

Iconography for the twenty-first century¹

Many good books have been written on the theology of the icon, and so I am not going to repeat their content here today. What instead I want to do is to look first at the challenges facing the Church and her iconographers as they try to apply this theology in the twenty-first century, and secondly, to discuss how from its ascetic and iconographic tradition the Church can develop an intelligent critique of western art.

There are many elements of our epoch that present both challenges and opportunities to iconographers and those who commission them. I shall identify some of these and suggest some possible responses. We shall consider the situation throughout the world, but give particular attention to the U.K.

Travel and technology

Perhaps the most immediate difference between modern times and the past is the unprecedented ease of access to icons and reproductions of them from all ages and cultures. Through easy travel, exhibitions, and books with excellent illustrations we are exposed to the whole gambit of icon styles on a scale that has never before happened in the history of the Orthodox Church.

What are the advantages and the potential dangers of this exposure?

- Previously when life was less mobile and less technological, iconographers didn't have so many influences to contend with, and so unity of local style was more natural. Also, there was no alternative to an iconographic style before the advent of the naturalism that developed in the West at the Renaissance. There was a sort of innocence. Now, we keep to the tradition more self-consciously, and this can, ironically, stifle the creativity that existed earlier. We can be afraid of creativity within the tradition because we are afraid of distorting it, of letting in influences foreign to the spirit of the tradition. How do we avoid this excessive zeal?
- We can see this access to the whole great range of iconographic styles as a God-given opportunity. If we research these variations in style with intelligence and open-mindedness we will discover those elements common to all epochs, and so enter a deeper understanding of the tradition. This in turn will help develop an iconography that is fresh and yet traditional. Photius Kontoglou, who effectively revived traditional iconography in Greece in the mid-twentieth century, affirmed this need for a profound experience of tradition. He writes of good iconographers of his time who

...studied the tradition better, and experienced it more profoundly.

Consequently, they were in a position to make works that are not a dead imitation of old holy icons, but more or less original, in the sense which originality has in Byzantine iconography.²

He contrasts these iconographers with others who

...have the idea that [Byzantine art] is a fossilized art, and that those who practise it copy in a slavish manner older works of iconography.³

This leads us to the next observation.

¹ A lecture given at Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, for the conference "Orthodoxy and the Arts" organized by the Institute for Orthodox Christian Studies, 3-8 July, 2005.

² Photius Kontoglou in *Fine arts and Tradition* ed. by Constantine Cavarnos (Massachusetts, 2004), page. 58.

³ *Ibid.* page 62.

Tradition and creativity

We in the twenty-first century are still in the process of recovering the secrets of traditional iconography, after some two or three centuries of decadence. Just because the vast majority of new icons are not painted with the naturalistic or sentimental elements found in decadent periods does not mean that we have regained the tradition in its fullness. The work has only begun. There is always the need to deepen our theology of the icon, so that we work from the deepest principles of the tradition rather than from a copyist or reactionary stance. Perhaps fundamentalism, in its various guises, is one of the great challenges facing our century, and if Orthodoxy in general and the icon tradition in particular is to avoid this we need always to remind ourselves of these first principles. The challenge is to avoid the two extremes of novelty for its own sake on the one hand, and a frigid copyist style born of fearfulness on the other.

What are some of these timeless principles, as distinct from local traditions, which need to be adhered to?

- Icons must depict the world in its transfigured state, that is, as transparent to uncreated light, as grace bearing. Both naturalism and arbitrary abstraction are equally foreign to this aim.
- Although in spiritually and culturally arid periods copying good prototypes is preferable to decadence, the ideal is an intelligent, creative, wise response to the needs and insights of the individual or community who have commissioned the work. The marvellous frescoes and mosaics of Moni Chora in Constantinople, for example, are much indebted to the input of the urbane and learned commissioner, Theodore Metochites (c. 1260-1332). Another graphic example is the illustration of the Transfiguration in the manuscript, now in the Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris, commissioned by the Emperor John Cantacuzenos. Painted sometime between 1347 and 1355, the image's colours clearly reflect the then current controversy on the uncreated light, led by St Gregory Palamas.

