

Celtic, Anglo-Saxon and Romanesque Iconography¹

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“And they were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance...and at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in his own language.” (Acts 2:4,6)

Introduction: the inspiration of the Forum

Concerning the “arts”, the Orthodox Church is confronted with two challenges in the West. First, what western forms, if any, can she incorporate into her liturgical life? For example, is there anything from the West, past or present, which can be used in the design and construction of a new church building? If it *is* traditional to thus colour our liturgical forms with the personality of our indigenous culture, how do we discern between what is eternal, and therefore unchanging in the Church’s worship, and what is a matter of legitimate cultural variation? How can we distinguish between unchanging content and variable language?

The second challenge concerns art which is not liturgical - gallery art, public performances, the media etc. How should the Church respond to this? Should we reject it all as the work of the devil, beyond redemption? Or should we consider all forms as inherently neutral and therefore capable of positive use? Or is there a middle road, with some forms being more capable than others to communicate something of the mystery of life?

These questions raise the more specifically practical question: Should we only critique western art, or should some Orthodox be blessed to work within it, to make non-liturgical art? If so, is there some spiritual purpose in their work - can it be part of the Church’s ministry to the world?

This second challenge is I think the one where there will be the most initial disagreement among Orthodox. We are not able to refer to clear a precedence in the writings of the Fathers, apart from general principles. This is mainly because the secular art of our western culture has been developing for about eight centuries outside Orthodox cultures, and the last few decades is the first time that an appreciable population of Orthodox has found itself living within this secular culture.

For certain, Russia under Peter the Great, and Greece during Ottoman rule were influenced by westernism, but this was precisely a secular influence upon an established Orthodox society from *without*. Today in the West, Orthodox are a minority within an established secular culture. Probably the epoch of Church history closest to our own situation is that of the first few centuries, when the Church had to decide what to do with the pagan Greek culture: What was useable and what wasn’t?

I don’t think that these questions are mere cerebral games; they express real dilemmas for many Orthodox. An example: someone who has been much involved in the arts becomes Orthodox. They want to know what to do. Is the only option to transfer to the liturgical equivalent of their previous work, or is it possible to continue in the same medium, trying to express something of their new-found vision through this? Clearly what such a person in the end decides to do depends on their spiritual father, their spiritual strength, and on their circumstances, but the question still needs to be addressed in general.

It is these challenges and other reasons which have led a number of Orthodox to organise the Midlands Orthodox Arts Forum. We feel the need to discuss these things with others, ultimately so that we can find the mind of the Church. It is also hoped that through such a group those involved in the liturgical and secular art will have a means of meeting together with others of their own and other disciplines, to gain inspiration, constructive criticism and support.

So why call the group a forum? Primarily because the above questions need a spirit of openness in order to find answers, answers that express the mind of the Church Fathers. It has not been until recently that there have been enough British Orthodox involved in the arts for these questions to be real issues and consequently we are having to start largely from scratch. A certain amount of work has already been done by North American Orthodox - for example, I think Father Seraphim Rose and Fr. Alexey Young’s series of articles “the forming of the soul” are a valuable contribution. Nevertheless,

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many conclusions valid in America are not necessarily applicable to British Orthodox - our cultures and histories are different in many respects.

Although most Forum meetings will begin with a talk, it is hoped that much more will also arise from the ensuing discussions and from meeting new people.

The title of our talk tonight betrays my opinion on the first question. Yes, I do think that iconography in the West should incorporate aspects of western culture, and I have tried to do this with my own painted and carved iconography. This task of enculturation is made easier for us in Britain in that we are blessed to have had at least five centuries of liturgical art produced when the West was still Orthodox - the earliest substantial works produced in Britain being from around the late 500's.

I will begin with a brief sketch history of Celtic, Anglo-Saxon and Romanesque cultures, so that we can see their iconography in context. Then with slides we will look at examples of their works which, in my opinion, have elements which are usable for us today. To keep things from being too theoretical and academic, I have also included some examples of my own iconography, where I have incorporated elements of western iconography.

A Brief History of Pre-Schism Western Iconography

Early Christian Art (until late 5th century)

The style of Christian art in this period was more or less derived from late classical models, the difference lying more in *what* was depicted than *how* it was depicted. The relief stone carving on pagan and Christian sarcophagi for example, are virtually indistinguishable from one another in technique. Late Classic sculpture was tending away from free standing works towards relief anyway, which suited the more spiritualised needs of Church art.

