

CHRISTIANITY AND SACRED ART TODAY¹

The icon and an assessment of western art

By Aidan Hart

Introduction

Union: the essence of art

Our subject tonight is the sacred icon in the Orthodox Church and what light this tradition can shed on the predicament of art in the west today – both religious and secular.

The word art comes from the Latin stem *ar* which means to fit together. The word religion is probably related to *religare*, to bind. And the word culture derives from *colere*, to worship (hence cult) and to till. These etymologies reflect the profound fact that throughout history art and religion have been inexplicably linked. Art's very purpose and inspiration has traditionally been to join and bind together our world with a higher divine world.

Art as culture is an act of worship (cult) or honour offered to Divinity. In fact, as far as I can see, art throughout all epochs and cultures has been religious in its function: The first paintings – the cave paintings – anthropologists believe fulfilled some sort of shamanic function; Greek art reflected a realm of ideal beauty; Chinese art was a focus of Taoist meditation; African masks were used as part of sacred dances; Islamic calligraphy and architecture reflects the divine order revealed in geometry; and of course the Christian icon, our main subject tonight, acts as a door or window between heaven and earth.

And what is significant, as we shall see in more detail later, is that sacred art not only depicts a world shot through with divine power and light, but is itself an integral part of man's union with this divine light and love; the "art object" is used as part of a larger ritualistic life which unites its users to God. Art in these traditional cultures had and has a clear, lasting and inspiring function within everyone's daily lives. Such art was not an aesthetic optional extra to merely decorate a wall; it was an integral part of the sacred dance of life throughout the year. It mediated between heaven and earth.

The dilemma of secular art

But there is an exception among cultures to this ancient marriage of art and the divine, of culture and worship. This exception is us, our western secular culture.

Approximately from the Renaissance onwards the west has gradually sundered art from its spiritual roots. As a result we are no longer sure what art is for. And so we have this plethora of art movements, each trying to find a lasting inspiration and role for art. Restlessness, angst, the search for stimulation through novelty – the shock of the new - the exaltation of one isolated truth to the detriment of others – all these features of secular art are natural fruits of art's self-proclaimed autonomy. And we have got so used to this independence of art from the divine that we think it is the norm. It has even affected Christian art in the churches. My Roman Catholic friends bemoan the low state of their liturgical art. Protestant churches(though this is rapidly changing) have so often treated art as a potential wall rather than a door between God

¹ A lecture given 6 October, 2005, at Hillsdale College, Minnesota, US.

and man. Probably alone among Christian visual art the icon has retained its role as a spiritual mediator in both its style of painting and its liturgical use.

Approach

And so what I want to do tonight is to first outline the principles of the icon – how and why the icon is painted the way it is, and how it is used. And then I will make some brief observations on our western art based on these principles. I want in particular to refer to some key artists of the first part of the twentieth century who in fact tried to restore something of the spiritual in art, particularly Constantine Brancusi. I will finish with some comments on how I think our western Christian art – the art of the altar – can be rejuvenated.

1. The icon

Introduction: the aim of the Christian life

To understand icons we must first understand the basics of the spirituality of the Orthodox Church that creates them.

- The aim of life is union with God, “to become partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1;4). This explains the emphasis on light imbuing everything in an icon
- We are made in the image of a Trinitarian God, of a God who is love because He himself is a communion of three hypostases (or persons). This means that the communion of the saints is the prerequisite of our salvation. Icons are one means of communion with the saints in heaven.
- The material world is created by God and so is good; it plays an integral part in our spiritual life. Icons have been called “grace-bearing matter”.

What are icons?

Before we pass to the deeper matters of the icon, just what is an icon? How is a holy icon different from a photograph, or pious picture, or gallery art?

- images of holy people
- they are connected with their holy prototypes because they are a likeness and so are treated with special respect
- they are painted in a certain way, which indicates invisible spiritual values as well as physical, visible facts
- they can be in different media

What is the theology behind them?

