THE ICON
TRUTH AND FABLES

By Irina Gorbunova-Lomax

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This book by professional art historian, iconographer, and icon painting teacher Irina Gorbunova-Lomax, first published in Russia, offers a pene-trating critique of the discourse on icons and icon painting as developed in Russian émigré circles in Europe in the second half of the twentieth century.
Deconstructing the myths and fables which have grown up around icon painting, and attacking malpractice in its teaching, its author suggests ways out of the sterile impasse in which icon painting in Europe currently finds itself.

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Preface

The present work is an updated version of one originally published in Russian in 2009. I wrote it out of a growing conviction that the first attempts within the Orthodox Church in Western Europe in the 1960s to place iconography on a proper theological footing were clumsy and misguided and have seriously impaired the ability of religious painting to express deep Christian truths. This present book is conceived, not as a complete study of the situation, but as essentially a damage limitation exercise, highlighting some popular misconceptions arising from this initial gauche theologizing and suggesting paths towards a 'Theology of the Icon' that is more solidly based, both theologically and in terms of art history and theory, and which will free the icon to play a full role in the transmission — traditio — of Christian spirituality.

Fifteen years have passed since the publication of the first version. The present edition incorporates the experience of a further fifteen years' lecturing on iconography and teaching icon painting in Belgium to students of more than a dozen nationalities, from both Orthodox and Roman Catholic backgrounds. The quality of the work they produce convinces me more and more of the correctness of the direction I have taken.

A particular word of thanks to my husband, then deacon and now priest Michael Lomax, my theological sounding-board when conceiving the original text, and later, as its translator, fighting with it and with me to get it into shape for an English-speaking audience.

I dedicate this book to my students, past and present, and all those who set out seriously on the arduous but rewarding task of entering and continuing the tradition of icon painting and of Christian art.

Foreword

When the subject of my concern, which led to this book, first presen-ted itself to me in the late 1990s, I had as yet no idea that I would one day come to live in Belgium or that I would write about icons. At the time, I was content to paint in the workshop of Mother N, on the shores of Lake Onega in the depths of Karelia.

My subject first took the guise of a friendly young woman, a French television journalist, who had undertaken a seemingly endless journey (hundreds of miles by plane, then a night train, and then two hours by bus in never-ending forests) to find the parish of the Dormition in the town of Kondopoga, and there our workshop. It was here, she had been informed, that *real* iconographers still painted *real* icons, respecting all the rules and all the canons.

Hardly had she glimpsed our parish house, and our intrepid traveler's face already fell slightly: the large *isba* was decorated and furnished in the style of a house in the European countryside. In addition, one of Mother N's iconographer assistants (the author of this book) addressed her in pretty decent French, rendering redundant the interpreter she had brought from St. Petersburg.

But the biggest disappointments were yet to come. On entering the workshop, our visitor stopped horrified. On a table in front of her was an icon in the nineteenth-century "Academic" style, awaiting restoration. "What's that?" the visitor asked. "Aren't such icons banned in Russia?" It took a bit of time for us to realize that it was the Academic style of the icon that shocked her. But we soon informed our Parisian fundamentalist that these icons have never been proscribed and are still in use in churches, just like Byzantine icons. "But you, surely you don't still paint in this decadent style?" our visitor insisted. We were obliged to explain that no, our workshop indeed worked only in the Byzantine style, but we also accepted icons for restoration. And, as we had the know-how to restore not only icons painted in tempera, but also those produced in oil, people brought to us icons in every style.

The fact that we also know how to paint in oil did not improve our reputation in our visitor's eyes. Her critical eye ran round the work-shop: on the walls, the shelves, and on each painting desk were dozens of small photos of icons of every conceivable origin, school, and period. One served as a model of a canonical scheme, a second was used for facial expressions or folds, a third had been left by some-one on a visit, a fourth was dear to one of the iconographers for personal reasons.

All this “iconostasis”, this delightful jumble of colors and style, so common to any icon workshop, smelt to her of sedition: paper icons are not “real”, we cannot pray in front of them because they are absolutely empty of divine presence. And even more so, they can obviously not serve as models, and especially the reproductions of icons painted in an Academic style!

“But how then does one go about creating the image of St. Seraphim of Sarov, who lived in the nineteenth century and for this reason was never painted in the Byzantine manner?” we ask, trying to call our visitor back to her right mind. Our Parisian replies without hesita-tion that in this case, you have to paint the icon after the witnesses‘ descriptions because resemblance is not nearly as important as holi-ness, and a person painting an icon from a photo, a portrait, or worse, from nature, commits irreparable damage to holiness. Surprised at the depth of knowledge of our visitor, herself a Roman Catholic, though by her own admission non-practicing for many years, we question her as to the sources of her knowledge. Her response lacked both clarity and intelligibility. For her, what she says is commonly accepted; it is simply “in the air”.

Visibly, the Parisian air vibrates with a whole series of very amusing theories about the Russian icon. For example, we all, starting with Mother N., fell into sin by using ready-made pigments (small bottles marked “Sennelier” and “Windsor and Newton” betrayed us!). Instead of these artificial products, deprived of all spirituality, we should have collected colored stones and ground them ourselves, as only in this way does Mother Earth offer its minerals to God. Our timid assertions that our ready-made pigments are also of terrestrial, not Martian, origin failed to convince our visitor. Next to be condemned were our palettes: pigments and egg yolks ought to be mixed directly with the finger in the eggshells, of course! And our modern varnish! Only *olifa* oil is truly holy! But thank God, our eggs do attract any reproach: we gladly buy them in the village itself (but for the untheological reason that they are fresher and firmer). What would have remained of our reputation if we had purchased them in the supermarket? *Horribile dictu!*

Having completed her review of the “material” aspects of our work, our visitor turned her interest to the spiritual side, that is, the “special” prayers we were supposed to recite when working. She was stunned to learn that we do not recite, and indeed do not even know, any prayer of this kind: in the parish house, we say the regular morning and evening prayers, nothing more or less. Every Sunday and every church holiday, we go to church, and we take communion regularly, but while working, we do not recite any incantation, either out loud or silently. In any case, there is no obligation to do so.

With all this inquisition, we no longer even have time to speak of icon painting itself. Besides, the artistic side of our business does not interest our visitor that much. What interests her is authenticity, the criteria of which she appears to know better than we do. More than that, she shares with us some pearls of "Parisian wisdom." For example, the faces on Mother N.'s icons are for her far too lightly colored: faces in "real" icons must be clay-colored, because Adam was modeled from this substance. "How then do we depict the enlightenment of the faces of the saints and the Lord Himself?", we ask stunned. "You have to understand all this in the spiritual sense," the visitor replies. But as we still do not grasp why we are required to understand clay in the literal sense and illumination in the spiritual sense, she adds: "Illumination is expressed by the absence of shadows in the icon!"

"What, no shadows? What's that all about?" we say, pointing to the reproduction of the famous Mother of God of Vladimir. Here are the shadows under the eyebrows of the Mother of God, under her chin, and look, here is the shadow of her nose." "These are all own shadows and not cast shadows! But it's cast shadows I'm speaking of! Where are they?" our visitor retorts triumphantly. I take a brush and press it slightly into the palm of my hand. "In your opinion, is what kind of shadow is this?" "Cast, of course!" "And this one?" I remove the brush and replace it with one of my fingers of the other hand, so as to cast the same shadow. "Cast!" our visitor affirms. "You really think so? It's still my body, even if the hands are different." Finally, I slightly lift my index finger so as to cast its shadow on the palm of the same hand. "And that, what kind of shadow is that?"

Our visitor feels the ground becoming unsteady under her feet. The borderline between cast shadows and own shadows is clearly not as distinct as in the treatises or lectures from which she has drawn her information. There it was all so understandable, so obvious. "You know all your optical and physical science proves nothing. I'm talking about the spiritual meaning of the icon!" she says, trying to extricate herself. Faced with that argument, we remain speechless. We are dying to ask her how a cast shadow, for example by a person's foot, on the floor could make him no longer illuminated, while a shadow cast by her nose on her cheek could not. But we sense that our visitor's tolerance with our lack of spirituality is beginning to run out!

Meanwhile, lunchtime has arrived, and we troop down to the di-ning room. Father N., his family, guests, carpenters from the parish workshop, iconographers — twenty people in all — sit down at the table. The Parisian glances around her with some concern, no doubt preparing to repast on black bread and water, but as we are not in Lent, we are served chicken soup, chops, and *kasha.* And then, horror of horrors, the iconographers share the same menu as the others! The last illusion

collapses! “But what? You don’t fast forty days before commencing your work?” our visitor asks with a trembling voice. I translate the question. The apprentices giggle, the carpenters burst out laughing. We explain to our visitor that here we work every day and not once every forty days, and that our only fasting rules are the general rules of the Church.