Roman catacombs provide the earliest Christian painting known to us. These are less sophisticated than the almost contemporary Pompeii paintings - although perhaps the comparison is an unfair one, considering the different functions of the rooms they were embellishing. Nevertheless it could be said that even at this early stage the catacomb painters had begun to realize that the faith required a new style and not just new subject matter.

It was mosaic which led the gradual development of a specifically Christian style. For example, the church of S. Maria Maggiore, Rome (c. 440) has a gold background instead of the hitherto common blue one; this is a move from naturalism towards a more spiritual rendition. Mosaicists also gradually moved away from the classical roundedness and movement towards planarity and stillness. In Ravenna, that meeting point of East and West, we see this change when we compare mosaics from the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia (425-430) with those of the Basilica of S. Vitale (527-548). The flatness helped lead the faithful through the image to the saint depicted. The flatter picture plane also meant that figures could be arranged hierarchically, according to their spiritual importance rather than where they were in physical space.

In this early period Church architecture, both East and West, was based on the rectangular secular basilica, with a rounded apse. From the 4th century many larger churches were built which began to go beyond the secular prototype in that they had five instead of three aisles. In the 5th and 6th centuries the basic plan underwent further regional changes. In Syria, for example, the wooden ceiling was replaced in some instances by a stone barrel vault; this opened up the possibility of mosaics or paintings continuing from the wall onto the ceiling.

Baptisteries and tombs needed to be centrally oriented, and so the Roman circular or octagonal rotunda form was adopted. Later, from about the time of Justinian, the Byzantines began to fuse the basilica and the rotunda to create their distinctive central dome and cross design.

“The Dark Ages” of Europe (5th - 8th Centuries)

In this period we find some marked contrasts between western Europe and Britain. Whereas the former was devastated by barbarian invasions, the Celtic church of Ireland was, in the 7th and 8th centuries, experiencing its golden period in spiritual life, art and learning. How did this happen?

Around the fourth century began a massive migration, or rather invasion of western Europe by peoples from the eastern steppes - chiefly the Tartar Huns from Asia. Around 375 they crossed the Dnieper and Danube rivers and overthrew the Germanic Ostrogoth tribe and displaced the Visigoths, who spread out all along the Mediterranean coast. The Ostrogoths (the name means eastern Goth) in turn moved west and, along with other Gothic (Germanic) tribes, overthrew the western Roman Empire. Vandals and Lombards also swept down from northern Europe, and Angles and Saxons went

west into Britain. Rome fell in 410, but the ultimate demise of the western empire was the year 476 when the last Roman Emperor of the West advocated before Odovacar the Ostrogoth. Western Europe henceforth became the ground of various Romano-Gothic tribes, each distinguished primarily by the particular Germanic tribe which settled in the region. These are the seeds of most modern nations of Europe.

The eastern Roman empire, Byzantium, was more successful in fending off these barbarian marauders and so continued for over a thousand years, until its fall to Turks in 1453. Slavic tribes in the meantime occupied the north-eastern European areas which had been vacated by the Germans.

The overthrow of the Western Roman Empire allowed the nascent art of the native western peoples to emerge again. Also, these invaders introduced influences from the Far East. This is the raw material of western iconography. Also, it is out of this initial political and social chaos that modern Europe was born.

The barbarian Germanic tribes were by no means devoid of their own artistic culture. By nature a mobile people, their art tended to be one of decoration - metalwork in particular thrived for this reason. Decoration lends itself to geometric rather than figurative design, and this remains an important feature of Celtic and Germanic art. As the barbarians gradually converted to Christianity we naturally see these elements in their emerging new Christian art. However, it is not until the social stability of the Carolingian period, beginning with Charlemagne (768-814), that we get a distinctive Continental Church art re-appearing.

Celtic Art

Before the influx of Germanic tribes, the indigenous people of western Europe were Celts, of the so-called La Tene culture. However, their art had been more or less swamped by the conquering Romans. The fresh influx of Germanic tribes further buried any independent life they may have had. The Celtic Britons of Britain had likewise been conquered by the Romans. And after the withdrawal of Roman military support around 410, except for the Celts of present-day Wales, Scotland and the south-west (Cormwall and Devon), most had little time to resurrect their indigenous culture before the Germanic Angles and Saxon tribes invaded.

