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Window on Eternity: A Study in the Characteristics of Orthodox Christian Iconography

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**Window on Eternity: A Study in the
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Presented to the Department of Philosophy and Religion

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Moira Allison LeRoy Frazier

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Introduction: Secular, Sacred, and Orthodox Christian Art

Different works of art are used for a variety of purposes, with a multitude of intentions behind them. One of the most important distinctions in the world of art is secular art versus sacred art. Secular art can express the opinions of many different types of people, and it can be used for several things. Secular art “reflects the personality of the artist. It is something like the materialization of his thought and his vision of the world” (Quenot 71). Sacred art, on the other hand, has a more focused intention and use. Sacred art serves a different purpose, one that is tied into the doctrinal and theological thrust of the tradition from which it comes. It is a spiritual exercise, not only an aesthetic one, to make and to view sacred art.

This is particularly true in the realm of Christian art and architecture. While Christian art is often beautiful to look at, and incorporates a multitude of rich motifs and techniques to analyze, its ultimate purpose is to promote spirituality. Church art “served not as decoration for the church interior, but for prayer, instruction, or a reminder of the Christian truths. Church architecture and paintings are deeply symbolical” (Evseyeva, et al. 26). The art found in a church, whatever denomination or tradition it is part of, is meant to further the theological ideas of that church’s doctrine. Church art is meant to instruct its viewers on Biblical stories, tenets of the faith, or other key aspects of Christianity.

Even within the realm of sacred Christian art, Orthodox Christian iconography is distinctive. Western Christian art incorporates images of holy people or events, but they often serve to instruct the church’s patrons and little more. In Western Christian art, “regarding the ecclesial image ... its function is confined to the didactic. The image

cannot possess the holiness of Scripture ... painting has nothing to do with theology” (Zibawi 11). In other words, the images in Western Christianity are instructive and educational, but are not seen as holy entities in and of themselves. In Orthodox Christian doctrine, though, the image is of utmost importance both theologically and liturgically. The use of iconography in worship creates “the most integral and dynamic use of iconography in worship among all Christian traditions” (Cook 4349). The image itself takes on an importance on par with the Holy Scriptures. The Orthodox Church “regards icons not merely as a form of church art, albeit the main one, but as the visible expression of the Orthodox faith” (Evseyeva, et al. 11). Therefore, the icon in the Orthodox Church accomplishes much more than images one would find in a Western Christian church. The icon is incontrovertibly entangled in the theology, liturgy, and tradition of the Orthodox Church.

Orthodox Christian art, then, has its own specificity, even within the greater whole of sacred art. Even the development of Western Christian and Orthodox Christian imagery was divergent. Images “appeared in Christian art from the very beginning, but the icon developed together with the liturgy and dogma” (Evseyeva, et al. 11). The Orthodox icon became “an integral part of celebration as instrument and means of prayer, and the icon constitutes an organic element inseparable from the Church” (Zibawi 11). The image is a deeply important and vastly revered element of the Orthodox tradition. The image cannot be separated from the intentions of the Orthodox Church as a whole. Ultimately, the Orthodox tradition places a great importance on the image, and the icon became both a gateway to the divine and a key element of the Church.

These characteristics of Orthodox Christian art make the iconography of this tradition unique. The images of this tradition look different, the people who create the images think differently, and the underlying purpose of the images is ultimately one of a kind. Therefore, someone outside the Orthodox tradition can only begin to understand Orthodox Christian art by looking at many aspects of the imagery. The artists, the theology, and the technical characteristics are all vital to understanding why Orthodox Christian imagery appears the way it does.

Chapter One: Iconographers as Artists and Spiritual Workers

Many factors affect how an icon is made, what it looks like, and what it is meant to convey. One of the most important factors regarding Orthodox Christian icons is the people who create them. Iconographers, commonly called icon-writers by Orthodox Christian people, are more than a peculiar type of artist. Iconographers are spiritual workers who use artistic talent as a tool for the worship and glorification of God.

Iconographers are part of a tradition that has spanned centuries. Iconographers still practice many of the same techniques today that their ancestors did hundreds of years before. Iconography “has behind it many centuries of tradition, going back to the most remote antiquity. This capital is carefully preserved, like the living tradition of icon-painting, and is handed down from generation to generation, going back to its source in Byzantium, and from thence apparently to the ancient world” (Ouspensky, Lossky 53). Iconographers in contemporary times have goals that are similar or even the same as their predecessors from generations before, and the same process of creating the icons also lives on. This strong sense of tradition adds a rich meaning to what it is to be an Orthodox iconographer.

Iconographers are a kind of medium through which divine light can shine. They are the touchstone through which the “supreme artist” (Zibawi 65), meaning God, does work. An icon reflects the theological principles of the Orthodox Church and incorporates a wealth of tradition within one image. The icon also serves as a liturgical tool for the priest and the layperson alike. Thus, the iconographer is a conductor for spiritual and theological practice.

Iconographers must be devout members of the Orthodox Church at the very least. However, they are often monks or priests. Whether “monks, clerics, or lay persons, iconographers should be spiritual persons leading exemplary Christian lives” (Zibawi 64). Iconographers are first and foremost workers of the church. They are also just as important in worship practices as monks and priests are. Next to “the holy doctors, the holy monks, and the holy confessors, the Orthodox Church places the holy iconographers, whose lives were no less holy than the holy work they have consecrated to God” (Zibawi 64). In other words, iconographers are an essential part of the Orthodox Church. They have the vital function of creating liturgically useful pieces of art. In Orthodox Christianity, the church “sees in the icon not a simple art, serving to illustrate the Holy Scriptures, but a complete correspondence of the one to the other, and therefore attributes to the icon the same dogmatic, liturgic and educational significance as it does to the Holy Scriptures ... The icon is placed on a level with the Holy Scriptures and with the Cross, as one of the forms of revelation and knowledge of God, in which Divine and human will and action become blended” (Ouspensky, Lossky 30).

Artists in the Western sense create art for a variety of reasons that are often personal in nature; Western artists use their medium to convey their own thoughts, opinions, emotions, or perspective. However, the purpose and method of Orthodox icon-writers is vastly different. The work they produce is not for personal reflection. The art of the iconographer is “not the art of any individual” (Zibawi 61) but rather an act done for and as part of the Orthodox Church. The iconographer is an integral part of the worship, liturgy, dogma, and theology of the church as a whole. The work that is produced by an iconographer is different from the work of a Western artist quite obviously in its

appearance. However, a distinction must also be made regarding the underlying purpose of the piece of art. This distinction affects how icons can and should be viewed by people who are outside of the Orthodox Church. The iconographer's intended purpose is to further the tradition of the Orthodox Church, not to express his or her own ideas or viewpoints.

Therefore, the art an icon-writer produces is often uniform or at least similar to other iconography in its style, appearance, and purpose. The icon is an image with a specific set of purposes within the theology of the Orthodox Church. It is meant to be used for acts of worship and devotion. No part "of [the iconographer's] work appears open to free improvisation" (Zibawi 64) but is instead constricted by a set of guidelines created by the Orthodox Church. No matter how gifted an artist is, "he must not express his own individuality or indulge his imagination very much, except in well defined directions and not in a human sense. He must certainly not use models remarkable for sensuous beauty. The painter is thought of as a divine instrument rather than as an inspired creator" (Turner 1). Individuality, which is such an important concept in Western art, is much less of a factor when it comes to the art that is produced by Orthodox iconographers. Their purpose is to create art that furthers the values and goals of the Orthodox Church, making the iconographer more of a spiritual worker than an artist in the Western sense of the word.

Because of these fundamental differences in purpose and method between Western art and Orthodox imagery, the development of the two artistic traditions has been vastly different. The art of the icon "witnesses a parentage that is not from one person. This work, devoted to the celebration of the sacred, came about not from any one

generation of experiments of any particular creative artist or school, but developed through decades of uninterrupted work” (Zibawi 61). Unlike Western art, which is often propelled forward by individual artists or movements, the art of icon-writing has developed in a much quieter manner. The consistent shared goal of the iconographer, a goal that never changes significantly, has led to the similar style of the icon that has persisted for centuries. The teachings of the Orthodox Church are fundamental to the whole formation and existence of iconography. Therefore, “this art was not invented by artists. On the contrary, it is an institution approved by the Church. The artistic creativity is the province of the artist, but his method of proceeding obviously depends upon the Holy Fathers, and belongs to them” (Zibawi 61).

In many ways, iconographers are not seen as autonomous artists. They do not have free rein over the subject matter or technique utilized in their work. Most icons have similar subject matter, characteristics, and even style. At the Muscovite Council of 100 Chapters in 1551, it was stated that “the first models were established as patterns for future painters of icons, as well as extant works of celebrated iconographers” (Quenot 68). There is a set of icon archetypes that most iconographers emulate even today. This codification of the methods and subject matter of an Orthodox icon led to the creation of manuals that dictate technical, stylistic, and spiritual details. There are manuals such as these written for and by iconographers from almost every era. Some of these manuals are still consulted today. For example, Dionysius of Fourna (1670-1744), an Athonite monk, compiled a seminal work of Orthodox iconography guidelines. It outlined methods of creating icons as well as stylistic material (Hetherington). The same guidelines are still used in the production and creation of icons in modern times.