She is inconsolable. Inconsolable and deaf to all the theological, histo-rical, and cultural exhortations of Father N., himself a graduate in Art History of the Academy of St. Petersburg. She knows better than we what a true icon is! She has made a crazy journey in the hope of finding, in the heart of impenetrable forests, a wooden hermitage populated with emaciated *startsi* with long white beards and dressed in black, speaking only Church Slavonic, and eating locusts and wild honey. These *startsi* should cut linden boards with an ax, grind ocher and cinnabar in copper mortars, and, every forty days, while singing secret incantations, paint a “true icon”. And not having found in our parish house and workshop the exoticism of the old Christian Russia she had come looking for, she feels cheated. But for her, those who have deceived her are not the people who have fed her with these crackpot ideas about icons; it is not those people who recommended Mother N’s icon workshop to her. No, it is us! “Well, if at your workshop you do not paint true icons, we can’t really make a film about you!” she says, and gets up to leave.

We have a good laugh and quickly forget this strange episode. Maybe our Paris lady is still searching for the true iconographers of her dreams. Who would have thought back then that less than ten years later I would not laugh at all! That I would see with my own eyes the horrible and shameful daubings, presented by dozens of painters as “traditional Russian icons.” That I would be hearing lectures in which pious audiences were led to believe that Eastern Christian spirituality lies in the plastering of the boards and the grinding of stones into pigments, in inverted perspective and in the differentiated appearance of the two halves of Christ’s face. That my timid call for restraint would lead to an accusation of lack of spirituality, and even of communism! And not only me but also all contemporary Orthodox Russia. And what was then a silly misunderstanding, a small insignificant episode in the parish of the Dormition, is reproduced here in Western Europe in far more appalling proportions. These daydreams about Russian icons appeared to have acquired the strength of dogmas. Horrible amateur daubings, engendered and justified by all these false doctrines, unworthy of the name of sacred art or even just Christian art, are spreading more and more, and are accepted by millions of Europeans, Christian or not, as real Christian icons.

Fortunately, there are exceptions, people whose Christian conscience is not content with such theology or such icon painting. Here in Belgium the author has met sincere people, Orthodox and

Catholics, who are seriously learning to paint icons, or are already painting them and painting them well. This book, in fact, was born out of my answers to their questions, and those that we get at exhibitions and lectures.

It is not our fault that these questions are nearly always suffixed with "Is it true that…?" and that our answer is almost always" No, because …". It is not our fault, but that of the false doctrines that still hold sway in Europe. And if a series of chapters in this book are devoted to the demolition of ideas that are too often presented as self-evident, the reader should not be surprised. This is not the first time in the history of ideas that completely wacky theories have led, by healthy reaction, to more reasonable views on one or the other issue. The entire corpus of Orthodox theology, for example, was developed in response to heresies.

We shall limit ourselves in this book to judging the veracity and quality of all-too-widespread false theories on the icon *while remaining in the framework of the history of art,* because it is in that context that these theories indeed belong, not in the field of theology where they fell through ignorance and inadvertence. Our goal here is only to examine closely, both as an art historian and a professional icon painter, these doctrines that parade themselves under the name of "theology of the icon." The author does not claim to be a theologian, but she always takes care to check the accuracy of her theological remarks with Church teaching.

1. Materials, painting technique, and technology

We begin our study of the artistic language of the icon by reviewing the traditional painting techniques and materials. In some quarters, we find the belief that to cover a wooden board first with gesso and then with egg tempera is enough to make it into an icon. This idea is totally wrong, as much on the historical and cultural levels as from the viewpoint of the Church. This definition is, however, so deeply rooted in the collective consciousness that we find it even in

some encyclopedias. Moreover, the quality of contemporary icons is also evaluated according to these criteria. Popular literature on the icon, the *do-it-yourself* textbooks that are so popular in the West, are inconceivable without pretty pictures illustrating these *clichés:* colorful stones, crushed by heavy pestles into brightly colored powder, egg — the symbol of life, cinnabar and azure in eggshells, the sensual texture of a fresh board, rustic *pavoloka* fabric, gleaming white plaster, and the rest. What could be more magnificent than this display of such attractive materials, displays that have indeed attracted more than one, flattering our senses?

Does any direct relationship exist between these materials and the essence of the icon? Let us try to answer this question calmly, avoiding the traps of pseudo-mysticism and lyricism. But first, an icon, what exactly is it?

The simple translation of the Greek *eikon* (= image) is too vague for our purposes. Not all images are icons! We are accustomed to use the word "icon", not for any image, but only for *sacred images,* those of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Mother of God, angels and other bodiless forces, and saints, as well as episodes of sacred history. In so doing, we separate out icons and place them apart from all other artistic work, giving the impression there is art, including painting, as one category, and icon painting as a totally separate category.

But, following this now widespread approach, we must not forget that, originally, this separation between "normal" painting and icon-painting did not exist. But for Saints Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa (fourth century), these concepts are synonymous.[1] The founding fathers of the Christian theology constantly used the term 'artist' instead of 'iconographer', 'painting' in lieu of 'icon painting' and even — *horror horrorum* — 'picture' instead of 'icon' i.e. using for the sacred image a word that has taken on a pejorative meaning in a certain school of the theology of icons. For example, St. John Chrysostom (fourth century) used the terms 'painting', 'picture', 'image' in the sense in which we use the word 'Icon', recognizing as icons the creations of encaustic artists, sculptors, jewellers, chasers, fresco artists, thereby recognizing them all, *ipso facto,* as icon producers.[2] St. Cyril of Alexandria[3] and St. Sophrony[4] (sixth century) already used the specific word 'icon', but not in contrast to, but synonymous with words like 'image', 'representation', 'picture'. In the documents of the Fifth and Sixth Ecumenical Councils, we again met all these terms as equivalent and interchangeable.

[1] St. John Damascene. *Three treatises in Defense of the Veneration of Icons*, St Petersburg 2001, pp. 110–116.

[2] St. John Damascene, *op. cit*. pp. 122–123

[3] St. John Damascene, *op. cit*. pp. 132–133

[4] St. John Damascene, *op. cit*. p. 169

Only in the eighth century does St. John Damascene, in his work “Three treatises in defense of the veneration of icons”, start to use the term ‘icon’ as a dominant name for the sacred image. But this classical author does not totally reject from his vocabulary the terms ‘image’, ‘picture’, ‘representation’ and continues from time to time to use them as synonyms of the word ‘icon’. There is also an antonym — this is not a picture but an idol. It is possible that the very fixing of the term ‘icon’ in the special meaning of ‘sacred image’ gave rise to the iconoclastic controversy, and the need to express clearly and succinctly the concept of ‘the picture (image, fresco, cameo, mosaic, etc.), representing God and the Saints’.

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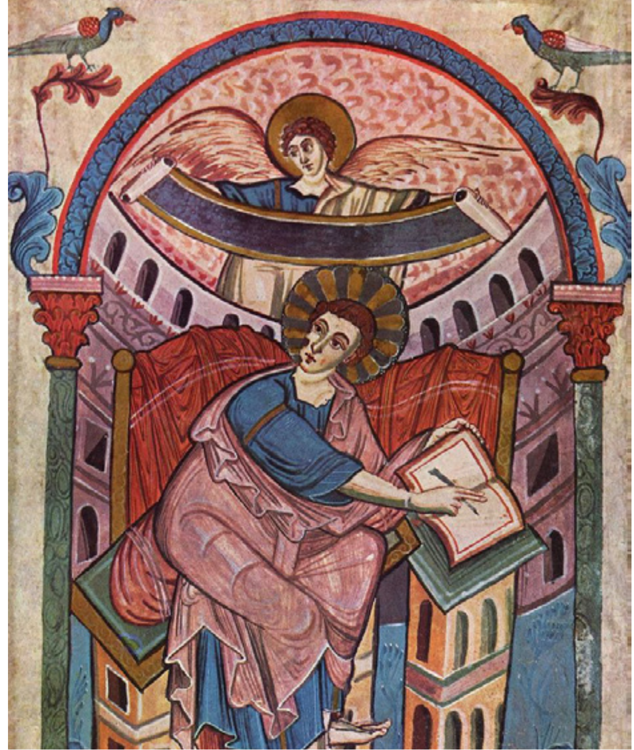
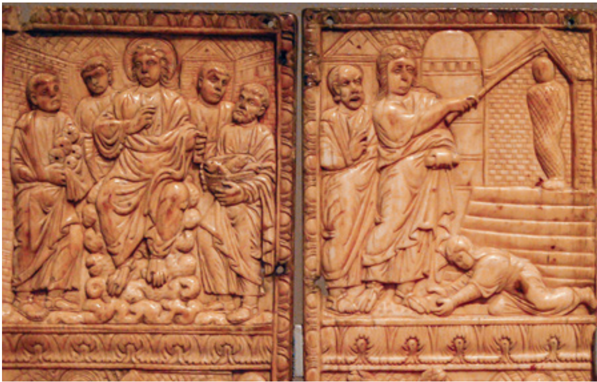




It is these concepts of picture, icon, and idol that are reflected in the decisions of the Seventh Ecumenical Council. *Certain pictures are icons, while remaining pictures, and other pictures are idols, while remaining pictures,* and certain pictures are simply pictures, neither sacred nor forbidden, created variously for teaching purposes, in memory of people or events, or for the decoration of everyday life, simply out of the abundance of creative energy.

