

THE ICON AND ART¹

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We live in an age where for most people art is something you hang on a wall to look at, a piece of music you listen to, or a performance you attend. It is assumed that art's purpose is to give one an aesthetic experience, or at least to entertain. And it is taken as axiomatic that what defines the artist is his or her creativity, the ability to make something novel. But these three ideas are new, very new in the history of man. They are the result of a materialistic, profane world view.

As far as I can see, ours is the only culture which has held these views of art. All others seem to have used images, music and other arts primarily as part of their religious life. This is at least what archaeology suggests: most finds are either ritual objects, or if utilitarian, have some spiritually symbolic decoration. These peoples believed that their art, through their sacred tradition, was in some way a revelation of the divine, a form of initiation into knowledge of Him, and a means of worshipping Him. That is to say, all their art was sacred art. Art had a definite function. And this function rooted it in and orientated it towards a higher, sublime realm. This spiritual functionalism inspired rather than shackled art, keeping it timeless therefore always new.

The closest these traditional cultures have come to our "art for art's sake" is decoration - the embellishment of some utilitarian object for the sheer joy of it. Being part of a utensil placed this art within the realm of functional daily life. And in any case, as we have noted above, these designs were often themselves of spiritual significance - three examples which come to mind are the geometric patterns on Persian carpets, Maori weaving or Celtic metalwork. Consequently, although utilitarian objects so decorated were not for sacred use, such symbolic decoration did link them to the broader ritual life of the people.

We in the West are probably stuck, at least for some time, with this system where art is produced, sold and thought of as a commodity for pleasure, entertainment, or sometimes, for shock value. So what do we do with this system? Can artworks be made more sacred within this infrastructure? Or is there something inherent within the system itself which will always sabotage such attempts?

To begin answering these important questions we have to return to a more fundamental one, namely, what is sacred art? This is what this article will look at, using as our source the theology and experience of iconography within the Orthodox Church. But why choose this particular Christian tradition? Primarily because it is here that the fullest Christian expression of image theology is to be found. This is so partially because the iconoclastic heresy compelled the eastern part of the universal Church to articulate its experience of sacred images more fully than in the West, where iconoclasm had not gained a foothold, and partially because the philosophical subtlety of the Greek language provided richer potential than Latin for theological expression.

After I have outlined why the Orthodox have icons and how they paint and use them, I will venture to distil some of the more general qualities of sacred art which western art could adopt - or rather, re-adopt!.

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What are icons and how are they used?

Icons have very specific roles within the life of an Orthodox Christian. Put simply, a holy icon is an image of Christ, His mother or a saint. Icons are venerated as a way of venerating those depicted on them. “The honour paid the image passes to the prototype” as the fourth century St Basil said. On entering a church the faithful cross themselves, bow, and kiss the various icons. Homes have icons, where the family say daily prayers. Icons are processed on feast days. In times of hardship icons are carried around as a means bringing divine grace right into the thick of hardship. They are to be found in people’s cars, in buses, above entrances to houses and public buildings. They cover the walls of churches, telling the story of God’s workings with the human race. In short, icons are doors or windows between heaven and earth.

The Theology of the icon

As we have seen, because of the iconoclastic heresy which did not effect the West, the eastern Christians had to articulate a theology of the image. Should Christians have images of Christ and the saints or not? And why? If they should have them, how should they be used? After one hundred and twenty years of much debate and struggle, the Church affirmed that holy images are good and worthy to be venerated. The answers given, and the theological reasoning behind them, also bequeathed us a rich body of teaching on the spiritual role of matter in general.

These teachings on the image and on matter both have crucial importance to our subject of art. They are to be found primarily in the decrees of the Seventh Ecumenical Council of Nicea (787 A.D.), the writings of St John of Damascus (?675-749), St Theodore of Studium (759-826) and St Maximus the Confessor (died 662). A related theme is the ascetic life, for which the Orthodox Church’s teaching can be found in the five volume compendium called *The Philokalia*. For the sake of brevity I will only outline the most central of these teachings on art and the material world..