Iconographers often look to the work of other artists before them when embarking on creating an icon. Sometimes they even use the exact same composition, form, and subject matter as a particularly celebrated icon. One icon that is often recreated is Andrei Rublev's "Trinity" icon. It is seen as a nearly perfect representation of a key concept of Christian theology that is hard to illustrate. However, the distinction must be made between merely copying a specific image over and over, and following a set of guidelines and examples. In the case of Orthodox iconography, the icon-writer adheres to a canon of suggestions. Even when recreating a specific icon such as Rublev's "Trinity," the iconographer still interprets the material in his or her own way. The iconographer does retain some sense of his or her own talent and imagination, just within a very strict context. It is almost like a language with particular grammatical and spelling rules, yet a writer can manipulate the language to create something of his or her own. Tsakiridou says, "the recognizable patterns generated in [Orthodox] art, literature and theology work like a grammar. Rather than exclude creative and original expression, they set the parameters within which it could resonate with collective experience ... far from being a stultifying force that enveloped the work of art from the outside like a rigid formula, permanence was understood dynamically and we might say organically, as the flourishing in recognizable patterns of vital form" (Tsakiridou 209). When discussing the work of the Orthodox iconographer, it is important to remember the balance between the specific iconographer's talent and the purpose of the icon in relation to the Orthodox Church.

However, iconographers do not feel as if they are held captive by the church canons. Rather, they are spiritual workers who seek the life of creating art that furthers the theological ideals of the Orthodox Church. Icon-writing is much like living the life of

a monk or ascetic; it is a spiritual act that in some ways resembles meditation, deep prayer, or other religious practices. An icon is ultimately meant to aid in worship for those who view it. Similarly, the actual act of creating the image is also spiritually fulfilling for the iconographer. By creating imagery that so directly ties into the theology of the church, the iconographer is not hindered by the guidelines but rather celebrates them. Icon-writing is seen as an act of meditative worship.

Although individual creativity of an iconographer is not vastly important, a basic level of skill and ability to execute the artistic techniques is. Only those with natural artistic talent are encouraged to become an iconographer so “their clumsiness may not offend God” (Zibawi 61). The method of creating an icon is quite complex, and requires a certain amount of skill. So while iconographers are not often allowed to express their individual creativity, they are certainly talented artists who can produce beautiful, intricate works. Even the regulation of talent is governed by theological ideas and by the goal to glorify God, since only the naturally talented are pushed to become an icon-writer in the first place. Iconographers with little artistic talent would offend God rather than glorify Him.

Beyond technical talent, the religious standing and thought process of an iconographer is very important. Icons are meant as tools for spiritual advancement, and the act of writing an icon is an act of worship in and of itself. Therefore, “a great deal depends not only on the artist’s talent, but also on his spiritual state of mind” (Evseyeva, et al. 17). Writing an icon is a spiritual exercise, and the iconographer is expected to possess a meditative state of mind while writing an icon. There is a variety of prayers, rituals, and spiritual centering that takes place before and during the creation of an icon.

Before drawing an icon on the prepared board, the iconographer “engenders it within his heart in silence, by prayer and asceticism. With purified heart and eyes, he can then draw the image of a transfigured world” (Quenot 68). As an iconographer is about to embark on writing an icon, a priest also blesses him with the following prayer:

God of all that exists, illuminate and instruct the soul, the heart, and the intelligence of your servant (name), and direct his or her hands to paint in a perfect and blameless manner the image of the All-pure Mother of God and of all the saints, for the glory, the joy, and the beauty of the Holy Church, and for remission of the sins of those who venerate and kiss these icons with devotion, attributing the honor to their prototype; free him or her of all diabolic influence so that he or she may advance in all the commandments, through the intercession of your Immaculate Mother, of the holy apostle and evangelist Luke, and of all the saints. (Zibawi 62-63)

This prayer showcases exactly how the Orthodox view iconographers. The prayer asks God to “instruct the soul” as well as “his or her hands” to paint images that illustrate the important figures of the Church, such as the Mother of God. Furthermore, the prayer mentions the worshipers who will venerate the icon, asking God for “remission of the sins” of these people. This section of prayer focuses on the people who will be using the icon for worship and liturgical practice, which is ultimately the purpose of the icon. Iconographers are a medium through which the grace of God can be shared.

This idea of the iconographer as a spiritual and theological medium is enhanced even by what types of icons he or she will paint throughout the career. The iconographer “begins by painting an icon of the Transfiguration so that the rays of immaterial light may illuminate and shine forth in any future icons he or she might paint” (Zibawi 63). This particular topic is an important one for Christians as a whole. The Transfiguration is one of the miracles of Jesus that is depicted in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). In this miracle, Jesus becomes transfigured on top of a mountain by shining forth

with rays of bright light. This is one of the few miracles that actually happens to Jesus himself. The Transfiguration is a pivotal point for Christians because it depicts where humanity meets God. Therefore, it is fitting that the first icon an iconographer creates is that of the Transfiguration. Icons depict where humanity meets the divine, and therefore the Transfiguration is a perfect subject to begin with. Furthermore, depicting the Transfiguration first allows the light of that subject to permeate the rest of the images an iconographer creates in his or her lifetime.

The role of the Orthodox Christian iconographer is complex. It does not encompass the usual things that artists generally do, such as injecting his or her own creativity and opinion into the work. Nor is the process of the iconographer purely meant to create aesthetically pleasing works of art. Rather, the iconographer is a spiritual worker. He or she uses natural talent to create works of art that are meant to further the liturgical and theological goals of the Orthodox Church. Understanding the intentions of the creator of the icon is vital to understanding why icons look the way they do.

Chapter Two: Theology of the Image

“Whoever sees me sees him who sent me” (John 12:45)

The theology behind the icon is of utmost importance; without theological context, these works of art have no context at all. The theology must first be understood to truly comprehend an icon. With any piece of art, having knowledge of the historical, cultural, and religious context of the work is vastly important. Conventions or “cultural standards that allow religion, the state or subjectivity to direct perception are an integral part of the aesthetic experience” (Tsakiridou 206), meaning that understanding the context of a work greatly affects how one views it. By understanding the thoughts and beliefs behind Orthodox icons, as well as the reason for their creation, the viewer can begin to comprehend why an icon looks the way it does.

The most basic element of the theology relating to Orthodox icons relates to the purpose of these images. Icons are fundamentally meant to make theological principles, biblical stories, moral teachings, and other aspects of Orthodox Christianity accessible to everyone by depicting these ideas in images. These images are capable of making the mysterious, impenetrable elements of the faith concrete and material to mortal beings. In icons and through icons, “the intangible become tangible, divinity and holiness become accessible, the unpredictability of the supernatural may become predictable, and the power and philanthropy of the Christian God, the Virgin, the angelic orders, and the armies of saints that have earned the privilege of sharing in God’s holiness may be invoked by the faithful ... which is not limited by natural law” (Safran 58).

This practice of producing images as teaching tools of the faith began in medieval times when most parishioners were illiterate. These worshipers could not read the Bible for themselves, much less the associated theological texts of the Orthodox faith. Only the

priests could read these texts. Additionally, sermons were not a substantial part of Orthodox worship either then or now. The service was mostly music, chanting, Eucharistic action, and the like. Therefore, the people needed some way to learn the principles of their faith. That is where icons became vastly important, because images could convey to illiterate people what words could not. These images also had the effect of making the divine accessible to even those who could read. Icons “are, in other words, one of the answers of Byzantium to man’s perennial quest for access to, and participation in, the realm of the divine” (Safran 58). These images were the best way to convey the mysteriousness and beliefs of the Orthodox tradition.

Therefore, icons are just one of the mysterious mediums of the Orthodox faith. There are others as well. For example, the chanting that is so common in an Orthodox service certainly invokes the divine, whether we understand it or not. But icons are perhaps the most tangible, corporeal element of the Orthodox tradition. One can see and touch an icon, and the image becomes a vessel for creating and depicting the tenets of the faith. The principles of Orthodox theology regarding images “lies not in proving the Truth, but in bearing witness to it. Icons are one of the languages of theology, by means of which the Church carries the glad tidings into the world, bears witness to the truth, and reveals Christ and His Church triumphant, that is, transfigured, deified mankind” (Evseyeva, et al. 11). In other words, these concrete, tangible images become one of the ways in which the Orthodox faith can spread its wisdom, mystery, and faith among many people.

Another important aspect of the theology of an icon is the idea that icons become a sort of window into the divine realm. By looking into an icon, the viewer can look into

the divine world that he or she cannot see in the material world. *The History of Icon Painting* explains this concept well: “whereas a picture can be called a window into the world around us, an icon is a window into the invisible world. It does not show things that people are familiar with in their everyday lives, but reveals the Kingdom to come” (13). Therefore, the icon serves to help the viewer imagine this divine world, a world they too will be part of eventually if they are faithful believers. It is this depiction of the world to come that is the crux of the icon’s mysterious power; “more than a religious image, the icon is for the believer an anticipation of the kingdom. Destined to reflect the deification of the human being, the icon finds its aesthetic upon an eschatological realism” (Zibawi 33). By depicting the divine aspect of humanity (whether this is the Christ figure, the Mother of God, or a saint), the icon gives the worshipper hope of the world to come if they believe. Therefore, the power of the icon lies in its ability to show a mortal being the immortal, holy Kingdom of God. Icons “were meant to recreate a spiritual realm, to paint a world in which temporal beings live eschatological lives” (Tsakiridou 206). It is this depiction that becomes inspiring for the worshipper, as well as an integral tool in the faith of the Orthodox Church.