The Irish Celts, called Scoti, were in quite a different situation however. They had never been conquered by the Roman armies. Consequently, while the western Continent was being tossed about by warring Germanic tribes, famine and pestilence, this isolation of the Irish Church helped it to flourish in its monasticism and learning. For this reason, this Celtic epoch has been called Insular. Later, many of the Irish monks, learned in Greek and Latin, were to peregrinate to Europe from the 7th century and play a major role in its spiritual and cultural rebuilding.

Carolingian Art (768-888)

Until Charlemagne, post-Roman Europe was fragmented into disparate tribes. The way for Charlemagne's Frankish empire was prepared chiefly by two people - Charles Martel (714-741), who had stopped the advance of the Arabs into Gaul by his victory at Poitiers, and St Boniface, who converted the northern Germans to the Faith. It has often been said that modern Europe proper began with the crowning of Charlemagne by the Pope in 800, since under the new Emperor there was one law and one faith for western Europe. This empire covered roughly present day France, Germany and Northern Italy.

Carolingian art is a fusion of various European cultures with a classicising element, this last emerging from Charlemagne's desire to revive a Roman-styled empire. Because Byzantium represented a living continuity with that empire, many influences were drawn from it as well.

But it was to be a short lived revival of the Roman Empire. Norman and Hungarian invasions laid waste France and Northern Italy respectively, and by 888 the Carolingian Empire ended.

Ottonian Art (887-1024)

These Norman and Hungarian invaders did not however conquer Germany, and there the Carolingian ideals continued as the Ottonian Empire. This empire remained as a sort of bridging culture, feeding into the Romanesque period which was to come. It reached its climax under Otto the Great (962-73), who refounded the Holy Roman Empire. The power struggle with the papacy and internal divisions were to lead to its eventual downfall, when the Norman kingdom of France took over. It was this the kingdom and that of France which were chiefly responsible for Romanesque art.

Anglo-Saxon Art

The Germanic tribes of Angles and Saxons living in Britain by and large remained pagan from the time of their invasion in the mid-5th century until the time of St Augustine of Canterbury (died c. 605). Augustine's Roman-based mission introduced continental influences to the native Anglo-Saxon art. The energetic St Benedict Biscop (c. 628-c.690) gave special impetus to this contact, bringing many icons, relics, stone masons, Psalters and glaziers from Rome, in order to decorate his monasteries of Jarrow and Wearmouth.

The Celtic mission headed by St Aidan (d. 651) cross-fertilised Insular art with the Saxon, producing such wonders as the Lindisfarne Gospels. Later, in the 9th century, Anglo-Saxon art is influenced primarily by the Carolingian and Ottonian movements of the neighbouring Continent. It was not until the ascendancy of the Mercian and Northumbrian Kingdoms, and the rule of Alfred the Great (871-899) that English Britain experienced enough political stability to flourish greatly. To my mind the climax of British painting is in the manuscripts of the mid 12th century, where Saxon, Celtic, Romanesque and Byzantine influences marry in the persons of masters like Hugo.

This period came to an end with the Norman invasion of 1066, when the Romanesque style was enforced.

Romanesque Art (11th and 12th centuries)

The fall of the Carolingian Empire led to a period of great instability and decline, an anarchy unfit for the development of art. But the continuance of its spirit in Ottonian Germany, and the links that that empire forged with Italy and Byzantium provided the seeds for Romanesque art. Romanesque essentially arose out of the ascendancy of the kingdoms of France and Spain.

The main feature of Romanesque art is that it is inspired primarily by the Church, and monasticism in particular. The Carolingian art was supported by the court and the small intellectual elite. Ottonian art was mainly aristocratic, revolving around the patronage of princely bishops and the imperial court. Romanesque was by contrast commissioned by a much wider scope of people: popes, monasteries, and secular clergy, as well as emperors, kings and aristocracy. But their commissions were overwhelmingly religious. Also, the Crusades and the Norman conquest of Sicily, a trading interface of East and West, brought close links with Byzantium. The splendours of Constantinople were ever a source of admiration, inspiration and, ultimately, covetousness for westerners.

