

The Icon Tradition from Within¹

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By way of illustrating the theological vision behind the icon tradition of the Orthodox Church, the icon painter, carver and mosaicist Aidan Hart describes his artistic journey.

This text is adapted from a talk given for the Temenos Academy as part of the series "In Celebration of the Image". The purpose of the series has been to allow artists working from the visionary imagination to speak about how they work. It was the idea of Temenos Board member Dr Jeremy Naydler. Being himself a gardener as well as a philosopher, Jeremy well knows the need to keep abstract thought grounded in our splendid material world. And I suppose who better to talk about the sacred arts than the makers of sacred art.

Having said this, I found the idea of talking about myself difficult because, as some of you may know, icon painters generally do not sign their work. We do not seek to promote ourselves as individual artists. Our task is rather to create works that help people come a little closer to Christ and His saints. An anonymous Christian writer of the 8th century described the icon as a door between heaven and earth.² So we might say that iconographers consider themselves as glorified door makers: Once we have completed an icon and see that it works, we step into the background and begin making the next door.

Also, we believe that the beauty of a well made icon is a reflection of divine beauty. The iconographer is more a participant in beauty than a creator of it. We consider originality as getting to the origin of things, and not as a quest for novelty.

That is not to say that the tradition does not strain every creative muscle. It cannot be otherwise when created and therefore limited human beings strive to suggest uncreated and infinite realities. Contrary to a common misconception, the icon tradition is not a matter of copying, but of making images of holy people and a world transfigured, a world full of light. And it is natural that each iconographer makes an icon of a given saint a little differently from another. He or she is a unique person, and paints within a unique culture and epoch.

And so, as I thought about what to say today, I saw that what I really wanted to share with you was not myself as an isolated individual, but my personal journey as part of a more universal struggle to discover and to communicate something of divine beauty and love.

So let us begin our journey.

¹ Adapted from a talk given at the Royal Asiatic Society, London, 9 February, 2015, for the Temenos Academy as part of the series *In Celebration of the Image*.

² From *The Life of St. Stephen the Younger*, (died c. 794 AD).

My parents are New Zealanders, but when they married they went to England, where my brother and I were born. When I was one year old we returned to New Zealand, where I grew up in Auckland. This city is subtropical, and so much of my time was spent outdoors, in trees, under trees, building huts in trees, swimming in the ocean. So I came to love the material world very much. I also loved English literature and chose to major in this for my degree at Auckland University.

But the world of mathematics and biology equally drew me. As a Christian since fifteen years of age, I saw mathematics and biology as divine art. Its study was therefore akin to the study of human art and literature, only that this art was created by God. Fortunately I could take mathematics papers within my arts degree because, insightfully, the university's regulations placed mathematics under the arts umbrella as well as under science. All this later helped my iconography, for as well as spiritual knowledge this sacred art requires an analytical mind, understanding of anatomy, geometry, and even some chemistry.

On completing my degree I made what I think was a mistake - though the Divine Chess Player does have a habit of making everything work for the better. Rather than set out on the unknown and perilous path of an artist I decided to take a well trodden route and train as a secondary school teacher. (No criticism intended against that venerable calling; in fact I think all teachers should be canonized or at least given an OBE!). I survived the year to complete my diploma in secondary school teaching, but after a few months of teaching came to my senses: in 1978 I decided to set out on life as a sculptor.

Before making this decision I had always felt drawn to art but hadn't allowed myself the luxury of thinking it possible to pursue it as an occupation. This was perhaps the influence of my grandfather and father. My grandfather was a brilliant cartoonist, but had done the sensible thing and became a lawyer, albeit excelling as a cartoonist as a secondary occupation. My father is a gifted painter and sculptor, and used to teach the latter at night classes. But he too had been cautious and pursued a respectable career as a civil engineer. My great great grandfather on my mother's side had however taken the leap and had become a painter. I think he must have been urging me on in the background. This Albin Martin was a close friend of Samuel Palmer. He had in fact accompanied Samuel and his poor bride Hannah on their honeymoon-cum-grand tour of Europe, along with a few other painter friends of Palmer! Albin later became a leading painter in New Zealand.