Another important aspect of the theology of the image is the justification for imagery in the first place, especially imagery depicting God and the divine. While the Old Testament does prohibit making graven images of God, the arrival of Jesus (the Son of God, or human manifestation of the divine) changed this. The New Testament scripture that is the basis for iconographic practice is John 12:45: “Whoever sees me sees him who sent me.” This piece of scripture, attributed to Jesus, refers to seeing God. Jesus states that anybody who lays eyes on Jesus himself is also seeing God, since Jesus is the

human manifestation of God. Therefore, human beings have seen the face of God (at least in a certain form) and can therefore create images of it to further worship the deity better. This scripture is “the charter that justifies the iconographer’s art” (Evdokimov 83).

In this manner, God “has already been heard, touched, and seen, since he once walked on earth and lived as a man among his disciples. Hence, we can picture him” (Evdokimov 82). Jesus was the human expression of God; he was a tangible human being whose features could be discerned and looked upon daily by real people. Therefore, portraying the image of God through Jesus, the human form, is acceptable and even encouraged in the Orthodox faith. According to an Orthodox priest, Michael Evdokimov, the “face of God appears for us through the Son. We see his individual face, singular and personal, easily recognizable by us no matter how many representations there are scattered over the whole earth” (Evdokimov 83). The icon suddenly makes the idea of God, as well as the image of God, more imaginable and accessible. The figure of Christ, according to the theology of the image, is present in every icon. Worshipers “can see him present to us, even awaiting us in an open and kind manner. We can expect to find in Christ’s gaze a source of grace, a reassurance and an assurance of counsel in troubled moments of our life. By returning the gaze that looks on us we renew our intimacy with God” (Evdokimov 83). By presenting an image of God, the icon makes the idea of the divine come into contact with the worshipers who gaze upon the icon.

The theology of the Orthodox Church is rich, complex, and layered. There is value and beauty in this complexity. However, this intricacy sometimes makes the theological principles difficult to assimilate into everyday lay practice for the average person. This is why there are often vast differences in the theological discourse of the

Orthodox faith, and the actual practice of the Orthodox Church's members. This divide between theology and practice certainly affects the theology of the image, and how icons are utilized in daily worship by both clergymen and lay people.

These images have a very important role to play in the liturgy of the Orthodox Church. Church decoration (including not only icons, but also the architecture of the church itself and other elements like the design of a censer, for example) has a very close relationship to liturgy and worship. The layout of the church and where the icons are situated is vital to the worship practice. Icons themselves are used extensively in the liturgy in several different ways, and are an integral aspect of Orthodox theology. It is "hard to imagine an Orthodox Church and service, or an Orthodox believer's home and life, without them" (Evseyeva, et al. 11). Therefore, in both the communal sphere (church liturgy) and personal sphere (home shrines), the icon is vital to facilitating a meaningful worship experience.

In both personal and communal worship, venerating the icon is of utmost importance. By the late 12th century, "the devotional focus of the laity had shifted from the Eucharist to holy icons" (Gerstel 10), and venerating these images became very important. This involves prostrating before icons, kissing them, lighting candles before them, or other actions, depending on the circumstances and the preference of the worshiper in question. The veneration of icons is an established practice in the Orthodox Church, and very important to its worship practices. The "doctrine of the veneration of icons was adopted by the Seventh Ecumenical Council in 787 ... and was consolidated in 843 by the victory of the veneration of icons" (Evseyeva, et al. 11). Icons are thought to be a window into the divine, and this aspect makes them special and holy. Therefore,

venerating them allows the worshiper to be a part of that divine power. Icons “were held, at least in the East, to contain something of the divine energy and were thought to benefit substantially those who contemplated them” (Turner 29). Venerating and praying with icons is certainly one of the most important aspects of Orthodox worship, whether communal or individual.

One of the most common ways to venerate an icon is by kissing it. This honors the icon while bringing the worshiper closer to the divine energy mediated by the image. The custom of kissing icons is a very old practice and is mentioned in the text from the Seventh Council of Nicaea: “as for the kiss which they place upon the icon, this had the significance, according to our faith, of a veneration” (Zibawi 19). However, the custom of kissing icons still permeates any contemporary Orthodox service as well. The laity kiss icons in various locations around the sacred space at various times (including when they enter the space, when they leave the space, and other particular moments during the liturgy). Icons “play a fundamental liturgical role: the priests incense them and the faithful express their gratitude by kissing them and lighting candles before them” (Zibawi 11). The kissing of icons is equally as prominent in personal home worship; many of the faithful have small shrines or icon corners in their homes, and they will venerate them much in the same way as they would in the communal setting of a church.

Another important aspect of icons as they are used in worship is their location within a church. The primary location of icons is on an iconostasis, which is a wall or screen of icons erected between the sanctuary (altar area) and nave of the church. In worship, the iconostasis ended up separating the laity and the clergy, though this was not its original intended theological purpose. However, the practical use of the iconostasis led

to a separation of laity and clergy, and the laity was never permitted to go past the iconostasis into the sanctuary. The 69th canon of the Council of Trullo said, “let it not be permitted to anyone among all the laity to enter the sacred altar ... in accordance with a certain most ancient tradition.” Essentially, the iconostasis became a shield for the most sacred spot in a church. The iconostasis “obscured the mysteries from the gaze of the unconsecrated” (Gerstel 9). Therefore, it served to preserve the mysteries of faith from those who were not, in the eyes of the church, equipped to handle them. Bishop Symeon of Thessalonika said, “it is, as it were, a firm barrier between material and spiritual things” (De Sacro Templo 136, MPG, clv col 345). The iconostasis served as a shield for the most important parts of the church, especially the altar. Although the iconostasis was always a part of the church, it was in the 16th century when it “became one of the most important parts of the Orthodox Church” (C. Walter 252).

Therefore, the iconostasis became a separator of the material world and the spiritual world, a spatial division of the two ideas. The nave of the church, where the laity resides for worship, represents the material world we live in every day. Conversely, the sanctuary represents the Kingdom of God. The theological idea was not to make the spiritual realm invisible to the laity but instead to make the mystery of the Kingdom of God palpable to the laity. However, the practical application of this theology became such that the laity is usually shielded from the sanctuary completely.

The iconostasis as we know it today is a lavishly decorated screen, often tall enough to shield most people from the holy altar, with several icons gracing its front. However, the iconostasis did not start out that grand. Over time, the iconostasis became more and more decorated, developing from a low, plain wall in front of the altar into an

elaborate high wall decorated with sometimes dozens of icons. Most scholars agree that “by the middle Byzantine period the sanctuary was divided from the nave by a barrier that was blocked to waist height by decorated panels” (Gerstel 7). The iconostasis became another part of the decoration of the church, as important if not more so compared to other architectural elements. By this time, the iconostasis consisted of “many images fused into the single image of the Church, triumphant and united in Christ” (Evseyeva, et al. 28). Since the laity was shielded from the high holy altar, the iconostasis “provided the lay audience with images that satisfied personal devotional requirements, ones that did not demand the strict fasting and spiritual catharsis required” by the clergy (Gerstel 11). In other words, the iconostasis provided a worship experience for those church members who were not qualified to see the high holy altar or take part in the Eucharist. Eucharist at that time required strict fasting for days beforehand, hence most people only participated in the sacred rite once a year. The icons of the iconostasis provided everyday people with the opportunity to worship, even when they could not prepare for Eucharist or become clergymen.

While every iconostasis differs at least marginally in its details, the general organization of an iconostasis follows a certain pattern. The “Tsar Doors” or “Royal Gates” (Coomler 297) is where the priest enters and exits the inner sanctuary. These doors usually bear icons of the Four Evangelists, with the Archangel Gabriel on the left and the Mother of God on the right. The Last Supper is usually depicted above these doors, and this particular icon is generally in the shape of an oval (quite uncommon for most devotional icons). There are also doors on either side of the Royal doors, which tend to be decorated with images of the Archangel Gabriel, the Archangel Michael, or various

holy deacons. To the left of the Royal Doors is generally an icon of the Mother of God and the Christ Child. To the right of the Royal Doors is generally an icon of the local signature saint or event that is special to the church, meaning the saint or event that the church is dedicated to. For example, the Church of St. Basil would have an icon of St. Basil; the Church of the Annunciation would bear an icon depicting that particular event.

The general order of the iconostasis is thematically divided. The canonical order of themes from top to bottom is: patriarch icons, prophet icons, feast day icons, and the Deisis icons. The Deisis row, or prayer row, is the fundamental organizing center of the iconostasis. It includes icons of Christ, the Mother of God, and the Archangels Gabriel and Michael, and could also include other icons of other figures. Deisis means “prayer” in Greek, and this layer of icons on the iconostasis depicts John the Baptist, the Mother of God, and the archangels Gabriel and Michael praying before Christ. Below all these layers is the bottom row of icons, where the laity can access the icons. They are low enough to the ground that lay members can touch and kiss them. This bottom tier is “called the Veneration Tier because it is physically accessible to worshipers who may kiss the icons” (Coomler 297). Perhaps the most important part of the iconostasis for lay worshipers, this row can contain a variety of icons with a variety of subjects or themes.

