

Advent Study 3- Christ through the lens of Iconography 7/12/2022

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Introduction

Welcome to the third study in our Advent series which explores the theme of Who is Christ through the lens of iconography? This is important because it challenges us to reflect more deeply about who we think Christ is and how he is represented in Christianity and other traditions through art.

How do people express their faith through the arts?

Christians worship God in various ways- in dance, drama and ritual, in liturgy, song and prayer, through poetry, art and architecture- all of these can be worship.

What is an Icon?

The tomb paintings of the early Christians led to the development of icons. An icon is an image, picture or representation; its likeness has symbolic meaning for an object by representing it, or by analogy, as in semiotics. However, the use of icons was not without opposition. During the 7th and 8th Century the use of icons developed into controversy and caused iconoclasm.

Take a moment to study the icons on display around the Lady Chapel, what do you notice about them? How do they make you feel? Are any of these icons familiar to you and if so, why? Consider what you think Jesus looks like? What do you think Mary the mother of Jesus looks like? What might a saint look like?

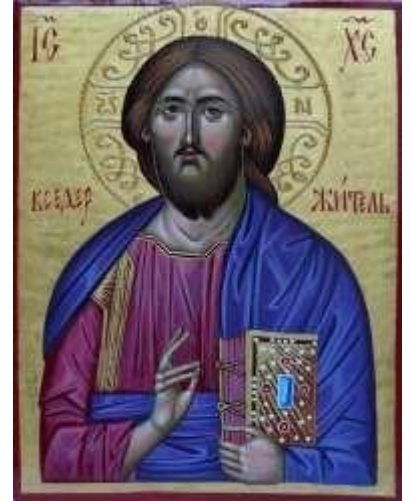
People construct and make art pieces for different reasons and art has always been an important element of religion. Christian figures like Jesus, Mary the mother of Jesus and many other Saints like St Giles, St Benedict for example lived before the time of cameras and photography so there is no record of what they looked like. Throughout the centuries, artists have depicted what they think and this is shown in their work. What is distinctive about icons, is that artists have often shared messages about these religious figures by the way they have drawn them, the colours they have used and the symbols they have included in the image.

A familiar type of icons are Byzantine icons and these are actually sacred paintings. They often depict Christ, his mother Mary, scenes from the Bible or the lives of saints. Usually they are elaborate, two-dimensional paintings which are of immense importance in Orthodox Christianity. They are often used as a spiritual link between God and the worshipper. Icons often a gold leaf background and are usually painted on wood. Why do you think 'gold leaf' is used? Icons differ from any other form of picture because they are painted in a unique way, and each of the colours used is significant. They are golden to remind us of God's Heavenly Kingdom. Greek Orthodox icons or Byzantine icons are purposely not realistic, they do not represent the world as we know or experience it with our senses, rather they depict how it is in the celestial kingdom, transformed by the grace of God. Each object on an Orthodox icon

contains theological symbolism and significance. Nothing is painted by chance or merely for decoration.

The colours in icons have special meaning, for example the **gold** colour used many times in orthodox iconography is not for aesthetic reasons, but has theological resonance. For example, **Gold** is reserved for Christ and symbolizes his divinity. The use gold leaf shines through on the halos and other parts of the icon. The gold represents the eternal uncreated light of God and his heavenly kingdom. Where there is never darkness.

Christ Pantocrator (The Almighty) (Russian Icon)



Purple was the Byzantine symbol of royalty. It is used in icons to represent Christ's Kingdom.

White is used to depict heavenly purity and divinity. Icons of the resurrection will often show Christ in white robes pulling Adam and Eve from the depths. White is also used to represent swaddling clothes of babies, the shrouds of the dead and the robes of angels.

Red is used in icons to represent humanity and the saving nature of the resurrection. It is the colour of blood and thereby signifies life on earth.



Blue represents the heavens and the kingdom of God and the kingdom of God not on this earth. Byzantine icons of Mary show her with red outer garments and blue ones on the inside. This signifies her original human nature (the red) and her heavenly nature (the blue). In Eastern iconography Mary was painted in red or brown to depict her as a physical (grounded) being but the earliest icons depict her in blue. It may have depended on the availability of pigment. Lapis Lazuli was ground in order to produce the blue colour and it was a very expensive stone.

Green is the colour of the living earth and has been used to portray youth, hope and where life begins. This is in contrast to **brown** which is meant to indicate our fallen nature on earth and that we will all eventually become dust.



This Icon shows Christ's Victory over Death.

Black is used in Iconography to portray evil and death. Demons and satanic beings are portrayed in black. However, several religious orders use black vestments and, in this case, black is used as part of the traditional dress of the order. The colours of white, grey, blue, green and light shades of red are used for other holy people.

Clothing is also significant. Icons of Christ will show him with Blue outer clothing and red denotes inner clothing. Christ's inner garment is red and symbolises his humanity. His outer garments are blue and depict his true divinity. The colours of red and green are also used for Christ and the Virgin Mary.



This is a picture of Andrei Rublev's icon of the Trinity, from the 15th century. A larger version hangs in the offices of Trinity Integrative Medicine. The original is located in the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, Russia.

What is the meaning of the Icon?

