ROMANIAN ICONOGRAPHY
"Today and Tomorrow: Timeless principles in the training of future Romanian iconographers"[1]

Abstract

Most literature on icons, be it theological or aesthetic, concentrates on works of past epochs, but little on current and future needs. This talk distils the key principles behind great works of the past and of good contemporary Romanian icons in order to establish a framework for the training of future iconographers. The author's experience as a professional icon painter and carver, and as a teacher and writer in the field, permits him to draw together both practical and theological elements. The talk challenges the assumption that faithfulness to tradition consists of imitation. It shows that like in the great epochs, experienced iconographers innovate and invent, albeit within the theological parameters of the Church's tradition. The growing demand for icons, both in Romania and elsewhere, requires more good iconographers, and also the means of training them. This talk therefore suggests some answers to the questions: What should this training aim for? What theological and aesthetic principles make for a well painted icon?

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INTRODUCTION

I would like to speak today about the training of iconographers, not so much the practical ways that this can be achieved, but the more fundamental question of what sort of iconographers we are trying to train. Or to put the question another way: What constitutes a well painted icon? Icon schools and teachers are moving blind if they do not first give deep consideration to the qualities that they wish to see in the works of their mature students.

The effective training of iconographers is a very pressing and practical issue. As the number of Orthodox churches increases, both in the West and in previously communist countries, more icons and wall paintings are required. Our Roman Catholic and Anglican brethren are also wanting icons for their churches and for personal use. But these churches will be filled with mediocre work if our training of iconographers is mediocre. Forward planning is needed. It takes many years to become a good painter. According to the master iconographer Archimandrite Zenon, 10,000 hours of practice are needed to become proficient.

So is a good icon simply an accurate copy of a past masterpiece, or are there timeless principles within which there is room for creativity, both from artist to artist and from epoch to epoch? Or perhaps, as some writers have recently suggested, the formal qualities of an icon have little theological significance and it suffices that the image simply bears the name of its subject.

Icons fulfil many functions, but I would like to concentrate today on two main functions that can be summarized with the words communion and illumination. I will give particular consideration to the role of illumination

1 A talk given at the in Oxford Feb 27th, Kellogg College, Oxford, "The Christian Religious Image" organised by the St John Cassian Association.

because this has the most importance for the formal or stylistic qualities of icons, and therefore on the ability of the iconographer.

Most of my talk will be to outline various qualities which I believe are fundamental to well made icons. Some of these qualities are theological, some are aesthetic, and some practical.

I have arrived at this "list" through a combination of close observation of actual icons over the past thirty years that I have been a full time iconographer, from my teaching – in particular the Diploma in Icon Painting that I teach for The Prince of Wales' School of Traditional Arts. I will attempt to relate these principles to the theology of the Church as expressed through her liturgical texts, the Scriptures and writings of the Fathers.

As many of you are from Romania, I shall illustrate my talk using icons from some leading Romanian iconographers. You can see these images in an excellent article in the Orthodox Arts Journal: http://www.orthodoxartsjournal.org/the-new-romanian-masters-innovative-iconography-in-the-matrix-of-tradition/

Contemporary debate

I will begin by outlining a debate current among some Orthodox writers regarding why icons tend to be painted the way they are, that is, with some abstraction rather than naturalistically. The outcome of this debate has bearing on the future of icon painting and on the training of iconographers.

For the past century the most commonly held view, led by Pavel Florensky, Leonid Ouspensky, and Photius Kontoglou, is that the style of traditional icons exists to indicate the transfigured world.

These three writers acknowledge that patristic writings dwell not the peculiar style of icons, but on the theological fact that the icon is holy because it depicts holy persons. But these writers argued strongly that the church icon, to be worthy of the name, must also reflect spiritual realities in its style. Much of their writing was therefore centred on developing what we might call a "mystagogy of style". As Ouspensky wrote:

> *The historical reality alone, even when it is very precise, does not constitute an icon. Since the person depicted is a bearer of divine grace, the icon must portray his holiness to us. Otherwise, the icon would have no meaning.*[2]

The Orthodox critics of this notion, for example Evan Freeman[3], Irina Gorbunova-Lomax[4] and Julia Bridget-Hayes[5], assert that there is no support among patristic or historical accounts for this mystagogy of style. They also call it an "essentialist" approach because of its claim that icons must indicate

2 Leonid Ouspensky, Theology of the Icon, Vol 1, SVS Press, 1992

3 Most recently a published talk by Evan Freeman, Rethinking the Role of Style in Orthodox Iconography: The Invention of Tradition in the Writings of Florensky, Ouspensky and Kontoglou, (translation)" in "Church Music and Icons: Windows to Heaven: Proceedings of the Fifth International Conference on Orthodox Church Music University of Eastern Finland Joensuu, Finland 3–9 June 2013" , published by The International Society for Orthodox Church Music, 2015, p. 350-369.