I have experienced similar creativity working with the widow of the late Philip Sherrard in frescoing their chapel. We wanted something that reflected Philip's emphases in his writings, particularly the role of the material world in man's relationship with God.

- It is good to draw on, assimilate, and reflect the character of the culture within which one works, and to even incorporate elements of local art traditions where they are appropriate. These things are especially important in a mission context, since they show that mission is not a form of cultural imperialism but an affirmation of all that is good in the culture and a transfiguration of its unique character. This affirmation of cultural personality is ultimately what lies behind the diversity of traditional icon styles between such Orthodox civilisations as Byzantium, Russia, Ireland and Georgia.
- The style of iconography, apart from the subject, must help initiate the faithful into a spiritual way of seeing. This is done through various artistic means, such as diverse types of non-naturalistic perspective, ascetic details in the physiognomy of the saints, the harmony of colours, and of course the "hands on" liturgical use of icons.
- The individual painter must strive to know the saints whom he or she is depicting, so that what is painted comes from living experience rather than

from fantasy or mere copying. This is stressed by Photius Kontoglou when he writes that the iconographer who “serves the tradition in spirit and truth”
contributes to the creation of works that are enduring and mystical.

*Therefore, he is not a technician, but a mystic.*⁴

This is again emphasised by the great Russian polymath and martyr of the last century, Pavel Florensky. He wrote in his seminal book “Iconostasis”:

*If someone copying a prototypical icon is unable to experience in himself that which he depicts...then (being honest) he will try as precisely as possible to reproduce in his copy the prototype’s outward features; but it almost always happens that, in such a case, he will not comprehend the icon as an opening and so, lost in copying the fine lines and brush strokes, he will interpret unclearly the icon’s essence.*⁵

Florensky discerned four categories of icon, each depending on its origins. First there are Biblical icons, based on scriptural accounts. Then there are portrait icons, based on the icon painter’s direct knowledge of the person whom he or she paints. There are icons from holy tradition, that is ones based on descriptions handed down. And finally there are revealed icons, wherein the painter works from “either direct vision or from mystical dream.”⁶

Florensky goes on to say that in painting an icon of any of these four types, the painter still needs to be in a place of spiritual vision:

*Even when the icon is a portrait icon, it is clear that in order for it to be an icon, it must in the icon painter be based on vision (for example, a vision of spiritual light in the person – even though that person is still living on earth)... Equally, the icons of the holy Tradition demand that the icon painter go beyond the merely abstract accounts of past experience and see something with his own spiritual eyes.*⁷

In support of this view Florensky quotes St. Dionysius the Areopagite: “Icons are visible images of mysterious and supernatural visions.”

Modern materials

New building techniques and materials and modern paint media present challenges and problems which need to be addressed by Orthodox architects and iconographers..

- The use of concrete in churches is a major challenge, both for the form of the church itself, and for the difficulties it presents for those who might paint its walls. Some areas to be looked at by architects are acoustics, thermal qualities, and integrity.

On the subject of integrity, we might mention that arches and domes are a structural necessity for stone spans, but not so necessary for reinforced concrete. So does an architect retain these forms in concrete as a sort of imitation of stone or does he develop a new form suited to the structural nature of concrete?

For wall painters the question concerns the best medium to use if the base surface is concrete. True fresco is probably precluded because there can be problems with salts from the concrete leeching into the lime plaster. In this case, is glueing painted canvas onto concrete the best solution, as they often do in Greece?

⁴ *Ibid.* page 61.

⁵ Pavel Florensky *Iconostasis* (Crestwood, U.S.A. 1996), page 74.

⁶ Pavel Florensky, “Iconostasis” (New York, 1996), p.75.

⁷ *ibid.* page 76.

