

Week 1: Overview & Materials

Introduction to icons

We often see icons, and may think “they are nice pictures”. And they are. But, in another vast tradition of our church; they have a special meaning & depth. A few years ago, we made our own rosaries; this year, we thought we’d explore something sacred from the Orthodox tradition (300 million followers globally).

By the end of the next 4 weeks; you will have learned something new about your brother and sister Christians in other countries, gained a new insight into the pictures that hang on the walls, and had a go at making your own icon. The reason why we are not so familiar with icons is due to some ancient history. Try this for a grudge. In 1054 AD, Christianity separated along theological lines. There is considerable debate about the technicalities of the split; but essentially – the two churches had less to do with each other and each claimed unique authority. One was the Roman Catholic Church, with the pope in Rome as head of the church. The second was the Orthodox church, with the patriarch in Constantinople (now Istanbul) at its head.

The “Great Schism” – as the split was called was because of a disagreement about how the Holy Spirit descended and operated in the world. The Catholic church believes that the Holy Spirit descends from the Father AND the Son; whereas the Orthodox believe that Holy Spirit descends only from the Father.

The two churches, each with its own vested interests and spheres of influence (one in Europe and one in the Byzantine empire); developed their own traditions after they stopped co-operating with each other. The icon developed in the Byzantine Empire; which was the successor to the Roman Empire; and had 3 characteristics that made this development possible and distinct from the Roman Catholic and Eastern tradition: 1) The ruling emperor from Constantinople was seen as God’s agent on earth (rather than the Pope); the Greek language which replaced Latin (that was still used in the West until much later) by the seventh century; and the Orthodox Church under the spiritual guidance of the Patriarch.

That’s the background; and one of the key features of Orthodox spirituality is that of icons. Like the rosary, or a holding cross, or a Bible or prayer book, it is one of the most important sacred aids.

What is an icon?

The term icon is derived from the word eikon meaning image. It is any representation of a sacred person and/or event in any medium, of any size. In a narrower meaning, it means a wooden, painted, devotional panel of variable dimensions.

In a tradition that continues to this day; people make the sign of the cross, kiss icons, burn candles and incense before them – and have them in their homes and in processions – like we have processions of banners or statues; or a cross or crucifix on our walls at home. Icons are not put up as decoration though, they are put up to protect and “keep watch”.

If this sounds strange; or even uncomfortable; you might be right! Early Christianity had a resistance to images of any form due to their early persecution; where they were forced to worship idols and because the Old Testament takes a clear stand against any representations of the divine (like Muslims do today) (Exodus 20:4-5; Leviticus 26:1 & Deuteronomy 27:15). We’ll cover that in week 3’s input.

How to “read” an icon.

Like any image; it is designed to convey something. Even a photograph is meant to capture a snapshot in time; or something about the person that you wish to remember. Same with an icon.

This is an early one – and I’ll tell you about it next week; but let’s read it together.

So, who is it?

An icon acts like a stained glass window that opens up and invites us, through our sight, into a spiritual world. The flatness of the background lacks any hint of physical surroundings; suggesting that what you see is a divinity that neither resides in nor follows the laws of our natural world. It is an image of the invisible God (Col. 1. 15). Show picture of the Hodegetria Icon.

The left arm, which is bent at the elbow, seems to support the Christ-Child, while she points at Him with her right hand. Why do you think that is significant?

What about Jesus then? It is extremely difficult to tell His age. He is supposed to be a baby, but He looks more like a miniature grown man. Closer observation reveals that His Mother’s left arm, which should be supporting Him physically, actually does not. Christ effectively defies the most basic law of nature – gravity – and floats in the air. The icon thus prompts the faithful to comprehend that Christ may have a human form, but He is more spirit than flesh.

Finally, Mary with her free right hand points at Him; she puts Him on display for the faithful viewer. This icon was kept in the “monastery of the Guides” in Constantinople whose main task was to show the way to others. Therefore, the representation of the Virgin here underlines a fundamental precept of Christianity: that is, Christ is the one and only way that leads to salvation and eternal life.