4 In English there is Landscape elements in Iconography, Irina Gorbunova-Lomax, Brussels Academy of Icon Painting, Brussels.

5 See for example her blogs http://ikonographics.blogspot.gr/2016/02/revisiting-patristic-theology-of-icon.html

the essence of the subject and not just the visible aspect of the holy persons they depict. The critics argue, quite correctly, that taken to its full conclusion this is the error of the iconoclasts. Iconoclasts mistakenly thought that iconodules claimed the image has identity of essence with the prototype; in fact the iconodules claimed that image and archetype are linked only through likeness to the person, not to the essence or nature of the person.

The critics argue that the essentialist view stems not from Orthodox theology but from modernist western aesthetics. Florensky, Ouspensky and Kontoglou were not reflecting an Orthodox tradition at all, they say, but in fact owed their approach more to the very western mind that they so vehemently criticized. A pioneer of this essentialist conception of abstraction is the German art historian Wilhelm Worringer, whose work *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* ("Abstraction and Empathy"), was published in 1908. Worringer argued that abstraction in art aims to:

> *…wrest the object of the external world out of its natural context, out of the unending flux of being, to purify it of all its dependence upon life, i.e. of everything about it that was arbitrary, to render it necessary and irrefragable, to approximate it to its absolute value.*[6]

While most of the critics acknowledge that icons do and should have stylistic parameters and should not be naturalistic, they give reasons other than essentialist. Juliet Bridget-Hayes writes for example:

> *There are reasons for the abstraction used in Byzantine iconography, but as we will see, it has nothing to do with symbolizing Christ's divinity and the deification of the saints. Rather it is what helps the icon achieve its function of making the persons depicted present in the same time and space as the viewer.*[7]

And later in the same text:

> *The icon, for the Fathers, shows historical reality. It shows the persons and events ("feats and braveries") that took place, it doesn't describe their spiritual state.*

According to Irina Gorbunova-Lomax, herself an iconographer and teacher, one practical outcome of what she considers a pseudo-spiritualisation of style is that it tends to make iconographers lax in understanding form and other aesthetic principles. Theology becomes an unwitting cloak for artistic ineptitude.

A recent, and I think very well argued case for finding the best in both of these schools of thought has been put by Father Silouan Justiniano in a series of three articles in the online journal "Orthodox Arts Journal"[8]. I

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6 Wilhelm Worringer, Abstraction and Empathy, trans. Hilton Kramer (New York: International Universities Press, 1953; originally published in German as Abstraktion und Einfühlung in 1908), 17.

7 http://ikonographics.blogspot.co.uk/2016/02/revisiting-patristic-theology-of-icon.html.

8 For a thorough discussion on the theological basis for the icon, see article in three parts "The Pictorial Metaphysics of the Icon : Abstraction vs. Naturalism Reconsidered" by Fr. Silouan Justiniano, in the online journal "Orthodox Arts

recommend these articles to you. Arguing against those who claim that Byzantine icons were not stylistically different from secular work, he shows by examples that they were in fact selective about what they took from their classical and Hellenistic heritage, leaving aside the more naturalistic trends.