We can therefore, and on a provisional basis, define the icon as a *sacred image, in the form of an easel painting (mobile)*. In so doing, we should not, however, lose sight of the fact that sacred monumental painting (frescos), sculpture, illuminated manuscripts, and even certain kinds of decorative art are so close as to interpenetrate at times with the icon proper. In present-day scientific language, we also find, for distinguishing the icon from other forms of pictorial expression, the specific term of *iconic* image, a tautology that perfectly demonstrates the profound unity of Christian sacred art.

Is this definition sufficient to cover fully the icon? We have come all this way without speaking of wooden board, gesso, egg tempera, nor of so-called "Byzantine" style or even of canonicity.

Style and canonicity will be the subject of specific chapters. In the present chapter, we limit ourselves to the questions of materials and technology that relate to tempera painting and to the board itself, while insisting that these are not exclusive criteria for describing a religious painting as an icon.

EGG TEMPERA

In sacred painting, egg tempera is no more than one technique among others, as pigments (fine colored powders) were historically mixed not only with egg yolk but could also be combined with other binders. The oldest icons surviving to our day are painted in encaustic, a technique that uses heated beeswax as a binder. This was the main technique used in easel painting up until the iconoclast crisis of the eighth century. Also used as binders, besides wax and egg yolk, were various vegetable glues, and even linseed oil, well before the official onset of oil painting.

Certain blue or green pigments, which do not bind in suspension with egg yolk, were crushed with honey, gum arabic, or oil. This mixture was then used in the areas in question of icons painted otherwise with egg tempera.

Once oil painting appeared on the scene, it was used not only in the Catholic West but also in the Orthodox East, and not only in sacred painting in the Academic style, but equally much in "Byzantine" painting. There were techniques in which the first layers were placed in oil and finished with egg tempera, and others on the contrary where surfaces painted in tempera were then retouched in oil. Some local iconography schools worked with oil paint on glass, with the glass serving both as support and protective layer. We can also mention here icons in enamel (painted or *cloisonné*), which were produced in various countries and at different times, as well as the mosaic icons (not to be confused with wall mosaics) which were very popular in the Byzantine Empire until its downfall.

The egg tempera itself was composed to recipes that varied from one school to another. 'Entire' tempera mixes the yolk and the white of the egg. The best-known temperas use only the yolk, but this is at times diluted with water, vinegar, or beer. These mixtures are used at times fresh, at other times after a period of rest. These different mixtures have varying technical characteristics, calling for specific processes, which can strongly influence the artist's technique and style. It is therefore correct to say that there can exist more technical differences between two schools of tempera painting than between egg tempera painting and oil painting!

THE SUPPORT

Wooden boards are the main, but not the only form of support for icons. Besides natural materials (wood, stone, bone), we also find man-made materials: fabric, glass, metal, and, since the eighteenth century, porcelain and papier-mâché.

'Tablets' made of several layers of fabric glued together have been known since the Middle Ages in Greece and Russia. Prototypes of our existing laminated wood, thin, very strong, and lighter than wood, they survive much better than wood: the grain of wood is uneven and capricious, wood can bend, crack along the grain or joins, and even break in two. Tablet icons are well preserved from this type of trouble. Their only disadvantage compared with wood was that, at the time, they were complicated and more expensive to produce, and it was impossible to make them in large dimensions (nowadays it is wood that is the more expensive). Even today, supports in glued fabric or chipboard are used wherever it is useful to have thin, lightweight icons: at the top of an iconostasis, or the series of icons for the daily feasts of the church calendar.

It is useful to remind ourselves that all the long and costly methods of preparing the wooden board serve to obviate, and ideally to eliminate, the peculiarities of wood as a raw material. The board is gradually dried to remove all moisture from its porous structure. It is soaked with glue to fill the now empty pores. All knots are cut out of the wood, and the holes filled with the same wood to ensure an even surface porosity. Onto the wood is then glued a linen or cotton fabric, in one or two layers (the first along the grain of the wood and the second diagonally to it) so as to produce a complete barrier against its hydrophilic natural texture, always likely to cause accidents (bubbles, cracking, and loss of gesso). Lastly, several layers of gesso (also known as *levkas*), a mixture of glue and white chalk powder, is spread on top. Each layer is allowed to dry thoroughly, so that the paint has no contact whatsoever with the board, because the support for the tempera is the gesso and not the wood. The sides and the back of the board or panel are imbibed with paint or oil, so as to enclose the wood on all sides, until nothing of the natural aspect of wood is left. In this way, the icon board completely loses its own physiognomy, and Fr. Pavel Florensky is telling the truth when he speaks of the icon as a substitute for fresco, an attempt to create a "wall fragment"[5], regardless moreover of the original appearance of the material (wood, cloth, paper mâché, or laminated wood) dissimilated under the gesso layer.

Historically, artists have painted on the supports available to them, supports which have varied depending on the place and time. St. John Damascene in his *Three speeches defending the veneration of icons* claimed that any material, in the hands of an artist, can be used to the glory of God.[6] We have no reason to consider egg yolk to be purer or holier than linseed oil, or a limewood board to be nobler than any other medium. A particular material is selected because it best suits the artist's project, and not because it is "more traditional."

THE PIGMENTS

Of all materials used by iconographers, one would expect pigments to be the least affected by these supposedly tradition-based prejudices. Whether in the form of natural minerals or industrial products, their chemical formula is identical. But, paradoxically, here too fantasy ideas abound, sacralizing unimportant secondary elements to the detriment of the essential.

We know these outlandish and so widespread claims: a true icono-grapher should himself collect the stones for his colors in Nature and grind them personally into pigments. Leaving aside the

[5] Pavel Florensky, *Иконостас. Избранные труды по искусству*. St. Petersburg, 1993, p. 130–131. Page numbers refer to the Russian edition.

[6] St. John Damascene, *op. cit*. pp. 64–65.

curious “chthonic” aftertaste of these claims (Mother Earth, direct contact increasing the mystical power of holy icons and the rest), let us stick to the facts. A village painter was obliged to limit his palette to soot from the oven, local clays, and colored particles obtained by scraping oxidized metals. The higher his socio-professional level, the less he participated in person in the preparation of pigments. The market for “ready-made” pigments became more accessible to him, he became more demanding in terms of their quality, and he was less inclined to take the risk of crushing unknown minerals without being sure of their reaction with other pigments, in particular under the action of hot *olifa* varnishes or the sunlight.
Andrei Rublev certainly did not go picking up himself in the meadows around Moscow the precious cinnabar and shining lapis lazuli of his icons: he imported them from abroad. To prepare a sufficient quantity of pigments for the frescoes in the Dormition Cathedral in Vladimir, he would have had to spend all his life grinding them!
The *Paterikon*[7] tells us that another holy Russian iconographer, St. Alipi of the Monastery of the Caves in Kiev, spent on materials a third of the money he received for his work. Obviously, his primary concern was for quality, not for “connecting with Mother Earth.”

Today, when ready-made pigments (natural or artificial) are available in powder form and more accessible and cheaper than the natural raw materials, it would be strange to oblige iconographers to set up grinding equipment in their back kitchens. There is no justifica-tion — technical or theological — for this whatsoever. Technically, the advantage of industrially produced pigments lies in their compliance with standardized official norms. Their lightfastness, their reactions with other pigments and egg yolk, their grain, their covering power, etc., are checked by the manufacturer’s specialists, giving a certain degree of security to the artist. By contrast, handmade pigments, even when produced from carefully chosen raw materials and worked with all appropriate care, can always give unpleasant surprises. While for eating or dressing natural products may be the better choice, this does not apply to pigments for painting. It very often happens that artificial pigments are the most resistant to light, have more vivid colors, or other equally desirable qualities.
Nor does the very notion of “natural” necessarily mean “used by medieval artists.” The chemical manufacture of pigments has been known since ancient times (in ancient Egypt, for example), and contemporary recipes differ from medieval recipes mainly by their precision and their concern for the health of those who prepare them. More than this, we can state without hesitation that

[7] Paterikon: a collection of narratives about outstanding religious figures of a particular monastery or locality. We have used the *Киевопечерский патерик по древним рукописям* edition of St. Sergius Lavra, Moscow, 1991, p. 144.

chemical science as we know it was born in the laboratories of medieval artists and physicians. Indeed, the creation of new colors and new medicaments was the primary purpose of chemical research from the outset. This explains why some famous medieval iconographers were also physicians, two such distant professional areas being chemically linked! And in any case, we have no pretext to suppose that Dionysios or any other famous medieval icon painter would have lost their place in heaven if, in addition to only natural pigments, they had had on their palettes red cadmium or blue phthalocyanine or green cobalt. Certainly, they would have accepted using these pigments just as they accepted lead white and yellow arsenic.

As for the theological reasons that supposedly justify the rejection of artificial pigments, we have seen that this runs counter to the opinion of St. John Damascene on the equal dignity of all materials belonging to the created world. The possible contact of the raw material or ready-made pigment with impure substances or impure beings does not make them unfit for icon painting. Let us recall that the recipes given in the *Hermeneia*[8] (the classic manual containing the experience of generations of iconographers on Mount Athos) are very far from any fundamentalist purity. We can cite rotten egg white, the boiling of animal skins to make glue, copper filings covered with a layer of fresh manure, and so on. These artists saw no mystical impurity in these natural substances that seem nevertheless to embody the idea of impurity and decomposition.