And, as we look at them, they also look at us. Depicted in a simple manner but rich in meaning – the divine sees us too. Each icon tells us the story & meaning of their life; and how it can guide us.

Materials

I have taken these hints from the website of professional, UK based, icon painter, Katherine Sanders:

- There is a school of thought that only natural pigments should be used; and this is a mix of egg yolk, crushed powder, wine, water or vodka.

We won't be using those for time or cost reasons; but using acrylic in this course; but if you like it – have a go!

- The most common error beginners make is using thick layers to try and cover the gesso quickly - it can be strange and frustrating to start with, seeing these almost invisible layers slowly building up. This is where the 'dark to light' idea can be so troublesome; but theologically it reflects the creation story of darkness to light.
- Think of your acrylic like a watercolour and try to let it dry; thinking about the folds of clothes and faces.

The proplasmos or membrane technique is recommended:

A monochrome underpainting is laid onto the gesso first, then layers of thin, membrane colour washed over the top before highlights and shadows are added.

Firstly, it allows the initial drawing to be adjusted and refined.

Secondly, it discourages the 'slapping on house paint' approach.

Thirdly, it creates a beautifully complex painting, with depth and liveliness throughout the whole icon.

Selecting an image

Originally, like the wall paintings in churches, is important to remember that the original viewers would have been familiar with the Gospels. The narrative of the Bible and its use in liturgy would have been familiar to the congregation; which is why I have selected some from the Christmas story and given some background reading for you for each; have a read through your booklets; your Bible & look at the examples – who or what draws you, and why? Who's story can you think about and pray while making your icon?

Once you have picked an image; let me know and I will pray for you before you get your materials. Icons, and writing them, are a spiritual and meditative activity; so music will be played and refreshments are available throughout. There is a video on Youtube which is very good from the account called “Painting the Light” on how to begin painting your icons. It lasts around 50 minutes long; and there is a 15 minute example too. If you find this useful and can spare a donation to Antonis' (or any of the mentioned) channel, I'm sure it would be very appreciated.

Videos to help (these can be played during the session quietly).

50 minute start to finish small icon video

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2T5M9feCImE>

15 minute face

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yD9tb-17kyY>

How to thin acrylic paints – 2 minutes

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r3665QD0CvY>

Drawing heads – 15 minutes

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5FPTKZRuMUI>

How to paint with acrylics – 15 minutes

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fwg5RTnm-gA>

Basic Acrylic Techniques – 5 minutes

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wla7FB3Vrm0&t=41s>

Acrylic Painting Techniques

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cDzcoyeaRKI>

Week 2 – Theology & Tradition

So, we continue with our icons today – and I want to introduce some of the theology of them – how icons are thought to connect us to God.

The primary function of an icon is to represent saintly persons and events faithfully so Christians can recognise them.

It was considered of vital importance for the day of the Second Coming: by having seen Christ's face in an icon, His true 'likeness', the believers would be able to recognise Him at the Last Judgement.

So, the icon functions as a window of the heavenly world. It is a door through which the faithful enters a supernatural sacred space and time – like during a prayer or in the Eucharist.

Icons have been described as 'inferior' art – e.g., flat, not anatomically correct, lacking perspective. But these characteristics all point to their function as a gateway to a spiritual world, where the laws of nature (gravity, shadow, weight, perspective, etc.) are irrelevant. This spirituality is accessible via the icon regardless of the environment in which it is placed.

From the eleventh century onwards, all sources invariably identify the Hodegetria icon found in the monastery with the acheiropoiotos icon created by Saint Luke. The icon was destroyed in 1453 when Constantinople fell to the Ottomans. Some sources say the Virgin took it back to heaven before the final attack on the city.

Because of this history, icons depicting the Virgin and Child are by far the most popular. According to the legend, once Saint Luke showed the Virgin what he had produced, she said 'My grace shall be with this'.