Father Silouan also addresses the fact that the few Byzantine passages that do comment on the stylistic aspects of icons actually praise them for their life-likeness rather than for any formal abstraction that lends them a special spiritual quality. He argues, I think persuasively, that the Byzantine concept of being "life-like" cannot be identified with our current associations of photographic likeness. A degree of abstraction is indeed required to do justice to the life of the subject. As he writes:

… reality itself consists of intelligible (noetos) and sensible (aisthetos) realms. These spheres of being are symbolically conveyed by abstraction and naturalism respectively.[9]

On the face of it, patristic writings seem to side with the critics. The fathers defend icons purely on the basis that they depict the visual reality of the person and inscribe their name. They do not refer to any capacity of icons to indicate the inner spiritual state of their subject. As the Acts of the 7th Ecumenical Council state:

> *Therefore it is in this form, seen by men, that the holy Church of God depicts Christ, according to the tradition of the Holy Apostles and Fathers. She does not divide Christ, as they frivolously accuse her of doing. For as we have said many times, what the icon shares with the prototype is only the name, not what defines the prototype.*[10]
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> *The icon lacks a soul – something impossible to describe, for it is invisible. Thus if it is impossible for one to depict a soul – even though soul is created – how much more is it impossible for one to consider depicting, in a perceptible way, the incomprehensible and unfathomable divinity of the only- begotten Son? – unless one is totally out of his mind.*[11]

My personal view is that these critics of Florensky, Ouspensky and Kontoglou do have a point, and must be listened to. They are a corrective to the often uncritical spiritualisation of every aspect of one particular school of iconography. They have however, in my view, gone too much the other way in rejecting the capacity of style to affect the way we see things.

Journal", December 29, 2015. http://www.orthodoxartsjournal.org/the-pictorial-metaphysics-of-the-icon-abstraction-vs-naturalism-reconsidered/

9 The Pictorial Metaphysics of the Icon: Part II

by Fr. Silouan Justiniano • January 5, 2016, in "Orthodox Arts Journal" http://www.orthodoxartsjournal.org/the-pictorial-metaphysics-of-the-icon-part-ii/#_edn11

10 Acts of the 7th Ecumenical Council ;Mansi 13, 340E

11 Acts of the 7th Ecumenical Council ,Mansi 13, 340E-342A

I believe that the icon acts in two respects. First, as an image bearing the likeness and name of its subject and thereby bringing us into relationship with that saint. This is the icon's primary role.

But secondly, an icon can also be a means of transforming the way we see things through its formal or stylistic qualities. It cannot depict these ineffable realities, but it can indicate to us and remind us of their existence. Abstraction can jolt us, awaken us from the slumber of familiarity.

Why then is this role not written about in Byzantine texts? We do not know, but perhaps they did not feel the need to write much about this second role because it was taken for granted. There was no threat at the time to this role being lost. Most of patristic writing is after all a response to heresy rather than an attempt to codify for its own sake.

So, on the one hand, icons cannot actually depict and describe invisible realities, such as divine glory or uncreated light. But on the other hand (and icons of the transfiguration are evidence of this) icons can indicate the existance of these realities. After all, the church fathers had no hesitation in writing about divine things, albeit in a very guarded and provisional way. While they preferred apophatic terminology to katophatic – describing what God was not rather than what He was - we must remember that words are a form of image, indicating things without claiming to be them. So if the Church fathers believed that they could indicate divine realities without thereby limiting or debasing them, then surely a painted image can do the same.

In a sense, yes, pioneers such as Florensky, Ouspensky and Kontoglou were treading new ground, were innovators. As icon painting returned to a more traditional, nuanced approach in the early decades of the 20th century, such writers were needed to explain the difference between, say, a Baroque depiction of a sacred scene and one by a Byzantine or medieval Russian painter.

The task of the pioneers was akin to that of the apologists of the first centuries, trying to discern what was usable in their surrounding culture and what was not. Like many first generation explorers, these pioneers went too much the other way and became to my mind unnecessarily anti-Western in their polemic. They could also sometimes be somewhat partisan. Kontoglou claimed that Byzantine icons were on a higher plane than Russian, and Ouspensky that the Moscow school was the summit.

One unfortunate result of these writers' strong reaction against naturalism has been that too many iconographers have not gone through the long apprenticeship to understand form, anatomy, drapery and proportion. As the Romania sculptor Constantin Brancusi said, "simplicity is complexity resolved". Authentic abstraction in iconography must arise from a deep understanding of the form that it seeks to simplify.

The theological crux of the problem is that Christ transfigures matter, He does not dematerialise it. So icons must affirm the materiality of things as well as their transfiguration through uncreated light. Icons can and should affirm form and matter, for it is part of the divine creation. We are not cardboard cut-outs. But icons equally show us a world in which this matter shines like Christ's garment on Mount Tabor, transformed from mere matter to radiant adornment. While icons cannot depict the actuality of divine glory, they can suggest its existence, like a still small voice. Otherwise we need to remove the nimbus surrounding Christ, all haloes, and all gold backgrounds.

