ICONOGRAPHERS OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY[1]

Brother Aidan

Introduction

The characteristic feature of last century's iconography, world-wide, is a shift from a somewhat decadent, sentimental style back to traditional models. Although there were scholarly and social influences helping to effect this revival, the return to the actual painting of traditional icons was initiated by just a few iconographers; it is these, plus some other influential iconographers whom we shall be discussing this evening.

Inevitably there will be a subjective, personal element in my choice of iconographers in such a presentation as this. However, I have tried to pick those who are generally agreed to be among the most influential in their respective countries. Since this is a gathering of the Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergios, I should include Anglican iconographers, but I am afraid that I do not know any.

To appreciate the contribution of these formative twentieth century iconographers it is necessary to know a little about the state of iconography inherited by the twentieth century, so I will begin with a very brief overview of the preceding four centuries, with their trend towards decadence.

After surveying the twentieth century it is natural to ask: what can we of the twenty-first century learn from it and where should we go here? So by way of an epilogue I will venture to express and illustrate with my own icons some iconographic themes which I think need to be explored in our own twenty-first century.

The growing decadence of icon style from the 16th century

Greece

We can trace the beginnings of stylistic decadence from the 16th century, in the Ionian islands and Crete; this was mainly due to their more intimate contact with Italian influences. Features of this style are sentimentality and the inclusion of many didactic details which distract from the primary role of the icon, which is to bring one into relationship with the saint depicted rather than tell you stories about him or her.

Elsewhere in Greece, particularly in the Peloponnesos, the tradition was kept more intact, albeit to a more folk standard than works of Byzantium. However, this changed after the War of Independence in 1821, when westernised Greeks returned and introduced modernist iconography throughout Greece.

Russia and the Bulkans

In Russia elements of decadence begin to enter in the latter part of the seventeenth century, although some would say that the extreme elongation of Dionysius's works earlier in that century were already signalling a departure. Things accelerated markedly through Peter the Great and Catherine campaign to westernise Russia. Just as Russia's church music was dominated by Italian tastes, so also did its iconography. Naturalism, superfluous detail and naturalistic perspective systems characterise this period. (The exception to this is the Old Believer sect, whose liturgical conservatism

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[1] A talk given at the Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius Annual Conference, Stourbridge, 22 August, 2000.

kept its icons more true to the old stylistic tradition.) Rumania, Hungary and Serbia all fell under the same influences.

The fact that varnishes darkened with age and wall paintings became sooted over, meant that people became more and more ignorant of traditional styles.

The return to tradition and its proponents

Greece and Photius Kontoglou

The revival of traditional iconography in Greece is mainly attributable to Photius Kontoglou, who actively used his abilities as a painter, scholar and writer to promote the cause.

Kontoglou was born in 1895 in Ayvali, Asia Minor. After the death of his father the next year he was raised by his mother and her brother, who was abbot of the family monastery. He studied in 1913 at the Athens School of Fine arts, but at the outbreak of the War he travelled throughout western Europe, studying its art, before in due course he came to study and work in Paris. Here he worked as a designer for the "Illustration" publication, from which he received a prize. He began his writing career in 1918 when he wrote and illustrated "Pedro Cazas". In 1919 he returned to his home town where he taught French and technical drawing for two years. In 1922, after the disastrous Asia Minor campaign for which he had been conscripted, he departed to Athens, and married Maria in 1925.

Most of the extant works up to this time are highly accomplished naturalistic works, and generally non-religious in subject matter. Portraits and illustrations predominate. However, there is a discernible growing influence of icons in the simpler, more abstracted style. The earliest overt icon I can find is a Baptism of Christ dated 1923[2], so it is clear that even in this early time he was being attracted to the Byzantine tradition.

In 1930 he was appointed as technical adviser to the Byzantine museum, Athens. In 1932 he began his fresco painting career by painting, with his pupils Tsarochis and Nikos Engonopoulos, his newly built house in Patisia, Athens.