The rite of the blessing of the icon, celebrated in church, washes it and purifies it of its "earthly" origin, including the will of those who worked on it using earthly and perishable materials, according to the technique specific to a particular school or period.

In summary, although the majority of the icons are painted in egg tempera on wood, this is not an exclusive criterion of authenticity. There is no foundation for describing as "decadent" or "false" icons painted on other media, using a different technique or following other recipes.

THE USE OF GOLD

And gold? Sometimes we hear people saying that the gilding of the background, of the haloes, of the *assistes* (gold hatching highlighting the shapes of objects) is neither more nor less than the equivalent of the uncreated light.[9]

[8] Dionysios of Fourna, *Ерминия или наставление в живописном искусстве*. In *Икона. Секреты ремесла* under the direction of A. Kravtchienko, Moscow, 1993, pp. 27, 51 ff.

[9] L. Uspensky. *Théologie de l'icône dans l'Eglise orthodoxe*. Paris, Cerf, 1993, pp. 155–158 and 472–474.

The ease with which this expression is used is staggering! Uncreated light is a phenomenon of the spiritual world, invisible by definition except in very rare circumstances. From where does this peremptory and self-confident discourse come which tells us that the uncreated light cannot be transmitted by the pigments themselves, and therefore requires the use of gold? In what proportion (double? triple?) would this noble metal be better able to render uncreated light than the different minerals that are used in composing the colors? No one can answer this question, but the use of gold in the icon is still considered of paramount importance. The popularizers of the icon are unable to avoid such passages as *"the flamboyant, golden paintings tell us conclusively that the world opening before us in the icon is the supernatural world, the world of the Absolute, the Eternal."*[10] In its further development this lyricism leads to amusing theological conclusions, as *"the supreme beauty of the Theophany is neither in the form nor in the color but in the purifying, formless, life-giving fire"*.[11]

In fact, the habit of using gold in sacred images existed long before Christianity. This is partly explained by the custom of placing on the altar of divinity the most precious objects, and to use for worship works of great value, able to last an eternity. In pagan cults, a mystical meaning was sometimes attributed to the use of gold, the brightness of the metal being directly related to the light of the sun, evoking the life-giving light of a sun god.

Some scholars even tell us that, under the reign of Pharaoh Akhenaten, who had tried to establish the monotheistic cult of the sun god Aten, the concept of this invigorating emanation was very close to the Christian idea of the uncreated light.

We should note, however, that idols in solid gold (like the "golden calf" of the Bible), or plated with it, are characteristic of cults and cultures of a very primitive level. In more developed pre-Christian cultures, there was already a preference to use gold only for the secondary details of the sacred images of the gods, reserving for their faces stone, wood, or ivory, all materials that "humanize" more the carved image. The Christian icon also followed this trend: gold is used in the background of the icon, and sometimes as thin hatching or *assiste* on certain details of clothing, furniture, architectural constructions, or plants. It has become the rule, even though it is not from these objects, but from the unique God, that this uncreated light emanates, that this light should be rendered by a metal alloy containing a predetermined percentage of gold.

Let us quote here some "concrete observations" and the amusing conclusions drawn from these

[10] Deacon Andrey Kurayev, *Традиция догмат обряд*. Moscow-Klin, 1995, p. 318.

[11] *ibid.*

observations, committed to writing a hundred years ago by Prince Yevgeny Trubetskoy, at the very dawn of the rediscovery of the ancient Russian icon: *"In this illumination by the divine light, the 'assiste' makes us participate in the glory of everything that surrounds the Godhead, everything that has already entered the divine life or appears as its immediate vicinity. The 'assiste', for example, covers the throne and the brilliant mantle of Sophia, Divine Wisdom, as well as the Virgin's mantle when she ascends to heaven. The wings of the angels and the tops of the trees of paradise are often touched in the same way. In several icons, the 'assiste' appears on the onion-shaped domes of the churches."*[12]

Is the Mother of God before her Dormition really more distant from the divine life than treetops or church domes? Little theological training is needed to distance oneself from this preposterous "Marian thesis"!

And what about the Christology in colors? *"In general, the colors of the other world (a term Trubetskoy introduces here with neither inverted commas nor definition, leaving us to guess its exact meaning from the context) were used with remarkable tact, especially by the painters of Novgorod. The assiste does not appear on the icons representing the earthly life of the Savior, which focus on the humanity of Christ, and in which his divinity is hidden under his condition of a slave. But as soon as the artist sees Christ appear in glory, or wishes to point forward to his future glorification, the assiste reappears."*[13]

According to this incomparable logic, iconographers did not see the glorified Christ, and did not want to point to his future glory in the icons of the Holy Face. This is because we never see *assiste* in the icons of the Holy Face, except in very rare instances where it appears on the Savior's hair. In the same way, we suppose, the artist did not see Christ's glory, according to Trubetskoy, in the icons of the *Crucifixion* nor even, despite its title, in the type called *King of Glory*, depicting Christ after his descent from the cross. The logical conclusion would be that only the *Pantocrator* type expresses the divine glory, since the *clave* (the wide, decorated ribbon) on the Savior's shoulder is usually decorated with *assiste.*

Here is another sample of the same irresponsible lyricism, dating this time from the end of the twentieth century, of *"the first and only approach up to now to the old Russian icon, which is at once artistic, historical, and theological."*[14] *"The strongest artistic effect of this use of 'assiste' is obtained in those icons where the artist wants to contrast the two worlds, and to widen the distance between the earthly and the divine, for example,*

[12] Yevgeny Trubetskoy, *Trois études sur l'icône,* Paris, YMCA-PRESS/O.E.I.L., 1986, p. 66.

[13] *ibid,* p. 67.

[14] Preface to the Russian edition of Trubetskoy, *Три очерка о русской иконе,* Novosibirsk, 1991, p. 44.

in the ancient icons of the Dormition. One look at the best of them tells us that the Virgin, dressed in dark clothing and resting on her deathbed among those familiar to her, remains bodily in this plane of being that we can touch with our physical hands and see with our physical eyes. But Christ, in light-colored clothing standing behind the bed and holding in his arms the Virgin's soul in the guise of a child, is manifestly a supernatural vision. His entire face glows and sparkles, separated from the intentional heaviness of the colors of the earthly plane by the ethereal lightness of the lines highlighted with 'assiste'."[15]

What then is this *"manifestly supernatural"* vision? The majority of mortals, including the author of these lines, lack the depth of experience of the afterlife that would allow them to describe it that way. Furthermore, if the figure of Christ is distinguished from *"heavy earthly plane"* by the *"ethereal lightness of its lines highlighted by 'assiste'"*, it is useful to note that these "lines" do not form a complete network which *"separates Christ from the earthly plane"* but that the *assiste* covers only his clothes, and not either his face or his hands!

So where does this heavy earthly plane *"that we can touch and see"* originate in the icon that until now has been considered as being on the celestial plane? These quotes give us an indication of the scientific and literary level of all these theories about gold as a "divine emanation bathing the objects of the terrestrial world."

[15] Yevgeny Trubetskoy, *op. cit.* pp. 67 and 68.

In the course of this work, we will studiously avoid these quotes of a cheap lyricism that offend the most basic good sense, but that are all too prevalent in the "theology of the icon." This text of Trubetskoy's, a confused torrent of disparate thoughts, the scope of which the author himself has failed to gauge, tells us no more than that the addition of gold in the form of *assiste* is optional and only applies to inanimate objects, and also that it is in no way a mark of holiness: the clothing of monks is never covered with gold, while *assiste* often covers that of kings and princes, including the garments of King Herod and Pontius Pilate, two of the most execrable figures in the Gospels!

The essential fact we gain from this is that to depict what is holy (human flesh transfigured in the Spirit), gold is **not** used. Everyday pigments, both natural and chemical, and lacking any particular luster, are used to paint the One God. In so doing, we commit no desecration, no blasphemy, *because* in front of the glory of God, pure gold or the most common ocher (actually crushed clay) are equal in dignity.

Nor is there anything blasphemous in sacred images in which gold is completely absent, for economic or any other reasons. Very many images painted in the "profane" Academic manner, but also traditional "Byzantine" icons, are without gold decoration. Even the nimbus or halo, the symbolic expression of the aura of

divinity reflected by the face of God or a saint, was not necessarily depicted in gold. It could well be outlined only with white or cinnabar contour line, it could — especially in frescoes — be yellow, blue, greenish, or also represented by several circles of different colors.

In scenes consisting of several characters, haloes may be omitted, but never those of the Savior and the Mother of God.

For example, the holy apostles are often presented without haloes in the icons of the Dormition, Pentecost, Ascension, in the subjects of Holy Week and other topics from the Gospels. The Righteous in the so-called *Protection* or *In You Rejoices* icon are sometimes haloed, sometimes not.

The icon of the *Forty Martyrs of Sebaste* sometimes shows these valiant warriors with haloes (as a result of which we see only faces of those in the first row), and sometimes without (in this case forty faces are visible, with forty haloes shown in heaven separated from their "owners").