TWO MAJOR ROLES OF ICONS

We shall now pass to an outline of the two major roles of icons. Let us remember also that iconography cannot be limited to painted panel icons, for wall painting, relief carving, mosaic, embroidery and so on are all equally used to create holy images. Most of the principles described below apply also to these other media.

Icon as image

An image that bears the name and received likeness of the subject helps connect us with this subject – Christ, the Mother of God, the saints or angels. As the Acts of the Seventh Ecumenical Council put it:

> *For the honour which is paid to the image passes on to that which the image represents, and he who reveres the image reveres in it the subject represented.*

This communion with the prototype is possible regardless of how well the icon is painted; even an unskilfully painted icon should be venerated, for we are venerating not the icon so much as the holy person depicted. So this liturgical role of the icon as an object of veneration is primarily dependent upon *what* it depicts.

Icon as aid to illumination

But I believe that the icon has also a second role, which is to help us see the world not just as a bush, but as a bush burning with God's glory without being consumed. This role of illumination is more to do with *how* Icons depict their holy subject, with their formal or stylistic qualities. Although this glory cannot be depicted as such, its existence can be hinted at through colour and line. It would be to contradict patristic theology to depict merely the outer aspect of things. As St Maximus the Confessor wrote:

> *…a view of the sensible world that relies exclusively on sense perception, are indeed scales, blinding the soul's visionary faculty and preventing access to the pure Logos of Truth.*[12]

A traditional icon slightly abstracts the physical world in order to help us see deeper, to see the holy fire within all things, to awaken us. As we shall see later, the icon's unusual way of depicting things throws us off balance in order to look for a deeper explanation. We recognize what we are looking at in the image – St Peter, St Paul, a tree, an historical scene or whatever - and yet the image is nevertheless different. The colours, the perspective, the abstract composition all suggest a deeper way of seeing than what our eyes and brain by themselves can see. They suggest the existence of the pure Logos of truth within. The icon affirms as real what we see and touch, but it also affirms as real the uncreated grace of God which creates, sustains and guides what we see and touch.

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12 St. Maximos the Confessor, "Second Century on Theology," in: The Philokalia: The Complete Text, St. Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and St. Makarios of Corinth (ed.), G.E. E. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, Kallistos Ware (trans.), Vol. II, London, Faber and Faber, 1981, p. 156.

Even on the purely biological level we assimilate what we see in different ways. Indeed, as scientists tell us, we do not in fact see with our eyes at all, but with our brains. Electric impulses pass from our retina into our brains and it is there that an image is constructed, not our eyes. The notions, expectations and experiences already recorded in our brains affect the way it organises the electric data sent from our eyes. The brain is a synthesiser and not a blank slate.

We recall that the fathers outline three phases of the spiritual life: purification, then illumination, in which we perceive the logoi or words of Christ within each thing, and finally union, where we are deified or enter union with the Logos Himself.

The way icons are painted suggest all three of these phases, but I would suggest that the formal elements of icons are particularly relevant for the second phase: illumination. The word abstract means to draw out, and the abstraction of a good icon draws out and manifests the inner and unique logos of its subject, be it mountain, tree, animal or saint.

As the iconodule fathers were emphatic to point out, the icon is not of the same essence of the persons depicted, but connects with them through likeness to their person or hypostasis and by bearing their name. However, this likeness cannot be a mere matter of having two eyes and a nose, but must also be a likeness that suggests the subject's particular virtues and ministry.

We could therefore say that the icon is not naturalistic, but is profoundly realistic. It affirms both the materiality of the world and the fact that it is created, animated and directed by the Logos. The icon depicts the world as a burning bush, as a tent of meeting over which the glory of the Lord hovers and through which He speaks. We recall the words of St Maximus the Confessor quoted above: "…a view of the sensible world that relies exclusively on sense perception, are indeed scales, blinding the soul's visionary faculty and preventing access to the pure Logos of Truth".