In 1933 he directed the Coptic museum in Egypt, then the following two years helped clean the wall paintings of Mystra, Greece. From 1937-40 he painted the wall paintings for the Athens City Hall. The most intense time for painting icons and frescos and for writing was from the 1945 until his death in 1965. With his assistants he painted about 5,000 square yards of frescoes, most of which can be found in Athens. Altogether he wrote over a dozen books plus numerous articles. His chief book is "Ekphrasis", published in 2 volumes. This is a painter's practical manual, and explains techniques as well as the contents of all the major icons.

What are the characteristics of Kontoglou's work? He is most known as the one who turned the Greek church back to the sublimity of the Byzantine icon tradition. By his writings and example he showed that there are profound reasons for the traditional style, and therefore that Orthodox need not feel that it is inferior to secular western art - to the contrary, that it is superior. His work as a restorer helped him to study old works closely.

Yet it must be said that he did not understand the tradition to be static, a mere copying or painting by numbers. His icons are recognisably his. An interesting point is

[2] "Ekphrasis" by P. Konyiglou. 1960, Athens; ill. 2

that while he was an iconographer he continued to accept secular commissions, like portraits, illustration and the decoration of municipal and private buildings.

Russia: Sister Yuliania (Maria Sakalova) and Archimandrite Zenon

How did the Russian Church return to paint icons in the traditional style? Interest in medieval iconography began its revival through the works of scholars and archaeologists, in the latter half of the nineteenth century - for example, N.V. Pokrovski who in 1890 published a paper on mural paintings in Old Greek and Russian Churches. The Russophil movement also helped to remove an inferiority complex about the non-naturalism of icons. This renewed love for things Russian led some painters to go search-out old frescoed churches and photograph or paint them. A notable instance is the remarkable fourteenth century church of the Dormition at Volotovo Polye. This was photographed in detail by L.A. Matsulevich in 1910 and excellent painted copies made by L.A. Durnovo and others. Tragically this church was bombed to rubble by the Nazis in World War Two.

A more public and striking impetus to the revival came in the beginning of the century with the cleaning of old icons. The art historian I. Grabar who had written the multi-volume work "History of Russian Art" began the first restoration workshop at this time. The famous *Hospitality* or *Holy Trinity* icon by St. Andrew Rubliof was one of these first icons to be restored.

The Russian revolution forced underground the church and the practice of icon-painting. But from the 1930's, a secret nun named Sister Yuliania (Maria Nikolia Sakalova in the world) was secretly painting icons based on the recently restored medieval icons. Immediately after Stalin officially recognised the Church in 1944, St Sergius' Lavra was re-established and with it a seminary and academy. Here Sister Juliania immediately began teaching iconography and restoration to seminarians and monks, and continued to do so until her death in the 1970's. Hers was the first official academy of iconography in communist Russia and to her is primarily due the restoration in Russia of traditional iconography. It appears to me that her models were taken mainly from the Moscow school of Rubliof's time (14th and 15th centuries). In the 1970's lay people began to come and study under her as well. Her pupils continue the teaching tradition there.

More recently, Archimandrite Zenon has become among the most famous of Russian iconographers. His characteristic feature, at least since the latter 1980's, has been the choice of inspiration from the Middle Byzantine Era (ninth to thirteenth centuries) rather than Russian models.

Father Zenon was born in 1953 in Pervomaisk of the Nikolayev region where, perhaps significantly, there had been Greek settlements. He later studied at the Odessa arts college, where in his second year he began to paint icons. He then did his military service, as an artist, after which in 1976 he became a monk at Pskov-Pechery monastery.

From 1983 until 1989 he began work on the St Daniel Monastery in Moscow , the new Patriarchal centre. There many Moscow artists began to paint under his direction.

A few years ago he was made abbot of an ancient monastery, to restore it and to establish an iconography school in the context of the monastic life. However, after disciplinary action over an ecclesiastical issue he left, with one or two of his monks, to live in a village near the boarder of Estonia and Russia, north of Pskov. Pupils from

over the world still come to study under him, which together with publications of his work and the icons themselves ensure the spread of his influence.