The art of the Orthodox Church is distinctive; it has a style and overall look that is all its own. This is in large part due to the church canon of laws that dictate the production, style, thematic material, and overall purpose of iconography in the Orthodox tradition. The art of the Orthodox Church “rests on a single canon. A canon ... does not mean a strict framework restricting the artist’s creative potential. It is rather a pivot, a voluminous artistic language discovered by the Church, an icon grammar” (Evseyeva, et

al. 17). These guidelines draw the connections between imagery and theology very clearly. Orthodox thought “has vigorously emphasized the role and task of the image. The iconographic tradition is at the core of this reflection: a purely pictorial theological language is its foundation and the structural frame of every icon” (Zibawi 61). In other words, the icon serves as a visual representation of the theological principles of the Orthodox faith. The canon of guidelines regarding iconography is there to ensure these theological ideals are achieved by every icon that is produced.

This canonical set of guidelines governing the production of icons is very old, dating back to the very beginnings of the Orthodox Church. The Seventh Ecumenical Council at Nicaea in 787 was one of the first to define what the purpose of the icon is, as well as how it is best honored according to the laws of the church. The text from that council said this about icons:

We decree with all exactitude and deliberation that one should make room, next to the reproduction of the precious life-giving Cross, for holy and venerable icons made in colors, in mosaic, or in some other material, and which ornament the holy churches of God, objects of devotion, and the sacred vestments ... whether the icon of Our Lord, God, and Savior Jesus Christ or of the Immaculate Lady, the Holy Mother of God, of the venerable angels, and of all holy people ... to all such things it is proper to show respect through incense and lighted candles, and thereby to honor them according to our most ancient customs. (Seventh Ecumenical Council at Nicaea, Zibawi 30)

In modern times, the church canon is equally important, no matter what its subject. The Orthodox Church’s literature today says this about the canon of church law: “The Church’s law, commonly referred to as canon law, is the system of law emanating from the holy canons, which derive from the Church on her own authority. ... The Church’s law is first and foremost spiritual, since its main purpose is the spiritual growth of the faithful. Furthermore, the main object of concern is the inner disposition and intention

behind one's actions" (Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America). This idea can certainly be applied to the canon regarding icons, imagery, and how they are to be produced and used in liturgy or personal worship.

One aspect of iconography that the canon of guidelines regarding icons dictates is the technical element of icon writing. The icon's "design, its disposition, its composition depend quite clearly on the Holy Fathers" (Seventh Ecumenical Council). Therefore, the canon was put in place to guarantee each icon met the standards of the church regarding how the image looked. Even the design and composition of the image were codified by the canon of guidelines. Along the same lines, the style of Orthodox icons was also a key part of the canons regarding iconography. There is an obvious unity of style when one looks at Orthodox icons over most of the Orthodox Church's history, except for a period from the late 17th century to the early 20th century in which Orthodox iconography started to adopt Western characteristics. Despite this period of about 250 years of development, more recently Orthodox imagery has returned to some of the Byzantine methods in a wave of neotraditionalism. In any case, the Orthodox icon has retained a unity of style more than other types of ecclesiastical art. As "an image of the Church, the Orthodox image remains unified ... freedom and creativity [of the iconographer] obey monastic criteria" (Zibawi 12). The church canon of guidelines (the "monastic criteria" that Zibawi speaks of) is largely responsible for this codified style. The main purpose of an icon in the Orthodox Church is to reflect the theological ideals of the Church in a tangible image. The "objective was to impart on matter a spiritual quality" (Tsakiridou 206), and by codifying a specific style through a set of guidelines that icon writers always follow, the Orthodox icon became the image of the Church that it is today.

Perhaps the most specific set of guidelines in the church canon about imagery is the section regarding thematic material. There are specific rules on what the subject of an icon can be, as well as how that subject should be depicted. The major themes of Orthodox iconography include various versions of the Christ figure; the Holy Trinity; the Mother of God; various saints of different levels; various angels and archangels; the Holy Apostles; bishops, presbyters, deacons, or priests; monks; important Christian rulers; and the Gospel feast cycle. Each of these subjects has a specific way it is handled by iconographers, and this is dictated by the Orthodox Church.

Arguably the most important subject of iconography, the Christ figure in its various forms has been a popular subject for Christian art, and Orthodox art in particular. There is a specific way that Jesus Christ is generally portrayed in Orthodox iconography, and this is true across regions and centuries. *The History of Icon Painting* says this about the depiction of Jesus:

The ‘historical’ type of the Saviour that became established in Byzantine art and then throughout the Christian world is regarded as canonical. Christ is depicted as a man in middle age, with dark brown hair down to His shoulders, a short (sometimes forked) beard, regular facial features of the so-called Greco-Semitic type and large brown (or blue) eyes. Generally speaking this type is recognizable and standard for all schools. (17)

Within these confines of how the Christ figure is represented, there are several scenes that Jesus can be part of. A very popular one is the Pantocrator, a “half-length image of Christ with a Gospel book in His left hand and His right hand raised in blessing” (Evseyeva, et al. 18). This is a canonical form that appears in many icons. Christ in Majesty is a variation of the Pantocrator and also a canonical form; it depicts “an image of the Second Coming of Christ in Glory ... which is proclaimed for the four corners of the earth, represented by the symbols of the Evangelists” (Evseyeva, et al. 18). This form

also shows Christ with his right hand raised in blessing, hence why it is a version of the Pantocrator composition. Another canonical form involving the Christ figure is the Holy Trinity, which is an artistic representation of the three forms of God (Father, Son, and Holy Ghost). This theme is traditionally difficult for iconographers, since it is a more esoteric subject than most considering that it is not always clear how God the Father or God the Holy Spirit should be portrayed or signified. It is thought by many that Andrei Rublev's (1360-1430) "Holy Trinity" icon is the most revered and most perfect example of a Trinity icon that has ever been produced (see Figure 1).

Another canonical theme that appears in many icons is the Mother of God. The Orthodox Church holds the Mother of God in the highest regard; the Church doctrine says she is "purer than the cherubim and incomparably more glorious than the seraphim." Therefore, as the mother of Jesus Christ, Mary is a particularly special topic in iconography. In most icons with this subject, "the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, is depicted with the Infant Christ. Even when she is shown alone, however, Christ is invisibly present, for the Virgin is connected to Him by the closest spiritual and bodily ties" (Evseyeva, et al. 19). She is a key figure in Orthodox theology, given that she is the one who bore the Son of God. There are some variations of how the Mother of God is depicted though some are more popular than others: "the Virgin is usually shown half-length, yet there are also many full-length images and some to the chest or even shoulders" (Evseyeva, et al. 20).

Angels, archangels, the Holy Apostles (Peter, Andrew, James son of Zebedee, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas, Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, Simon, and Judas), the Evangelists (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), and other various

saints are also popular tropes in Orthodox iconography. The Holy Apostles and Evangelists are special classes of saints. There are many saints and many different types of saints, and each one has its own stylistic characteristics (as I expound upon in Chapter Three of this thesis). A saint is “depicted in the rank in which he served in which the Church revered him. He appears in robes that indicate most clearly his service extolled by the Church. The gestures, attributes, and objects that the saint holds in his hands all emphasise his feat” (Evseyeva, et al. 22). For example, the Holy Apostles are “shown in Greek robes holding scrolls or a Gospel book as bearers of glad tidings” (Evseyeva, et al. 22). The Evangelists are often shown with copies of the Gospels they wrote. Angels are also a canonical theme and a special class of saint. Angels are often “glorified on icons as warriors (in armour) or servants of the King of Heaven” (Evseyeva, et al. 22). They can also be shown performing the act they are most famous for, such as Saint Gabriel the Archangel appearing to Mary to tell her she will bear the Son of God.

Many icons represent celestial, spiritual figures in the Orthodox theological tradition. However, some icons also depict more “ordinary” figures. Bishops, priests, deacons, presbyters, and monks can also be the subject of an icon. These figures were “usually glorified by the early icon painters for their service by the throne of God, and therefore attired entirely in liturgical robes such as would be worn, first and foremost, for performing the greatest sacrament of all, the Eucharist” (Evseyeva, et al. 22-23). These holy leaders were generally shown in the garb they would wear to conduct a religious service. Furthermore, monks are “shown in full monastic dress, that is, in a habit, girdle, cloak, analav and schema” (Evseyeva, et al. 23). This is another instance of the icon reflecting what the Church regarded as the most important aspect of their being; by

showing them in priestly or monastic dress, their role as a religious figure is emphasized. Key Christian rulers from the Byzantine era, as well as those from more modern times, were also sometimes depicted in an icon. “Byzantine emperors, Serbian kings, and Russian grand princes and tsars are shown with nimbuses, a sign not of personal sainthood, but of the sanctity of the office of an Orthodox ruler” (Evseyeva, et al. 23). In other words, the Orthodox Church saw rulers who followed the Church as worthy of being the subject of an icon as well, since they too were holy leaders (just perhaps in a different way than a priest or bishop).