- icons of Christ affirm the incarnation; “The word became flesh”
- icons of saints affirm our deification; “partakers of the divine nature”
- icons affirm the communion of saints; “we have come to the heavenly Jerusalem”
- icons affirm the role of the material world as a bearer of grace, of spiritual life, like St Paul’s handkerchief, or Christ’s spittle mixed with clay, or as shown in the transfiguration of Christ’s garments. They are a material means of communion with Christ and the saints, like the Bible.
- icons reflect the beauty of life with God, and so have a missionary role

- the seeing and kissing of icons, together with incense, hearing the word of God, and tasting Communion, affirm that all our bodily senses are important to the spiritual life and worship
- icons are a way of showing that all places are holy and suitable for prayer

How are icons used?

- Their chief role is to be venerated (bowed before and kissed) and prayed in front of, as a means of honouring those whom they depict.
- in churches they are chiefly found
 - on the iconostasis, placed between altar and nave, and so reveal the means of communion of God and man, heaven and earth
 - as wall paintings or mosaics; these play a teaching role and affirm the fact that our worship is participation in heavenly worship
 - as individual panel icons, on the wall or an analogon
- at home, as a place of prayer
- in vehicles, over gates, as shrines etc.
- they are held in procession
- they are worn
- they are prayer in paint

Why are icons painted the abstract way they are?

- It must first be said that the style of the icon is not according to arbitrary rules, nor is it a copyist's tradition. Rather, there are principles based on spiritual realities, and these timeless principles are expressed in different ways by different peoples in different epochs. The icon is realistic and not merely naturalistic.
- There is emphasis on light – all around and radiating from within
- Perspective: multi-view, inverse, flatness, isometric projection, vanishing point, tipped, hierarchical.
- enlarged organs of reception and reduced organs of expression
- garments reflect transfiguration of the body
- creation e.g. mountains, reinforce the spiritual action of the event

2. The principles of sacred art in general

Having described the features of the icon in particular, it would be helpful to recapitulate by summarizing the principles of sacred art in general. These principles will be useful as we now turn to early twentieth century art, and finally, to church art in our own times.

- Sacred art mediates. It does more than offer a fleeting aesthetic experience. The way it is painted and used initiates us into a relationship with the person or realities depicted. It is original in the deepest sense, in that it penetrates to the origins of things.
- Sacred art participates in what it represents. The icon is the fruit of raw materials being gathered together and made into something better still by priestly man and then filled with divine grace.
- Sacred art helps to change our way of seeing the world – metanoia. It unveils the inner beauty of things and reveals them as gifts and not mere objects.

- Sacred art is always liturgical, always part of a way of life. The Russians have a term meaning “the art of liturgical living” – *bytovoe blagochestie*.
- Sacred art can be prophetic. At its best, it gives new insight, brings out the best in a given time and culture, reveals God’s providence, is the living word of God.
- Sacred art reveals the inner essences of things. It is never naturalistic, but aims to be realistic, using abstract means to reveal not only the visible outer form of things but also the invisible realities, what the Fathers called the *logoi* of things.
- Sacred art affirms and incorporates elements of its mother culture. It is in fact a child born of the union of the eternal God with a particular human culture rooted in time. This explains both authentic art’s timelessness and its dynamic quality

3. Threshold art

So far we have only looked at art that is intended for specifically religious use. But the fact remains that in our times the vast majority of art made and exhibited has quite a different function, or even no deliberate function at all. What is one to make of this world of art whose secular aims are so different from virtually all other cultures throughout history?

Undeniably a great deal of this secular art will die a natural death, to the extent that it is subject to pretension, shallowness, novelty, the desire to shock. But as a human person a secular artist is made in the image of God, and despite his or her consciously held philosophy, will still find themselves seeking and stumbling across things that are inherently spiritual and eternal. Truth often comes up from behind. And most importantly, there will always be those artist’s who will not walk with the vocal majority and will consciously seek what is true and profound and spiritual.

I would like to suggest two categories of art that describe works which, though they are not liturgical in their intent, nevertheless profoundly participate in one or more of the principles of sacred art that I have mentioned above. Such art I call threshold art: it stands on the threshold of the holy, and to some degree participates in it, while at the same time reflecting much of the world of angst and struggle.