His earlier works, like the St Nicholas Chapel at Pskov, are mainly in the 14th century Russian tradition - particularly the Moscow and Novgorodian schools. Around 1988 works like the St Seraphim side-chapel of the Trinity Cathedral Church of Pskov show a greater influence from the Middle Byzantine period. It should be noted also that there exist in Pskov works from this period, still in the Byzantine style, which doubtless had a direct influence on Fr. Zenon.

In deciding to go back to this earlier epoch for his inspiration, he is going to the source of all Russian painting But he is also creating a bridge between the Greek and Russian iconographic traditions, which for too long have been considered two quite distinct, even partly contradictory schools. He said in an interview:

> *Since living spiritual tradition has been completely severed the level of our spiritual development is very low. Therefore it would be unrealistic to proceed from the highest achievements of fifteenth century icon-painting. They are undoubtedly beyond the comprehension of a modern man. We should go further back to or spiritual origins by mastering the Byzantine tradition.*
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> *Each icon-painter will have to tread the path covered by the first Russian icon-painters following the adoption of Christianity in Russia. And they imitated the Greek models.*[3]

There is also a refreshing boldness and authority in his brushwork; he apparently works quickly. His restless exploration of new - or rather, old - techniques and stylistic roots keep his work vigorous. Yet there is an undeniable stillness and interiority to his works, especially I think those done in the early Byzantine tradition. More recently he has been using the encaustic technique (that is, with wax, as most early icons until about the 8th century were painted).

Europe: Leonid Ouspensky and Fr. Gregory Kroug

Few Orthodox need an introduction to these two painters, particularly perhaps Ouspensky. Leonid Ouspensky is known mainly through the many pupils whom he has tutored in Paris, and through his books “The Meaning of Icons”, written jointly with Vladimir Lossky, and “The Theology of the Icon”, now available in expanded form in two volumes.

Ouspensky has an interesting history. He was born in Russia, where he fought as a teenager with the Red Army. He and some of his comrades were captured by the White Army, who were fleeing the Reds at the time. In the midst of their flight the White soldiers decided to dispose of all their captives, and so lined them up and proceeded to shoot them. Their captain stopped them in time to save the young Ouspensky. He was subsequently taken by them to Germany, where he worked in a mine for some time. Later he went to Paris where he studied art, and began painting icons. Later he came to be known not only as a painter but as a teacher of the craft, as well as a writer and a lecturer on the theology of icons at the St Serge Institute in Paris.

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[3] “Russian Church Art Today” by S.V. Timchenko, Moscow, (1993); p.13.

Among Ouspensky's best known pupils is the American, Thomas Doolan, now the monk Father Simonas. In our own country another pupil, Mariamna Fortunatto, is known for her teaching the art of iconography.

The other key figure for the Russian tradition in Europe is Fr. Gregory Krug, who lived also in Paris and often worked with Ouspensky. He was born in Petersburg in 1908. His father was Lutheran of Swedish origin and his mother was Russian Orthodox. They later moved to Estonia. Raised in the Lutheran tradition, the future Fr. Gregory became Orthodox at the age of 19. In 1928 he studied art in Tallin, then later in Tartu. In 1931 he left for Paris, where he studied further at the Academy of Art, under Milioti and Samov. But his icon-painting career began when he learned to paint icons with Federov, Stelletsky and Sister Jean (Reitlinger).

During the war he suffered psychologically, from depression I think, and was hospitalised. With the help of his spiritual father he recovered enough to leave and become a monk at the Skete of the Holy Spirit. There for the next twenty years of his life he dedicated himself to icon-painting. He also painted frescoes in churches outside the skete, notably, along with Leonid Ouspensky, the Russian Patriarchal Cathedral in Paris. In this country the monastery of St John the Baptist in Essex has the largest number of his icons. He died in 1969.