I am mentioning all this because I have since learned that self-knowledge is intertwined with knowledge of God. To find God it helps to find one's own gifts and way of serving others, to find one's God-given name. Why should this be? On the one hand, Christians believe that we are created beings and not an eternal effulgence of God. There is therefore a real and ontological distinction between Creator and creation. God cannot be known as an object out there, treated as a larger version of us humans. In this sense, according to His essence, He is totally other.

On the other hand, God is closer to us than we are to ourselves. He is the ground of our being: "In Him we live and move and have or being," as St Paul said (Acts 17:28). We are made in His image, and to know Him we must grow deeper into His likeness. We are called to love God as unique, alive human beings, not as robots. The basis of Christian asceticism is that self-knowledge is intertwined with God-knowledge. As St Irenaeus of the second century writes:

The glory of God is a living man, and the life of man consists in beholding God.³

This is the whole basis of icons, and what explains their use and the way they are painted. Icons depict saints, and a saint is fully human because he or she is not merely human but is radiant with the indwelling Holy Spirit. He or she is a god by grace. And Orthodox Christians venerate or honour icons by way of honouring Christ in the saints. But I am creeping ahead of my story.

As a Christian I soon found that the overarching aim of my sculpture was to suggest the mysterious union of spirit and flesh, of Creator and creation. The human face was the focus of this research. After studying the life and works of masters whose sculptures I respected, such as Constantine Brancusi, August Rodin, and Alberto Giacometti, I concluded that I had to start with modelling and drawing the human body. I had to understand and be able to model visible realities before embarking on invisible realities. Not that the two can be separated, but that there is a taxis, an order.

I learned later, on becoming a member of the Orthodox Church, that this progression is a principle of the spiritual life. First comes purification, then knowledge of God's 'words' or logoi within each created thing. This stage is called natural theology in the East and illumination in the West. By this contemplation of God's brightness both revealed and veiled by creation, the seeker gradually becomes accustomed to the light until he or she is ready for the final phase, which is variously called union, deification, or mystical theology. Following the words of the Word, we come face to face with the incarnate Word Himself.

These three phases are illustrated in the life of Moses. He first spends years working as a humble shepherd, then sees and hears God in the burning bush. In the fullness of time he is called to ascend Mount Sinai, where he speaks with God face to face, and when he descends from the mountain his face is shining with divine glory. These three phases are not of course mutually exclusive for us, for the closer we are to divine glory the more we realise we need purification and the more we wonder at God's creation. But there is an order.

As it was to transpire, my calling was ultimately not in the hurly burly of the art world but in liturgical art, whose sole aim is to aid others in this arduous journey up Mount Sinai. My art's aim was to be, in some small way, an aid to purification; to show the world burning with divine glory without being

³ St Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book IV, 20, 7.

consumed; and to depict the Bridegroom's face with whom we seek union. In retrospect, I see that my early training as a sculptor was the necessary preparation for this calling in liturgical art, for it taught me form, proportion, anatomy.

So my early sculptures were quite representational, influenced by sculptors such as August Rodin and Michelangelo. I even, like Constantine Brancusi, modelled and cast a flayed figure, making first a detailed skeleton and then building up muscle by muscle.

Having come to some understanding of figurative modelling I then concentrated on ways to suggest the spiritual nature of the human person. To this end I studied works by traditional cultures - mostly Egyptian and African, and to some extent also Maori. It became clear that most of these traditional works were in fact religious in function, an attempt somehow to join the living with the dead, the spiritual world with the material world. I noticed in particular three elements that most of these traditions had in common: emphasis on a strong vertical axis, along with a degree of elongation; a slight enlargement of the eyes and in general a degree of abstraction; and an interiority and composure devoid of agitated movement.