The overall purpose of an Orthodox icon is to reflect the theological principles of the Orthodox Church. Through depicting biblical stories and important figures of the Christian faith, icons make these principles tangible and accessible to lay people in inspiring ways.

Chapter Three: Technical and Artistic Elements of Iconography

Orthodox Christian iconography is based upon several theological principles, and these ideals greatly affect how icons appear. Due to this backbone of specific theology regarding imagery, Orthodox icons have a wealth of distinctive technical and artistic characteristics. These images are also created in a formulaic manner. In this system, an icon from hundreds of years ago and an icon created last week may share similar characteristics. The use of formal elements such as light, color, composition, and perspective, as well as the specific method one uses to write an icon, have not changed significantly in centuries.

A logical place to start in an explanation of the artistic and technical elements of Orthodox iconography is the process itself. Some medieval manuals on how to write an icon still survive, and the same basic methods are still utilized in Orthodox monasteries today. One of the most essential aspects of the icon-writing process is the technique of layering, using mainly tempera. According to *The History of Icon Painting*, “put at its simplest, icon painting is the consecutive application of layers of coloured paint on the white surface of a wooden board primed with chalk or plaster. The multiple layers are the most important feature” (Evseyeva, et al. 31). The layers are created by tempera, which is a particular method of mixing paint with some kind of binding agent. In icon writing, paint is usually dry powder or pigment, and the binding agent is traditionally an egg yolk emulsion. Each layer is added when “the one below is quite dry so that the fresh, wet paint does not mix with it” (Evseyeva, et al. 32). In this process, the background is always painted first; the last layer is generally the face of any figures on the painting, which are the most detailed and difficult to execute. The face is “painted in

several layers. It is more difficult than the other parts. The flesh priming is applied first, followed by flesh tinting, then rouging and, finally, the highlights ... the last stage is to add close-set rows of fine curly or hooked lines by the eyes, forehead, nose or lips ... finally, the artist applies (if necessary) gold highlights ... thus all forms are revealed from dark to light and are crowned with accents of light that emphasise the luminiferous nature of the transfigured flesh” (Evseyeva, et al. 17). It is this layering technique on the smallest details of the face which achieves human flesh that looks so transcendent and divine. This appearance of flesh is vastly important in an icon that depicts the divine (whether that be the Christ figure, the Mother of God, or some other saint) in a manner that indicates the importance, transcendence, and *theosis* of the figure in question.

The technique of making different colors of paint is also fairly codified. Many of these techniques are still utilized, even with the availability of modern paints, pigments, and dyes. According to *The History of Icon Painting*, each color used in an icon (red, blue, gold, green, et cetera) is derived from different minerals or other natural substances:

Natural or artificial vermillion, red ochre, red lead and red organic to convey the red range; light ochre, leadtin yellow sienna, and auripigment for yellow; natural ultramarine obtained from the mineral lazurite, natural and artificial azurite, and indigo for blue; glauconite and malachite, both natural and artificial, and copper for green; various ochres (containing iron and potassium), umber, and haematite for brown; charcoal for black; and lead white for white. (Evseyeva, et al. 32)

These methods are still used by many iconographers today, perhaps because they are responsible for the deep, saturated colors one sees on an Orthodox icon. This effect of saturated color is important to the appearance of the icon, and therefore the medieval methods are still used.

Perhaps the most recognizable formal element of an Orthodox icon is the distinctive perspective. It is generally called “reverse perspective,” since it “reverses” the perspective utilized in traditional Western artwork. Many scholars argue that this particular aspect of Orthodox iconography is truly its distinguishing factor; it is what “justifies a unified conception of icon art” (Antonova 1). The use of this perspective allows one to group together many paintings created in several different time periods. Orthodox iconography is traditionally identified with the medieval and Byzantine periods of history; however, the same art form persists today. While reverse perspective is far from the only defining characteristic of Orthodox iconography, it is certainly one of the most distinctive technical elements of this type of art.

The use of this perspective is far from random. On the contrary, it is theologically grounded. It is meant to reflect “the theological dogma of timeless eternity” (Antonova 1), meaning that in the spiritual world an icon is attempting to represent, elements such as time and space do not matter in the same way they do in the material, human world. The spiritual realm is timeless. In the same way, an icon, too, is timeless, demonstrating a perspective devoid of time that consequently makes icons themselves joined together in one cohesive style that spans centuries. Additionally, the icon is not meant to represent the transient human world, but rather the eternal spiritual world. Icons “began to be painted in order to show this other world, the new heaven and the new earth ... so the realistic, or rather, naturalistic method of depicting is not suitable for the icon” (Evseyeva, et al. 13). The world being depicted in an icon is almost fantastical, not our own material world, and the method used must match.

To achieve this timelessness, the icon eschews three-dimensionality or depth. An icon's surface "evolves in a reversed perspective that ignores any depth of field, where everything vanishes in the eternal silence of the infinite spaces" (Zibawi 50). The quality of three-dimensionality found in many Western forms of art, including most painting and sculpture, is nonexistent in an icon. Instead of an image's depth culminating within the image, "the painted image converges toward the one who approaches it: the spectator is invited inside" (Zibawi 52). This particular effect directly reflects the theology of an icon. An icon is meant to be used as a liturgical tool, and the viewer sees it as a window into the divine. This particular perspective is actually essential to achieving the goal of the icon in worship. This principle relates also to how the perspective of an icon shapes the space of the viewer, bringing him or her into the icon's world: "in an icon the only point at which lines intersect, geometrical and semantic, is the one where the worshiper stands: the icon's space opens up round him, as it were, drawing him into the icon's world, and this explains why all the objects seem to unfurl around him" (Evseyeva, et al. 14). The icon aims to tangibly involve the viewer, drawing him or her in and inspiring worship of the divine.

Related to perspective, the use of light is also an independent formal element specific to the icon. The light in an icon envelops the entire image. As Zibawi comments, "the light in the icon does not originate from some determined point. The icon is ethereal. The play of light is transposed ... the divine light arrives from every direction" (Zibawi 50). Many Western paintings incorporate a light source that is easily identified; a spot of light may illuminate a certain figure, or derive from a particular area of the painting. There is almost always shadow of some kind in a Western painting. However, an icon is

all about light emanating from everywhere. Light permeates every part of the image. There is no shadow anywhere, because luminescence is so important to portraying the divine. The icon “represents light and not darkness. The figures do not cast shadows ... the traditional icon cannot contain chiaroscuro, which arises as a result of an external light source with one side illuminated while the other one is in shadow, because Divine, Uncreated Light illuminates everything” (Evseyeva, et al. 14). When depicting the divine, as an icon does, divine light is most important, and this special lighting technique “contributes to the icon’s luminiferous quality” (Evseyeva, et al. 16). This attribute can be easily seen by any viewer; the use of gold leaf and all around light in an icon makes the image appear to glow.

Composition of an icon is also distinctive, and is directly related to the lighting technique and perspective. The composition of an icon “no longer takes place in depth, but in height” (Zibawi 51), meaning that depth is not an important factor in an icon. Rather, the gradations of different figures are determined on a scale from the top of the icon to the bottom, since there is not a great range of depth from front to back. An icon “does not show a fragment of the heavenly world, but reveals an image of the fullness of being, of a full worldview. The image rarely spreads into the margins. It is complete and cannot simply be extended like an Impressionist painting, an almost random piece of the earthly world” (Evseyeva, et al. 13). Instead, an icon takes on a far broader, and theologically grand, topic that cannot be cut into fragments. Each icon represents a whole theological scheme in one image.

A key aspect of the composition of an icon is the depiction of a figure’s face. Generally speaking, “the face is the most important part of the iconographic image”

(Evseyeva, et al. 33). When an icon depicts a saint, a frequent subject in this genre, the face is especially vital; it “testifies to the saint’s identity” (Evseyeva, et al. 15). The positioning of the faces on an icon is also noteworthy. The faces of icons “are usually painted frontally and even when saints are addressing each other we do not see them in profile, but facing us in a three-quarter turn. The only figures shown in profile are either negative characters (such as Judas in the scene of his arrest by the guards) or secondary ones who are not saints” (Evseyeva, et al. 13). This positioning indicates the importance of the saint depicted by fully showing the viewer the saint’s most distinguishing feature. It also helps the viewer identify the saint in question. The depiction of the eyes of the saint is equally essential. The portrayal of eyes in an icon represents another distinctive aspect of composition that relates to the viewer in a special way. They are “painted stretched wide open ... it is through the eyes that the icon reveals the most important elements in the treatment of the face, showing the sanctity of what is represented, the light-bearing quality. The accent on the eyes creates the impression that rather than you looking at the icon, the icon is looking at you” (Evseyeva, et al. 15). This effect relates to the theological idea that an icon is a window into heaven, so to speak. The viewer is once again invited to be part of the image, to let it fully surround him or her, and to be a part of it.

Yet another element of composition is the positioning of hands. The hands of a saint or other figure can tell the viewer a lot about his identity and function. According to *The History of Icon Painting*, “the hands are also important. Hence the great significance attached to the gesture in icons; blessing or praying, or lifted to the ear of one listening to the Lord, etc.” (15). Gestures are often depicted in all kinds of Christian art, but in the

Orthodox icon they are particularly important. Many times the hand gesture of a saint will be the only identifying factor. Other times, the gestures are more canonical (such as the Christ figure making the sign of blessing) yet equally important in conveying theological principles.