In the words of Henri J. M. Nouwen (writer of *Behold the Beauty of the Lord: Praying with Icons*), this icon depicts three angels, representing the Father, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, inviting individuals to participate in their work in the world offering hope to the world. This imagery comes from the story of the visit of three angels to Abraham, recounted in Genesis 18:1-8 - lending an alternate title to this work: *The Hospitality of Abraham*.

How are Icons Used?

Praying with Icons is an ancient prayer practice that involves keeping our eyes wide open, taking into our heart what the image visually communicates. We focus not on what is seen in the icon, but rather on what is seen through it -- the love of God expressed through God's creatures.

Religious Icons are commonly referred to as "windows to heaven" or "windows to the eternal". The idea that a piece of artwork can give us a glimpse of the invisible comes from Christology - the study of the person of Christ - which focuses on the Incarnation. Because God took on human flesh, He allows us to see the person of Christ, who is God.

Iconography and Spirituality-

Iconography is linked to spirituality because Icons are a part of the rich, resonant spirituality of the Eastern churches - Greek, Russian, Serbian Orthodox and the Maronite, Melchite, Ukrainian and Russian Catholic and Coptic Church. Gradually, over time Icons have acquired a more universal appeal, they have moved out of the bounds of Orthodoxy. (Carroll and Jaaniste (date). The contemplative appeal and qualities of icons has increased contemporary interest: "Icons can also open the door to a spirituality that fulfills a deep, religious need." (Nes, 2007).

“The information society we live in produces a continuous stream of intrusive and rapidly changing visual stimuli. The mass media makes it possible for images to be devoured like consumer goods. And such a continuous, cursory stream of pictures has a disturbing effect on people’s minds. Orthodox iconography has a form which inspires serenity and a content which invites meditation “(Nes, 2004, p7).

Icons are useful because they can provide a concrete point of entry in an educational context for helping students of a religious background or none to understand the significance of religion. Icons point to something beyond... Ranson (2002). For people of faith, Icons allow for a retelling of the Christian story and a way of exploring one’s own personal story. Icons are the key to orthodox spirituality and liturgy is a useful tool in helping people along their journey of religious understanding, spiritual journey, and self-knowledge. Icons are another text by which individuals can begin to engage with religious understandings that belong to a community of faith and have their foundation in the biblical text. In addition, the icon as a concrete religious’ item can allow for the movements of attending, inquiring, interpreting and acting. (Ranson, 2002). Having learnt a little more about Christian icons, has your view of them changed or remained the same? Do you have a favourite icon?

A knowledge of Orthodox theology and spirituality helps to unlock the symbolic language of the icon. According to Nes (2004, p13) icons have a dogmatic character, they provide visual expression to Church teaching and belief. Icons are essentially didactic and also have a liturgical function. The dogmatic character of an icon means that there is a standardised form and content. Rather than an emphasis on personal style, the icon is a visual representation or expression of a community’s faith. With consistent form and rules for depiction, an icon uses a symbolic language when it attempts to express dogmas. Nes (2004, p 12) points out that an icon is conventional, that is, it is rule bound in both form and content, builds on authorised models, in a customary form and in so doing communicates the official teaching of the church. Thus, the painter is not free to incorporate a subjective interpretation into the work.

“An icon is above the personal, it is an expression of the community’s faith” (Nes, 2004, p 12). Thus, icons have a didactic purpose. Icons originated in a very different time from our 21st century secular world. “The world in which icons were produced and viewed was one in which everyone had knowledge of the Bible and of medieval Christian devotional literature, and looked at icons with this awareness always at the front of their minds... (Cormack, 2007, p 49). Today icons can serve as a vehicle to teach about religion, spirituality and the numinous. They point to the foundational events of the Christian story.

Orthodox Churches contain many icons. Orthodox religious art, writes Ware (1964, p 277), involves an elaborate system of symbols that take in the church building and its decorations. Icons thus have a theological and liturgical function. The icons which fill the church serve as a point of meeting between heaven and earth. As each local congregation prays Sunday by Sunday, surrounded by the figures of Christ, the angels, and the saints, these visible images remind the faithful unceasingly of the invisible presence of the whole company of heaven at the Liturgy. The faithful can feel that the walls of the church open out upon eternity... (Ware 1964, p 277).

Icons are an expression of presence, rather than representations as in western art. They allow access to another dimension of reality that shapes our consciousness. In that sense they are 'windows to heaven'. The viewer is drawn to look in and through the image as an icon points to something beyond. Icons embody an invitation to mystery. A study of icons fosters a coming to attention, a spirit of attentiveness, an awareness of self and an awareness of the activity of God in one's life. Just as icons were a 'window to heaven' for illiterate medieval Christians, icons can be a 'window to heaven' for the secular religiously illiterate. They are an invitation for everyone in a secular society to engage or reengage with religious literacy.

Summary-

Christian iconography may be defined in various ways and icons themselves are unique and are used in varying ways to assist prayer, liturgy, worship and as an expression of spirituality. What is clear is that Icons themselves are viewed distinctively by individuals and churches alike. They continue to hold a fascination, to exert a visual and compelling signpost to the numinous, both in an individual, private and corporate sense. Icons remain a consistent expression of spirituality in a way that mere words alone cannot do.

In this time of Advent, of waiting, anticipation and hope, what Icon or Icons might you adopt to help you to understand more about the mystery of the coming of Christ?

The Methodist Art Online Collection provides an excellent gallery of contemporary iconography with concise explanations of every icon in the collection.