- Matter is created by God and is therefore good.
- Matter - which includes the human body and material things formed by man - is an integral part of man’s relationship with God and his fellow human. The spiritual life therefore must also be material, and the material life spiritual.
- The whole material universe is a revelation of God’s glory, wisdom and love to man. It is not just as a teacher, but itself bears the glory of God, the grace of God. Matter is a grace-bearer, a sort of cosmic chalice bearing to us the wine of God’s light.
- Material things are one means of the human person expressing his love for God and for others. So as well as being a bearer of God’s life to man, matter is a means of man expressing his love to God. It is thus a means of communion.
- All the above are confirmed through the Incarnation of God in the flesh. God was not ashamed to unite Himself, forever, with human flesh. This is the basis of the great honour with which the Church regards matter. “I do not worship matter, I worship the creator of matter, who because of me became matter and consented to live in matter and through matter worked my salvation; I will not cease from venerating matter through which my salvation was effected.” (St John of Damascus)
- Holy icons are images of Christ, the Mother of God and the saints. Because they bear the name and likeness of their prototypes, the Orthodox honour them by way

of honouring those they depict. As we have seen, “The honour paid to the image passes to the prototype” (St Basil the Great). Although icons are used as teaching tools, their main role is this sacramental role of mediating between the person depicted and the faithful. Because of this, the icon is never regarded as art as such, as an object of aesthetic contemplation. It is rather the middle partner in a triad of saint, icon and venerator. It is a window or door, hence its rather flattened style.

- The icon is not symbolic, at least in the common contemporary understanding of the word, but depicts only real person and real events. They do not depict ideas or principles. The Seventh Ecumenical Council said that Christ need no longer be depicted symbolically - as an anchor, shepherd or whatever - but as a real man.
- Through man’s fall from grace the material world has become for him somewhat opaque to the divine world. This is one aspect of the garment of skin given to Adam and Eve after their fall. Before that, they had a garment of light, the uncreated light of God’s glory which illumined the material world and made it Paradise. Wishing to heal man of his state of blindness and mortality, Christ took upon Himself this garment of skin. Through thus mingling His divinity with our humanity He healed our blindness and mortality. And in taking upon Himself our body He also He took upon Himself the whole material universe. He thereby transfigured it, making it shine with uncreated light.
- The icon depicts this transfigured world through its somewhat abstract style. By refusing to be naturalistic, the icon can be more realistic. For example, one will not find chiaroscuro, because the saints and everything else depicted shine with the light of Christ.
- The body of Christian ascetic writing, East and West, testifies to three main stages in man’s journey to God; the icon and liturgical art in general play a role in all these. First comes purification, through deep repentance. The ascetic look of the saints in icons reminds the faithful of the struggle needed to open themselves to God’s light. Then comes illumination. Through purification, the spiritual eyes of the pilgrim have been opened and he begins to perceive the grace of God working within each created thing. He is illumined. Each thing has been brought into existence through a word of God, and this living word remains within the thing it creates, keeping it in existence and directing it towards its end in Christ. In this second stage of illumination the pilgrim is granted to perceive these “words” or *logoi*, just as Moses saw the bush burning without it being consumed. Through various stylistic means the icon indicates this invisible world which is revealed through the visible. Finally, the pilgrim is granted union with the Word Himself. The possibility of this union, which is called deification or theosis, is affirmed in icons such as Pentecost and the Transfiguration.

The Style of an icon

As mentioned above, what is characteristic of holy icons is not only what they depict and how they are used, but how they depict their subject. Here are just a few of the stylistic techniques used to suggest the spiritual world.

- *Flatness*. The icon leads us through itself to the person depicted. Flatness helps this. The icon does not replace the reality it depicts, but rather leads us through itself so we can meet the reality itself.