The depiction of figures as a whole is also integral to the appearance of an Orthodox Christian icon. The portrayal of saints is ultimately meant to emphasize the *theosis* of the figure in question; they are not of this world, but of the spiritual world, and the way they are represented reflects this theological principle. The bodies of saints are “weightless. They barely touch the ground and are incorporeal, immaterial” (Evseyeva, et al. 15). The figures almost seem to float in many icons, which further indicates the holiness of the figures. Additionally, these figures tend to be an almost caricature of a human being, while still retaining human characteristics. They tend to gloss over the physical imperfections of humanity: “the inmates of heaven [saints] are free of blemishes, both physical and emotional; they are inspired. Yet this movement away from matter to spirit never leads to the disappearance of the bodily element in the icon” (Evseyeva, et al. 14). This depiction of saints incorporates an interesting tension between the human and the divine; the saint belongs to another world, yet still remains human. This dichotomy is described concisely in a passage from *The History of Icon Painting*:

iconography does not ignore a saint’s individual features and external distinguishing marks (sex, age, hairstyle, shape of beard, headwear, etc.) but the saint is also depicted as transfigured, remote from earthly passions. He already belongs to a different world and looks down on us from there, which is why icons never portray emotions or passions (15)

This tension between the human and the divine echoes the theology of the Christ figure, who was both human and divine simultaneously. It is one more example of how Orthodox theology directly affects every aspect of an icon.

The image of a saint in an Orthodox icon, and the way it is executed, tells the viewer a lot about who the image is honoring. Saints are organized into classes, and the way in which they are portrayed in images reflects these classes:

The saints venerated ... are divided into classes by their costumes and by the usual attributes that they held: evangelists, for example, wore the antique tunic and himation and displayed their books, holy bishops were attired in their liturgical vestments and also held books or scrolls, monks wore their habits, soldiers wore their military tunics and cuirasses and brandished their weapons, and doctors grasped their medicine boxes and surgical instruments ... further, the class to which the saint belonged tended to govern the age at which he or she was shown. Thus, bishops and monks were often portrayed as old, with white or grayish hair, while doctors and soldiers were shown younger; women, with a few exceptions, also tended to be shown as young. (Maguire 16)

However, it should also be noted that there is a distinction between saints in Orthodox imagery and saints in Western ecclesiastical art. In Western medieval art, saints generally are assigned a specific attribute, but in Orthodox art, the class of the saint is more important. For the more important saints in Byzantine art, the artist used facial features to identify them; it is this reason that explains why “Byzantine artists developed a much more extensive gallery of facial portraiture than did artists in the West” (Maguire 18). But for lesser saints, “art attributes were more important for establishing the category of saints to which an individual belonged” (Maguire 18). In other words, Orthodox images focus far more on the type (bishop, soldier, etc.) than the specific named figure. This focus can be seen in the iconographical symbols used to portray each type of saint, whether it be a military saint or a bishop.

In the eyes of Westerners, the Orthodox icon seems decidedly unrealistic; the image looks fantastical, almost primitive when compared to the naturalistic figures that often populate Western art. However, iconographers see their images as indicative of the ideas they are trying to portray. A major purpose of the icon is to indicate to the viewer which saint or other religious figure it is depicting. In this goal, icons are successful.

Iconographers

do not seek optical illusionism in their portraits, but rather accuracy of definition. Their expectation was that the image should be sufficiently well defined to enable them to identify the holy figure represented, from a range of signs that included the clothing, the attributes, the portrait type, and the inscription. For the Byzantines, these features together made up a lifelike portrait ... they make statements about the nature of the holy person being portrayed and about his or her position in the scheme of intercession and salvation. (Maguire 16)

Therefore, the purpose of the image is to convey a message about the figure it is depicting.

Another element specific to an Orthodox icon is the use of script on a painting. Iconographers usually do not sign their icons; this practice would indicate that the work is their own creation and their own art, when in fact it is a spiritual exercise that they see as coming from a higher, divine authority. There are some exceptions, as with any rule. For example, some Greek icons bear signatures that essentially claim that the iconographer is the spiritual medium through which divine concepts are transmitted. Despite the rarity of iconographers signing their paintings, script is often used on icons. The script generally describes the saint or scene depicted. While the portrayal of saints through imagery is the main way viewers identify the subject of an icon, the “inscription became the final element in the definition of the image” (Maguire 37). The script, then, provided the final piece of the puzzle regarding what religious figure the icon represented. Script is also

used frequently to inscribe particular Bible verses onto an icon. The verse chosen usually corresponds to the scene being depicted in the icon. For example, parts of the Gospel would be used on an icon of the Christ figure, while the Old Testament would be used on a figure from that time period.

The type of script used is also of interest, and often aids art historians in dating or contextualizing an icon. According to *The History of Icon Painting*, “Russian pre-Mongol icons were inscribed in uncials, a symmetrical, static script. Later semiuncials began to be used, a script with a large number of asymmetrical elements” (40). This element of an icon, however seemingly small and insignificant, is yet another distinguishing characteristic, and many assumptions can be made based on the type of script, whether the language be Greek, Russian, or something else. It also often makes an icon more aesthetically pleasing, with script becoming a part of the image, while at the same time helping the viewer to know what he or she is looking at.

The use of color in an Orthodox icon is another integral part of the style. The iconographic technique creates glowing, deep, saturated, and long-lasting colors that invoke the divine. The “secret lies in the technology of the icon, each stage of which is designed to preserve the colour ... very small particles of paint at the bottom and larger particles of pigment on top ... determines the richness of the colour” (Evseyeva, et al. 32).

Color symbolism is also widely used. While there is some variation in the meaning of specific colors, there are basic ideas that each color invokes. *The History of Icon Painting* lays out a basic guide to the meaning of the colors in an icon:

Red is an earthly colour, the colour of blood and sacrifice, yet at the same time a royal colour. Blue is a divine, celestial colour, which stands for purity, virginity,

electedness. Green is the colour of the Holy Spirit, eternal life and eternal flowering. White is the colour of transfiguration and the robes of the righteous. Black is the colour of darkness, the abyss of hell, yet dark colours or black also symbolize the Divine darkness. Gold is the colour of the heavenly Jerusalem ... the pictorial resonance, noble colour, and varied textures of the icon are a reflection of the beauty of the Kingdom of Heaven. (Evseyeva, et al. 16)

While this scheme will not always apply, it is a succinct guideline to start with. Many color symbols, particularly blue as the heavenly color, are generally true of iconography as a whole, and can be useful in interpreting an image. Red is also utilized in essentially the same way in most icons.

Some colors are more complex, such as gold. Gold is included somewhere on almost every icon; in many, gold leaf makes up the entire background and becomes a focal point in and of itself. To the iconographer, gold is seen not as a color but as a form of light: “the gold of the icons incorporates heavenly light. This color that one never finds in nature makes up the background of the icon and penetrates its different elements” (Zibawi 51). In other words, gold transcends all other colors and becomes a symbol itself of divine light.

Other colors also represent a complex theological scheme. Red, for example, is a paradox. It simultaneously represents the negative and the positive: “red, the color of blood, is also the color of life” (Zibawi 58). This paradox reflects the story of Christ, who died but came back to life. Red often represents blood, and by extension, the human and tragic aspect of Jesus. Therefore, “the Saviour is often shown in a dark red chiton and blue himation, which symbolizes the union of His two natures: the Divine (blue) and human (red)” (Evseyeva, et al. 19). This statement leads one to the next important color, which is blue. Blue is centrally important in iconography because it symbolizes the divine. Blue, red, and gold are often thought of as the most important colors in Orthodox

iconography, as they tend to appear in nearly every image because they represent major theological ideas.

These quantifiable elements of an icon, the formal characteristics, are as important as the theology that informs them. Orthodox iconography is distinctive in its appearance. By analyzing the formal elements of this type of imagery, a viewer can pinpoint exactly what makes it different. Color, perspective, form, composition, and other elements are key in identifying what is so individual about Orthodox Christian iconography.

Chapter Four: The Transfiguration Icon

“And while he was praying, the appearance of His face changed, and His clothes became dazzling white” (Luke 9:29)

One story that appears in many Orthodox icons is that of the Transfiguration of Jesus. This event, which is detailed in the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew (17:1-13), Mark (9:2-13), and Luke (9:28-36), is a miraculous occurrence involving Jesus and three of his disciples. Jesus, Peter, James, and John travel to the top of a mountain, and Jesus begins to glow with bright rays of light and his garments turn dazzling white. The prophets Elijah and Moses appear next to Jesus, and Jesus is addressed by God. This is one of the few miracles of Jesus that affect Jesus himself instead of somebody else.