Icons are above all visual, and are therefore connected with the eye of the heart, what the Fathers call the *nous.* Words are good at instructing and explaining, at describing detail, whereas images are good at initiating us into a different way of seeing. Indeed, St John of Damascus extols sight as "the noblest of senses":

> *We use all our senses to produce worthy images of Him, and we sanctify the noblest of the senses, which is that of sight. For just as words edify the ear, so also the image stimulates the eye.*[13]

This primacy of sight is surely linked with the primacy of the highest of human faculties, the nous, or eye of the heart. We recall the scripture's description of the disciples' meeting with Christ on the road to Emmaus:

> *As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognising him…Then their eyes were opened and they*

13 John of Damascus, On the Divine Images, 1.17, translation by D. Anderson from On the Divine Images: Three Apologies against Those who Attack the Divine Images (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980), p. 25

recognised him, and he disappeared from their sight. (Luke 24: 15,16, 31)

The words spoken between Jesus and the disciples prepared them, but the relationship was not complete until "their eyes were opened and they recognised him".

Over the centuries Orthodox iconography has developed numerous ways of assisting this process of initiation or illumination. It is the task of an iconographer to learn these principles for they are his or her vocabulary. As the contemporary iconographer and teacher George Kordis has written:

> *The immutability of Byzantine technique means that there has to be an artistic system with specific rules and principles governing the execution of icons throughout all periods of artistic trends; and, because such a system exists, it must be possible to discover and set out its principles. These principles obey an inner logic, and describing them is the first step stage in learning the art of icon painting. They can be described without endangering Byzantine iconographic style because they are constant and so unchanging.*[14]

To these principles we shall now turn, and I will illustrate them with particular reference to some contemporary Romanian iconographers.

SOME PRINCIPLES BEHIND THE FORMAL QUALITIES OF ICONS

Affirmation of matter and form

There has been some mistaken writing about iconography that associates transfiguration with dematerialisation; this is a Doscetic heresy. Icons depict a material world transfigured, not dematerialized. So icons must therefore show a profound understanding of and respect for the form of the material word as God has created it. Although we are in a fallen world, the lineaments of this world remain incredibly beautiful and divinely inspired.

In order to affirm this two-fold aspect of the transfigured world - its material form and spiritual grace that transforms it - the Byzantine icon tradition seems to have drawn inspiration from earlier epochs. According to Father George Kordis, who has studied this field much more than myself, the Byzantine tradition used techniques from the Hellenistic period to achieve plasticity, movement and rhythm, and from the more expressive Late Antiquity it learned the use of line and colour to construct form, vertical perspective, linearism, and compositional method. In his own words:

> *Byzantine iconographers…instead of devising their own solutions, they turned to the great inheritance of classical and Hellenistic art as well as to that of late antiquity. It was the art of these periods that provided them with the answers they needed. Taking away depth, and using line and local colour to construct a form in sculpture or painting, was a technique already prevalent in the second century AD…It was from this important period, the expressionism of late antiquity, that they borrowed the vertical*

14 G. Kordis, Icon as Communion, Caroline Makropoulos (trans.), Brookline, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2010, p. 2.

> *system of perspective, linearism, and of course compositional method. However, Byzantine iconographers also sought to express movement and rhythm in their art. For this they looked at the classical naturalistic tradition, from which they borrowed…plasticity, the dynamic manner of drawing figures on the surface, and the philosophy of rhythm. They took their fundamental artistic principles from these two main sources and used them to construct their own artistic system.*[15]

Asceticism

St John Maximovitch wrote:

> *The task of the iconographer is precisely to render, as far as possible and to as great an extent as possible, those spiritual qualities whereby the person depicted acquired the Kingdom of Heaven*[16]

An icon should therefore inculcate a sobriety that leads the viewer toward repentance. A well painted icon does not impart aesthetic delight without also offering the means of the venerator becoming themselves beautiful. This is why faces possess their characteristic bright sadness, a mixture of joy and sorrow, a compassionate peace. One brow is often softer in curve, while the other is more arched. One cheekbone is more sunken or pronounced, while the other is gentler of curve. The regard of the face is attentive without being tense.

Asceticism means training, the stripping away of superfluous weight so we can run the good race. An icon therefore strips away superfluous decoration and detail in order to focus on the content. Although there is movement, there is no agitated, wasted movement. The saint concentrates on us, is focused, is in a state of prayer and listening.