1. Art of essence

Art of essence - be it visual art, music or literature – seeks to unveil and make more manifest the inner essence of its subject matter. In sculpture we have the great Rumanian Constantin Brancusi. In fact a perusal of his aphorisms show how consciously he was trying to unearth and manifest the essence of things.

Reality lies in the essence of things and not their external forms. Hence, it is impossible for anyone to produce anything real by imitating the external form of an object.

Van Gogh with his vibrant colours aimed to show a world radiant with spirit. He wrote:

I want to paint men and women with that something of the eternal which the halo used to symbolize, and which we seek to confer by the actual radiance and vibration of our colourizing.²

Cecil Collins and Mark Rothko are two other painters who could be included in this category.

2. An art of compassion

² “The Letters of Vincent Van Gogh”, ed. Mark Roskill (Fontana, 1983), P. 286.

I suggest that there is another form of art which is spiritually positive not because it seeks to reveal unalloyed sublimity, but because it depicts human suffering with compassion. Such art does not forget the paradise whose loss is the essence of our suffering, and so inspires hope and gives insight. In literature I think Dostoyevsky does this superlatively, revealing deep understanding of the human person. On a smaller scale, there is the little known Papadeamandis of Greece. I would put Rembrandt and the sculptor Alberto Giacometti in this same category of compassionate art. There are of course many other such artists.

The challenges facing contemporary sacred art

To finish, I would like to outline some of the challenges facing the practise of sacred art in our own time.

Principles not copies

Of major importance for those already practising an established Christian tradition, like the iconographer, as well as for those beginning to learn it, is the need to go beyond a mindless copying of past forms – like Byzantine or Russian icons - and instead penetrate the principles which have guided these past masters. While indeed a long apprenticeship of intelligent and inquiring copying is needed in order to discover for oneself these mysteries, faithfulness to the tradition is ultimately in keeping the principles and not in aping.

An important spin-off of this more dynamic approach to sacred art is that it will attract gifted people who might otherwise be put off by a slavish copyist's approach.

Affirmation of one's culture

Secondly, it is a sign of maturity to look actively in one's surrounding culture for all that is good and adaptable for use in sacred art. The early Church fathers did this with Greek philosophy. The early painters of icons did this with the pagan encaustic funerary portraits of Egypt, making them the basis of their iconographic style.

Rewriting art history

Parallel with this affirmation of positive elements in our western culture is an intelligent reappraisal of western art history from a sacred rather than a secular perspective. For example, most secular historians have written off the perspective systems of icons and medieval art as crude compared to the mathematical system developed in the renaissance. But they fail to see that there are profound reasons for these systems.

Schools of sacred art

A revival of authentic sacred art would be aided by proper schools of iconography, sacred architecture and music. Here the requisite skills and theology could be taught and discussed in depth. Such a school of iconography exists in Moscow in the Institute of St. Tikhon, which offers a five-year degree course. Apprenticeships with masters is also a traditional way forward.

A strong spiritual life and humility

On the personal level, the artist of the sacred must have a strong spiritual life. As well as acquiring the necessary skills, he or she should try to know by direct experience the

Saviour and His saints whom they are depicting. They need to be active in the Church, to experience for themselves the communion of the saints.

Humility is needed. A true artist is a servant. They desire to know the beauty of God and convey this to others through their art. To reflect divine beauty the artist of the divine needs to become beautiful.

To incarnate divine love in inanimate matter the artist needs to love ardently. I would like to finish with some words from two saints. The first are from the fourteenth century Kallistos Xanthopoulos, who attributes the success of an icon of the Archangel Michael to “the ardent love” of the painter for his work:

How is it that matter can drag the spirit down and encompass the immaterial by means of colours? This is the work of ardent love, as shown by the facts, and it kindles the heart.

The second is from that great mystic and poet of the fourth century, Saint Gregory of Nyssa. He tells us that true beauty leads us beyond itself to its source, to God who is Beauty:

The person who gazes on divine beauty marvels at what is continually being revealed to him and never ceases desiring more; what he awaits is even more magnificent and more divine than what he sees.