- *Inverse perspective.* Instead of lines converging in some fictitious space behind the image, they often pass through the real space in front of the icon and converge in the viewer. Thus, the icon is not interested in imaginary space, but in real space. They sanctify the actual space in which they are found. The icon's function is not primarily to establish a relationship between the viewer and itself - to stimulate a purely aesthetic experience - but to a relationship between person and person through itself.
- *Multi-point perspective.* The viewer is encouraged to view the world as God sees it, from all viewpoints, and not from the limited, single viewpoint of an individual.
- *Isometry.* Lines that are parallel in nature are depicted as parallel in the icon. In doing this the icon affirms the "isness" of the object, the object as it is in itself and not merely its appearance to our physical eyes.
- *Radiance.* In Christ, everything is filled with divine light, and therefore all shadows flee. Whilst there is enough modelling to affirm the materiality of the thing depicted, the icon depicts a material world transfigured by, soaked in, uncreated light. The halos surrounding the heads of the saints and the gold leaf background all testify to this. "In God we live and move and have our being" as Saint Paul said.
- *Divine and profane time.* In Greek there are two words for time: kronos, which is clock time, and kairos, which is divine time. Often the same person will be depicted a number of times in the same icon, since what is important is the eternal significance of an event rather than the strict time sequence within kronos.
- *Scale.* What is most important is the relative spiritual importance of the persons depicted, and so icons often adjust their scale accordingly.
- *Garments.* In icons, garments reflect the transfigured state of the bodies they clothe. Their lines are harmonious and abstract, whilst conforming to essential anatomical laws. Usually curved lines of drapery are broken into a series of straighter lines. Sometimes by contrast these curves are accentuated, as in some Comnenian icons and in Romanesque works. In general, the abstraction of the icon is a means of unearthing reality; it is not, as with much modern abstraction, an attempt to depart from reality and launch into a creative act *ex nihilo*.

GALLERY ART

It can be seen from the above that whilst the icon has very many facets, it nonetheless plays a very specific role, a liturgical role. Where does this leave "gallery art", the art of the world whose aim is at present quite different? Any answer to this question must involve some personal opinion. But I feel that some response must be made to secular art, since it plays such a considerable role in forming our society.

Personally, I think that secular art would experience a great impetus from rethinking its whole philosophy in the light of the icon, or more specifically, in the light of the whole theology of the sacred and of the image which underlies the icon. This re-evaluation would have a radical effect on western art. The unstated axioms of any system are what give it form, and unless these are changed, no system can undergo any lasting transformation, and go deeper.

At this point, lest it seem that I am unreasonably negative about modern western art, I need to say that I am talking about art's *dominant* world view, and especially the world view of the critics. Few would disagree that the general trend of artistic philosophy over the past few centuries has been towards the secular. It is therefore this

trend which I am addressing. However, there have been, and always will be, individuals and schools in the midst of this secular art world which do manage, with varying degrees of success, to intuit and express the sacred. This is wonderful and refreshes the soul. The human person is made in God's image, and this living image will always in various people be erupting through the crust of secular systems. But these inspired people are the exception to the rule set by a profane society, and it is this rule which we are concerning ourselves with here.

Seen one way, re-evaluation in the light of a sacred tradition would inspire secular art to go backwards. But why not? If a road we have chosen proves to be a cul-de-sac, why not admit the mistake, go back and find a road that goes somewhere?

But a more positive way of seeing the past few centuries of secular art is to regard it as prophetic. It has reflected back the true inner state of its mother culture, saying effectively: If there is no God, then this is what life is really like: purely material, selfish, and ultimately chaotic. Seen in this way, secular art has done us a service in acting as our dream world, vividly depicting for us the progressive stages of our self-destruction. If so, our dreams are now say to us: We have reached the bottom of individualism's valley, it is now time to climb back up towards God.

Western art's return to a sacred world view would open a whole new, bright world. It would entail a looking outwards and inwards at the same time; an outwards towards God, and inwards, not into the fragmentation of fallen, individualised man, but into his true self, created in God's image.

Essentially, the icon challenges modern art to change from a man-centred state into a God-centred one, to shift from a secular, world-centred state, to a sacred state. Man cannot be understood apart from God, in whose image he is made, and the material world cannot be understood apart from its Creator. That is, to be truly humanist and matter-honouring (can I dare say, "materialist"!) an artistic culture must be sacred.

So what I would like to explore now are, firstly, a brief identification and critique of modern art's basic axioms, and secondly, a description of alternative sacred axioms for the foundation of a new, because ancient, modern art.