I noticed also that the gaze of these paintings and sculptures generally engaged the viewer. It seemed that these artists were aiming to make work that mediated between the subject and the viewer. They were not making works of art in the modern sense of art for art's sake, but objects that fulfilled a religious function. I learned many years later that the word 'art' derives from the Latin word meaning to fitly join together. Traditional art was trying to join together the invisible and visible worlds, heaven and earth, those who had died with those who were on earth.

In this new phase I deliberately began with a somewhat extreme degree of elongation and abstraction, with the aim of later bringing together the abstract and representational into a more balanced harmony.

I also came to believe that any abstraction needed to reflect reality and not be a departure from it. Indeed, as I found out later, the word abstract means to draw out or draw from. So I concluded that any abstraction of style needs to draw out and manifest reality, and not be a stylistic conceit. Authentic abstraction requires metaphysical precision as well as artistic creativity.

It was during this time that I first encountered icons, at an exhibition at the Auckland City Art Gallery. Although I wasn't immediately attracted to them, these icons planted a seed, and my thoughts often returned to them.

Having experimented with the two extremes of naturalism and abstract sculpting, I then attempted to unite them. The illustrated sculpture is one such work. Gradually I came to some conclusions about how to obtain this balance, conclusions which were later to be confirmed when I encountered icons again. Perhaps the most important thing was that there should be enough 'naturalism' to indicate the person's uniqueness, their personhood, and enough abstraction to show that this personhood is fulfilled in unity with the

Holy Spirit. Somehow one had to indicate both the material substance of the bush and the divine glory with which it burned without being consumed.

The union of opposites - though opposites isn't quite the right term - is the foundation of lasting beauty. It is like the tension in the strings of a violin: without the tautness of paradoxes there can be no music. Art is at its richest when it seeks to 'fitly join together' our world with Divine beauty.

In the midst of this artistic journey I was also seeking a deeper life of prayer, reading books by people like the Roman Catholic Trappist monk Thomas Merton, and through him, the writings of the early monastics of the Egyptian desert.

It was then, in 1982, that a friend told me about two New Zealand monks of the Orthodox Church whom he had just visited, one of whom was also an icon painter. 'I think icons do what you are trying to do,' Ralph said, 'And I think the Orthodox tradition of prayer might be what you are looking for.' So I arranged to visit Fathers Ambrose and Nicholas. This visit was destined to set my life on quite an adventurous path.

To cut a long story short, in 1983 I became a member of the Orthodox Church, with the intention of becoming a monk with the fathers at Kiwitea. But they suggested a trip overseas first. As it turned out, while on this pilgrimage providence conspired that I settle in England, where I had been born. By 1984 I was supporting myself fulfilling commissions as an icon carver and soon after, also as an icon painter.

From 1988 to 2000 I was what is called a Rasophore monk, which is an intermediary form of monasticism somewhere between the novitiate and taking vows. Two of these years were spent in training at Mount Athos in Greece, and the last six and a half years as a hermit in the hills of Shropshire, England. As I was to learn, if you want a quiet life don't become a hermit!

Eventually it proved best to dedicate myself solely to the demanding life of an iconographer, and so, not having taken monastic vows and with the blessing of my bishop, I left the hermitage in 2000 and became an active member of my local Orthodox parish.

Icon painting is ultimately about creating images of Christ and his saints. And like portraiture, you want to know the people you are painting, to paint them 'from life' so you can draw out and suggest their inner character. So not only is artistic skill required of an iconographer, but also a life of prayer, love, and participation of the sacraments of the Church. The communion of the saints must be a reality for the iconographer if he or she is not to produce vacant masks. My twelve years in monasticism has helped a lot in this respect. The long services and the many hours spent praying the Jesus Prayer roots a monk in inner prayer. This communal and inner prayer continues to underpin my work, though of course my life is marked more by falls, failings and omissions than by holy living. But one struggles on.

To paint and carve icons is itself an act of prayer, an expression in paint, stone and wood rather than words. I feel like a composer and poet, but

working in colour and form rather than notes and words. Any visitor to an Orthodox service will experience how we embrace all the bodily senses in our worship. It is an incarnational mysticism.

