

# ICONOGRAPHY *Considered*

Introduction

Coptic

African

Byzantine

Russian

Eastern

*Heruvimskaia Chant*



Christ Pantocrator - XIIIth c. Detail of a mosaic icon of the Deisis. Hagia Sophia, Constantinople.

*Hidden and Triumphant*  
by Irina Yazykova

Theotokos  
Saints  
Iconographer

Workshops

The Coptic Monastery of Saint Anthony

Saint Paul's Orthodox Church

Summary Report

# ICONOGRAPHY *Considered*

## Introduction

This interactive PDF contains several links to videos that offer lots of information about iconography. Click on the titles and browse the pages to see examples of iconography, listen to music you might hear in an Orthodox Church, hear an interview at a Coptic Monastery in Egypt, experience the sites and sounds of an Orthodox service in process, visit the website of Vladimir Grygorenko, an iconographer from the Ukraine who has written icons and murals for a church in Houston, Texas. Read about a workshop where you can learn to paint icons. Learn about the symbolism in the iconography featuring Mary, the Mother of God and the saints and martyrs who have been canonized. Check out the book, *Hidden and Triumphant* by Irina Yazykova.

## ICONOGRAPHY Considered

Studying the differences between African/Coptic, Russian, and Eastern Orthodox iconography has given me a glimpse into the mystery of how people, for two thousands of years, have been inspired and encouraged by icons to spiritually enter into the Presence of God through ardent acts of prayer to the Intercessor for spiritual regeneration and worship of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

### Coptic iconography:

In Egypt, Coptic iconography evolved from and was influenced by mummy portraits or Fayum mummy portraits, a term given to a type of realistic painted portraits on wooden boards attached to mummies, and was the only large body of art from that tradition to have survived. This stylistic innovation dates from the 1st century BC onwards to about the 3rd century and was continued into the local tradition of Coptic iconography in Egypt, as well as to a lesser degree into the Byzantine and Western traditions.

Often, they depict a single person, the head or head and upper chest from a frontal viewpoint. Brilliant colors on the paintings were preserved unfaded by time. Icons in their use of encaustic and artistic devices with gold backgrounds, wide-opened eyes and full-face poses gave an accurate depiction of the living flesh. The difference between the funerary portraits and icons were the testimony to death's power verses images as reminders of the Resurrection and victory of Christ over death. They depict the visual evidence of a saint's participation in that victory and resurrection. The Coptic icons are best identified by the predomination of local Coptic saints.

Russian iconography:

The zenith of the Byzantine icon was reached in 13th-14th century. In 1453 the 1000 year Byzantine Empire ceased as Constantinople fell to the Ottoman Turks and the icons found new homes in new lands. Serbia, Macedonia, Bulgaria, Greece and Russia were countries united by a liturgical tradition. The art was based on a

shared canon throughout the medieval period. To the folk of the land the shared art, artists, icons, manuscripts and sacred objects pointed to their participation in the world of the miraculous. To the church fathers the icon painter's canon presented a theology painted in colors defined according to the internal logic of visual principles that formed the core of the stable tradition. The stylistic rules and symbols became definitive allowing for the re-use of the same pattern over the centuries. From the 10th-16th centuries many Russian icon masterpieces were created.

Beginning in the 9th century icons came to be painted exclusively in tempera because icons of this period were ethereal figures with luminous faces levitating against a gold background. The figures excluded foreshortening and the full-face portraits underscored the theme of eternity and complete dwelling of that figure in the presence of God. Andrei Tarkovsky Rublev's icons in 15th century began spreading across the entire world with their silent testimony to eternity. They became a

window onto eternity within a world torn by grief, a constant testimony to divine joy and inexhaustibility of hope.