So what are the axioms of modern art? (By modern, I mean art from about the Renaissance, which is when art more obviously shifted from theocentricity to anthropocentricity.) I suggest that these axioms are primarily the following:

- The hallmark of art is creativity, the belief that an artist can bring into existence something which did not exist before. The artist's imagination therefore acts as a demi-god.
- Although it is not an axiom as such, but is a result of the above philosophy of self-expression, the subject matter of art is in fact the inner state of the artist.
- The main role of art is to give the viewer/listener an aesthetic experience, be it pleasant or unpleasant, stimulating or soothing, comforting or shocking.

What is the origin of the idea that an artist can create something out of nothing, like God? It began in the Renaissance² and becomes fully evident in the Romanticism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

² The following analysis is indebted to Dr Andrew Louth's article, "Orthodoxy and Art" in *Living Orthodoxy in the Modern World*, edited by Andrew Walker and Costa Carras, London (1996)

The concept began with Nicholas of Cusa's theory that the human mind is a demi-god, able to create things out of nothing in its conceptual world. This seminal idea was expanded by the Renaissance humanist Scaliger. He asserted that the true poet (the word means to make), unlike say an actor who performs an existing work, is able to make something new, and is thus a second God. Another influential figure in this theory was Giordano Bruno.

These ideas then spread to Germany, the birthplace of Romanticism. There the word *Schopfer* or creator began to be used for poet, not at first without reaction from Christian thinkers. With time however, this concept of the poet creating things from the depths of his own being became accepted as the norm.

From this time, in effect, the object of the viewer or listener's experience was no longer art but the inner world of its creator. And as society, and therefore most of its artists shifted away from God, so the inner world of its artists became increasingly chaotic. The artist felt that his task was to reflect back to the world, usually in a magnified state, the chaos it was in, despite outward appearances. The artist thus adopted a prophetic role, although not speaking with inspiration from above, but from below, from the primeval chaos which preceded the formation of beauty by God.

This is more or less where mainstream art is now. Attempts to rediscover beauty and harmony have tended to remain materialistic, searching for the core of meaning only in a sort of scientific, structuralist way, like Cubism or plain field painting.

A Threshold Sacred Art

Probably gallery and entertainment art can never be sacred in the fullest sense, that is, "set apart" for God, simply because that is not its aim. Nevertheless, whether or not we like it, aestheticism is the dominant setting for art at the present, and so the question is whether or not some *elements* of sacred art can be introduced into art of this family. I think that this is possible. Musicians like Sir John Tavener and Avo Part are doing just this. The sculptor Constantine Brancusi, chiefly under the influence of the Orthodoxy of his Rumanian homeland did this. The writers Tolkein and C.S.Lewis imbued their fiction with a Christian world view. The names can be multiplied.

An important step towards transforming the secular ambience of contemporary art must surely be to identify the characteristics of sacred art. It is then for individual artists or schools to enter into this way of thinking and to reflect it in their work.

What then are key elements of sacred art, according to the iconographic tradition of the Orthodox Church? For simplicity's sake I refer below primarily to the visual arts, but the same principles surely also apply to the sister arts of writing, music, theatre, film and so on.

- Sacred art is humble. That is, its style leads us beyond itself, albeit through itself, to the divine source of goodness and beauty. "Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights" writes the apostle James (James 1:17).
- The artist himself experiences something of the holy, and so his art is not merely the intellectual expression of rational ideas but is a description and embodiment of personal experience. And yet, it is not self he is expressing, but God. "God is light," writes St Simeon the New Theologian (949-1022)³, "and He communicates His radiance to those who are united to Him, to the extent that they are purified."

³ *Ta Apanta* (Thessaloniki, 1969), I Homily 25.