You may be asking at this stage what the Orthodox Church tradition of the icon has to do with life in the contemporary western world. If you will permit, I will now pass to this subject before discussing a range of icons that I have made in different media to illustrate aspects of the icon tradition.

When we talk of icons we are talking about the sacred imagery of the Christian Church from the first centuries after Christ, such as the catacomb paintings and carved sarcophagi of Rome. This icon tradition was shared by all Christendom, western and eastern, until around the 14th century. At this time the western icon tradition that was so richly expressed in Romanesque art began to be eclipsed by the greater naturalism of the Gothic and then the Renaissance. One might say that artists began to depict Moses' bush but without its divine fire.

Another western trend was to leave the stylistic form of its liturgical art to the artist's choice and world view, be it Christian or secular. Art subsequently became more a form of enquiry rather than of revelation, a form of philosophy rather than of theology. This shift was a boon to the world of art as we now know it, but a handicap to western liturgical art.

In the meantime, the Orthodox Church in Western Europe in countries such as Greece, Russia and the Balkans continued the icon tradition. However, the quality of work produced experienced a downturn - in Greece because of the deprivations of the Turkish rule, and in Russia because of the westernising and secularising policies of Peter and Catherine. Particularly in the 18th and 19th centuries icon painting became somewhat debased by sentimentalism, naturalism, or simply inept painting. Many of the "old" icons we see today are in this category, and don't do justice to what the icon is capable of.

Nevertheless, during this low period the icon's theological roots remained more or less intact, with icons continuing to be venerated and used liturgically as before. Beginning in the end of the nineteenth century in Russia, and the mid twentieth century in Greece, the more traditional form of iconography began to revive.

But this revival has not been limited to traditionally Orthodox countries. Over the past fifty years or so great interest has grown in the West, facilitated by such things as icon exhibitions, immigration of Orthodox, conversions of people like myself, and the establishment of Orthodox parishes all over the world. In fact, about two thirds of my commissions come from Anglican and Catholic churches.

With this reintroduction of traditionally painted icons, one challenge that faces iconographers is how to indigenise their icons, how to express timeless verities while incorporating elements of the native culture in which we live. We learn from the Byzantine tradition, but by continuing its timeless principles and not merely copying its masterpieces.

So what are icons? We can summarise their theology in four words: **incarnation, community, transfiguration, prayer**. I would now like to explain these in reference to eight icons that I have made over the past thirty years.

The Incarnation

The icon tradition is based on the fact that God has become human in Christ, that God the Word became flesh, became visible and therefore representable. And so the first and most important icon is that of Christ.

The words inscribed on the cross within Christ's halo make this point emphatically. ο ων, means "The Existing One", or "The Being", which is the Greek Bible's translation (called the Septuagint) of Jehovah. This man is God incarnate, the one who spoke to the prophets, the one who gives being to His creation and indeed is Being itself.

The second illustration is of a limewood cross I carved in 1985.

The union of opposites is the theme of this work, one of the first wood carvings I made. It shows Christ on the cross, which is depicted as the budding Tree of Life. At the top is Christ in glory, enthroned in heaven, while below He is in Hades, delivering the dead. The left icon shows Christ's baptism, which is God entering the created world. On the right is His transfiguration, which shows human nature radiant with God's glory, His uncreated light.

The design illustrates two things: the interdependence of hymnography and iconography – the written and visual expressions of worship - and the indigenisation of iconography into its mother culture.

I based the design on a prayer used twice during each Eucharist service:

With your body, O Christ, you were in the tomb, with your soul in Hell as God, in Paradise with the Thief, on the throne with the Father and the Spirit, filling all things, yet yourself uncircumscribed.

An image gives the overall picture of things, while words fill in the detail. They interpret each other, but in different ways. In the worship of the Orthodox Church icons are the incarnation of words. They put a face to the words spoken. We do not merely hear about Christ, about the angels, about the saints, but we behold their faces through their icons. This saves Christianity from becoming a moral or intellectual system.