Fr. Gregory's icons are stylistically unique. While remaining true to the principles of the icon tradition, he has his own unique way of expressing these principles. One such feature is his use of darts of pure white highlights, which float over a sea of uneven colour. Also, the over-sized irises and pupils of his eyes give an impression of tenderness, sadness devoid of sentimentality, and of a deep interior life.

Fr. Gregory's icons stand above all for a marriage of freedom within and a deep respect for the Church's iconographic tradition. His work is devoid of that unhealthy type of fear which so easily leads to lifeless copying, but nor is it disdainful of the Church's wise traditions. Unfortunately most of his icons are deteriorating rapidly, in part due to the poor materials he used, in part due to poor technical workmanship.

Great Britain

In this country virtually all Orthodox iconographers have been working in the Russian tradition. Mention could be made of Fr. David of Walsingham, perhaps known most for his icons of British saints, and his pupil, Leon Lidament. We have already mentioned Mariamna Fortunatto, whose teaching on the theology and the practice of icon-painting has been of great service over the past decades. Although I do not know her work personally, I understand that Matushka Patsy Fostiropolos is busy. The nuns of the Monastery of St John the Baptist in Essex have under the inspiration of Father Sophrony been producing for fifteen years portable icons, frescoes, mosaics, carvings, enamels and embroidery. And then there are numerous other iconographers in various stages of development painting as much as their family or work commitments allow. In the last ten years Sergi Feodorof, a pupil of Fr. Zenon, has become well known through his commissions for Anglican and Catholic cathedrals and abbeys.

Iconography in the Twenty-first Century

Timeless yet indigenous; humble yet fearless; traditional yet new; these are some of the qualities of great icons. How successful have we been this past century in

achieving these standards? What challenges therefore lie before the iconographer of this century?

In assessing icon painting of such a vast and diverse world as international Orthodoxy, only generalisations can be made. Is it worthwhile then to make such generalisations? I think they can be helpful, although the views I express now will only be my personal ones, and hold no authority in themselves. I will discuss some key issues under headings.

The return to traditional prototypes

The turn from secular and sentimental models to traditional prototypes is clearly a welcome move. (Though it should be noted that this revival is by no means universal, especially in Russia where a lot of the churches being built or restored are having icons painted in the sentimental style.)

But the question needs to be asked whether the copies being made of traditional icons are copies made with understanding or are they clumsy approximations? Sadly, I think many, if not most icons being made in Greece are in the latter category. The paints are applied much more thickly than the Byzantine models, and usually garish artificial pigments are used in place of the natural ones. The wooden support of the icon is often of inferior quality and will not last. Very few use burnished gold but rather oil gilding, and as far as I know, the norm in Byzantium was burnished gold.

In Russia there seems to be a much greater respect for the materials; very often for example iconographers collect and grind their own pigments. In this respect the Russians' imitation of the masters tends to begin at an earlier stage of the icon production process than in Greece, with the pigments themselves.

However, I would question the great emphasis put by some Russian teachers on the puddling technique as the only legitimate Russian technique (this method involves the application of watery , puddled layers.) This was certainly one method used by the medieval painters, but not the only one. Used exclusively, it does not give one enough control to give variety of expression or crispness of form. In reality, within a given medieval icon there are usually various methods used: some areas have been laid down quite opaque and others more translucent, some with a dry brush charged with concentrated paint and others with more dilute paint.

There is nothing like detailed, personal observation of icons, preferably the originals; often a teacher will emphasise only one technique or school of thinking, but in the long run an iconogrpaher I think needs to supplement this with his or her own observation.