- Sacred art makes the viewer more perceptive to the *logoi* within the things depicted. It perceives and abstracts and magnifies the God-given spiritual essence of its subject.
- Whilst making the logos more evident to us, the sacred artwork does not disdain the material expression or “body” of that logos. The work therefore always remains incarnate. It shows a transfigured world and not a dematerialised one.
- Sacred art often reflects the suffering, hardship and even apparent ugliness of this life. It is never idealistic or utopian, but shares in the reality of our human struggles. For the same reason, when such a work does depict something of the harsher realities of this life, it also reveals the image of God in the people suffering and the inherent goodness of created things. Suffering itself presupposes the existence of a state of non-suffering, a Paradisical state where “there is neither pain nor sorrow nor sighing but life everlasting” as an Orthodox requiem hymn describes it. Ugliness presupposes beauty, and can always only be a distortion of beauty. Sacred art is therefore neither sentimental nor pessimistic.
- Sacred art does not attempt to isolate the viewer in a purely sensual aesthetic experience. Sense experiences, even if of the more refined aesthetic type, are but a fleeting and poor imitation of a genuine spiritual state. Instead, sacred art makes the viewer more receptive to revelation, so that he can himself partake directly in God who is the source of the reality it depicts. It not only gives us a taste of beauty, but it aims to make us beautiful. To this end it has an element of what has been called “bright sadness”. The brightness is an aesthetic fruit of the paradise that can be enjoyed by the viewer, whereas the sadness engenders the repentance needed for the viewer to personally enter that paradise.
- Different forms of sacred art are united by universal laws or principles. Because these principles are rooted in God, they are not restrictive but to the contrary open doors of almost unlimited potential. The depth of richness of these principles inspire a great variety of expression, depending on the individual maker, his culture and his epoch. Paradoxically, any art which seeks for novelty at the expense of sacred laws will eventually collapse into a boring chaos of uniformity, a pile of rubble.
- The individual maker is part of a tradition. Therefore on looking at a sacred work one is not so much aware of an isolated genius, but of an inspired tradition which acts through the individual maker or workshop. That is, the artwork will always be communal, relational. The wisdom needed for sacred art cannot be gained by a single person in his or her lifetime. Each person living the sacred tradition might add his unique expression to the whole, but his uniqueness flourishes within the community of that tradition, and not outside it. In this way sacred art keeps the human person from collapsing into individualism.
- Sacred art not only depicts something sacred, but also, and more importantly, it participates in a sacred process. This process includes the making of the art work, the art work itself, and the experience people have through that work. What is this process?
- Sacred art is part of the return of the disordered cosmos to its primal order and beauty. There are two sources of this disorder. Firstly it has become disordered through the fall, through humankind worshipping the creation rather than the Creator. But there is also an element of fecund “disorder” or unchecked exuberance which God implanted in the world at its creation, independent of the

fall. In the midst of this teeming world God planted a garden, the fruit of His divine intelligence transforming still further the “raw material” of the world. He then gave man a task, a transforming, creative task, which is to extend this garden of paradise into the whole world. He told Adam and Eve to multiply and fill the earth, to till the earth, that is, to “hominise” and thereby divinise the whole world. “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation (*cosmos* in the original Greek)”⁴ said Christ to the Apostles before His ascension. Sacred art is part of this process of making the good very good, of revealing more clearly still the divine order. It is a form of weaving the cosmos into a garment of the Church.

- Sacred art is part of man’s expression of worship and thanksgiving to his Creator. It is worship expressed in colour, form, music. It is the using of all his senses and faculties to love God. It is part of our fulfilment of the first command, to love God with all our strength and mind and heart.
- Sacred art is part of the process of discovery, of searching, of inquiry. God is infinite, and His revelation cannot be exhausted. Sacred art on the one hand rejects illusion and fantasy, and on the other hand it fearlessly explores the dominions of truth and genuine beauty. There is always therefore the element of surprise, youthfulness and newness to it. The tradition exists not to restrict this exploration, but to the contrary to guide one away from cul-de-sacs, illusion and solipsism.
- Sacred art is peaceful and vigorous at the same time. It is peaceful because the artist has cast off, or is in the process of casting off, the shackles of individualism and egotism. He has thereby entered the realm of love, relationship, harmony. His art will be vigorous, because truth sets people free, because humility returns a person to his true God-given nature and so grants fearlessness and spontaneity.
- Sacred art is deep. It does not offer platitudes. It has passed through the Hades of suffering, darkness, as did Christ. Its basis is that light overcomes darkness, life overcomes death. What makes it sacred is therefore not so much what is depicted, as how it is depicted. It is possible to depict an apple in a sacred way and the crucifixion in a secular way.
- Sacred art has an element of imperfection or incompleteness about it. My spiritual father once said that there is an imperfect perfection and a perfect imperfection. The former is something so mathematically or formally complete that there is no room for the viewer. It is mechanically complete but inorganic. The perfect imperfection on the other hand beckons the viewer to complete the work. It begins a process which is completed in the heart of the viewer. Its incompleteness keeps it organic, growing, alive.
- Sacred art has a presence about it. It leads you to the threshold of something. It doesn’t violate your freewill by whipping up your emotions, but quietly leads you to the threshold of another world. It belongs to the *temenos*, or precinct of the sanctuary. To enter the sanctuary one must walk alone, of one’s own volition. The mysteries of the sanctuary are only given to those who are ready, whereas art by its nature is public and open to all. Authentic art therefore acknowledges that it is fruit but not the tree. Recognising this limitation it leads us to the light-filled shadow of the divine Presence, but does not compel us to enter the sanctuary and enter the divine presence. Only freely offered love can lead us into that place. In this way sacred art therefore affirms the primacy of love over aesthetic experience. It enchants but does not presume to save.