The three Synoptic Gospels each tell the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus. While there are some variations in specific details or wording, the basic narrative is the same with one major difference. In Matthew and Mark, “the Apostles fell after having heard the voice of the Father and seen the bright cloud” (Ouspensky, Lossky 211). In Luke, though, they witnessed the glory of Christ. Luke’s version of the story reads:

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly, they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem. Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him. ... A cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my Son, my Chosen, listen to him!” When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen. (Luke 9:28-36)

The story of the Transfiguration of Jesus is quite mysterious. In the presence of three of his disciples, the Son of God suddenly changes appearance dramatically, converses with

important prophets, and is addressed directly by the all-powerful God. Whether or not the apostles witnessed all of this or fell into a stupor after they heard the voice of God, the main point of the story remains the same: the radiant fulfillment of the law and the prophets. In iconography, both versions are depicted in various images by various iconographers.

The Transfiguration, celebrated on August 6, is one of the Twelve Great Feasts of the Orthodox Church, feasts which commemorate key events in the life of Jesus and the Mother of God. The Transfiguration, along with Baptism, Crucifixion, Resurrection, and Ascension, is one of the most important events of Jesus' life. The Transfiguration stands out because it demonstrates the perfection of Jesus' divinity and the fact that he is the Son of God. It highlights the absolute connecting point between the humanity and the divinity of Jesus, and demonstrates where God meets human, where heaven meets earth, and where the eternal meets the worldly. This event is distinctive; "nothing can rival its metaphysical splendor" (Andreopoulos 15). In the same way, icons are meant to show the meeting place of the divine and the human. Therefore, the Transfiguration of Jesus is a topic that lends itself especially well to being depicted in an icon.

An important element of the Transfiguration in the Orthodox tradition relates to the light that shone forth from Jesus. This light is often referred to as the "Tabor light," a name that comes from the name of the mountain (Mount Tabor) that was allegedly the site of the Transfiguration. This light is vital to many of the more mystical subsets of the Eastern Orthodox tradition. In the East, "rich theological thought surrounds [the Tabor light]—especially within the tradition of hesychasm" (Andreopoulos 15). Hesychasm is the practice of contemplative, mystical prayer in the Eastern Orthodox tradition. The

“hesychastic tradition is based on the ceaseless repetition of what is known as the Jesus prayer or prayer of the heart” (Andreopoulos 214). It was originally associated with monastic circles, as many Orthodox monks or hermits practice hesychasm. Hesychastic mysticism involves looking inward and attempting to block out other senses in order to focus fully on the presence, or divine light, of God. The Transfiguration is particularly important to hesychastic mystics; many mystics report deeply religious experiences that involve witnessing the Tabor light, that is to say the energies of God, much as the disciples witnessed the light in the Transfiguration of Jesus (Cook 4349). The energies of God are uncreated (therefore divine) although Orthodox theology is careful to distinguish the energies from the essence of God. The former are perceptible through prayerful contemplation. The latter is beyond all comprehension.

The appearance of divine light through constant prayer is a key part of the hesychastic tradition. In contemplative prayer, “the monk withdraws into an inner space of his soul, clears his passions and his ego, and invites in the grace of God, which is sometimes experienced as a resplendent light ... hesychastic contemplation was sometimes accompanied by visions of the divine light” (Andreopoulos 214). These visions of light relate directly to the Transfiguration. Therefore, the icons depicting the Transfiguration are of utmost importance in the hesychastic tradition. Icons of this type are often used by mystics to enhance their prayerful practices. Monks use the depiction of the Mt. Tabor light in Transfiguration icons to meditate on the presence of divine light.

In addition to the importance of this event theologically speaking, as well as its importance in the hesychastic tradition, the Transfiguration is also easily depicted in artistic mediums. The event, involving dramatic rays of light and beautiful garments,

lends itself to being painted. It offers subject matter that is dramatic as well as aesthetically pleasing. Therefore, even beyond the Transfiguration's theological importance, the event is the subject of many artistically pleasing icons that can be enjoyed by any kind of art appreciator, even non-Orthodox and non-Christian ones. In any case, many icons depicting this event exist, and there is a rich tradition of iconography in this subject.

One of the earliest depictions of the Transfiguration in Orthodox art is the apse of the chapel at St. Catherine's Monastery at Sinai (see Figure 2). This secluded monastery houses many early examples of Orthodox imagery, largely because it was a protected location far away from wars and the threat of iconoclasm. This mosaic depicts Jesus in the bright white garments described in the gospels, with dense gold surrounding him to represent the rays of light that he emits. The prophets, Elijah and Moses, flank Jesus on either side. Jesus' disciples, John, Peter, and James, surround him at his feet. This mosaic is an early illustration of the topic, and it led to many other depictions of the event in church mosaics, monasteries, manuscript illustrations, and (most importantly here) iconography.

Most icons of the Transfiguration of Jesus follow a basic pattern. The divine light is important in all Orthodox iconography, but it takes a particular focus in the Transfiguration icon. The light that Jesus emits "was the Divinity manifested to the disciples on the mountain" (Ouspensky, Lossky 209). As in other icons, light is often represented by the use of the color gold, which is seen less as a color and more as a form of light. Therefore, Transfiguration icons are often saturated with gold leaf or yellow-gold paint to demonstrate the intense light that was radiating from Jesus. The clothes

worn by Jesus are always bright, stark white, according with the scriptures. The colors of the garments of Peter, James, and John often follow the same patterns as in other icons that feature these men as the subject.

The Transfiguration icon also has a set of figures that are fixed in both scripture and in the iconographic tradition. Of course Jesus is the focal point; he is usually positioned in the center top portion of the icon, with his right hand raised in blessing. On either side of him, the prophets Elijah and Moses bow towards him. This represents how Jesus' divinity fulfills and transcends the law and the prophets of the Old Testament. These two prophets also have specific symbolism attached to them. Moses died and was buried in the traditional manner, and he was resurrected for the Transfiguration. Elijah, though, never actually died but instead was whisked off to heaven in a blazing chariot. Moses represents the dead and Elijah the living. Jesus ministers to both (Ouspensky, Lossky 209-212).

The three apostles, James, John, and Peter, are also included in Transfiguration icons. Depending on the version of the story the iconographer is drawing from (whether the disciples have fallen asleep or stay alert to witness the glory of God), their positions are different. However, they are almost always under the feet of Jesus. A common version of the story used in icons depicts the apostles running from or shielding themselves from the divine light. "Starting with the XIth century, St. Peter will be represented kneeling, supported on his left hand, and raising his right hand to protect himself from the light (or to make a gesture accompanying the words that he addresses to Christ). St. John (always in the centre) falls, turning his back to the light. St. James flees before the light or falls backwards" (Ouspensky, Lossky 211).

Almost every iconographer writes a Transfiguration icon at some point, and for many it is the first icon they ever create. The divine light that illuminates the Transfiguration is thought to radiate through the iconographer's later work if he or she creates an icon depicting that story first. Therefore, there are many Transfiguration icons to analyze. Here though, I will choose a Transfiguration icon by Andrei Rublev (1360-1430). His Transfiguration icon, circa 1405, is a nice example of many of the key aspects of the Transfiguration icon (see Figure 3). Rublev's treatment of the Transfiguration icon is particularly important due to his involvement in the hesychastic revival of 14th and 15th century Russian Orthodoxy. Rublev was a monk who was deeply involved in this mystical movement, and his version of the Transfiguration icon reflects that mystical sense.

One immediately noticeable aspect of this icon is the overwhelming use of yellow-gold paint. This use of all-over color represents the most important aspect of the Transfiguration, which is the divine light that radiates forth from Jesus. The yellow-gold color encompasses the entire icon except for the figures, and this comprehensive use of the color shows how important this aspect of the image is. The use of bright white is also very effective. Jesus' robes, in white that contrasts with the yellow-gold of the rest of the image, form a strong focal point in the upper center part of the icon. Around Jesus is a mandorla (a holy aura around a figure) that is green, which symbolizes the Holy Spirit or eternal life. This color is very appropriate for this particular icon, which illustrates the divinity and holiness of Jesus. The green mandorla further emphasizes this divine quality.

There are also a few other qualities in this icon. For example, the mountain is represented in symbolic imagery as well as an actual physical structure. Four symbols

that appear to be trees seemingly dance across the center panel of the icon, inviting the viewer to imagine the mountain that Jesus climbed upon to shine out his holy light. This abstract design also serves to visually divide the figures at the top of the icon (the powerful Christ and the two prophets) from the figures at the bottom of the icon (the three apostles). This depiction of the mountain is an example of Rublev's personal style of icon writing.

The image, body placement, and facial features of Jesus are canonical for Transfiguration icons. Jesus is positioned in the top third of the icon, which draws the viewer's eyes up to the focal point of the image. This is usually where Jesus appears in Transfiguration icons, since in the story Jesus is being transfigured at the top of a mountain. The position of Jesus at the top of the image also further emphasizes his holiness and divinity; he is raised to the top of the image above his merely human disciples. Jesus is also positioned between the two prophets, which demonstrates how he is the central focus of both the image and the biblical revelation as a whole.

The positioning of Jesus' body in Rublev's Transfiguration icon is also common for this subject. Jesus is standing upright and looks like he is floating above the mountain and the three disciples. This is another indication of his divine nature. Additionally, Jesus is shown with his right hand raised in blessing. This is a common position for Jesus in many types of icons, but particularly the Transfiguration, which demonstrates the divinity of Jesus. Jesus is also facing forward, with his eyes apparently focused on the viewer. This focus engages the viewer and further indicates the focal point of both the image and of the theology. The halo around Jesus' head completes this point, emphasizing without question once again how holy and divine the Son of God is.