- What about synthetic pigments and mediums, like acrylic? Should they be used at all, or just sparingly? Or are they entirely neutral and so be used, provided they are permanent, without harm to the integrity of the tradition? Opinions on these questions differ among iconographers, though in general it can be said that acrylics and synthetic pigments are used more often in Greece and in the U.S. than in other countries. My own opinion is that the natural and the traditional is best, for the following reasons:
 1. Traditional techniques and materials are tried and tested over centuries; modern ones haven't been around long enough to prove themselves.
 2. A natural pigment, especially if hand ground, has a variation in particle shape and size lacking in synthetic, and therefore has greater depth and optical interest. This is particularly true of the stone-based pigments, such as lapis, azurite and malachite.
 3. One element which helps to make good art is the artist's love of his medium. Compared with the factory uniformity of artificial pigments, it is easier to love natural pigments because of their with their history, their associations with particular places where they were mined, and the infinite variations and subtleties they provide.
 4. The sense of transfiguring God-given raw materials into a grace-filled icon is keener when one is working with materials directly from the earth.

Training

How can we train and support more and better iconographers, especially in countries like our own where the Orthodox population is still small, and so cannot support full-time training institutions?

First, let us look at how things are at present in the UK.

- Generally it must be said that nothing exists in the way of substantial formal icon training.

At the moment the teaching of new iconographers, such as it is, is primarily through one week or day courses run, usually spasmodically, by a very few painters, some of whom are Orthodox, some Roman Catholic or Anglican. Marianna Fortunato who spent some time studying under Leonid Ouspensky in Paris, has in the past taught people either individually or in groups. I do two one week courses a year. Dr. Stephan Rene in London, painting in the Coptic style, sometimes takes on a pupil. Recently Sergei Tarakyan has been taking courses in Surrey as part of the "Prosopon" school.

The only experienced Roman Catholic iconographer that I know of who is teaching is Sister Petra Clare, based in Scotland, but who takes classes at Belmont Benedictine abbey in Herefordshire.

Such short and infrequent courses are a beginning, but to be more effective they need to be more regular, and to methodically work through the various skills with the same pupils over the span of a few years.

- In reality those who are painting now have done most of their learning from the experience of doing it, from reading, and from picking up what they can from observation and talking to fellow iconographers.
- There is also the possibility, if one can afford the time and money, to go overseas for a period and do an apprenticeship or study in an institution.
- There is potential for a Masters degree (or Doctorate) in iconography through the VITA programme within The Prince's School of Traditional Arts in Shoreditch, London. The first year of the two year course consists of

mandatory modules which teach a wide range of skills, one of which is on icon painting, and that for two weeks. In the second year pupils concentrate on one discipline, which can be iconography if so desired.

What can be done to improve the situation?

- Apprenticeships are probably the best means of training, but this requires a master who has ample work to support both him or herself and the pupil over, ideally, a period of at least three years. Where this is lacking, the pupil can at least visit at intervals over the course of a few years.
- Another means of study is a full time school dedicated to iconography. Such exists in Moscow, the St. Tikhon Institute. This teaches a five year course offering both practical and theoretical training. But such a school requires enough students to justify its existence, and a large amount of funding.
- In Greece there are many night classes, some privately owned and some church owned. The one I have seen in Thessaloniki has, for each pupil, two three hour courses a week, and these extend over three to four years. These classes are organized methodically over the four years, beginning with drawing and progressing in the final years to more demanding skills such as the painting of faces. Most of these courses offer a certificate or diploma to those students who satisfactorily complete the studies.

Over and above the initial training of iconographers, there is the need to sustain and further develop them as good professional iconographers. I think there are various important ways forward here:

- For good iconographers to continually improve it is obviously desirable that they be able to work full-time. This requires that they be properly paid for the icons they make, so that they do not have to do other work to survive. So the Church and individuals commissioning work need to be ready to pay for all the time and materials involved, rather than treating this ministry as a hobby.
- Some sort of networking and communication among professional iconographers is highly advantageous, so that they can pool their learning and discuss ideas and techniques. The Association of St John of Damascus in the U.S. aims to do this. Conferences, journals and informal communication via mail and the internet are obvious means of networking.
- Better communication also needs to develop between icon restorers/conservators and icon painters. The technology available to conservators means that they gain an in-depth understanding of ancient techniques. But more often than not this knowledge never filters down to the painters. It is published in specialist, and usually expensive, conservators' journals, and is usually of necessity full of scientific technical detail which can be off-putting to a painter. As a result, we painters sometimes continue in dogmatically held beliefs about techniques which just don't stand up to objective observation of old masters.

