

Byzantine Iconography: A Synopsis



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Iconography can probably be better understood when compared with the philosophy of Western art which may be stated as: “Art is the expression of the individual and the influence of his environment at a particular period of time.” Western art seems to have evolved without a common denominator, and as a result does not adhere to strict rules. If rules are made, the artist is free to change or alter them during the process to the point where the act or process can become the subject of his art. In other words, it can be art for art's sake. This idea has gained a great deal of momentum over the past century in Western culture as evidenced by its rapidly changing and diverse styles. Iconography, on the other hand, is not “art for art’s sake,” but “art for the edification of mankind.” It is not the expression of only one person, but the expression of the historical Christian church, its Traditions, and Holy Scripture.

The icon painter or iconographer is required to be a Christian, and from the two-thousand-year-old Christian values, derives his inspiration for expression. The originator or creator of this art form is the unbroken Tradition of the Church. The artist is like a musician who uses his talent to interpret and perform the composer’s musical composition. For this reason, iconography has not experienced the drastic stylistic changes that Western art has because it kept its roots and built on them. Western art is seen as a process of revolutionary statements where the present one exists in disagreement or negation of the one it preceded. It seems as though its purpose is “how to be different.” Iconography, on the other hand, has been going through a “slow evolutionary process,” and its purpose is “how to be better” rather than “how to be different.” This consistent style gives iconography a timeless and universal quality which can truly be referred to as classical. It is also the most noble of all arts because its subject is God.

The word “icon” is usually considered to apply to a religious picture of two dimensions or relief. But, to the Orthodox Church, the term is a theological one. “Icon,” from the Greek, means image as in reflection. And the icon is, in fact, a manmade reflection of the incomprehensible, an earthly image of the heavenly pattern.

The veneration which an Orthodox Christian accords to this image is not one of worship, but of adoration. In respecting the image, the believer pays homage to its Prototype. Man is too insignificant a creature to be able to see his God directly in this life. The mystic, otherworldly quality of Byzantine icons, their expressively non-naturalistic form echoes this humility of man in exaltation of God.

The beginnings of Byzantine art are found in the earliest days of Christianity. Combining Greek, Roman and Middle Eastern influences, it quickly evolved to an abstract, stylized form for the instruction and inspiration of the faithful. Because of the destruction of images in the eighth century (iconoclasm), little remains before that time. But of the later works, there are roughly three main schools: the Constantinopolitan, featuring asceticism and imperial grandeur (Russian iconography is its direct descendent); the Macedonian, with less starkness, more roundness of

form; and the Cretan, with elongated features and somber colors. Partial or complete adornment with silver or gold metal covering as an expression of piety became common after the fifteenth century.

As a form of inspiration, the icon is to the eye the same as music is to the ear; as incense is to the smell; as veneration to the touch; and as Holy Communion to the taste. Although, as mentioned, these may seem superficial, the intent is to charge all of our senses and guide us toward a higher and spiritual understanding.

For those who may not be familiar with icons, at first glance they may appear rather strange, but further observation will reveal various unique qualities. As one gazes at an icon of a saint, the pose will be straight forward, austere, and serious because it is a confrontation with the Kingdom of God. It will be matter of fact and not an ostentatious or theatrical pose. The saint will not contain any worldly or mundane characteristics but portray a solemn and spiritual quality. The eyes of the saint will be rather large symbolizing faith in God; the nose will be long and slender denoting dignity; the mouth will be small, the ears large indicating humility and obedience to God by being able to listen more to His Word and speaking very little. The forehead of the saint will be rather large showing spiritual wisdom and the overall appearance will be slender from fasting and control of worldly temptations. Finally, this art will look abstract and unnatural because of inverse visual perspective where the vanishing point will not be somewhere in the picture, but in the eye of the viewer. The scene will expand rather than diminish, symbolizing that we, the viewers, live in a finite world and we gaze at a window of eternity. Also, through this symbolic inverse perspective we understand the fact that man cannot, on his own, walk in God's domain, but God, through His Grace, comes to us and lifts us up.

The icon invokes a sense of divinity, yet it maintains an anthropomorphic form. It attracts the gaze of the believer, and in its own way guides and directs his prayer. In the historical context, the Church realized the importance and the necessity of providing this visual aid, together with architecture, music, the fragrance of incense and the participation of Holy Communion to provide "a total work of art" creating a heavenly environment to bring the believer closer to his God.