But the icon is also incarnational in a broader, cultural sense. When healthy, the icon tradition assimilates useable elements of its mother culture to express timeless verities. In this carving I drew on the Romanesque 'Cloister Cross' (now in the Cloisters Museum in New York) for the overall concept and the tree of life motif. In the boxes I added icons from the Byzantine tradition, and adapted the figure of Christ from Romanesque works.

Community

Besides icons of Christ, we also have icons of saints. The basis of these is the belief that life in Christ overcomes the separation of death, that the brethren in heaven are together with those on earth. The Church is a single community. We have already alluded to this truth in the cross above, but it is also graphically illustrated in the icon of the Transfiguration. Christ is shown

together with Moses and Elijah, who are from heaven, and with Peter, James and John, who are still on earth. In Christ death and separation are overcome.

But for all its drama, the event of the Transfiguration is but a foretaste of a deeper union effected at Pentecost. At Pentecost the Holy Spirit comes to indwell in each person personally, and transforms isolated individuals into a community of deified saints. A practical iconographic expression of Pentecost is a frescoed church. I know this chapel well, having founded and lived in the hermitage for over six years. Many hundreds of hours were spent alone praying in this chapel. And yet, thanks to the frescoes that completely surround the chapel, I knew I was not alone but was communing with Christ in the company of the saints and angels.

Iconography does not only express community, for it is also itself a fruit of community. The iconographer does not work as an isolated individual, but as a member of a body. This chapel was frescoed with the aid of helpers and apprentices. I now have a full-time assistant and numerous other freelancers who help. And the imagery itself does not exist in isolation, as on a gallery wall, but is part of a liturgical symphony, the other members being the church architecture, the poetry, composition and chanting of hymnography, the choreography of the clergy and people during services, the incense, the lighting.

Transfiguration

Icons show the world transfigured. In the famous words of the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, “The world is charged with the grandeur of God. It will flame out, like shining from shook foil”. This is in part why the first icon that a fully trained iconographer paints is the Transfiguration of Christ. The Gospels tell us that Christ’s garments shone with divine glory as well as His face. For His garments – which after all are made of inanimate matter – we can read the whole cosmos. Why? The Greek word for the created world - what we inaccurately call nature – is *cosmos*, which means adornment. Icons show the cosmos restored to its place as adornment of the Body of Christ. Christ’s radiant garments are the whole cosmos that Christ wrapped around Himself through His incarnation in the flesh, thereby restoring its paradisiacal transparency to divine glory. The Church clothed in the cosmos is what John the Divine describes in his vision: “a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head” (Revelation 12.1).

But this perception of the world “charged with the grandeur of God” does not come without struggle, without purification. I tried to show this in the illustrated triptych commissioned by Shrewsbury School for their chapel. The image of Jacob wrestling with the angel illustrates the struggle or synergy required in the spiritual life. Illumination, the next stage, does not come without this purification.

The icon on the right shows Jacob’s dream. The book of Genesis tells us that he saw a “ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it” (Genesis 28.12). After waking, Jacob says: “Surely the Lord is in this place; and I did not know it.” God had always been “in this place”, in our world, but Jacob needed his eyes opened and his being transfigured in order to see this and to hear God speaking.

The central icon illustrates the culmination of purification and illumination, which is union with Christ Himself. The event not only affirms Christ's divinity, but also manifests what the human person is called to: union with Christ, or deification or theosis as some Church fathers describe it. As one hymn used in the Orthodox Church's celebration of Transfiguration puts it:

*Thou hast put on Adam entire, O Christ, and changing the nature
grown dark in past times, Thou hast filled it with glory and made
it godlike by the alteration of Thy form.*

(The Feast of the Transfiguration, Matins)

Christ unites His divine nature to our created nature, so that our nature can be united to His.

This in part explains the way icons are painted, their formal or stylistic elements. We do not for example use chiaroscuro, a single external source of light, but show a world in which the saints shine with light, in which God is all around and within. Inanimate matter is also shown to participate in this transfiguration, for gold lines (called assist) are often used on trees, furniture and clothing.