The Convent of the Annunciation in Ormilía, Greece, is trying to bridge this gap. The ideal would be a regular, perhaps yearly, journal and a website, which summarize all the latest scientific findings relevant to practical iconography.

One example of a re-evaluation of technique brought about in part by scientific research is as follows. Up till now virtually all teachers and modern books have said that the only way to paint icons is to work from dark to light, and that this is the way it has always been done. But the leading painter in Russia, Archimandrite Zenon, for

some years has been using another technique described by Theophilus the Presbyter, who wrote probably in the mid thirteenth century (though German, there is clearly a lot of Byzantine influence in the techniques he describes). Fr. Zenon believes that this is the earlier method used by iconographers, and the simpler *proplasma* or *sankhir* technique developed only later, about the thirteenth century, because it was easier. That he is right seems to be confirmed by scientific analysis. This technique is summarized and illustrated by microscope photographs in a chapter by Anna Yakovleva in the recently published “A History of Icon Painting” edited by Archimandrite Zachaeus Wood (Moscow, 2005).

Iconography and Western art

Our final area of discussion does not relate directly to the making of icons, but to the relationship of the tradition to non-iconographic art. How should the icon tradition relate to the art traditions that have dominated the West for centuries? This one question immediately raises many others. Should Orthodoxy reject this art wholesale as being entirely profane? Or does this art have value but with a function different from that of the icon? Can elements of western art be incorporated into iconography in a way that is entirely within the tradition? What would be an intelligent approach to a critique and history of western art from an Orthodox perspective? To these questions we will now turn our attention

Western Art: A critical appreciation⁸

In the West the assessment of western art, the writing of its history, and theories of aesthetics have been by and large approached from a secular viewpoint. Quite naturally, those epochs which were anthropocentric have tended to get a better press than those which were theocentric. What is now needed is an appreciation from a sacred viewpoint. This is particularly important since, in the whole gambit of art history, the vast majority of art has been religious in its inspiration and function. Most civilizations have believed that art mediates in some way between a higher world and this world.

The Orthodox Church is potentially in a very good position to develop such an intelligent re-write of art criticism and history, since it has developed a very deep theology of the image through its icon tradition. However, it has really only been since Orthodoxy has returned to the West in the last hundred years or so that the opportunity and compulsion to respond to western art has arisen. We therefore have a lot of thinking and work to do before we arrive at any satisfactory response.

So far the response has tended to be one or other of the two extremes of undiscerning adoption or utter rejection. In the 18th and 19th centuries iconographers tended to adopt elements of this secular art without much understanding of its consequences. By contrast, many of those involved in the restoration of the tradition in the last century, like Photius Kontoglou and Leonid Ouspensky, have tended to reject outright all western art because they have judged it solely by comparison with the icon, whose function and therefore aim is usually different.

Personally I think a more complex response is required, one that acknowledges other functions of art besides the central liturgical role. Such types of art I have dubbed threshold art. They participate in many elements of the sacred – either

⁸ The second part of a lecture given at Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, for the conference “Orthodoxy and the Arts” organized by the Institute for Orthodox Christian Studies, 3-8 July, 2005.

consciously or unconsciously – without having a liturgical function as such. By acknowledging these different and legitimate ways of enriching people's spiritual lives we can have a more discerning and a potentially more affirmative response to the vast array of western styles which confront us. But I shall speak more of this threshold art at the conclusion of my talk.

What I want to do first as a contribution to this evolution of an Orthodox art criticism is to first outline the insights into art appreciation of three twentieth century Orthodox thinkers, and then share some of my own thoughts as a practising iconographer and artist.

