WALL PAINTINGS AND MOSAICS IN CONTEMPORARY CHURCHES:
Theological principles determining their subject matter and placement

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ABSTRACT

The Orthodox tradition of wall painting and mosaic is a living tradition, born of the union of timeless divine truth with the changing circumstances of human cultures. This paper outlines some of the unchanging theological and aesthetic principles that have informed traditional wall painting and mosaics. Knowledge of these principles is essential if the contemporary iconographer is to go beyond the mere copying of past works and at the same time avoid un-theological innovation.

The paper first describes the spiritual role of murals and mosaics, and then summarizes the theological themes that inform the themes and placement of murals in the various sections of both the basilican and the cross-domed church types. In the light of these it finishes with a discussion of challenges facing contemporary iconography.

INTRODUCTION

Traditional Orthodox wall paintings and mosaics vary in their style and placement within the church. This variety is a natural and healthy consequence of the incarnation of God and the transfiguration of man and creation. Iconography is the union of timeless divine realities with variable cultural, economic, and pastoral factors.

A good iconographer therefore knows which things can vary and which should not. He or she knows the difference between Tradition with a capital T and traditions with a small t, to use a distinction coined by Vladimir Lossky. If we are to see mature contemporary iconography, and not just an endless copying of past works, then we must be able to discern between iconographic Tradition and traditions.

In this paper firstly I wish to outline what I see to be the main spiritual functions of murals and mosaics, then describe the most common themes depicted in the different parts of the church building. In conclusion I will discuss some challenges facing us today in the light of these principles.

THE MAIN FUNCTIONS OF ORTHODOX WALL PAINTING AND MOSAIC

1. Orthodox liturgical art exists to initiate the worshiper into actual experience and love of the person depicted. Shape, colours and the juxtaposition of subject matter should all therefore aim to open the eyes of our spiritual heart so that we can behold and experience Christ and His presence in the world around us. Writing to the Ephesians St Paul said that he prayed to the Father that:

> *he may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your heart enlightened, that you may know*

> *what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power in us who believe…"* (Eph 1: 17-20)

2. Icons depict the world transfigured, seen like a bush aflame with the indwelling divine *logoi* , their indwelling spiritual essence. Icons should show the world as seen with the eyes of the spirit and not merely with the physical eyes or the rational faculty. In "Ambigua:10**",** Maximus writes:

> *As Christ's garments shine with Him, so when Christ reveals himself to the human soul, then all the* logoi *of things intelligible and sensible in the Scriptures and in nature appear as present with Him.*

Icons help to initiate us into this "noetic`' way of seeing by confounding our rational faculty so that we are compelled to use the eye of our heart (the *nous* of patristic Greek, or *intellectus* of patristic Latin) in order to comprehend what is seen. Frescoes and mosaics can do this using stylistic means (such as inverse perspective); by creating an atmosphere of compunction and interiority (especially using harmonious colour and light); and by the skillful juxtaposition of subjects to make insightful links between salvific events (as do the Church's hymns).

3. Murals should give a sense of participation in heavenly worship – the communion of the saints. They exist not so much to teach us as to include us. When we enter churches entirely covered in murals or mosaics we feel that we are joining the choirs of heaven.

4. Liturgical art needs to reflect something of its surrounding culture, to be incarnational. As at Pentecost the same truths were declared in different languages, so liturgical art takes what is good or even partially good in its surrounding culture, adapts it when necessary, and incorporates these things into its received body of liturgical wisdom. The first panel icons, for example, were adapted from the Romano-Egyptian encaustic mummy portraits. Being from Britain, I myself am seeking to incorporate aspects of Romanesque, Celtic and Anglo Saxon work into my own iconography.

But this cultural assimilation needs discernment: it is possible to adopt the wrong things from one's culture, as when most Orthodox iconography from the 17th to the 19th centuries adopted elements of naturalism and sentimentality from western art.

5. Murals teach the stories of salvation and stimulate curiosity. This role particularly applies to children's education: "Mummy, what is happening in that painting? Who is that saint?"

THE THREE MAIN CHURCH TYPES

There are three main types of church design, and a mural arrangement needs to take into account the theology inherent in these designs:

- Basilican (basically a rectangle with an apse, and usually two or four side aisles). This was based on the Roman secular buildings used for meetings, markets and courts. Most early churches are of this design. it

has remained the type favoured still in the West. Especially when a simple rectangle, it is the cheapest to build.
- Centrally oriented church (octagonal, circular). These are usually limited to baptisteries, or to house a major relic.
- Cross-domed church. This was developed in the East as a specifically church design, and is the type favoured by Orthodox communities when they can afford it. It arguably provides a richer theological expression than the above two types, largely because it is a synthesis of them. It is however the most expensive type to build, on account of the great diversity of forms that it uses: domes, apses, drums, barrel vaults, squinches, and arches.

