

ON THE ART OF WRITING ICONS

Gazing comes first. Before the students in Deacon Mary Beth Wells' class ever mix pigments or lift a brush, they must begin by contemplating sacred images - "gazing at the invisible" - and journaling about the ones that seem to "resonate".

Choosing the image to copy is the first prayerful act of learning to make an icon. "Behind the image is the Garden of God," says Deacon Wells. "You enter into that in prayer and contemplation. The gazing is prayer."

Wells, who is a spiritual director and psychotherapist as well as an artist, has taught courses in icon "writing" over the past fifteen years first in Delray Beach, Florida, and now in Orange and Charlottesville, Virginia.

An icon is a "written image", rather than an original work of art, she explains.

"Copying is what we do...just as you wouldn't change the words in scripture, you wouldn't change the symbols in a sacred icon. It's not about you creating the icon painting. It's not about your creative work...it's just a total prayer experience."

Iconographers use natural elements - natural pigments mixed with egg and water, painted on wooden boards.

The students come quietly into the weekly class, gathering their materials and sitting in silent prayer before beginning work. Contemplative music is playing, and there is little conversation, beyond questions and answers exchanged with Wells about technique. The atmosphere is not an enforced library hush, but a comfortable and serene sense of focus.

Some of the students are just beginning to transfer a chosen image onto the board, placing a photocopy of the icon over transfer paper and tracing each detail of the design. Others have begun to paint, mixing pigments with the egg and water solution, filling in large areas of color or patiently working on fine details.

For Wells, the icon class is one of "so many different ways you can make people aware of who they are...of their creative energy, which is always to be used in community. The icon becomes part of your spiritual journey."

The above is based on an article that appeared in *The Sacred Art of Icons*, by Mary W. Cox, *Anglican-Episcopal World*, Advent 2004.

ON ICONOGRAPHY

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The art of icons is considered a sacred art. Icon actually means “to be like” or “image” and is regarded as a guide and instructor for your spiritual life. Icons are holy images of the divine – images of Christ, the Virgin Mary, the evangelists and all the saints and angels, all who are holy. These images are given special veneration; we are to see them with the heart, not the mind. They are a window through which we can look at the world transcending time and space and through which the divine can enter into our being. Therefore, the process of gazing at an icon is seen as prayer and contemplation as all things holy cannot be invented but must be received.

Icon is prayer and contemplation transformed into art that becomes a work of wonder. The art of icons, therefore, is sacred art. They are all pictorial expressions of spiritual subjects: compositions related to Holy Scripture. They represent spiritual truth to Tradition.

Icons used for prayer date to first centuries of Christianity have not reached us, they are known from church tradition and historical evidence. They can be traced back to the lifetime of Christ himself and the period immediately after him. Art of portraiture was flourishing at that time in the Roman Empire. Portraits were made of relatives and distinguished people. In the *History of the Church* by Eusebius, he writes of seeing many portraits of the Savior and of Peter and Paul, despite Old Testament prohibitions of images. This prohibition led people to assert that Christian art was born outside the Church and against the will of the Church. People related icon-worship to idolatry and specifically to paganism and its idolatry. Therefore, Christians of both Jewish and pagan origin were conscious of the negative experiences of paganism and united to protect Christians from idolatry. Despite this, there were icons of the Savior and the Holy Virgin. The mystery of the Incarnation became the defense for the icon allowing depiction of the divine. Therefore the art does not contradict Christianity but is inalienably connected to it. Because God through Christ had become man, Christ can be depicted in human form for the sake of man’s salvation.

The fundamental principle of this art is a pictorial expression of the teaching of the Church by representing concrete events and images of sacred history and indicating their inner meaning. This art is a vehicle of Gospel teaching. Themes do not reflect problems of life but answers them. Iconography is placed by the

Church on a level with Holy Scriptures and with the Cross as one of the forms of revelation and knowledge of God. The image transmits the teaching of the Church and expresses the grace-given life of the Sacred Tradition in the Church. Church art is considered liturgical art.

Iconography never strives to stir the emotions in the direction of another yet in the icon all human feeling thoughts and action, as well as the body itself, are given full and equal value. It is regarded as prayer itself. All that is depicted in the icon reflects not disorder of a sinful world but Divine order, peace, a realm governed by earthly logic, not by human mortality, but by Divine grace. The Divine Light permeates all things, they are not shadows. All the forms in the icon are centered on the spiritual content. The icon is unlike what we see in ordinary life and is opposed to illusion (perspective). In the icon, space and volume are limited to the surface of the panel and must not create an artificial impression of going beyond it.

Icons should be painted as the “ancient holy iconographers painted them.” It is not a personal creation – the iconographer communicates not his own idea but that which is contemplated. The iconographer works not for his own glory but for the glory of God. Yet, it is not considered copying. Icons are painted from previous icons; the creative expression of the artist is there but not by expressing his own personal and internal self.

The spiritual freedom of the artist assures no two icons will be alike (not ego).

Both theology and iconography face problems which are insoluble, to express by means of the created world that which is infinitely above the creature. No icon can be perfect just as no word image can be perfect – they can each reach the limit of human possibility. Therefore, the methods used by iconography for painting the Kingdom of God, can only be figurative, symbolic, like the language of the parables in Holy Scripture.

The most fundamental of those materials (water, chalk, pigments, egg) are taken in their natural form, merely purified and prepared, and by the work of his hands, man brings them to serve God. Matter serves to express the image of God.