Is there a rule or theological rationale for the absence of the halo here? Yes, an explanation exists, not theological but purely practical. It is a question of artistic composition: haloes are omitted when space is lacking, when the artist prefers painting the protagonists' faces rather than the symbolic attributes of their holiness.

Nor is the presence of haloes in painting exclusive to Christianity: pagan gods, heroes, and kings were sometimes painted or sculpted with haloes which were round or of another shape. Thin golden crowns surround the heads of mere mortals (neither kings nor heroes) on the famous *Fayoum Portraits* from Egypt, images for the funerary cult, but painted from nature during the lifetimes of the persons represented. An Egyptian, after his death, changed his name and became Osiris+name (after the name of the resurrected god). A crown of gilded leaves was then added to his portrait. This symbolized that the deceased had passed into the mysterious invisible world of beyond and had himself become a god. This tradition that preceded — and may have contributed to forming — the Christian tradition is just one of countless proofs that the truth can open itself also to pagans, and that Orthodox spiritual art is connected to the artistic and spiritual traditions of all humanity, much more strongly than is sometimes believed.

These relationships exist, whether one likes it or not. It is probably wisest not to attempt to conceal our “sinister pagan past”, but rather to try to recognize in it the presence of elements that will become important for Christians, as well as the presence of other more secondary elements, which we could discard without problems, and finally of traditions from which we need to detach ourselves, as remaining faithful to them could divert us from specifically Christian values.
So let us stop looking for cabalistic explanations of what are simply the technical tricks of the painting trade or the search for decorative effects. These theoretical inventions serve not to make prayer in front of an icon more concentrated, nor to advance us in our understanding of Orthodox holiness.

2.

Can an icon be painted from a live model?

We have already mentioned the *Fayoum Portraits*, painted during the lives of those portrayed and transformed into cult objects after their deaths. But then a new question arises: is it acceptable to paint an icon 'from nature', more specifically from a live model?

At the beginning of the rediscovery of ancient icons, Prince Yevgeny Trubetskoy expressed in 1915 his ideas on this issue with his trade-mark emotionality: *"He* (man) *cannot enter God's temple in his present condition: there is no place in this temple for uncircumcised hearts, for fat, self-sufficient bodies. This is why icons cannot be painted from live models."*[16]

But let us move beyond the typical language and logic of early twentieth-century writers on icons. Here we must distinguish two cases. The first is that of someone whose portrait was produced during his lifetime, and which, after his death and canonization by the Church, becomes an icon. The second refers to a situation in which a painter happens to ask someone to serve as a model because his appearance reminds him of or evokes that of a saint.

The prevailing view is that both are unacceptable.[17] In the first case, because the Church recognizes saints only after their deaths, and it would be quite inconceivable and indecent to make a portrait of someone in his lifetime in order for this portrait to serve one day as an icon after his death and his eventual canonization. The second case, the use of a model, is for many downright blasphemy: what is

[16] Yevgeny Trubetskoy, *op. cit.* p.25

[17] L. Uspensky, *op. cit.* pp. 148–153

there in common indeed between a saint and any first comer? The appearance? It is obvious

that what the icon sets out to depict is flesh illuminated by the Spirit, not an outward appearance, a simple envelope deprived of spirituality. In addition, instead of genuine contact with the personality — unique and irreplaceable — of the saint, it is with the personality of the model that the artist, and later the spectator, comes into contact, and the icon in this way loses all its mystical charge.[18]

But are these standpoints really valid? Are they really unshakably founded in Orthodox theology and icon painting tradition?

Let us examine the first case, that of portraits made during saints' own lifetimes. Photographs, we know, are not recognized by the Church as icons and never presented in churches as objects of veneration, yet many believers have them in their domestic iconostases alongside or instead of icons. We also know that the known portraits of St. John of Kronstadt and St. Seraphim of Sarov, in both cases painted during their lifetimes, have not become icons, even though the portrait of the latter by most iconographers is practically an identical copy, and the classical icon of John of Kronstadt perfectly matches his portraits, both painted and photographic.

On the other hand, church tradition relates that the apostle Luke made many portraits of the Mother of God during her lifetime, and that these became the first icons of her.

[18] L. Uspensky, *op. cit.* pp. 151

Although experts deny the dating of a part, if not all of this series of icons to the first century, the very existence of such a legend, as well as that of ancient icons where Luke is shown at his easel in the process of painting an icon-portrait of the Virgin seated before him as a model, is sufficient to tell us that the painting of an icon from a live model is not canonically prohibited. Moreover, the expression "icon-portrait" is a tautology: originally, the Greek word *eikon (icon)* meant precisely *portrait, reflection in a mirror, likeness.*

However, we cannot treat this example as a unique exception to the general rule, given the special nature of the painter and especially his model, whose holiness was unquestionable and perfect. In fact, we have no idea how the first icons of saints were painted, whether from life or from memory. We have no direct evidence, but this indirect evidence and common sense tell us that they were painted from life, as normal portraits. For example, in book four of the Life of the Holy Emperor Constantine, it is written that his subjects "venerated him dead in exactly the same way as when he was alive, presenting, in a picture painted in colors, a view of the sky, and above the firmament the emperor resting in the ethereal dwelling."[19] As we see, it is this posthumous veneration through pictures that strikes the hagiographer as remarkable, while veneration through

pictures during the emperor's lifetime was viewed as perfectly normal.

We are unable to determine today what these early icon-portraits were like, as a hundred years of iconoclasm smashed the artistic heritage of the earlier centuries. But even if tens of thousands of ancient icons had survived until today, we could not say with certainty that we would be able to distinguish, among all these representations, which image of St. Nicolas or of St. George was the first prototype. Countless copies of the venerated images abounded at the time in the Church, and the concept of copyright did not exist. If an icon is venerated, it is for reasons of its relationship with its holy prototype, and equally with its painted prototype. Good copies were accorded just as much veneration as the "original" icon, and very quickly this rapprochement turned into total identity.

[19] St. John Damascene, *op. cit.* p. 141.

We now understand better why the Church, based on the faith of the people and given the great miracles associated with certain icons of the Mother of God, continues to attribute them to Luke, even though experts have determined that these are later copies.

Fortunately, we can draw certain conclusions from examining the portraits of emperors, builders of churches, donors, or priests that have come down to us in icons or mosaic murals. They are represented in prayer before God or a saint. These portraits were made in their lifetimes. They did not become saints and, for that reason, are not replicated in any subsequent copies. They remain unique, enabling us to say that they are indeed living portraits of their models. What do we see in this type of icon? No difference in style distinguishes them from the saints next to them. Their lack of holiness is not marked either in their type (*typos)* nor in any specific brutality of their features, compared with those of neighboring saints. The only way to distinguish between saints and other persons in a traditional icon is the nimbus and the inscription. Where they are omitted (which can happen in scenes with large numbers of figures), we are deprived of any opportunity to distinguish between the saints and other mortals unless we know the subject, the canonical or traditional disposition of the participants, their appearance, or their clothing.

What then of the other people represented, apart from the sponsors or the high-ranking persons we just talked about? Many members of the "crowd" are present in festive icons, in the *vitae* of saints, or in narrative subjects from the Gospels. This "crowd", a necessary part of the narrative, is not always in a very pious mood. Sometimes the artist is even obliged to represent pagans, sinners, or executioners. Even so, the proportions of the bodies of the mob or of criminals are as noble as those of the bodies of the saints; nor are their faces marked by vile passions. In the scenes of the *vitae* of the saints, except in scenes of open violence, we cannot distinguish the good from the bad in the absence of explanatory inscription.

The artist paints the same way all these persons of different categories, whether saints or not, alive or dead, those who served as models to the artist, or those whose appearance is known to him by previous images, or whose appearance he "invents." The artistic manner remains the same, and type does not vary either. This indisputable observation already entitles us to state that the fact of working with a live model or from memory or imagination, whether the person portrayed is a saint or not, in no way influences how human beings are represented in icons. This settles the question regarding the saints and the "non-saints," painted from life during their lifetimes. We can also leave out the anonymous "extras" that populate multi-figure scenes: prayer is not directed in any way to them.