THEOLOGICAL/ICONOGRAPHICAL THEMES OF CHURCH PARTS
Let us now look at the theology implied in the different sections of the basilica and the cross-domed church, and the themes commonly depicted on them.

1. **THE BASILICA**
The basilica is essentially a rectangular box, albeit usually with arches and columns running along the sides, with a pitched roof (normally of wood), culminating in an apse. The dominant movement is therefore a horizontal journey from entrance towards the apse.

Side walls of the basilican nave: The basilica's east/west linear movement produces three common arrangements for the north and south walls of the nave:
- Processional (as in Ravenna). The figures process towards the altar.
- Instructional. Here a series of scenes are to be read like pages in a book which presents the life of Christ, the Virgin or a saint.
- Standing saints can face not towards the altar, but straight forward toward the people in the nave. This has the advantage of complementing the rather one-dimensional west-east movement by creating a sense of God being present in the nave, among the people.

Triumphal arch: The next form is the **triumphal arch**, which leads into the apse. This is the gateway to the apse, to the Holy of Holies, as it were. It should therefore depict the means by which we enter the kingdom of God.
- The Annunciation is often depicted either side: the Archangel Gabriel and the Mother of God have a conversation across real space, a space which includes us, the worshippers. This evokes a sense that we too are being addressed and asked if we will let God be born in us.

The apse. The apse consists of the curved (or faceted) wall, surmounted by a half-dome. Because a dome or a rounded arch draws our eye to the centre of the curve, it is an incarnational shape – it draws us to its interior. (The pointed Gothic arch, by contrast, points the viewer outside of itself.) The dome also symbolizes heaven and the divine realm since it is based on the circle, which like God is without beginning or end.
- Because the typical basilica has a hipped roof and therefore no natural means of depicting Christ, the apsidal dome tends to do what the dome

does in the domed-cross church: it has a representation of Christ, often flanked by the Virgin and John the Baptist and other saints.
- Numerous early churches in Rome have mosaics of the Second Coming of Christ, flanked by saints and with other subject matter like the twenty-four elders, and Bethlehem and Jerusalem.
- There are instances of basilican apses depicting just the Virgin and Child (as at Torcello, Venice), but these are the exception.
- In rare cases an event in Christ's life is shown, as at St Catherine's, Sinai, which has the Transfiguration (the original dedication of the monastery).

The West wall
- The back wall is what is seen as the faithful exit, and therefore often depicts the Last Judgement. The theme in general is end things: our personal mortality, or the end of the world and coming of the kingdom of God.

Portico. It should be noted that most early basilicas, up to around the tenth century, had a portico at the entrance end. This produced a kind of narthex, an intermediate *temenos* that prepared the faithful before entering the nave. It was colonnaded, and so was part inside, part outside. A fiali or fountain was often at the centre, providing the symbolism of cleansing by repentance before entering the church proper. This portico, often called paradise, also provided a more welcoming aspect for outsiders, who might otherwise be intimidated by the great doors of the church. Perhaps we should consider a revival of this wonderful tradition.

2. **THE CROSS-DOMED CHURCH**

The essential form of this church type is a cube surmounted by a dome, with an apse on the east side. There are often secondary apses on the north and south walls, and extensions to the west forming a narthex and even exo-narthex. The cross-domed church thus combines the basilican east-west movement with the stillness and interiority produced by the central dome: movement and action are united with being and contemplation.

Let us now consider the theology and common themes of each area as we move west to east:

Exo-narthex and Narthex. The place of preparation, purification. Sometimes Old Testament scenes are depicted here, showing the historical preparation for the coming of Christ, or types of his coming (such as Jacob's ladder). In the Portaitissa chapel at Iviron, Athos, certain classical Greek philosophers are shown, as pre-Christian thinkers who helped prepare the Greeks to receive Christ. On Athos you also find depictions in the exo-narthex of all creation praising God (from the Praises, the last three Psalms). The narthex is often dark. Ascetics are commonly depicted here, to emphasize the need for struggle.

The nave, often with choir extensions. Integral with this space is the drum and dome. The dome represents divinity, and cube creation. Together they represent the Church, the body of Christ.