As a consequence, it carries the seal of approval of the Virgin herself, that representing the divine was blessed, but is also 'true to life', since the portrait reflects the real likeness of the Virgin and Christ. This directly relates to Saint Basil's declaration that 'the honour of the icon passes to the prototype' used by people in defence of icons; like asking for the intercessions of a patron saint.

This 'original' Virgin and Child painted by Saint Luke is considered to be an acheiropoiotos icon (from the Greek 'not made by hands' since Luke was a saint); and it is believed that all subsequent icons of the Virgin and Child should be derived from this first 'life' portrait.

In order to remain true to the 'prototype', so that the worship of the faithful passes directly to the divinity, icons had to reproduce the 'original' format as closely as possible. This theological mandate is one of the main reasons that Byzantine icons and art seem to be repetitive – but this not due to any lack of artistic ability – as we will find in our attempts!

Early theologians established that the icon serves as a channel of divine grace. This was one of the main arguments that iconophiles ('friends of the icons') used in their defence. Hence, when the Orthodox Christians venerate icons, they venerate the person depicted because, according to Saint Basil (c.329–379), 'the honour given to the icon passes to the prototype'. As Saint Basil lived before Iconoclasm, his phrase was used as a defence of icons first by John of Damascus (c.675–c.749) to highlight that the icon is the 'visual aid' to worship, not the object of worship. It was, therefore, established that it is impossible for the Orthodox believer to confuse an icon representing Christ, the Virgin or any other saint/event narrated in the Bible with an idol – idols were pictures of false gods, while icons depict the one, true God.

In fact, the Byzantines maintained that their images were so 'lifelike' that there was no difference between standing in front of them, and standing in front of the saintly persons depicted. In order to achieve this, Byzantine artists heavily relied on reproducing faithfully the specific identifying features of the sacred persons, so there would be no doubt regarding their identity.

One story about this is from a visit by the Greeks to Italy for the Council of Ferrara-Florence in 1438/9 to negotiate the union of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches.

This was an unsuccessful political attempt at rescuing the dying and bankrupt Empire by uniting the Christian Churches hoping for subsequent western aid. The Greek Orthodox delegation found it difficult to identify with

western representational conventions. Patriarch Gregory Melissenos (Patriarch between 1443 and 1459, but left Constantinople in 1450) stated:

When I enter a Latin church, I can pray to none of the saints depicted there because I do not recognise them. Although I do recognise Christ, I cannot even pray to Him because I do not recognise the manner in which He is depicted.

The official end of Iconoclasm in 843, which gave the veneration of icons the seal of approval, is commemorated by the Orthodox Church with the feast of the Restoration of Orthodoxy, held annually on the first Sunday in Lent.

The Church awarded saintly status to those who defended the veneration of icons during its ban, either with their writings or with their lives. Such is the case of the monk Lazarus, who was tortured for refusing to give up the painting of icons during Iconoclasm. A miniature in the Ioannis Skylitzes chronicle (Codex Vitr. 26-2), dated to the twelfth century, depicts him at work within a church, painting an icon of the Virgin and Child (Figure 3). This is an important manuscript illumination, as it presents icon painting as a highly spiritual undertaking, which required contemplation and concentration. In fact, this belief reflects the sacredness of icon painting.

This also has an implication on how they built and build their churches.

A standard Byzantine church faces eastward. In a large-scale construction, the edifice is fronted at the west end by a narthex, which represents the things that exist on earth. It is followed by the nave in the middle, which represents the things that exist in Heaven, and finally the sanctuary or holy bema, which represents the things that exist above Heaven. The latter is only accessible to the clergy and off limits to any form of female presence, except images of the Virgin.

The highest zone hosts representations of the holiest persons, such as Christ Pantokrator (the 'all ruler') (Figure 6), the Virgin and angels, and scenes associated with heaven, e.g., the Ascension and the Pentecost.