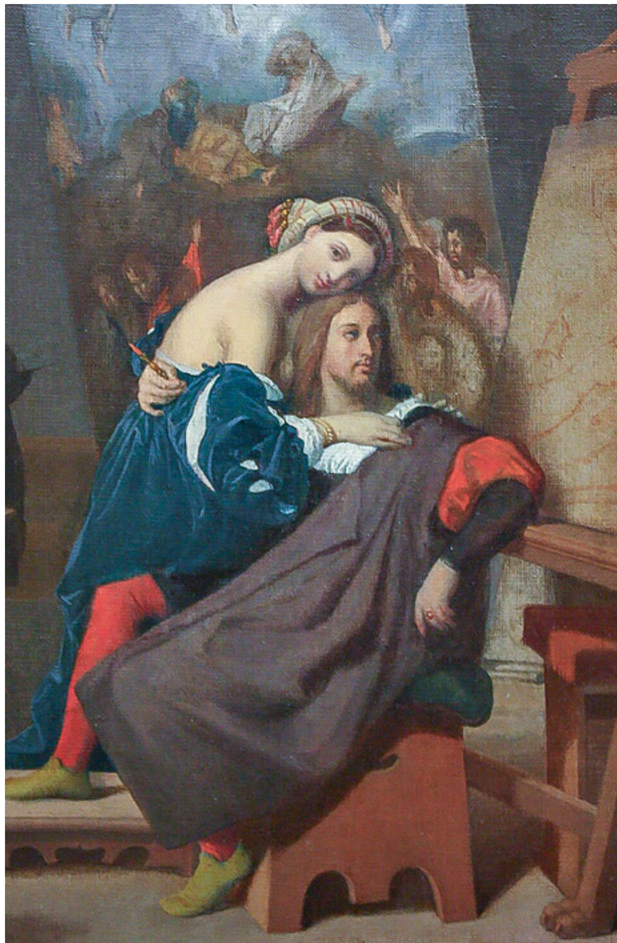
Let us now turn to the second case. Is there really a mystical taboo that prohibits a painter from taking a noble old man with gray hair as a model for painting Saint Nicolas? Is it really wrong to drape the head of a beautiful young girl in purple for painting the Mother of God? This is a complex and complicated issue. Before discussing here Orthodox mysticism, let us first check if we have not fallen into pagan mysticism. The significance in Christian culture of the production of portraits is the transmission of physical appearance. For pagans, summarily carved idols (two eyes, two holes for the nose and one for the mouth, a gender identifier) acted as sacred doubles and, as such, could act as objects of veneration or witchcraft. We are no longer there. We do not commission a portrait from the first artist we meet who is ready to spend a certain time in front of the model, contentedly receiving the "authentic" product of this contact on a sheet of paper or on canvas or in clay. The authenticity of the contact of the author of a portrait with his model is of little concern to us. What matters to us is the resemblance.

The difference between a professional and an amateur artist consists precisely in the fact that the professional does not try at all costs to achieve mystical contact with Nature, whether living or not. His task is to produce to the best of his ability the resemblance that is expected of his painting. To the extent of his talent, and according to his aesthetic, moral, or spiritual ideas, he adds to his work the artistic quality of his touch, which will distinguish it from the clumsy attempts of any beginner artist. In other words, the artist can make his model more imposing, or give it fineness or emotional depth, piety or chastity, or indeed sexual attraction, spirituality, or concentration. Portraits of the same person painted by different artists will show that person under different lights, each artist emphasizing a particular psychological, intellectual, or spiritual feature, while all bearing the portrayed person's likeness.

The means used to achieve this similarity will also differ from one artist to the next. One will prefer long sittings with the sitter, while carefully keeping the pose, the lighting, the folds of the garment, etc. Another will take a series of quick sketches as a basis for painting his portrait at leisure in the studio without his model. The artist can pay a model to pose dressed in the costume of the person whose portrait he is painting; he can also use a dummy, or he can also draw inspiration from other previously painted, drawn, or sculpted images of the person in question, done by himself or by others. He can even use photographs. However he goes about his work, this will be assessed on its resemblance and on the spiritual or psychological emphasis given to his portrait.

We will take the liberty of telling a little parable to clarify what we are trying to say. Imagine two painters invited to paint the king. The first paints an awkward portrait from life. Instead of admitting his failure, he insists heavily, saying that his work is valuable because of its mystical

content provided by genuine contact with the king during long sittings. He also accuses the second and more gifted painter of taking as a model for his monarch's portrait a man of questionable character that he found in the street. What are we going to respond to this rogue, at least if we find it worth the effort to respond to his bad faith? He will be told roundly that, of the two portraits of the king, the more correct is the one where the sovereign is recognizable even without inscription, and we can not only recognize him but appreciate the rendering of his nobility, wisdom, and majesty. If the artist has been able to glimpse these qualities even in the humblest of the king's subjects, good for him and good for the poor man. The king will be in no wise offended. What could offend him is the obstinacy of the author of a clumsy, unworthy portrait, lacking any resemblance, in trying to force everyone to recognize this image as authentic.



Nothing could be more obvious in a secular context, but when it comes to icons, reasonable responses become rarer. This scam would appear to be widespread, enveloped in an unhealthy mysticism that takes us back to the days of primitive idols made of clay. So how did this opposition arise between, on one hand, Raphael, denounced as a blasphemer for using a young woman of easy virtue as a model for the Mother of God, and, on the other hand, a host of "true icon painters" who avoid soiling their art by… but, yes, by what? By imitating nature?

This expression "imitation of nature" is so often used in discourse on icon painting that we think that a momentary digression is justified here. What are we talking about when we say "imitation of nature"?

An artist *never* copies nature mechanically, as does a photo camera. We sometimes hear the stupid comparison with photography (or with *the vision of Christ through the eyes of a spiritually blind crowd*)[20] as "proof" of the impossibility for an artist to render Christ's divine nature by means of realistic painting. In fact, such a comparison proves nothing. All it shows is that its author does not know, or chooses expressly to ignore, the ABC of interpretation of nature by an artist.

Even the pictures of hyper-realist painters who aim precisely at the impersonal, mechanical imitation of photographs (these artists being fully aware of the impossibility of copying nature mechanically) bear almost imperceptibly the traces of the individual manners of their authors. And "imitation" of nature, in the true sense of the word, is *always* creative and *inevitably* transforms this nature. The specific features of this transformation are the flesh and blood of art, its very reason for being. It is these features that open up to us the inner world of a painter, and provide data on his capabilities and professionalism, on his school, his period, and his nationality. These data, that specialists can read like an open book, are the specific criteria for assigning work to various schools. Those who are not blind could well see in their work further evidence of the existence of God and His incarnation by contemplating the indescribable and inexhaustible richness of these individual visions of nature embodied by artists, each of whose visions is miraculous in itself. Every work involves the projection of the macrocosm into a microcosm, an authentic projection incarnated in the raw material.

What remains miraculous, and not yet explored, is the fact that each of these projections is formed unconsciously: the artist is seeking Beauty and Truth; his purpose is not to create a new style! The great names in the history of art are not those who have stood chewing their brushes, wondering how to paint so as not to resemble Michelangelo or Chagall. Rather it is those who have applied themselves most to transmit as sincerely as possible their worldview, that is, to pass on the truth as they understand it. Some people imagine that an artist's principal concern is to develop his individual style in proud isolation from the world and from his colleagues. This idea, in its appalling banality, is the fruit of the blindness of dilettantes who do not even suspect what might be an artist's relationship with the world created by God, the same world that he wishes to represent.

Allow me to illustrate my point with two little bits of history. First, that of the indignation of the London public at Claude Monet's painting, *Impression, Sunrise,* first exhibited in England in the 1870s, so new, so strange to the eye of the philistine. And yet, coming out of the exhibition, the same audience could discover that the mist over the River Thames, which it had seen a thousand times, was really pinkish like the mist Monet had painted.

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[20] L. Uspensky, *op. cit.* p. 152

The second and better-known story would seem to contradict the previous one: the pious Roman populace, to whom it was announced that Raphael had painted the Virgin using a less than suitable young lady as a model, rushed to his studio to plunder it and to murder the artist. But suddenly, the crowd stopped, overcome by the beauty of the painting, softened and calmed because Raphael had been able to reproduce what he himself had perceived in this "in-decent" nature.

Beyond the difference in mentality between the eras and the causes of public anger we see in both cases, the same situation: the public at first reacts negatively because its idea of truth has been shaken, but is then convinced by an idea that is more profound, more subtle, better founded, and skillfully transmitted. In both cases, the public discovers the vision of the world proposed by the eyes of the painter, a vision that turns it upside down. Both incidents occurred *despite* the fact that Raphael and Monet both painted directly from nature, or, according to the philistine conception, they imitated nature!

Let us recall once again the axiom without which all talk of fine arts remains so much dilettante banter: *the artist, facing nature, does not see what a camera lens captures, but the Truth, to the extent that this is accessible to him.* A thousand years before the appearance of photography and the scientific theory of art, St. John Damascene stated that *"any picture makes clear and shows things that are hidden."*[21]

So back to the "true iconographers," this "separate group of other artists" so named based on the assertion that they never painted from live models.[22] Our first comment is that we really know very little about their working methods. Being scientifically accurate, we can only observe the absence of documents or other evidence on the question of painting "from nature." As we have seen, working from nature is not limited to long sessions in front of a posing model or to outdoor outings with an easel. Any observation by the watchful eye of an artist of the world surrounding him is already "working from nature." Any practical utilization of this observation, whether a minute later or after one year, is also working from nature. And whenever an artist remarks in another person's work a particular way of making things more alive, more real, he continues, in a certain way, to work from nature, comparing the findings of the other artist to the observations he has already harvested for himself.

Can we really say that the great iconographers of olden days never saw chaste young men, or noble girls, or worthy old men? No one whose appearance conjured up ideas of beauty, nobility, or peace of mind? No one who radiated wisdom, virility, active love for his neighbor, humility, and mastery

[21] St. John Damascene, *op. cit.* p. 89.