The traditional, spiritual aims of Romanesque art always led it to a certain abstraction, which was needed to suggest invisible realities. This changed as the rationalistic scholasticism was disseminated through the growing network of universities; by the early 14th century liturgical art is already becoming more humanistic. Increased emphasis on the scientific study of the created realm naturally led in art to a greater emphasis on naturalism and quantity rather than spirituality and inner quality. And so was eventually born the Renaissance, a revival of the humanism of classical Greece and Rome.

In summary, we can say that the chief western epochs which provide us with an Orthodox iconography are the Celtic Insular period, the Romano-German periods of the Anglo-Saxons, Carolingians and Ottonians, and then Romanesque art.

The main contribution of Celtic art to iconography today lies I think in its abstract design, which can be incorporated into metalwork, carving, fabric and so on; their figurative tradition was generally too abstract for use. For this, Romanesque art is I think the most developed source. Carolingian and Ottonian figurative work has still to find an articulate voice; it was after all only beginning the revival of a figurative tradition which had been all but swamped by the barbarian invasions of the early 5th centuries. Also, at this stage the western Church had an underdeveloped theology of the image and perhaps also the deification of man, things both required to develop an authentic iconographic language. Nevertheless, there are elements which are useful in these two periods - ideas can be gained from their metal work, like Gospel covers, from some lettering styles, architecture, and their carved figurative work - chiefly in ivory.

Artistic Contacts between Byzantium and the West

For a western art to be Orthodox in its style does not of course necessitate that it be influenced by Byzantium; what makes a style iconographic is its ability to express spiritual truths rather than its likeness to a given human culture. Nevertheless, it does seem that some, if not most of the successful figurative iconography of the West emerged from a strong Byzantine influence. How was Byzantine art known in the West? The following are the chief means.

- Objects were given as gifts by Byzantine emperors or emissaries, sometimes on the occasion of a marriage. These are sometimes listed in extant literary sources, although only a small portion of the actual objects exist now. Anna Komnene (1083-1153) gave an account of gifts given by her father Emperor Alexios I (r. 1081-1181) to Henry IV of Germany (r. 1056-1105). Emperor Michael III (842-67) gave an illuminated Gospel to Pope Benedict III. Illuminated manuscripts were probably particularly influential, since they contained so many images which could serve as models or inspiration for western works. Silks were another common gift; the Byzantine "Rider" silk placed in the tomb of St Cuthbert in 883 may have come originally from the East as a gift.

- Western traders would bring back objects they had bought or traded.

- Artists from the West visiting the East made drawings of images they saw; these were then copied and disseminated in the West. Two such sets of "pattern" drawings are known to us.

- Byzantium was regarded as the height of artistic splendour, and consequently westerners sometimes commissioned works from Byzantine craftsmen. In the 11th century for example, a Psalter was commissioned from Constantinople for the Sankt Gereonskirche in Cologne.

- The iconoclastic period caused many Byzantine iconographers to flee west, where they continued to work. This particularly happened in the southern tip of Italy, where many purely Byzantine frescoes were painted in the 10th century.

- Conquests of domains bordering on or close to Byzantine domains brought intimate contact. Sicily and Italy were the main places where this happened; from the late 11th century were begun a number of remarkable mosaic schemes, made by Byzantine craftsmen brought in by Norman patrons.

- Marauders or whole armies would bring back Byzantine treasures as plunder. The main example of this is of course the sack of Constantinople by the Crusaders.

- Although scholars are not agreed on the source of the so-called Crusader icons of St Catherine's, Sinai, many believe that these icons were made by western artists working at Sinai. They learned the iconographic style of the region, but, consciously or unconsciously, westernised them to an extent.

- The brotherly nature of monasticism naturally led to contacts between monasteries East and West. It is known that Cluny, Moissac and Grandmont maintained direct contacts with some monasteries in Byzantium and the Holy Land. Possibly the silk shroud of St Siviard came to Sens in this way.

Conclusion

Iconography must be authentic. In the beginning we must copy intelligently, in order to perceive the mysteries handed on to us. And then, gradually and naturally, without the desire to impose oneself egotistically, we digest these mysteries which are beyond time, make them our own, and so, even without our realising it, make works that are indigenous. To quote Archimandrite Vasilios's words to some English pilgrims, to be Orthodox you must be true Englishmen, and to be truly English, you must go beyond Englishness and seek what is eternal, what is uncreated.