Jesus' facial features and other artistic details are also canonical. As outlined in Chapter Three, the canonical depiction of Jesus is the image of a middle-aged Greco-Semitic man with shoulder-length brown hair, a brown beard, and brown eyes. This certainly describes the Christ figure that Rublev has painted. Jesus has all of these features, which aligns with the vast tradition of iconography and depicting the Christ figure in Orthodox Christian art and imagery.

The positioning of the two prophets in Rublev's icon also follows the common canon of Transfiguration icons. The two Old Testament prophets flank Jesus, and they are in profile. They are also bowing towards Jesus. This represents how Christ's divinity reigns over even the most important prophets of the Old Testament. It also symbolizes how all prophecy in the Old Testament ultimately points towards the arrival, miracles, and resurrection of Jesus. Elijah and Moses are important in their own right as well of course; their position in the upper third of the icon shows this. But their off center positions and bowing towards Jesus demonstrate how Jesus is the ultimate divine truth, and how they were messengers of that truth.

Finally, the positions of the apostles are also in line with the common portrayals of Transfiguration icons as described by Ouspensky and Lossky. The three apostles are in the bottom third of the icon, below the more powerful figures of Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. Peter, James, and John all cower before the powerful divine light in some manner within Rublev's image. Peter, depicted as he usually is with white hair and a white beard, is on the far right. He is the most erect of the three apostles and is merely kneeling before the power of the divine light. He is still gazing towards it in profile, though, which represents his wisdom and his sense that this is a miracle to be witnessed. John, the youngest of the

three, is in the center in a complete prostration before the power of the Christ figure. James is on the left, turned upside down in the presence of the divine light. This is not a common position for one of the three apostles, but it certainly is an artistic choice that emphasizes how dramatic, powerful, and even bewildering event this was for the disciples.

When viewing, analyzing, and discussing Orthodox icons, it can be useful to look at a specific type of icon. The Transfiguration is a wonderful example, considering its importance theologically speaking. By considering the biblical story, theological background, and canonical appearance of a particular icon, the general characteristics of Orthodox iconography as a whole become apparent.

Conclusion

Even the most cavalier observer can see that there is something special about Orthodox Christian iconography. This form of art is distinct whether it is compared to secular art, the iconography of other religious traditions, or the art produced by Western Christianity. Orthodox iconography is conceptually and artistically unique. The distinctive quality that permeates Orthodox Christian imagery is due to several factors, including the theology behind the practice of iconography, the mentality of the iconographers who create the images, and the liturgical practice that is centered on veneration of the icon.

This thesis has attempted to pinpoint exactly what makes Orthodox Christian iconography so distinct. By explaining the various artistic elements of the canonical icon, the reader can start to understand what exactly is different about this form of art. The reverse perspective utilized by Orthodox icons is perhaps the most readily apparent difference. This perspective is completely different from Western Christian artists' use of perspective. However, there are other differences as well. The use of light, color, form, and other formal elements is also distinctive in the Orthodox icon. Additionally, the icon draws on a canon of specific interpretations of various elements of the icon, including the depictions of certain figures such as Jesus or various saints. All of these commonalities among Orthodox icons are vital in understanding the exceptionality of Orthodox Christian art.

The theology of the Orthodox Church also contributes to the distinctiveness of these images. An icon usually represents a specific theological rubric, whether that be a biblical story or a theological doctrine, such as the divine-human nature of Jesus. The

icon transmits this knowledge visually to the viewer. Furthermore, the icon is used as a devotional tool, an aid in prayer for the priest and the layperson alike. Therefore, Orthodox images are vastly important in the Orthodox Church, and a key part of liturgy for any faithful Orthodox Christian.

There is, of course, much more to be said about this type of art that is so distinctive, mystical, and often mysterious. While Orthodox Christian iconography is obscure to the Western viewer, who is more familiar with Western Christian imagery, it still has much to offer even non-Orthodox individuals. Much of the research on icons today is written by members of the Orthodox Church. Orthodox monks, priests, and theologians weigh in most on this subject, considering they are most familiar with the various aspects of this form of art. However, there is something special about these icons that is definitely worth exploring, no matter what a person's religious background or tradition happens to be.

Image Index

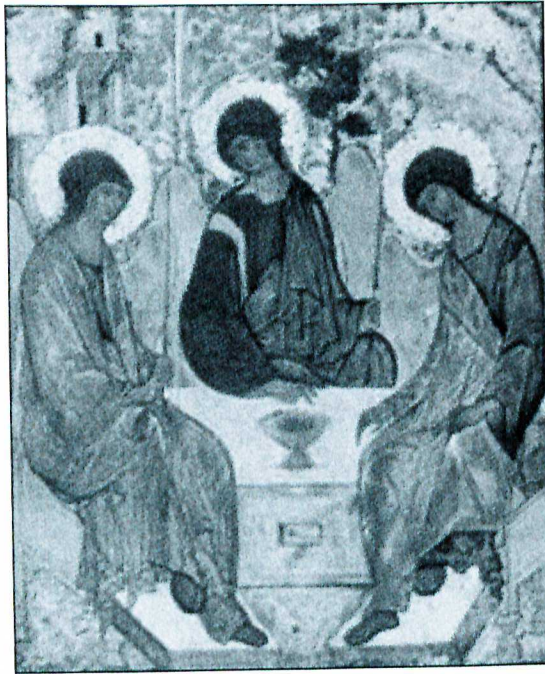


Figure 1 (http://www.holy-transfiguration.org/library_en/lord_trinity_rublev.html)

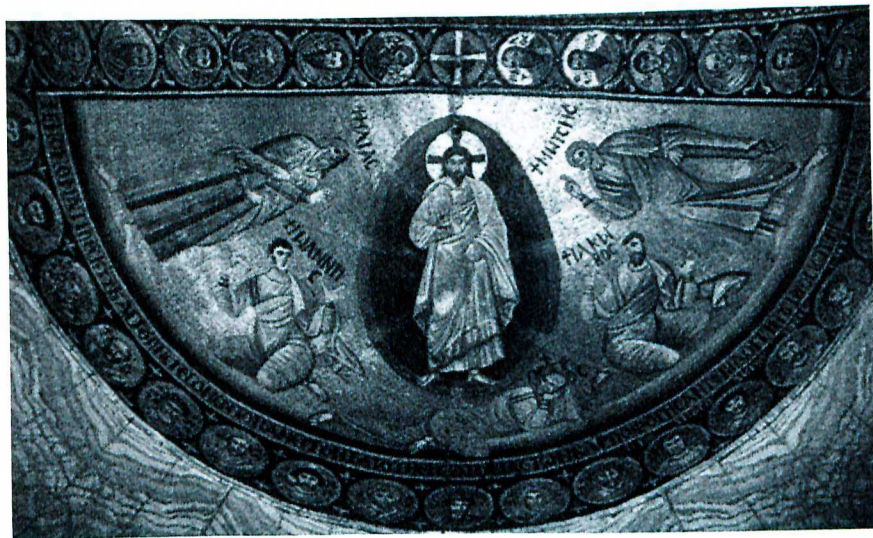


Figure 2 (<http://www.touregypt.net/featurestories/catherines2-49.htm>)

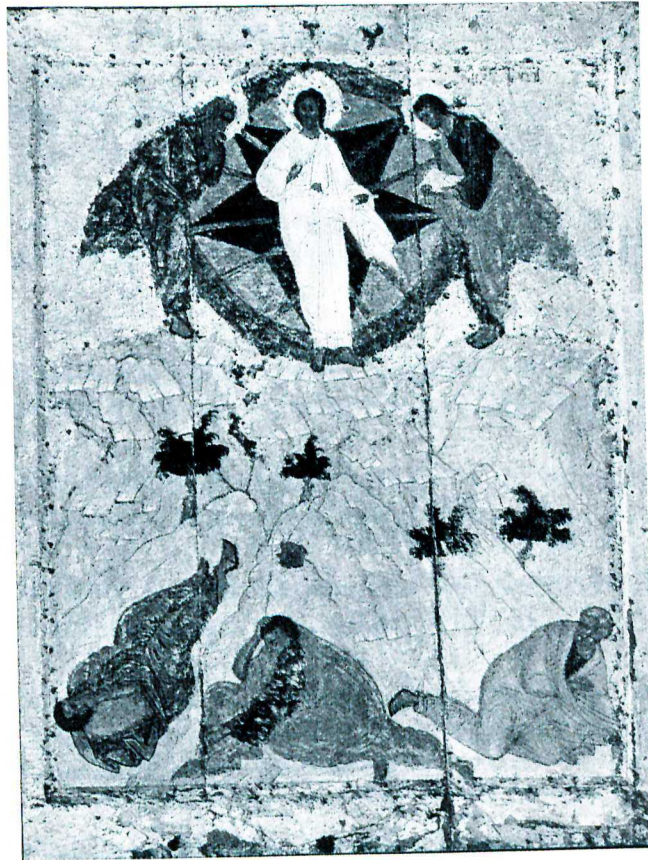


Figure 3 (http://iconreader.wordpress.com/2011/08/06/transfiguration-icon-the-event-and-the-process/rublev_15c/)

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