The second zone mainly features scenes from significant episodes from the Life of Christ, based primarily on the narrative of the New Testament, which is known in Byzantine art as a 'festival cycle'. The liturgical calendar has a series of feasts, particular celebrations, often of events described in Holy Scripture; such as:

- the Annunciation to the Virgin
- the Nativity of Christ
- the Presentation of Christ in the Temple
- the Baptism of Christ
- the Transfiguration of Christ
- the Raising of Lazarus
- the Entry into Jerusalem
- the Betrayal of Christ
- the Road to Calvary
- the Crucifixion
- the Anastasis (Harrowing of Hell)
- the Koimesis (Dormition) of the Virgin.

Finally, in the third, final and lowest zone, a gathering of single saintly figures (male and female) are represented:

This gathering is usually placed at the congregation's eye-level. The saints are there to both guide and protect the faithful, humans who are named after them, and to remind them that if they follow the Christian teaching then they, too, can end up in Paradise for eternity.

At home, at least one room (usually the master bedroom) will have an icon of either Christ or of the Virgin and Child on one of its walls. Additional icons may be found in the remaining bedrooms and in the living room. The choice is usually based on the protector saint of the owner. Icons can be placed in any part of an Orthodox household, except the bathroom. It is very important to remember that their primary role is distinctly different from any other ordinary painting with which they may share space: their presence is linked to watching over and protecting the household and its members.

So, with our opening prayer – we continue with our sacred work; with music and refreshments.

Week 3 – Make No Graven Image? How Do Icons Work?

Now, a lot of the discomfort we can feel around practices in church stem from an inherited suspicion.

To decide for ourselves; it is best to find out why things are done; and then decide for ourselves accordingly – whether it enhances or detracts from our faith.

On the one hand, the Old Testament seems unequivocal in its condemnation of imagery of any kind, particularly religious imagery.

The iconophiles countered that while the Bible prohibited images in some passages, God also mandated the creation of images in other instances, for example God commanded that should adorn the Ark: *“You shall make two cherubim of gold; you shall make them of hammered work, at the two ends of the .” (Exodus 25:18, NRSV).*

Figurative art, often with a biblical theme, has been produced by Christians for Christians since at least the third century CE. As we discussed last week, figurative art in the form of sculpture is built into the fabric of many churches. When figures are depicted upon an altarpiece they form a focus of prayer. Private devotions are still aided by the contemplation of religious pictures.

The iconoclasts argued that God was invisible and infinite, and therefore beyond human ability to depict in images. Since Jesus was both human and divine, the iconoclasts argued that artists could not depict him in images. The iconophiles agreed that God could not be represented in images but argued that when Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was born as a human being with a physical body, allowing himself to be seen and depicted. Since some icons were believed to date to the time of Christ, icons were understood to offer a kind of proof that the Son of God entered the world as a human being, died on the cross, rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven—all for the salvation of humankind.

The iconoclasts also objected to practices of honouring icons with candles and incense, and by bowing before and kissing them, in which worshippers seemed to worship created matter (the icon itself) rather than the creator. But the iconophiles asserted that when Christians honoured images of Christ and the saints like this, they did not worship the artwork as such, but honoured the holy person represented in the image. Many of the same battles are fought, with a lot less theological knowledge; and far more expressions of preference in churches still today. We have a similar dichotomy of opinion in my house!

This apparent contravention of the Second Commandment has attracted continuous attention from theologians, worshippers and art historians. But the debate about the validity of Christian images first became a crisis in the Byzantine empire in the eighth century, known as the iconoclastic controversy.

Debating for over a century whether religious images should or should not be allowed may puzzle us today. But in Byzantium, religious images were bound up in religious belief and practice. In a society with no concept of separation of church and state, religious orthodoxy (right belief) was believed to impact not only the salvation of individual souls, but also the fate of the entire Empire.

While today the word 'icon' is usually used to mean a person or emblem representative of an age, movement or place: Marilyn Monroe, for instance, or Che Guevara. But, as we said in our first session, the Greek word from which it derives means 'likeness', and in art history the word icon refers to Christian images of the saints, Christ or the Virgin. It is most often used to refer to painted images on wooden panels, but the word can refer to work in any medium.

