integrity of each thing rather than reducing it to a numerical one. Unity presupposes relationship which in turn presupposes otherness, though not separateness.

5. Hierarchical perspective

Often a personage who is more important than others will be enlarged. A typical example of this is the Virgin in the Nativity icon. Conversely, someone might be made particularly small to make a spiritual point. The Christ Child is often depicted overly small in Nativity icons, to emphasize God the Word's humility in becoming man for our sakes.

6. Mathematical vanishing point perspective

Although inverse perspective is more commonly used, we do find instances where lines converge toward somewhere in the icon's distance. However, this is not pursued in the systematic, mathematical way devised first by the Renaissance painter, architect and sculptor Alberti Brunelleschi. In fact, when this system is used there are as many convergence points as there are objects. As with multi-view perspective, the viewer is transported beyond the static vantage point assumed by mathematical perspective and presupposes instead a much more dynamic experience.

Many art historians, such as Gervase Matthews, have noted that Byzantine descriptors of church interiors often speak of not knowing where to settle their gaze. Beauty for Byzantines consisted not so much in the contentment of static balance as in the awe and wonder of ravishing movement. Paul the Deacon's description of Hagia Sophia runs thus:

Thus, as you direct your gaze towards the eastern arches, you behold a never-ceasing wonder. And upon all of them, above this covering of many curves, there rises, as it were, another arch borne on air, spreading out its swelling fold, and it rises to the top, to that high rim upon whose back is planted the base of the divine headpiece of the centre of the church.

Light

Icons depict people and the cosmos as full of divine grace and they express this grace as light. The concept of transfiguration is central to iconography, namely, that a created thing participates in the uncreated. By God's grace it becomes more than it is by nature. In the famous words of St Athanasius the Great: 'God became man so that man might become god by grace.'¹⁴

Because of this emphasis on transfiguration, while using enough shading to affirm the materiality of creation, icons primarily depict light is indwelling and surrounding its subjects. Saints are Spirit-bearers; they are Pentecostals in that word's original sense. Their icons therefore depict light radiating from within them rather than striking them from without, as in chiaroscuro painting. Deification, to become 'partakers of the divine nature' by grace, is fundamental to Orthodox spirituality. A truly fulfilled human person is not merely human but a god by grace.

¹⁴ *On the Incarnation*, 54.3.

This indwelling of God is most obviously symbolized by haloes but is also suggested by the translucency of the paint layers. Such glazes allow some of the incident light to pass through them and then reflect back out from off the brilliant white gesso ground that lies beneath. Light appears to come from within the painting, not merely reflecting off its surface.

As well as dwelling within the saints, God also embraces and sustains all things from without, like water does for fish: 'In him we live and move and have our being' said St Paul (Acts 17.28). This explains the golden 'backgrounds', and the gold lines of assist on inanimate objects like furniture and garments. These abstract techniques move the icon closer to reality than can mere photographic naturalism.

Symbol as both veil and revelation

I mentioned that icons are part of the sacred drama of liturgy. Traditional liturgy uses both word and image. There are some elements of icons that remain a mystery without the word, such as symbolism, while elements of the word too easily remain a theory without the image, such as the communion of the saints.

One rich example of symbolism is the icon of the Annunciation. In this icon, we see behind the Virgin a throne, a building, and a parted curtain. A spool of red thread falls from her hand. All this is veiled in mystery until we hear the hymns that explain the icon's typology. Mary is the 'throne of God' because she bore the Second Person of the Trinity in her womb. The building is a temple, and Mary too is a temple for God dwelt in her. The parted veil is the curtain into the heavenly Holy of Holies, opened to us through the flesh of Christ. We recall that at Christ's death 'the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom' (Matthew 27.51). The red thread comes from the Apocryphal *Protevangelium of James*. This tells of Mary spinning the scarlet thread for the temple veil when the Annunciation occurred, a symbol of her and Israel's preparation to facilitate God's incarnation in Christ.

A difficult beauty

I will finish with beauty. Icons have a particular form of beauty. Sentimentality is absent, and the faces usually display a union of sadness with joy. A word has even been coined for this state: *harmolipi*/ *Χαρμολύπη*, meaning bright sadness or joyful sorrow. Sometimes icons also alloy attractiveness with something repellent or at least unattractive. John the Baptist, for example, might be shown with a noble though weather beaten face, but emaciated and hairy arms.

Why this difficult type of beauty? One of the numerous Greek words for beauty is *kalos*, which also means good. The beauty of icons, and of liturgical life in general, exists to make people good and beautiful, not to titillate or entertain. And this transformation requires personal and communal struggle, repentance, compassion. This explains the ascetic quality of the icon tradition's aesthetic.

Thank you.