Panayiotis A. Michelis

Michelis was professor of theory of architecture at the National Technical University at Athens. His foremost work on our subject is *An Aesthetic Approach to Byzantine Art*⁹. Also translated into English is a collection of his essays called *Asthetikos*. Here I will summarize the thrust of the former book. Although its immediate aim is to show Byzantine art in a more favourable light than most western writers had hitherto done, his aesthetical theory is perfectly functional as a tool for a broader critique of art in general.

He says that any epoch must be judged by the category proper to it. Failure to do this will distort our judgement. A major fault of western critiques up to his time, he says, is to acknowledge only one aesthetic category, that of beauty, and consider all others as mere modes of this. He asserts that to the contrary there are six categories: the sublime, the beautiful, the tragic, the comic, the ugly, and the graceful. The two poles are the beautiful and the sublime, which Michelis believes are basic, opposed, and equal in value. The other four participate in one or both of these categories.

He identifies three types of cultural epochs. Those dominated by the sublime, like Byzantium, are theocentric, while those dominated by the beautiful, like the Renaissance, are anthropocentric. The third type of epoch, like the Rococo, is transitional. Those periods in transition from theocentric towards anthropocentrism humanize the gods, whilst those going in the other direction deify man. In both types of transitional periods the aesthetic category of the graceful dominates. Tragic, comic and ugly elements are used to serve these other three major categories, either by contrast or to induce a certain preparatory state in the viewer. A case in point are the sometimes repulsive ascetic features of the saints shown in icons; this draws our attention away from outer beauty towards the inner beauty of holiness.

Interestingly Michelis says that there do not exist epochs dominated by the aesthetic categories of the tragic, comic or the ugly. Perhaps our present age is in fact getting pretty close to precisely this happening! A frightening thought.

What are the aesthetic characteristics of the beautiful and of the sublime? In the words of the Greek writer Constantine Cavarnos:

*..in the beautiful there is a primacy of form, of measure, of the static, of quality, of the synthesis of antithesis, whereas in the sublime there is a primacy of the formless, of the unmeasured, of the dynamic, of quantity, of the resolution of antithesis.*¹⁰

In other words, the beautiful as described here appeals most to the rational faculty, whereas the sublime appeals to the noetic, spiritual faculties of the human person.

In terms of the spiritual effect on us of these two types of art, Michelis says that the beautiful emphasizes serenity and delight in the outer world, whereas sublime art

⁹ The original Greek was published in 1946, and the English translation by Batsford, London, in 1955.

¹⁰ Constantine Cavarnos *Byzantine Thought and Art* (Belmont, U.S.A., 1980), page 61.

leads us to exaltation, awe, and directs us to our inner selves. He particularly illustrates this latter point by referring to Byzantine church architecture, where the outside is plain and the glory is all within.

He has an interesting interpretation of the contrasts found between Byzantine and Gothic art. Though they are both sublime, theocentric forms, Michelis believes that the Byzantines married the beauty inherited from its Classical past with the sublime introduced by Christianity. By contrast, Gothic art expresses the sublime without the beautiful.

I think Michelis's approach is very useful. My only caveat concerns his belief that the sublime and the beautiful are equal in value, and opposed. I think the sublime is superior, as surely it must be if it is associated with theocentric cultures. Secondly, the contrast of the sublime and beautiful might be better expressed by saying that arts of the sublime category emphasize archetypal, spiritual beauty, whereas those of the beautiful emphasize the expression of these archetypes in the created world.

Pavel Florensky

Father Pavel Florensky, a Russian, was born in 1882, and died a martyr under the Communists in 1937. He was a phenomenon in his time, a polymath whose expertise covered philosophy, theology, science and art history.

The work that most concerns us here is his final theological work, "Iconostasis". Though not systematic like Michelis's book, it is full of insight that could only have come from a man both polymath and possessing great spiritual depth.