[22] L. Uspensky, *op. cit.* pp. 151

of his passions? Should we imagine that, as soon as iconographers caught sight of such models, they immediately closed their eyes to avoid any temptation to use their observations in their work? Were they so fearful of condemnation, knowing that *any man who looks at a wife woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart?* (Mt. 5: 28). Would it not be more correct, more reasonable, both from the viewpoint of the theory of artistic creativity and that of theology, to assume that there is no adultery, no fornication in the fact that the artist, himself belonging to the world created by God, and having around him not angels but simply men and women, naturally finds beauty in this world, and in these men and women, and in this way comes to knowledge of the beauty of the other world promised to him, a beauty that he restores to us in his works?

To present as apostasy the experience of the encounter with God through His creation, to condemn the imitation of nature for depicting truth, describing it as mechanical and deprived of spirituality, is this not to commit a much worse infidelity to God and Truth? Entire epochs of sacred creation, the works of the most talented and daring artists, are in this way declared apostate. This obscurantism, bearing in itself the seeds of its own destruction, is happily doomed to disappear sooner or later. It finds no support in the hearts of spectators, who at best politely tolerate badly painted icons, nor does it encourage the spiritual and artistic development of those who follow it in their icon-painting practice. Its dissipation, as rapidly as possible, is in the interest of all who are not indifferent to the future of the icon.

For a painter to work from nature has never been explicitly forbidden in any canonical document of the Church, nor has the likeness of the icon with nature. What was forbidden was to paint the icons according to the artist's imagination, and what was recommended was to paint them according to the models, or older pictures.

This prohibition and this recommendation can be understood in the Spirit and the Truth, but they can be treated as well, if you will, in a different spirit. During long centuries iconographers, correctly understanding the Church's encouragement to follow the old models, did not copy them mechanically, but learned to draw, paint, and compose in the spirit of these models. While adhering to the canonical schemes, they brought these schemes to life again in each newly painted icon, filling it every time with the life-giving content of their spiritual experience and their creative knowledge of the world.

In this way, each new icon of the Savior showed Him majestic, gentle, strong, full of wisdom, and perfect in His flesh and spirit. And each new icon of the Mother of God showed Her majestic

and beautiful in her love for Her Son, and in Her compassion for suffering humanity. *The world of the traditional Orthodox icon is infinitely varied stylistically, but it is united in the Orthodox presentation of truth as beautiful and real.* It is here that faithfulness to the old models is rooted, and it is in this way that the artist protects himself from "his own imagination" or, more accurately, a self-will of mediocre quality.

This deleterious self-will commences where the artist, iconographer or not, decides that it is not necessary, and indeed harmful, to aim for beauty and reality. When an artist no longer follows these basic criteria, no longer checks soberly and carefully what comes off his brush against the yardstick of these criteria, it is then that we can say that he has fallen into the temptation of his imagination, into *prelest* or *planê* — the going astray of mind and reason, in the language of Orthodox ascetics — because he has nothing left, no benchmark, no reference point to guide or to correct him.

"How so, nothing?", they will say to us. "And the fact of following the old models? What *prelest* is there if one simply copies these famous classical icons?"

This argument, solid at first sight, is in fact worthless. As we said earlier, traditional iconography drew its inspiration from the old models, but did not copy them blindly. To copy them mechanically, you do not need to enroll in an iconography course. In fact, you would do better taking lessons from a hyper-realist painter, turning the model upside down to more completely distance yourself from its meaning, and transferring point by point onto the board the exact position of the areas of color. It is only in this way that a man, a sensible and spiritual being, can make (we purposely do not say *create)* a copy that does not reflect in any way his inner world.

As soon as he stops playing a merely 'photographer' role, as soon as his relations with his model become conscious, he is immediately invested with the same responsibility and subject to the same dangers as if working from nature, that is, he is faced just as much with the danger of falling into arbitrariness and seeing in his model "his own truth", a truth that is foreign to the culture of the Church. He is in danger of failing to realize how much the iconographers of old days aspired to beauty and reality, and, failing to see or share this aspiration, he will inevitably distort, pervert, and make ugly even the best models.

The similarity of such a copy with the icon that served as a model is like that which might exist between a corpse and a living man: the soul has gone, all we see left is rigid and decaying flesh. The soul of the icon, this invisible element that melts in a mysterious way into the "flesh" of the icon, into its colors, is the aspiration to Beauty and Truth. Without this thirst and without this aspiration,

all art, whether sacred or profane, degenerates into occult games, and falls into godlessness and *prelest.*

In every age, what mattered was not the model from which the artist worked, not whether he took his bearings from the artistic tradition or rather found his models directly in the world created by God. What mattered was that he did not fall into his "own imagination" during the process of seeing and then handling his models. Learning to see Beauty and Truth in the classic icon, and the desire to connect into this idea of Beauty and Truth in our creativity is not any easier than learning to see them in the world and then passing them on in our art. The opposite would be very surprising indeed! The understanding of the beauty of the created world, and knowledge of the rules of the transmission of this beauty, have always been the basis of iconography. Apart from this basis, the artistic language of the icon will always remain a strange and foreign language for self-styled "iconographers".

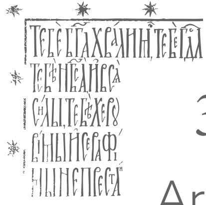
I end this chapter with a little folk story, full of wisdom.

Someone asked a village painter: "What is the most difficult subject to paint?"

"A rooster", he replied. "Why a rooster?" "There's one in every farmyard, and everyone knows what a rooster looks like. If I paint it badly, everyone will point at it and laugh." "And what is the easiest subject to paint?" "The easiest", the village painter answered, "is to paint the Lord our God." "How can that be?" "No one has ever seen God. You can paint Him any way you want, and no one will dare protest!"

This sad and paradoxical story featured regularly in collections of atheistic folklore. Those who compiled them interpreted this story from a cynical atheist perspective. They had forgotten that if the Russian people seriously thought that God was easier to paint than a rooster or a cat, it would not have composed such stories!

Those who think learnedly that we can paint images of God and His saints without any reference to nature do not compose witty little stories. No, they write entire books full of their pretentious, ill-founded statements, mixing, according to their whims, theology with a very amateurish theory of fine arts. By placing too much confidence in these writings, we risk losing our common sense that tells us at first glance whether the author of an icon is able to draw correctly a rooster or a cat or if, on the contrary, he has opted for iconography precisely because he lacks the talent and knowledge to paint cats and roosters!



3.

Artists' signatures on icons

The absence of the painter's name or signature on the icon is still widely viewed as a very important element of the iconographic tradition. A mystical meaning is attributed to this anonymity, which supposedly underscores the impersonal nature of icon painting and the painter's total submission to the Church.

But if the Church really shunned like the plague everything that could link an icon to the name of its author, then how is it that we know the names of the great iconographers of bygone centuries? It is the Church, not art historians, that has preserved down the centuries the data on the authors of several icons and murals. Moreover, the Church insists at times on supporting attributions which are questioned by experts. For example, certain old and venerated icons of the Mother of God are attributed to the Apostle Luke. And we can assume that in past centuries oral tradition preserved many more names of iconographers whose memory has not come down to us. These few examples show that the Church does not consider it a crime for a painter to attach his name to an icon he has painted. Sometimes the icon itself carries the name of its author, like the *Pietrovskaya* icon of the Mother of God, a miracle-working icon painted by Saint Peter Metropolitan of Moscow *(Pietrovskaya* is simply the adjective formed from Piotr, the Russian equivalent of the English name Peter).

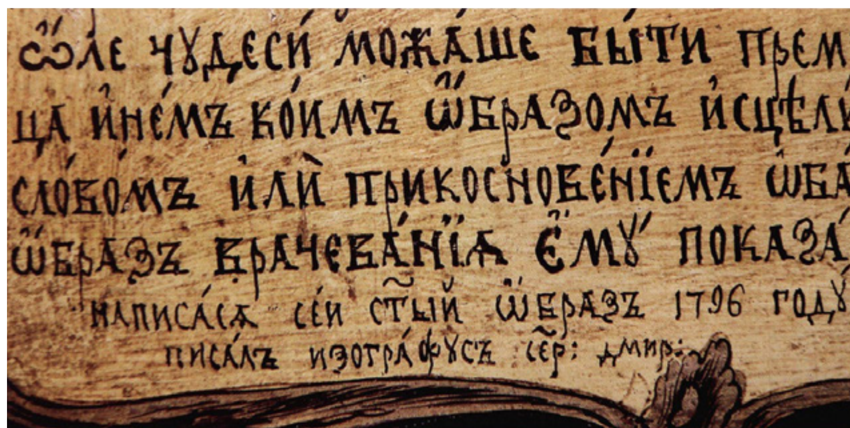
So why all the fuss about the question of signing icons? *The statement "artists never used to sign icons" is pure nonsense,* repeated by the ignorant or

transmitted by those who deliberately create legends in order to surround icon painting with an aura of mystery. Just take a well-documented catalogue of any large collection of icons to find a number of signed works listed there. For example, the collection of the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow alone contains signed works by more than sixty ancient Russian painters.[23] Moreover, we cannot be categorical about the presence or absence of signatures on ancient icons. Ancient icons were generally signed on the back. Not being reinforced with fabric and plaster or varnished for protection, the backs of the boards suffer significant wear and lose in a few centuries all traces of what may have been written on them. Greek masters signed their works on the front side of icons — which is why so many more such signatures were preserved. Often they also signed frescos, such as in the thirteenth-century Master Michael, Astrapas, and Eutychius, who left their signatures in a number of churches of Macedonia, while in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Veria (the biblical Berea) near Thessaloniki (1315) one can admire the naive and boastful self-promotion of *"Kalliergis, the best artist of Thessaly"* — thereby (and not without reason!) immortalizing his name. Our task is therefore to understand, not why icons were never signed, but why signed icons are rather few and far between. There are several objective, historical explanations for this, which have nothing whatsoever to do with any mystical taboos. First, in most cases, icons were not painted by one person but by a workshop, i.e. by a group of painters, each of whom specialized in one particular aspect: the head of the workshop or *znamenchik* did the preliminary drawing; "pre-face" specialists painted the clothing, the buildings, mountains, and other details of the landscape; the "face-painters" took care of the faces and, more broadly, other exposed flesh parts; while the gilders covered in gold the areas in question. The apprentices learned their trade with operations of a lesser level of responsibility, such as the preparation of the board, the transposition of the drawing onto the plaster, and the laying of the first coat of paint following the master's drawing. Whose name in such a case should serve as a signature?