Non-centric viewing

Some of the perspective systems used in icons encourage us to move beyond our self-centric world-view and see the world as God sees it. Multi-view perspective is one such. A building is often shown as viewed from three or more vantage points at once rather our own single situation.

Also, nothing is far from God, and therefore those further away in the field of depth are shown close to us. Icons therefore tend to express the axis of depth through the axis of height; someone further away is simply put higher up on the panel, but of the same size of those closer and further down the panel.

Perspective

In writings about icons one hears much about the so called inverse perspective. There are in fact numerous other techniques also used. These

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15 G. Kordis, Icon as Communion, Caroline Makropoulos (trans.), Brookline, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2010, p.51.

16 St. John of Shanghai and San Francisco, “Discourse in Iconography,” Orthodox Life, Vol. 30, No. 1 (Jan-Feb 1980), pp. 42-45.

Quotedhttp://archangelsbooks.com/articles/iconography/DiscourseIcon.asp, (accessed 7 February, 2016).

can be summarized as follows: inverse; flatness; multi-view; Isometry; hierarchical; and sometimes also, the renaissance mathematical system with the vanishing point on the horizon, though this is never applied as rigorously and throughout the whole image, as was done in the Renaissance period and after.

There are two schools of thought why these various perspective systems are used in icons. That which teaches a mystagogy of style says that these techniques help us to see the world in a more divine way. The other school denies the need for any spiritual explanation, and say that that these abstract means correlate with how we know things subjectively, and not just how our retina receives them. For example, we know that a building has sides as well as a front, so even if our eyes do not see the sides our mind nevertheless registers them as there. Multi-view perspective therefore represents our experience more accurately than the mathematical vanishing point system.

Personally, I think both schools are valid since both are rooted in the realities of God's world. One interpretation does not exclude the other. Either way, the iconographer needs to know these perspective systems and know how to use them.

Communion

The icon exists above all to aid communion, communion between the person depicted and the praying viewer. The face of the saint is therefore usually toward the viewer, or if in a scene, no more than three quarters view. Sometimes they look at us, sometimes slightly beyond us, as though contemplating something, seeing with the heart and not just the eye: "She pondered these things in her heart" as the Scriptures tell us of the Virgin Mary.

Light

We can identify four sources of light in icons: shining from within the saint; surrounding the saint; light for modelling form; and sometimes, though more rarely, directional light from a single external source. A good example to illustrate all four of these is the famous mosaic of Christ in the gallery of Agia Sophia.

1. The halo suggest the light radiating from within the person. In icons of Christ He is Himself this light. In icons of saints, the light is from the indwelling Holy Spirit.
2. Background gold as in this mosaic, or else a radiant colour such as vermilion, affirms the words of St Paul: "In Him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17.28). It is therefore not so much a background as the all encompassing divine "atmosphere" within which all things are sustained and directed.
3. Modelling light, to create a sense of plasticity. The rule of thumb for icon painting is that what is closer is lighter, and what is further away is darker. Or very often it is not so much that the "shading" is darker but that it is painted with a cool colour, such as green or even blue. Although icons do not use extreme contrasts of light and dark created by a single strong light source (a technique called chiaroscuro), Leonid Ouspensky was incorrect in asserting that icons do not have shadows.

There are clearly areas darker than others. This contrast of light and dark is used to suggest the materiality of the subject.

4. What is unusual in the Agia Sophia mosaic is the use of a single source of light. This is rare, but not outside the tradition. The point in this mosaic is that this directional source is identical to an actual window to the left of the wall. The shadow on Christ's neck is exactly where it would be if He were standing where the mosaic is, to the right this window. The creator of the mosaic is surely showing us that Christ is present here, in this gallery, in this place. Directional light is thus still used liturgically, and in conjunction with the other three techniques described above.

The iconographer's way of life

All Christians are called to live the sacramental life of the Church, to fast, to pray, to live according to Christ's commandments of love. This is also incumbent on iconographers, for if they are to depict Christ, the saints, and the angels then he or she must know them personally. Otherwise they would merely be painting a painting rather than painting a person.

In the world of secular art it is easy to distinguish a portrait made purely from photos and a portrait painted from life. Encounter with the subject helps the artist discover and indicate their character, to discern what is essential and what is secondary. Many small decisions are taken during the making of an icon – where to put a line, what colour or tone to use, and so on. Unless one has the music of heaven within oneself one cannot detect lines that are 'off key'.