The most important observation he makes for our purposes concerns how one situates the artistic act of creation within the artist's spiritual state. Father Pavel describes first the nature of the soul's ascent to God, its vision of God and the heavenly world. He observes that

at the crossing of the boundary into the upper world, the soul sheds – like outworn clothes – the images of our everyday emptiness, the psychic effluvia that cannot find a place above, those elements of our being that are not spiritually grounded.¹¹

On arriving at that place on high,

[t]here, free of all images, the soul is fed in contemplation by the essences of the highest realm, knowing the permanent noumena of things...

But the soul is not destined to remain in this high place, but "descends again to the earthly realm".

And precisely at the boundary between the two worlds, the soul's spiritual knowledge assumes the shapes of symbolic imagery: and it is these images that make permanent the work of art.¹²

And so Florensky distinguishes between art born from an ascent into the spiritual realm and art born of a descent from it. The former carries with it the effluvia of psychic and mundane images, images that appear to be spiritual but are in fact psychic, of the soul. Lacking an experience of heaven, such a soul cannot discern between the genuine and the counterfeit. By contrast, art born of descent from the spiritual realm is the stuff of sacred art, Florensky asserts. It does not imagine higher things, but reveals them from experience.

This view of things clearly sees the faculty of imagination, when it is healthy, not as an organ of invention, but as an organ of reception. Operating properly it does

¹¹ Pavel Florensky, "Iconostasis" (New York, 1996), p.44.

¹² Ibid.

not produce arbitrary images, and is not directed at producing novelties. Rather it sees the logoi or spiritual essences of things, and the images it produces on its descent back to the physical world are, as Florensky says, *experiences of mystical life crystallized out on the boundary of two worlds.*¹³

Paul Evdokimov

Paul Evdokimov (1901 – 1970) in his book “The Art of the Icon: a theology of beauty” gives many insights into art. Here I will be content to note some of his observations about modern art, given in chapter seven, which is titled “Modern Art in the Light of the Icon.”

He first sketches the gradual loss of the transcendent in western art, beginning from the 13th century when such techniques as optical illusion, perspective and chiaroscuro were introduced. This gradual secularisation of art left the artist increasingly alone, and no longer a mediator between a divine and a created world. For subject matter he is thus left only with the morass of his changing subjective states.

*The independent and deeply subjective painting of modern art manifests a need for constant renewal and seeks to portray perpetually unsatisfied spiritual and psychological states.*¹⁴

The diagnosis of modern art that Evdokimov then goes on to give is generally bleak. He describes it as fragmented and faceless.

*In the past, things questioned the artist...The modern artist, however, questions his own soul, then looks at the world and applies his disintegrating vision to things.*¹⁵

However, Evdokimov finishes his chapter on modern art in a more hopeful note, putting it in context as an inevitable reaction against the preceding art movements when the imitation of appearances dominated. He sees the experiment of modern abstraction as a necessary attempt to redress things:

*The immense demolition job, which is inherent in abstract art, is a form of asceticism, of purification, of aeration, and we should recognize that fact with respect. Abstract art is an answer to the sought-after purity of the soul, the nostalgia of lost innocence, the desire to find at least a ray or a burst of colour which has not been soiled by an earthly face...*¹⁶

Modernity, he says, has brought us to the zero:

The exterior form has been defeated, but at this level, no evolution is any longer possible.

In modernity not only is art’s rupture from the sacred a fact: it is fully acknowledged and even embraced. However, he sees hope in the midst of this abyss:

*Having reached its own dead end, modern art expresses the desperate expectation of a miracle whose form, however, cannot be foretold, as is the case with all miracles.*¹⁷

In the light of this expectation Evdokimov writes that it is all the more important that iconography

¹³ Ibid., page 45.

¹⁴ Paul Evdokimov, *The Art of the Icon* (California, Oakwood, 1990), page 77.

¹⁵ Ibid. page 79

¹⁶ Page 94.

¹⁷Ibid.

rediscover the creative power of the ancient iconographers and find an exit from the static immobility of the 'copyist's' art.

Perhaps it will be this sacred art, charged with vigour, which is the awaited miracle.