During the eighth century, the dispute on whether it was acceptable to depict divine nature escalated into a serious controversy, known as Iconoclasm ('breaking images'). The 'anti-images' faction obtained the Byzantine emperor's support, and a ban was imposed on the use of images. The controversy had two phases which lasted between 726–787 and 815–843. Icons emerged triumphant from this hard test. The Byzantine (i.e., Orthodox) Church took every precaution not to be accused of encouraging idolatrous worship when venerating icons.

Iconoclasts (anti-icons) may have been influenced by the rise of Islam: the followers of Allah were strict in their rejection of figurative art in a religious context. To direct prayer towards an image, to bow before it or to kiss it, was to return to the idolatrous practices of pagan Rome. To contain Christ in paint was to belittle his divine nature. For

the iconoclasts, the cross alone was sufficient as a visual symbol of the Christian message – much like the protestants during the Reformation.

The iconodules (pro-icon factions) argued that since in Christ, God had become man, his representation in paint was justified. They distinguished between the reverence given to an icon, and the worship directed towards God. They were not committing idolatry, they said, because they were worshipping the prototype upon whom the likeness was based, and not the material of the icon itself.

Finally, a Church Council in Constantinople in 843 ruled in favour of the iconodules. Icons were permitted once more as part of daily worship – a decision that is still commemorated on a feast day in the Orthodox Church known as 'The Triumph of Orthodoxy'.

Pope Gregory the Great – the Western Pope - also backed the use of icons in a letter. He wrote:

“For indeed it had been reported to us that, inflamed with inconsiderate zeal, you had broken images of saints, as though under the plea that they ought not to be adored . And indeed in that you forbade them to be adored, we altogether praise you; but we blame you for having broken them. Say, brother, what priest has ever been heard of as doing what you have done? If nothing else, should not even this thought have restrained you, so as not to despise other brethren, supposing yourself only to be holy and wise? For to adore a picture is one thing, but to learn through the story of a picture what is to be adored is another. For what writing presents to readers, this a picture presents to the unlearned who behold, since in it even the ignorant see what they ought to follow; in it the illiterate read...”

What do you think?

Does it matter?

Is it relevant?

Do people today confuse idols for icons?

Where do you find God in works of art?

What is it that speaks to you?

Let us ponder those questions as we pray and continue our writing...

<https://fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/explore-our-collection/highlights/context/stories-and-histories/iconoclasm>

Week 4 – Endings & Blessings

Thank you for coming to the last week of our study. I hope you've enjoyed it and found it spiritual and meditative. I hope you've also learnt a few things along the way; and you hold in your hands something that you have made with your hands.

One iconographer wrote that:

The purpose of the Iconographer is through their images attempt to evoke a prayerful ambience and connection between the icon and the observer. While the general attitude of the image is serious, it also must contain a sense of hope and consolation. Icons unmasterfully but piously painted can achieve the same result, despite a technical awkwardness inherent in amateur work.

Yours may be better, but I'm certain that is mine!

We will finish, or continue our icons, today – as usual with music and refreshments available.

At the end of our session; if you are happy that they are finished; then we will gather in the Lady chapel to bless your icons so that you can take them home to assist you in your own prayers!

We will use our prayers in your packs...

Skin Tones in Acrylic: A Process

March 31, 2016 by reinkat

I have been experimenting with painting icons using acrylic paints, after years of using egg tempera exclusively. I kind of like acrylics, with their ease of use and quick drying. Over time, I have studied with several different teachers, each with their own methods, and it has been interesting trying to find my own preferences and methods in my iconography.



I recently found myself fairly well pleased with a way to paint skin tones (sankir) with my very limited acrylic palette.