Training

As we have seen, the dissipation of some newly acquired skill, technique or styles requires some means of teaching it. In Britain there are very few means of learning the craft. There is Mariamna Fortunatto who has only recently resumed some measure of teaching. I myself do one or two workshop a year, of five days duration. But I am limiting these to the same five or six people. Apart from other iconographers sharing their experience with others in an informal way, I think that there are no other vehicles for learning. Consequently we have very few iconographers in this country who have undergone serious long-term training. A formal training is not always necessary by any means - Fr. Zenon had little training from others as far as I know, and learned

primarily from observation and analysis. But most people can not learn this way; they need a course of teaching. An icon school is something we need to work towards in Britain, be it an apprenticeship system or a formal institutional arrangement.

Payment

If someone is to become an accomplished iconographer they need to spend considerable time painting. The ideal is therefore to be a full time iconographer. Churches and individuals then need to recognise that if they want icon quality to improve they need to pay iconographers realistic prices (assuming the painters' standards are worth it!). The labourer is worthy of his hire. The iconographer for his part needs to try and produce top quality work, always trying to perfect the art, imbuing it with the spirit of the saints, and using materials and techniques which ensure longevity.

Towards a western or British iconography

The fact that by their style alone we can usually date old icons to within thirty years and identify their provenance tells us that there is a legitimate and natural variation within the tradition. A people receive the tradition from another Orthodox people, but before long they say the same thing with their own accent: the Byzantine dome becomes a Russian onion dome; the more bodily Greek icons become in Russia more diaphanous and elongated, and so on. Would it not be natural and traditional for the same to happen in Britain?

I think that there are three elements which would help in this natural, gradual process. First, iconographers can, with discernment, draw upon some features of western art produced in its Orthodox era - approximately up until the thirteenth century I would say. Celtic, Anglo-Saxon and Romanesque periods are obvious choices. Second, iconographers need to come to a deep understanding and intuition of the principles of the icon tradition. In this way they need not be committed to one cultures' and epoch's particular expression of these principles. If the iconographer is western, and seeks to be faithful to these principles which are rooted in timeless, heavenly values, then surely an authentic western, twenty-first century iconography will develop.

Icons as a real likeness

Icons up until around the iconoclastic crisis (for example, the mosaics of Ravenna and the encaustic icons) are unmistakably a likeness, or at least are not generalised faces differentiated only by having a different name written beside them. I think that we need to consider moving back to this tradition of the icon affirming the uniqueness of the human person. There are two reasons for this. First, sanctity does not abolish the uniqueness of the saint, but purifies his unique personhood. This surely should be reflected in the icon. Secondly, with the advent of photography we know what most saints who lived in the last century looked like - St Silouan the Athonite, New martyr Elizabeth etc. Surely, without being naturalistic portraits, their icons ought to reflect this likeness?

A pastoral and doctrinal sensitivity

It is clear from extant old icons that iconographers of old responded to the doctrinal and pastoral needs of the time. If, for example, the divinity of Christ was being questioned, they tended to design or chose icons of the Mother of God in which

the divinity of the Saviour was emphasised. One element I personally am trying to respond to through my icon-painting is the need for people in our century to slow down, to learn to be and not just do. For this reason, icons of the 10th to 13th centuries have been a big influence in my more recent work. Most icons of this Macedonian and Comnenian period have an inner stillness compared to, say, the more active and humanist Palaiologian school of the following two centuries.

Conclusion

We can characterise twentieth century iconography first, by a return to traditional models in the Orthodox countries, and second, by the reintroduction of the icon tradition itself to the west. Though we might regret icons being bought and sold as art objects on the commercial market, at least this process, along with often secular scholarship, has brought the icon tradition and Orthodoxy in general much more into the western public consciousness. Icons have a life of themselves, independent of the reasons people might buy or sell them.

Thirdly, and I think this is what concerns us most, there was and is still, a growing feeling that in fact we might not have returned to the tradition as much as we thought we had. Having effectively lost the tradition, we are finding that it is not so easy to regain it in all its subtlety and profundity. We need to dig deeper still, to understand the icon’s timeless principles so that new icons can be more authentic, can go beyond the extremes of fearful copying and impatience “to do one’s own thing” before humbly imbibing the tradition.