⁴ Mark 16:15

- Sacred art is triadic, having always three elements in dynamic harmony. There are many different levels of this principle. For example, there is the triad of archetype (the subject matter), type (the artwork) and the viewer. There is the triad of matter (the stuff or medium of the artwork), spirit (the logos of the matter) and heart (the human person in whom these two worlds meet). Another triad is balance, imbalance and dynamic resolution: pure balance is static and therefore closed; pure imbalance agitates and is unpeaceful; dynamic resolution combines these two with grace, like a beautiful dance.
- Sacred art delights in the very medium it consists of. It does not merely use its medium - be it wood, paint, notes, words or whatever - as though it were neutral and discardable means to an end. It does not merely depict a transfigured world, but is itself part of that transfigured world. Its very existence testifies to the possibility of paradise. It is itself a fruit of paradise, a union of spirit and matter. It has a sacramental property and is not simply a signifier. It is the child not only of love between the artist and the subject matter, but also of artist and the stuff of the artwork.
- Sacred art's greatness does not reside in quantity but in its quality. A small work of sacred art will be majestic, numinous, whereas a secular work, being solipsistic, is sadly small even when it is massive in size. The nobility of sacred art comes from its traditional and communal nature; it represents something much greater than itself. The individualism of secular work boasts self-sufficiency, and so cannot expand beyond itself.
- A given sacred artwork does not exist in isolation, but is part of a hierarchy; it exists only in relationship with something greater than itself. The icon, for example, exists properly in the wholeness of the church temple. The temple itself exists for the Divine Liturgy. This Liturgy on earth is a participation in the heavenly Liturgy. And the heavenly Liturgy is a participation in the incarnation, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ, God become man.
- The sacred artist's creativity does not consist of the imagined ability to make something that did not exist before, but in suggesting an aspect of its subject not before emphasised in this way. His creativity is not the object of his endeavours, but is an unconscious element which enters the work as he tries to reflect truth and beauty as he sees it. His subjectivity flourishes the more he ignores it in the ecstatic quest for objectivity, to depict the other. The more he dies to any desire to express himself or make something novel, the more truly expressive and fresh his work is. Dying to himself, he finds himself in the other.
- If we can speak of imagination at all in the production of sacred art, the faculty is not one of invention, but is rather a faculty of reception. It is a sort of screen onto which images can be projected from the spiritual world. It is not an originating organ, but a mediatory one. In the Orthodox Church's view of the human person, the highest faculty is the nous, which can be described as the eye of the heart. By the nous we can know things in an unmediated way. If the nous is purified, then it can communicate to the imagination images from the archetypal world, that is, from God. Operating in a purely soulful, natural fashion, the imagination can also be seen in a more active way, as a means of perceiving connections between things; dreams, for example, appear to be the mind's way of making sense of the experiences of the day or the past.

- Sacred art is always abstract, in the literal sense, in that it draws out the invisible essence of its subject. It uses abstractions of style to suggest these invisible realities. Such art is therefore not naturalistic, but realistic. It reveals the union of the inner with the outer, the invisible with the visible, eternity in the present.