Harmony with hymnography

The icon is liturgical, designed to be part of the greater liturgical life of the church. It therefore must correlate with the Church's hymnography and with Scripture readings appointed for its commemoration day. This is especially so with festal icons. One should be a commentary on the other. It is therefore essential that an iconographer know the liturgical texts of the feasts.

A good example is the icon of the Transfiguration where, among other things, we usually see a cave depicted under Elijah and under Moses. This stimulates the viewer to wonder why they are there. The Scripture readings for the Vespers remind us that both Moses and Elijah had partial theophanies in relation to caves. Moses is hid in the cleft of a rock and sees only the back parts of God. Elijah hears only a still small voice as he stands at the mouth of his cave. But here on Tabor they behold Jehovah face to face. This contrast is witnessed to by the hymns of the feast:

> *As for Moses and Elijah, when they conversed with Christ they made manifest that He was the Lord of the living and the dead, and that He was the God Who spoke of old in the law and the Prophets.* (Great Vespers)

Inner Geometry

As we have seen, a festal icon can be a commentary on the liturgical texts. One way it can do this is to possess an underlying geometry whose shape elucidates the event's theology. The individual elements of the scene can be

arranged within this structure and thereby create a single whole, whose arrangement and movement elucidate the dominant theology of the event.

The somewhat complex icon of the Nativity is a good case. It can be approached in many ways, but in the illustrated icon I have arranged the key elements in a circle whose centre is the Christ Child. This circle is then combined with a square. All the earthly elements are contained in this square, while the heavenly subjects (the angels and the star) are contained in the top half of the circle. These two shapes are combined to suggest a domed church. The dome represents heaven and the square represents earth. The whole icon is therefore an image of the Church, the body of Christ, God and creation united.

Appropriate to architectural space

Be it panel icon, wall painting or mosaic, an icon ought to fit the architectural space and lighting for which it is made. The whole of a parish or monastery's liturgical life can be considered as a single icon, and so each addition should supplement and complement what is already there. A certain understanding of liturgics, church architecture and art history is therefore required of an iconographer. When painting for a British Orthodox church, for example, I often draw inspiration from Romanesque, Celtic or Anglo Saxon work.

Uniqueness of persons

Each of us is unique, a profound mystery, possessing our own name and face. This uniqueness is the presupposition of communion, for unity is not possible without distinction. Icons have often failed to value this uniqueness. Icons of female saints in particular suffer from this, the same face being used endlessly with only the inscription varying.

The uniqueness of persons is very evident in icons of the first eight or nine centuries of church iconography, such as in the mosaics of the Rotunda (St George's) in Thessaloniki. But it seems to have suffered after iconoclasm. Faces became more formulaic.

Life-likeness is a particular challenge when we depict saints within living memory for whom we have painted portraits or photographs, such as St Paisius of the Holy Mountain or New Martyr Elizabeth. We need to affirm their physical likeness without becoming naturalistic.

Unity of persons and harmony

We are unique, but our unique face and personhood is fulfilled in relationship. Our unity arises also from our shared single human nature. There are many persons but one nature. An icon should therefore arrange its figures so that they are in harmony, especially in harmony with the workings of God expressed in that particular feast. George Kordis has an unusual theory on this matter. He suggests that icons can use colour to affirm unity of nature, while line can uphold the uniqueness of the hypostasis.

An icon depicts a redeemed world, a world where we see God's hand in all things. In this sense it is prophetical, unveiling God's hidden purpose in events. An icon is therefore a microcosm in which opposites are reconciled. It ought therefore to possess profound harmony, the elements being arranged in relationship to the boundaries of the panel with nothing arbitrarily cut off. An

icon is therefore not so much a window with an arbitrary view, but a door through which all the characters must pass.

Another basis for the need of aesthetic harmony in icons is that the world is an image of the Trinitarian God. A good icon therefore reflects a world in which there is both distinction, as in the three Persons of the Trinity, and equally also unity, for God is one.

The colours should be harmonious, therefore the iconographer needs to know colour theory: how complementary colours work, the action of warm, cool and neutral colours upon each other, and so on.