- **Dome** .Christ is usually depicted in the dome. The emphasis here is Christ as Pantocrator (Ruler and Sustainer: *panto-crator* means literally the one who holds all things); Logos (ordering principle of the universe); Conductor/Choir Master of the universal symphony. The cubic nave below is the created order transfigured by the Logos, loving Him and being loved by Him. Other themes sometimes depicted in the dome are the Ascension (Agia Sophia, Thessaloniki, 9th century), and Pentecost (western dome, San Marco, Venice).
- **The drum.** The drum can show angels (first created beings), patriarchs (first in the line towards the incarnation), or prophets (foretellers of Christ).
- **The squinches**. These bent triangles offer structural support for the drum or dome across the corners of the square nave. Symbolically they stand at the interface of the Old and New Testaments, and of heaven and earth. They therefore have either the four Evangelists who tell of the life of God incarnate on earth, or sometimes other themes like four hymnographers (as at Chora, Constantinople) or feasts (Daphne, Greece).
- **The nave walls, arches and drums**. The upper regions often show scenes in Christ's life. Down below are saints. The nave can be understood as paradise, a Persian word meaning a protected park for the king to enjoy the company of his friends. The saints – especially if soldier martyrs – can be seen as the protecting wall and also friends of Christ the King.

The icon screen. This is the interface of heaven and earth on the horizontal axis. It is not so much a wall as a door or window. I think that very high iconscreens are theologically suspect in this respect; they can separate altar and nave and make the Divine Liturgy a performance to witness rather than a work of the people together.

Altar/apse.
- **The curved apsidal wall** wraps around the holy table. It suits therefore the themes of hierarchs concelebrating the Divine Liturgy, angels in the Great Entrance (Mystra, Greece), or the Apostles' Communion
- **The apsidal half-dome**. Because there is a central dome in the nave which depicts Christ, the apsidal dome most frequently depicts the Mother of God. The Logos in heaven (the dome) enters earth (the nave) through the virgin (apsidal dome). The apsidal dome is the womb of the church, by which God becomes man.

CHALLENGES FACING CONTEMPORARY CHURCH ART

After about three or four centuries of decadence and debasement, we have happily seen over the last century a revival of traditional iconography and church architecture. However, I think there are dangers and challenges that face us in this still nascent period:
- We should not make the mistake of identifying tradition with merely copying past works, albeit masterpieces. This is not actually traditional. Intelligent copying is a good way to learn the principles of the past masters, but it is not of itself the essence of tradition. At best it is a stop-gap to prevent un-theological deviation until we gain maturity. The rich diversity of fully traditional Orthodox iconography is attested to by the fact

that we can determine a work's provenance and age by its style alone. The bottom line is not if a work is copied from a traditional prototype, but whether or not the style and arrangement reflects Christian spirituality and theology.

- Any iconographic scheme must be sensitive to the design of the church for which it is intended. We should not impose a mural arrangement that worked well in another church of a different design and scale. A successful schema will be sensitive to the particular strengths and weaknesses of the church in question. If the church is a rectangular/basilican design, don't treat it like a domed-cross design.

- New materials such as reinforced concrete, machine-made tesserae and synthetic pigments offer new opportunities but also present many pitfalls. We must be aware of these when choosing whether or not to use them. The strengths of these new materials is also their potential aesthetic weakness.

  For example, unlike the traditional materials of stone and brick, concrete has tensile strength and can therefore span areas without the beautiful arch or dome that are demanded by stone and brick. We can imitate these shapes, but they do not grow organically out of concrete's character.

  Most modern production techniques (gas or electric ovens rather than wood fired) produce smalti and gold tesserae that are very regular compared to old pieces. And the indirect methods of applying them to the wall, though faster and therefore cheaper, again tend to produce a flatter surface compared to mosaics made in the direct method, where in old masterpieces we see gold tesserae at an angle as much as 45 degrees to the surface.

  in the field of icon painting, synthetic pigments are usually very powerful and garish, being made of just one substance, whereas earth or stone pigments have many "impurities" which create subtlety.

- A balanced and thorough training is needed to ensure high standards in the future. Our liturgical life is a divine-human dance, a *perichoresis* that unites not just God and man, but also a whole range of arts: architecture, music and painting, to name but some. An iconographer therefore needs to acquire a clear theological understanding of their art's purpose, to try to master their craft, and to nurture a deep spiritual life so that his or her particular liturgical art serves the same ends as the whole.

- Liturgical art is not just a means to an end. The making of our art is of itself part of the Church's calling to transfigure the cosmos, to make it grace-bearing. When Christ was transfigured His garment shone with uncreated light along with His body. We are called to weave a garment for the Body of Christ through our art, so that matter may manifest the glory of God as did the ark of the covenant in days of old.