

Week 5: The Importance of Church Icons 101

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The techniques used to write an icon are meant to connect earth to heaven. Every icon should be “filled with light from the inside” and is therefore an extension of the Transfiguration. In this way the icon manifests our objective in prayer. The use of the gold “halo” around the faces of saints show the light of God radiating from them. Properly burnished gold leaf will reflect *any* light present and will be bright and visible even in very dim conditions, reflecting the reality of the light of God in our dark world.

The choice of (painting) media; traditionally encaustic, egg tempera, or fresco, also each have their own unique qualities that also reflect our theology. This may be “theologizing” a bit, (reading theology into already existing qualities) but for example, wax encaustic – though now all but abandoned for iconography - has a luminous “shine” and depth, but also is an enduring medium (under the right conditions). Egg tempera also shows luminosity, as the fat in the egg yolk adds a “waxy” quality to the finished product, and blends with a special varnish (olifa – boiled linseed oil) to penetrate the layers of paint and bring forward a lustrous shine and transparency that appears filled with light. Fresco is the medium of choice for walls; since pigment particles are “carbonatated” by the lime plaster in a “lime crust”, a correctly prepared (buon) fresco painting is not only vibrant, but virtually indestructible, showing the concept of the eternal truths of the one depicted. There are frescoes at Akrotiri in Santorini, Greece that have survived with nearly their original brightness since the 17th century BC!

Also, the use of inverse perspective in the icon leads the viewer to wonder; in Byzantine iconography the “vanishing point” is placed outside the painting and therefore at the

observer – this gives the viewer the impression that they are “part of the scene” and invites them to participate in it – truly Icons seek to make the viewer the subject of the scene.

Object lines parallel to the horizon diverge instead of converge; objects farther away are drawn larger or the same size as objects in the foreground, in this way the Icon, when written correctly is the complete opposite of a typical painting and is “otherworldly”.

Finally, the use of symbolism is very important in Iconography (and in ancient art in general). Intangible realities about the depicted scene or person can be shown this way.

Some prominent examples are (there are probably thousands of others):

- The three stars on the Theotokos representing her virginity 1) Before the birth of Christ, 2) While carrying and birthing Him, and 3) after giving birth.
- The angel’s wings on John the Forerunner – he did not have wings - he was the bringer of a message; the word for “angel” in Greek ἄγγελος, literally means “messenger”.
- The carrying of a certain item; a cross for a martyr, a small church for the founder of a prominent church building, a gospel book for a theologian, evangelist, or hierarch.

Symbolism reflects our spiritual knowledge of the subject, not only what we see with our eyes, which are corruptible. Icons always reflect the known truth, not the seen or visible perception. In this way the icon reminds us that nothing can be hidden in the kingdom of God.

Next week will be an overview of this series, some recommended reading, and concluding comments.