As many writers remind us, being a liturgical object means that an icon is more than just an art object. But I would assert that it is at least art. It should contain all that a good painting contains, and more. An iconographer should therefore strive to know more about their craft than a secular artist, not less. Most of the patristic writers were highly skilled in rhetoric and pagan learning, and turned this skill to the service of the Church. Should not an iconographer do the same, availing themselves of any skills available?

Authenticity and innovation

Whilst learning from past masters, a mature iconographer goes beyond imitation. Mere copying gives the false sense that to follow Church tradition is to live a mindless, robotic, and fearful existence. If the Gospels and Book of Acts are anything to go by, life with Christ is a rather daring and unpredictable adventure!

We might say that recent Romanian iconography is quite a leader in creative iconography. Perhaps situated geographically between Russia and Greece as Romania is, it can take the best of both traditions.

The challenge is how to work creatively within the received language of iconography without changing it so much as to render it unusable for liturgical use. One solution is to experiment initially not with one's icons but with non-liturgical art, what we might call "gallery art". After this period of trial, the iconographer then imports into their icons those elements that seem appropriate to their liturgical setting.

Logic in drapery

A common failing in novice iconographers is their drawing, especially of drapery. Icons go beyond naturalism in that they are not naturalistic, but they should be at least rational. A well drafted icon is supra-rational, not irrational. Drapery must have an inner logic, the lines indicating the horizons or boundaries of real forms. Once this rational language is understood, then the direction, volume and detail of the draper can be designed to emphasise the particular character of the saint.

Good figurative proportion

Even though icons are slightly abstract - for example they might elongate certain features, or even the whole figure - they nevertheless must preserve basic principles of proportion. Abstraction and distortion are very different things. There is great variety in figurative proportion between different schools of iconography, ranging from seven heads high (or even less if one includes figures in the small biographical scenes in some vita icons) to thirteen heads high in the most extreme cases, such as in Dionysius of Moscow. But to do

this well, one needs to know what one is changing. One needs to abstract from a place of knowledge of proportion and form and not of ignorance.

An inner and outer likeness

As we have noted above, it is interesting that most contemporary Byzantine descriptions of icons praise their lifelikeness. This is in part because the conservative nature of homiletics, writing, and poetry in Byzantium required them to use literary forms of expression (called *topoi*) taken from classical writings. And these topoi valued art works to the extent that they were lifelike.

But various scholars have pointed out to us that we should not read back into this term our current associations of life-likeness with photographic realism. Life-likeness is more than physical recognisability, for it is also to do with the character of the person. As such, a lifelike portrait requires a considerable degree of abstraction in order to draw out the inner character. An ascetic for example tends to have sunken cheeks, while a teacher might have a larger forehead.

Grace and stillness

What has impressed me most about the holy people that I have met or known personally is their union of inner stillness and activity. The Romanian priest Fr. George Calciu is a case in point. Few could outstrip him in his courageous activity and his endurance in communist and atheistic Rumania, spending around twenty-one years of his life imprisoned for the faith. And yet he struck me as someone inwardly at rest. As St Paul writes: "…I labour more than all the apostles, yet not I, but the grace of God within me" (I Corinthians 15:10).

An icon should depict this union of stillness and vigour. It should not be stilted or stiff, but nor should it be agitated. So there is usually a strong vertical axis, a lack of agitated gestures, a certain balance left to right. On the other hand, there are asymmetries and movements: heads rarely face us directly but are slightly turned; a standing figure shifts its weight slightly; drapery moves in rhythms.

CONCLUSION

Some iconographers manage to organise their own training, the highly gifted. But this should be the exception. We need to have schools and apprenticeships to teach skills and theology, establish the parameters, set standards. By standards I do not mean stylistic standards that ossify, but theological standards that inspire as well as preclude.

And this knowledge is important not just for the makers of icons, but also for those who commission them: bishops, priests and architects. It is no good training good iconographers if those commissioning them demand sentimental icons, or cannot tell the difference between inept and skilled work.

Icons are proving to be a profound means of mission in our world, so this presents a yet more pressing need for the highest standards in our icons, wall paintings, mosaics and all the other forms of iconography. We do not want to become precious about our icons, art critics rather than prayers and venerators. But, like a good sermon or devout and skilful chanting, we do want icons that inspire us rather than irritate us.