Icons also indicate this transformation of the material world through the way they depict drapery. There is great variety within the tradition, but the illustrated stone sculpture that my assistant and I carved for Lincoln cathedral illustrates one of them. Inspired by the Romanesque tradition, I organised the drapery into river-like currents. Well designed drapery in icons should accord with the fundamental logic of form and forces, but on the other hand should not be limited to these. They should not be irrational but supra-rational, not unnatural but supra-natural, not distorting but transcending.

Prayer

Icons and prayer are related in three ways. First, they help people commune with the persons depicted – Christ and His saints. Second, the act of making an icon is itself prayer. Third, the beauty created by icons and the other liturgical arts create an atmosphere conducive to prayer.

In Orthodox practice we kiss icons as a means of kissing or venerating the persons depicted. As St Basil the Great said, "The honour given to the image passes over to the prototype". Although the icon is of a different nature to the human prototype – it is merely wood and paint and not flesh and blood – it is nevertheless connected to its prototype by virtue of being his or her image and bearing their name. As St John of Damascus, the seventh century defender of icons, wrote:

Divine grace is conferred on material icons, by virtue of the persons whom they depict...material objects are not venerated in themselves, but if the person depicted is full of grace, the material objects share in this grace to an appropriate extent.⁴

When Orthodox Christians behold an icon of Christ like the illustrated mosaic, they pray to Him, and, if the work is within reach, kiss it by way of greeting their beloved Christ.

⁴ St John of Damascus, *On Icons*, i, 36.

In what way is the act of making icons itself prayer? Instead of praying only with words the iconographer prays also with colour, wood, stone, glass. We may even say that the whole Church prays through the iconographer as they make their work in praise of God.

An icon painter needs to be active in the Church, to fast, pray, try to live a righteous and compassionate life. The inner knowledge of the person of Christ that grows out of this struggle informs the multitude of aesthetic decisions that are made in the course of a work's execution. It is crafted prayer, crystallised in matter.

The illustrated mosaic took about two months to make. It was a slow and skilful process, requiring attention but not tension. It was also communal, involving at least three of us to create. During the process, for all its technical demands, I was very aware that this is precisely what prayer is about: prayer is an art and a science; it requires watchfulness without anxiety; it is communal as well as personal; it is contemplation as well as communication.

We can go a step further and say that not only people are praying through the act of making of liturgical art, but also the whole inanimate creation. Inanimate creation becomes more articulate in the praise of God through the work of our hands.

It is also a priestly and prophetic act being performed. The icon painter takes representatives of the whole material creation: pigment from the mineral kingdom, wood for the panel from the vegetable kingdom, and egg from the animal kingdom to bind the paint. Through skill and prayer he or she then fashions these raw materials, making them even more eloquent in God's praise. Good things become very good. The iconographer takes materials like words from a dictionary, and composes them into a poem of praise, a cosmic hymn. He tries to discern the character or logos of each pigment or medium and use it accordingly.

I was very aware of this while frescoing the private chapel of Denise Sherrard and her late husband, Philip Sherrard, who was of course a co-founder of Temenos. Because of Philip's writings on ecology, Denise wanted to include not just saints in the frescoes but also trees and animals. So besides people whose writings were important to Philip – such as St Basil the Great and St Maximus the Confessor – we also chose saints who had a special relationship with animals and included the animals associated with them, such as a hare for St Melangell of Wales and a lion for St Mary of Egypt. In between each standing saint I painted a tree, the species chosen from the locale. We even included a vegetable garden below the fresco of St Phocas the Gardener.

What of our third point, icons and beauty? Prayer can and should be offered in any and every place, even from a prison dungeon. But if we have control over our environment surely we want to create surroundings that nourish our spirits and not oppress them. A church's interior should reflect the beauty of heaven's worship. The icons, mosaics, frescoes, hymnography all participate in and reflect the heavenly kingdom. Such liturgical worship is culture in the fullest and most literal meaning of the word, for it exists for the *cultus* or worship of God.