

GLIMPSE OF AN ICON PAINTER'S JOURNEY

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As an iconographer my job is to introduce people to one another. When people pray before an icon they want to meet the saint whom it depicts. This makes the ministry of an icon painter an awesome responsibility. To do it well is very difficult. I have been an iconographer full-time for over thirty-five years, and each year the more I know I don't know. Let me explain what I mean.

The Church Fathers say that the connection of the icon with its subject is not because it shares the same nature - an icon is but wood and pigment while the saint is flesh and blood - but because it bears the saint's name and likeness. The Greek word *eikon* means image or likeness. To use theological language, the link is via the *hypostasis* or person of the saint and not their nature.

To write the subject's name is clearly easy, so the challenge for me is how to capture their likeness. Indeed, what does likeness mean? It seems to be in a tension between the specific and the infinite. Each person is unique, so I always strive to suggest something of the saint's distinctiveness as well as their "universality" as a Spirit bearer. In the history of humankind there has been and will ever be only one New Martyr Elizabeth, or one Saint Alban Protomartyr of Britain.**(1,2)** One of the tasks of an icon painter is therefore to indicate something of the subject's particular expression of divine love. As well as possessing particular physical features the saint will be known for their special charisma, as an ascetic for example, or a teacher, or a healer, or a counselor of souls.

So each person is specific – Jane is not Mary. But at the same time each person is a profound, God-created mystery and therefore, in a sense, infinite. So when I stand in front of a white panel before painting I know that a difficult journey lies ahead. In one sense I am doomed not to complete this journey, for pigment on panel can never do justice to a saint's holiness. While being a likeness, an icon will in another sense always remain unlike the saint.

So I begin an icon knowing that it will never be completed, that I will never be satisfied. For one thing, the icon's likeness to the saint could always be improved. You could say, from an artistic point of view, that I end up abandoning my icons rather than completing them! Though there will be things that I think have worked, there will always be things I want to improve in the next icon.

On the other hand, despite its imperfections, I know that the icon will still function liturgically. The joinery of my door is not perfect, but the door will still open. For the praying viewer will approach the icon in order to meet the saint

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it depicts rather than to study it as a work of art. Also, the icon will be part of a larger liturgical symphony, aimed at marrying heaven and earth, Christ and His followers. The rest of the orchestra will carry on playing despite the odd discordant note.

So why all the angst? Why don't I just mechanically copy good icons? Because it is not just who is depicted that impresses itself upon the souls of those who pray in front of icons, but how they are depicted. The art of the icon does still matter. Archimandrite Vasileios of Athos once described an accurate but dry theological speech that he had heard as being like someone throwing nutritious nuts at his audience. The nuts were wonderful, but not the delivery. If we think that the summit of Church tradition is to copy past masterpieces then we are saying, effectively, that the Holy Spirit no longer lives in the Church. We are machines destined to imitate, to do robotically what we are programmed to do. No freedom, no risk.

Last week my daughter showed me a video of a dog doing yoga exercises. It was imitating whatever its mistress did. There was doubtless some benefit for the dog, but I don't think what it did could be regarded as the authentic spiritual tradition of yoga. When healthy, the icon tradition is living, intelligent. It adapts itself to each epoch and culture, to its church setting, to pastoral needs. This great diversity in unity is why experts can give the date and provenance of icons by their style alone.

My own method of painting icons is first to study the life of the saint, or the liturgical texts if it is to be of a feast. I then jot down the salient features to which either the commissioner or I want to give special emphasis. I then research good icons of the subject – though sometimes I am asked to paint icons of British saints for whom no icon yet exists. I then jot down or sketch possible ways to express those characteristics of the saint, drawing on elements of past icons and my own experience.

The Logos was incarnate by the Holy Spirit in Palestine in the first century AD, but the Holy Spirit continues to bring the Body of Christ to maturity in each epoch and culture. So for me a very important element of the design process is to draw as much as possible from the culture of both the saint and the setting for which the icon is intended. For example, I am currently painting an icon of the Venerable Bede for the Pontifical Bede College of Rome. Bede is an early Anglo-Saxon saint, and the college is in Rome, so I have designed an icon that draws on iconography from both these sources. **(3)**

This principle of incarnation applies not just to time and culture but also to each iconographer. Christ, and all humans because they are made in His image, are an eternal mystery. No one iconographer can therefore exhaustively express the riches of this mystery called the person. This is one source of creativity and originality in the icon tradition. Such originality is not a matter of the icon painter egotistically seeking attention, but the natural result of a unique person – the iconographer - expressing a fresh nuance of the infinite mystery of a person. Iconographers should know and love the persons whom they depict. In this sense an icon should be a portrait taken from life and not just other people's portraits.

I think that icons should indicate a world transfigured, a material world illuminated by the uncreated light of divine grace. To do this well, I believe strongly that the iconographer must first understand the physical form of the world that is being transfigured. "The natural first and then the spiritual," wrote Saint Paul (I Cor. 15:46). Put another way, the great Rumanian sculptor Constantine Brancusi said that simplicity is complexity resolved. This is one reason why love the work of Archimandrite Zenon so much: his forms are articulate. **(4)**

This means that to paint icons well is much more difficult than most people think. Icon painting is certainly an act of prayer, but it is also a science and a craft. A good understanding of drapery form and the human figure makes the difference between distortion and distillation. The iconographer cuts corners at great risk. I founded and teach the three year part-time Icon Painting Certificate for The Prince's School of Traditional Art. The first year I have the students do only monochrome studies of good icons so that they can understand form before venturing into color. **(5)** Look three times and paint once, I remind them repeatedly.

So to simplify something I need first to know its complexity. But when it comes to simplifying, I need to discern what can be left out and what needs to be retained. To do this I need to know the church's theology and be a person of prayer so that I have the music of heaven within my soul. The painting of an icon requires hundreds of aesthetic decisions, and each decision needs to be measured against this inner music, a sensitivity gained by living the life of Christ. Does this color combination or form harmonize with this music, or is it discordant?

This is what I love about the ministry of iconography. It unites everything: prayer, asceticism, craft, science, observation, matter and spirit, heaven and earth. It is a form of monasticism.

CAPTIONS

1. Saint Alban, Protomartyr of Britain. By Aidan Hart.
2. New Martyr Elizabeth. By Aidan Hart.
3. Design for an icon of the Venerable Bede. By Aidan Hart.
4. Wall paintings by Archimandrite Zenon, crypt church of Feodorovsky Cathedral, Petersburg.
5. Monochrome study, egg tempera on watercolor paper. By Lee Harvey.