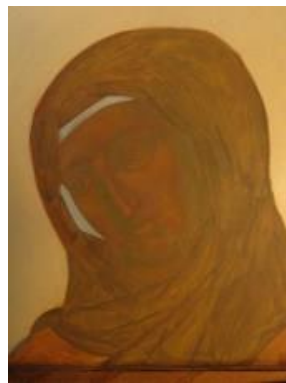
I use the paint directly from the tube, thinning it with equal parts water and Golden Fluid Matte Medium. Using only water gives you lovely transparency, but often there is a problem with lifting: the acrylic medium binds the paint to the surface, making it permanent. I mix the medium, water, and paint, using an old jar lid as a container, until it has the general consistency of heavy cream. Letting it sit for a couple of hours allows any bubbles to disperse.

My palette is very limited: the colours in the photo are 95% of what I used to paint these faces. One can also use the same powdered pigments as in egg tempera: just use the acrylic medium instead of egg yolk for the binding agent to make the liquid paint.

I'll go through my modest, cautious method (and there are many ways to make this work, this is just what I have stumbled upon) step by step, with this painting of St. Monica:



First, of course, I transfer the drawing to the board, line it with a mixture of red, ultramarine blue, and green to make a dark, dense colour. I don't often use black for anything. I then cover the entire board with a layer of yellow ochre to open the icon and provide a unifying harmonious colour below the other layers of paint.



The first layer of the skin tone/sankir is Chromium Oxide Green with a bit of Yellow Ochre. It is pretty green and alarming—but don't worry, it will work. Paint it on all skin and hair areas. If necessary, redraw most of the lines: upper eyelid, pupil, eyebrows, nose, mouth, chin. Next I paint on, in the areas that will be highlighted with Cadmium Red Light. I am careful to blend in the edges at this early step as best as I can, using water to thin out and avoid sharp boundary lines.



Mix some Yellow Ochre, about half and half, with the red. Thin with water and acrylic medium to make it transparent. (Anytime you thin acrylics with water, remember to add in some medium. Otherwise the pigments might not bind properly and will lift off when you paint the next layer.) Apply this colour as a base coat for the bright highlights. After this somewhat orangey layer, I use pure Yellow Ochre in transparent layers, until the features become distinct, moving gradually back away from the edges.

The brighter highlights are made by adding Titanium White to the Yellow Ochre. Float on transparent layers for a small icon, brush them on a larger one, using water and medium to dilute, soften and fade the edges so that there are no sharp boundaries.



As you paint, it can happen that the whitish paint layers come up too brightly, or the tones are too chalky. Fix this by putting a thin layer of transparent Red or Yellow Ochre –or both–over the entire skin and hair area, including the green shadow areas. These faint layers of red, then ochre, will soften the harsh green and red areas that are showing. They become more brown or olive in shade, depending on whether you push back the chalky areas with reds or ochres.



The transparent layers of reds or ochres will blend the entire skin tones beautifully, eliminating “islands” overly bright colour. Use as many layers as you feel is necessary, going back and forth between painting on highlights and pushing them back. With each layer, the face emerges a bit more. One nice thing about using this method is that it is never hopeless. You can always fix and correct anything. Paint it on, push it back. Just keep on tinkering with it, using the paint more like transparent water colours. Reline if necessary. Use a transparent layer of burnt sienna and green if you need to darken shadows.



Finally, once the skin tones are softly blended and look correct to your eye, use a 60-40 mixture of Titanium White to Yellow Ochre to do the brightest highlights. Pure white is too harsh. Paint in the dark lines (eyebrows, eyes, etc). And again, if they are too stark, push them back with a layer of Yellow Ochre over all again. Repaint if necessary. Put in pure red (transparent) lines along the nose, mouth, chin, around forehead, red spots in the corner of the eye and by the ear, and anywhere else that a warm emphatic line is useful.



Reinkat's blog

I am an iconographer. I have been studying Russian/Greek style icons for approximately 15 years. A trip to Russia to study icons and see masterworks "in person" was one of the highlights of my life. I am married with 3 children. I love the Lord, icons, my family, my church, dogs, hiking, camping, and the outdoors in general. I also enjoy reading novels, gardening, and eating chocolate ice cream.

<https://reinkat.wordpress.com/about/>