Art of essences and art of compassion

I believe that there are types of art, music and literature which though not liturgical in their aim, do stand on the threshold of the holy, and in some degree, participate in it. Their domain is the gallery and home rather than the church, and yet these works contain something of the spiritual within themselves. Two types of threshold art particularly attract my attention, those which I have dubbed arts of compassion and arts of essence.

These categories will I believe not only help develop an Orthodox critique of art, but also affirm the professions of Orthodox artists whose works are not liturgical but still very much an expression of the Church's life in the world. Examples of such artists who spring immediately to mind are the composers Sir John Tavener, Avo Part and Ivan Moody, and the authors Dostoyevsky and Papadeamandis.

The arts of essence

I define arts of essence as those works that unveil to us the inner essences of things. They reveal more clearly to us the divine words or logoi within creation. The unique logos within each thing sustains and directs it towards its fulfilment in Christ.

The sculptures of the Rumanian Constantine Brancusi are an excellent example of such art of essence. In fact a perusal of his aphorisms show just how consciously he was aiming to reveal the essence of things, and not only his subject matter and also the very medium of his sculptures:

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.

If we compare a quote from St. Maximus the Confessor with one from Brancusi we realize just how akin their visions are. First St Maximus:

Do not stop short of the outward appearance which visible things present to the senses but seek with your intellect to contemplate their inner essences (logoi), seeing them as images of spiritual realities...

And Brancusi's words:

They are imbeciles who call my work abstract; that which they call abstract is the most realist, because what is real is not the exterior form but the idea, the essence of things.

The Fathers also speak of the need for purity in order to see these logoi, and this, Brancusi affirms, is also necessary for the artist:

the vain ego of the person ought to be dissolved. The hidden principle - that is, the truth - can only be revealed if the ego is entirely eliminated.¹⁸

Van Gogh in his own unique way aimed to show with his vibrant colours 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.¹⁹

¹⁸ *ibid.* p. 11

¹⁹ "The Letters of Vincent Van Gogh", ed. Mark Roskill (Fontana, 1983), P. 286.

Vermeer, Turner, Vasili Kandinsky, Cecil Collins, and Mark Rothko are other painters who could be included in this category of art of essence.

An art of compassion

We come now to our second category, arts of compassion. This form of art is spiritually positive not because it seeks to reveal unalloyed sublimity, but because it depicts human suffering and struggle with compassion and spiritual insight. Such art does not forget the paradise whose loss is the essence of our suffering, and so inspires hope and gives insight. In literature Dostoyevsky does this superlatively, revealing deep understanding of the human person. On a smaller scale, there are the short stories of the little known Papadeamandis of Greece. Both delve into the depths of the human psyche in all its depravity and struggles and beauty. But somehow in the midst of this conflict they show us that at the core their characters are people made in the image of God.

I would put Rembrandt and the sculptor Alberto Giacometti in this same category of compassionate art. There are of course many others.

Conclusion

The word art means to fitly join together. In its deepest meaning, this illustrates that art's highest calling to help join together the divine and the created worlds, or rather, to manifest this union as it has already been achieved in Christ. Such art grows naturally from cultures and individuals who experience this union with God, or deification as the Fathers call it.

But such a union means not only being rooted in God and knowing timeless principles, but also being rooted in the earth and culture and epoch that has given us birth. If the Orthodox Church is to fulfil its calling in the twenty-first century it must gain prophetic, intelligent, sympathetic insight into the art and culture of the West. Mission is not just to bring good news from above to a culture: it is also to discover what the Holy Spirit has already revealed within that culture. In this way we avoid the extremes of pompous criticism on the one hand, and a ghetto mentality which attempts to ignore that culture on the other hand.

Parallel with this wakefulness towards modern culture, the Church must also enter much more deeply than it has into the timeless principles of its liturgical art. On the whole, we are still at an immature copyist phase, necessary as it is as a transitional period. As Vladimir Lossky affirmed, Tradition – with a capital T – is the life of the Holy Spirit within the Church. The most mature creation of liturgical arts is a prophetic act, and not the act of a scribe copying.