Second, iconographers of old, working alone or together in a workshop, did not always know how to read and write. The old rule that required artists to bring each newly painted icon to a priest— so that he could, after ensuring that it resembled its prototype, confirm this resemblance by the inscription— was established precisely because priests were often the only people capable of producing this inscription. Gradually, the monopoly of the inscription was recovered by artists, but that does not mean that there were no illiterates among them (in fact, these existed even among the priesthood). The inscriptions on the oldest icons (up to the start of the sixteenth century) are short and standardized; in the rare cases to the contrary, the value of the

[23] V. Antonova, N. Mnieva, *Государственная Третьяковская Галерея. Каталог древнерусской живописи.* vol II, Moscow, 1963, p. 518.

icon, for connoisseurs and on the market, rises considerably. Moreover, in these inscriptions we observe a considerable number of errors visibly due to the mechanical copying of misunderstood signs. There are even more serious confusions, like when an artist has piously copied the inscription in mirror image from a tracing. Or again, even more frequently, has given the names of the figures to the right to the ones painted on the left, and vice versa. At this level of education, adding his signature to his work would have been one



more chore for an iconographer. Especially as a signature served no practical purpose.

The identification of the author of a work of art is important when this work is placed on the market by an intermediary, or if it is expected to be sold at a certain point in its existence. This identification becomes extremely important when the buyer's choice of works is no longer defined by the artistic quality of the item, but by the prestige and added value of its painter's name. In this case, a certificate, signed by members of an expert commission, is more important than the signature of the artist himself.

Nothing like this occurred with icons from the "classical" period. The great iconographers worked only to order, and their works were meant to remain in one or the other church "forever." And if a lesser-known iconographer worked for the market, he could be sure that the buyer's choice depended only on the quality of the icon, not the author's name.

And finally, a man's name (in fact, his first or "Christian" name) linked him only to God or his patron saint, and was of little use for identification, in Russia and elsewhere. For the purposes of identification, there were family names for the nobles, and for simple

people, nicknames, often somewhat arbitrary, sometimes several for one person; or instead of a nickname, a patronym could be added to the names of more respected persons. Fixed surnames passing from father to son became mandatory only fairly recently, when it was decided to maintain population registers listing the precise identity of every member of society.

It is as we move from the Middle Ages into the modern period that artists begin increasingly to sign their work, whether secular or sacred. The example of Russia, which moved late, but then very rapidly from the Middle Ages to modern times, demonstrates clearly that *the boundary between signed and anonymous works does not coincide at all with that between the traditional icons and the paintings of another kind.* On the one hand, a number of secular portraits of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries are unsigned. On the other hand, an imperial edict (*ukaz*) of 1710 required all iconographers to sign their works.[24] Like almost all Russian *ukazi*, this one was never fully respected everywhere and by everybody, but nor on the other hand was there any opposition to it, either theological or from the viewpoint of taste or tradition. And this precisely when a veritable war was raging in Russia on iconographic subjects, styles, and the correct way to paint icons. We have many historical proofs of the intensity of this struggle in the form of polemical treatises for or against innovation in icon painting. If signing icons had been viewed as negative or destructive to the concept of the icon, we would certainly have had data on discontent with this *ukaz*.

This *ukaz* was respected by renowned iconographers working in the well-known workshops in major cities. And indeed, it was at them that it was directed, to ensure that they paid their taxes in a regular manner. But the artists of that level were signing their works well before the *ukaz*: already in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, signatures were not uncommon on good-quality icons. In remote areas, if iconographers simply ignored the *ukaz*, it was not for any mystical reasons: simply a signature served no purpose in the prevailing medieval conditions. Similarly, even in the early nineteenth century, many portraits, landscapes, or decorative panels were not signed when made to order and therefore normally intended to stay forever in the hands of the person commissioning them.

On icons for domestic prayer corners, and more often on icons intended as offerings to a church, was often added the name of the person commissioning it, along with his rank, title, and sometimes even his address (in other words, to ensure he could be identified), but without necessarily indicating the painter's name. There is a certain logic in this: the iconographer is nourished by his work; when paid, he is no longer the owner of the icon he has painted, and the donor has donated what is his

[24] L. Uspensky, *op. cit.* p. 391

property to the Church, relying on the grateful memory of the latter. Sometimes inscriptions of this kind, including those mentioning also the painter's name, were made (probably on the order of the commissioning party) not on the back but on the main face of the icon. Another way for the donor to perpetuate his memory and ensure the prayer of the Church for the salvation of his soul was to commission for a church an icon of his patron saint, or indeed of an entire group of patron saints of the members of his family, or of any subject which incorporated or was surrounded by these patron saints. Sometimes images of the donors themselves were incorporated into an icon, either in the margins or as figures contemplating one or the other of the canonical scenes. But these cases have remained rare exceptions, and for a very clear reason: one addresses a prayer to a patron saint, remembering the donor's name, but it is never the portrait of the latter which is the object of the prayer. However, the fact that pictures of this kind and such inscriptions were permitted shows us how the Church viewed the relationship between an icon and the people who had participated in its creation or its history, namely its owners or again the beneficiaries or witnesses of miracles produced through it. There are a whole series of icons of the Mother of God named after such persons: *Bogolyubskaya*, *Igorievskaya*, *Kasperovskaya,* to mention just three.[25]

The Church has never found anything wrong in preserving the link between the image of God represented in color on a board and its image found in every human being. The painter's signature on the icon does not destroy its mystical content. The presence or absence of the signature depends in part on tradition and in part on the economic or social importance attributed to the author, whether of an icon or another work of art. And who knows, it may be that in a thousand years art historians will tell us, with tears in their eyes, that Picasso and Dalí were so humble and so modest that they never marked their works with their individual bank account numbers!

The true humility of the artist, his or her submission to the artistic tradition and, in sacred art, to the traditions of the Church too, is not expressed in the fact that he or she signs her work. Similarly, a person praying in front of an icon carrying the name of its author, donor, or his relatives, will not be splattered with any mystical defilement, and his prayer will go up to heaven equally well, and it is certainly not any signature on a board that will block it!

It is very important to understand this today. When a consumer magazine with a circulation of several thousand copies publishes an article on a contemporary iconographer, with photos and pictures of his works, no one sees anything wrong in this, and indeed there is nothing wrong with it. But when, in the same article, we read that the heart-warming words that the iconographer, like

[25] A. A. Voronov, E.G. Sokolova, *Чудотворные иконы Богоматери*, Moscow, 1993.

a real medieval master, refuses out of humility to sign his works, this is ambiguous and ridiculous. A signature on the back of the icon serves a thousand times less to perpetuate the painter's name and advertise his talents than an article about him in a large circulation magazine or indeed his own website!

Working in Russia today, there are a large number of good icono-graphers, some of whom have become world famous. Those who pray in front of icons painted by Mother Iuliania (Sokolova) or Archimandrite Zinon normally know who painted them, even in the absence of any signature. And those who have never seen any of their original icons are familiar with them through albums of reproductions that give, of course, the names of the authors. In any exhibition of icons, we put labels with the artist's name next to his works. And if you buy a contemporary icon in a church store, you will surely find data on the author glued to the back of the icon in order to identify it at the checkout. And all these phenomena — the existence of a market for contemporary icons, exhibitions, the popularity of certain iconographers, the fact of publishing reproductions of their works — are evidence of the development of the art of iconography, of widespread interest in this art, the fact that society sees in this art its living, creative, personalized side. To condemn this personalized aspect as pride, unsavory vanity, or ivory tower isolationism, is pure obscurantism. To have the mystical or spiritual value of an icon depend on the presence or absence of the signature is equally obscurantist. To insist today that an iconographer not sign his or her icons, and to attribute spiritual value to the fact that an artist who has every means of informing the world of his or her activity does not sign them, is, to say the least, unreasonable.

In more general terms, this obstinacy in attributing mystical significance to falsely traditional characteristics of iconography is always suspect. It allows us to forget that Orthodox mysticism, unlike exotic occult mysticisms, is not accessible to those who seek to achieve it through mechanical ritualistic activities.