Before the 20th century the concept of women iconographers was non-existent. The design, pattern and theology of the icon was primarily “written” by monks or priests as a prayerful act of piety. Women made the needlecrafts, vestment, shrouds, and sanctuary furnishings. I was introduced to Mother Maria who embroidered her final icon in the Nazi death camp at Ravensbruck where she was sent in 1944. On March 30, 1945 Good Friday she was sent to the gas chamber. She had taken the place of a young woman who survived. The day after Mother Maria died the Soviets liberated the camp. The icon did not survive but was mentioned by other survivors. In 2004 the Patriarchate of Constantinople canonized Mother Maria. Her statement “Christianity is either a fire—or it doesn’t exist” has challenged me to consider am I burning brightly for Christ?

### Eastern Orthodox Iconography:

Nilus of Sinai, a student of Saint John Chrysostom (an archbishop of Constantinople and a church father), counseled artists of his day to paint in places of worship. "Let our greatest masters fill the temple from both ends with depictions of the Testaments both New and Old, so that even those who are unlettered and cannot read the Divine writings, looking at these painted images, will be reminded of the courageous deeds of the sincere servants of Christ our God, and will be inspired to try to equal that glorious and memorable valor, through which, having preferred what is unseen to what is seen, the earth was transformed into heaven." Originally Icon painting was a function as an act of piety by monks and priests.

The Orthodox position of the promulgation of the dogma on the veneration of icons was written into the Seventh Ecumenical Council held at Nicea in 787. They were commanded to make well-done pictorial representations to be shown in the holy churches of our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ, on walls, vestments, furnishings, houses, in accordance with the history of

the preaching of the Gospels because icons serve as confirmation that Christ in reality and not as mere apparition, became a man, which is to our benefit. The more often the icons of Jesus Christ, our Lady the Mother of God, angels, and saintly people that are contemplated, the more often will those who lift up their eyes learn to commemorate and love and honor them, not in worship of them which is only reserved for Him who is the subject of our faith, and is proper for the divine nature.

From the time of that oros forward, the icon came to be regarded as not only a work of art, but also as a witness to Christian faith in the incarnation of God. An icon, no matter what saint, apostle, martyr, or gospel scene is depicted, is ultimately an image of Jesus Christ, an image of His life, suffering, and resurrection, and of His coming kingdom.

The icons of Eastern Orthodoxy have been uniform, unlike later Western realistic depictions (which have had far less consistency in appearance and style from the beginning). The precision of

form and inner justification of its details, genuine sacred simplicity and overall artistic expression, like grace, draws the viewer in. Hesychasm was a new term for me. It comes from the word hesychia and means silence. It roots itself in the practice of prayer and contemplation of God's "uncreated light." The icons are not simply works of art but "prayers made flesh". Icons as "Light-bearers" reflect "uncreated light" coming from within the figure. St. Gregory Palamas taught that light is an uncreated divine energy, a quiet light, a form of grace within the soul that imparts love for all living things. Reverse perspective, seeing all sides on a flat plane draws the viewer into the present immediate space surrounding the figure. Seeing images of saints worshipping the Trinity, symbolizing the universal church triumphant in heaven, all perfected with no signs in their flesh of the ravages of their earthly martyrdom witnesses to the truthfulness of its content. The icons give precise expression to the spiritual meaning. They are symbols of the Heavenly Jerusalem.

## Summary:

Christian churches differ in the artistic ways they represent Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the saints. For example, a person from a totally foreign church would not be able to paint icons for the Coptic Church in the way members from the Coptic Church would be familiar with and would want to see.

Cultural exchanges and the interaction between cultures did not produce simple transfers of traceable elements from one culture to another and influences on religious iconography did not follow a simple path. Significant religious and theological differences between various Christian sects and churches had an impact on its iconography with every church having its own saints and its own traditions of representing them.

The research I have done has resulted in me having a new and better understanding of the faith of our church fathers and the role icons (the art of the church) have played in nurturing and encouraging the visualization of eternal truths down through the centuries.

It has expanded my ability to understand the background culture and faith of my Russian Orthodox friend and given me a new facility in finding common ground between her faith tradition and mine. The same is true with the recent conversion to Eastern Orthodoxy of my daughter, son-in-law and three of our grandchildren.

And finally, as an artist, it has brought a new awareness of the aesthetic beauty of the content of iconography and when considered, how they can facilitate prayer and testify to the Truth.

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