

An interview of Aidan Hart by David Clayton

Could you first tell us what an icon is?

“It is an image (the word icon is Greek for image) of Christ or His saints, and as such is a means of communion with the person it depicts. Orthodox Christians venerate or kiss icons as a means of venerating the person depicted. Also, the icon’s style reflects the spiritual state of the saint, as someone filled with the divine light and beauty of the Holy Spirit.”

Does this mean that every icon has a prototype which the iconographer works to? If so, where do these prototypes come from?

“Because an icon is an image of a person it must of course resemble them, or at least resemble what has come to be accepted as their likeness. So it is rooted in reality and not fantasy. So the prototype is the saint depicted. But in a deeper way, because saints are themselves icons of Christ, every icon’s ultimate prototype is Christ Himself, the source of all beauty.

“We know what many saints looked like, and for some recent ones we even have photographs, such as New Martyr Elizabeth, Queen Victoria’s granddaughter, who was martyred in Russia in 1918. The iconographic likeness of earlier saints can’t of course depend on photos. They arise out of things such as folk memory. In these cases the first icons painted tend to set the tradition of a likeness.”

So, if there are set prototypes, does it mean that all icons look the same?

“Certainly not. There is great variety of style within the theological principles which determine iconographic style. In fact a icon’s date and provenance can usually be determined with accuracy by its style alone. An icon should be true to these universal principles but express them in an indigenous way. This idea is rooted in Pentecost, where the one Holy Spirit descends on the disciples and enables them to preach the Gospel in many distinct languages.

“One of these principles is that an iconographer does not shroud one side of the figure in shadow as you would in *chiaroscuro*. This is because the saint depicted is radiant with the light of Christ.

This and other principles are rooted in spiritual truths and so they don’t limit creativity. The limitations they do impose reduce movement, as it were, to the left and the right so as to encourage the iconographer to look deeper and higher.”

What about the composition of each icon? Can you change the scenery, or even create new compositions with established figures?

“As long as these changes remain true to the spiritual principles, most certainly. These variations are the result of various factors. One is pastoral need. For example an icon type called the Kazan Mother of God, which emphasises Christ’s divinity, arose in the sixteenth century in an area of Russia where the divinity of Christ was being challenged by Moslem influence. On a more personal note, I am tending to make icons which emphasise being and stillness rather than movement, as an antidote to the frenetic activity of our secular culture.

“All the time the aim of the iconographer is to bring the viewer into a relationship with whomever is depicted. Artistic self-expression is not the aim. But of course each iconographer is a unique person, from a particular culture, and so his or her icons naturally have unique elements. I’ve found that the icon tradition stretches one’s creativity more than the secular tradition, because its aims are higher. It is creativity

with God at its centre, with the artist stepping to one side. The painter is thinking about the saint depicted and the viewer, not about himself. I think the more you 'disappear' the more creative you become."

Do you think iconography has anything to offer modern art?

"Modern art, as a rule, is ego-centric and omits God (though there are of course exceptions). Precisely because of this I think that iconography has a profound relevance. The icon tradition has deep insights into the meaning of such important concepts as originality and abstraction.

"To be truly original an artist needs to discern and manifest the origins of his subject, to find its inner name, its essence. And of course, the ultimate origin of all things is God. In this sense, to be truly original art must be sacred, numinous. If, by contrast, the individual ego is placed at the centre of artistic activity, originality becomes equated with the quest for novelty.

"And what is authentic abstraction? To abstract means literally 'to draw out from'. Genuine abstraction in art is therefore a stylistic means of drawing out or amplifying something already there, albeit hidden. Icons have a rich stylistic vocabulary developed to do just this. They draw out and manifest the spiritual through the material.

"I believe that there is a real place for an art that is for the home or gallery which, without being iconographic, is still informed by the principles of the icon. I think this can take two forms. There is what I call "burning bush" art. Like the burning bush which Moses saw, this art manifests the glory of God shining through the material world. Brancusi's sculptures do this, and you could say that Monet's paintings also do it.

"And secondly there is the art of compassion. This depicts human suffering but does so with compassion, not mockery. It communicates hope and makes you love more. It affirms the image of God in man despite his fallenness. I think Giacometti and Rembrandt are two examples. Francis Bacon also depicts suffering, but for all his artistic genius, he mocks man, gives no glimpse of the divine beauty in him.

"Icons contain both these features of glory and compassion, and so can inspire the artist working in the world to do deeper justice to his or her subject."