

Week 4: The Importance of Church Icons 101

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An important influence in Christian iconography was the use in Egypt of the “Fayuum mummy Portrait”; a portrait of an individual who had died that was attached to the front of the coffin. These were usually rendered in encaustic (melted wax to which pigments are added), though sometimes tempera was used. The Egyptians believed, rightly according to Christians, in the general resurrection at the end of time. What was strange about their belief however, and what led to the use of the highly skilled and beautiful portraiture, was the thought that the soul returning to the body would not recognize which body to return to – hence the need for a well crafted picture! This belief - needless to say - Christians do not share. All of the earliest Icons were painted in the same medium as the fayuum portraits, encaustic, and used almost identical technique; although, it can be said that the icons unfortunately, while beautiful in their own ways, were not really as skilled as the Fayuum portraits.

Most of the oldest panel icons from the 6th century reside at St. Catherine’s monastery at the foot of mount Sinai, including the famous “Christ Pantocrator” (which was also painted in encaustic). The advantage of this locale is the low humidity, which helps to preserve the icons from mildew, swelling, and cracking. This is how they maintain their luster, and how this icon in particular has survived so long.

The subsequent development of iconography from the period of the 4th century which saw the legalization of Christianity was rapid. We see 3 main media used for icons: Fresco, Egg Tempera, and Mosaic. There were other media such as enamel and encaustic, but the Byzantines were especially fond of the three media above for their artwork, and of the three, they were the true masters of the mosaic. Some stunning mosaics are found in the churches of Hosios Lukas and of course, Hagia Sophia. The continuity of content and technique can be seen carried forward throughout the Empire, with distinct Christian styles emerging between the 6th and 13th centuries.

6th Century: Justinian and the Church of Hagia Sophia.

The 8th century saw the advent of a true enemy of Orthodoxy; Iconoclasm, and a somewhat “dark period” in the development of iconographic expression.

Post 13th century was a refinement period; in my opinion the 14th to 16th century was a true “golden age” of the icon. Started by the renowned master Theophanes “the Greek” in Russia, truly the height of monastic iconographic expression was reached by the iconographer Andrei Rublev. His icons basically defined Russian iconography from then forward, until the period of decadence and “realism” in the 18th-19th century. Rublev’s style was elegant, wholly transfigured, highly theological, and greatly skilled. Even having been damaged by war, communists, or the ravages of time, his icons have taken the breath of everyone who has seen them personally.

This was unfortunately leading into decadence and decline (mainly due to western “enlightenment” and “renaissance” influences brought in by Tsar Peter “the Great”) primarily in Russia in the 18th – mid 19th century.

Finally, an interesting rediscovery and reinvigoration of iconography took place in the early 20th century under the likes of Photios Kontoglu (in the Greek east) and Leonid Ouspenskiy (in the Russian East). Their main student, the monk Gregory Kroug is perhaps the star pupil of this rediscovery, and their influence can be felt particularly here in America and continues to this day. Icons from these iconographers are somewhat stylized, but simple; truly unique and transfigured, but endowed with a personal and “folky” quality to them that defies description; their goal – which was largely achieved – was to recapture the iconographic traditions of the past that were obscured by the tumultuous history of the Church.

Next week (and likely the following as well) will be a summary of some of the techniques used in iconography that truly make them “windows to heaven”.