

“This intelligent study, noting everything from aesthetics and liturgical studies to theology, is an indispensable work for those who want to incorporate icons into Western worship and devotions. Grounded in solid scholarship and gracefully written, it is a most welcome volume on a quite timely topic.”

—Lawrence S. Cunningham
The University of Notre Dame

“*Icons in the Western Church* is a fascinating, helpful book for anyone who admires icons yet lacks an in-depth understanding of their background and purpose. Well-researched and clearly written, this work will help the reader sort through the theological, liturgical, and ethical issues involved in the use of icons in the Western Church. In this timely, ecumenically sensitive, and thought-provoking book, the author provides nuanced suggestions concerning the placement of icons in churches and homes of the faithful and also challenges the practice of some artists in creating ‘new’ icons.”

—Rita Ferrone
Editor of *The Yale ISM Review*

“Sr. Jeana Visel has done us a great service in her book. She writes with great lucidity, sensitivity, and learning about the need for the Western Church to embrace icons as part of its patrimony. After outlining the historical and theological background of the icon, she boldly and intelligently addresses the contemporary challenges facing the icon’s integration into the Western Church. A book for all Roman Catholic laypeople, and of great interest to Orthodox readers also, at the very least it should be mandatory reading for every Catholic seminarian, priest, and church architect.”

—Aidan Hart
British Iconographer and Writer

“This lovely book by Sr. Jeana Visel takes the reader through a well-rounded history of iconography, and it shows how the Western iconic tradition has been wider and more nuanced than often presumed. Visel argues powerfully here that deep iconic art has the charisma to bring grace to contemporary worship, just as it did in times past, and can serve as an ecumenical rapprochement, with Catholicism’s iconic tradition standing in a median role between the Orthodox and the Protestant worlds in their different understanding of icons as gateways to divine grace. The text has been produced by Liturgical Press with a deep artistic sensibility: its numerous illustrations make it a beautiful thing to possess. A little treasure. Highly recommended.”

—Archpriest John A. McGuckin
Nielsen Professor of Byzantine Christian History
Columbia University, New York

“Just as the words of Scripture have been carefully transmitted to us down through the ages, the icon likewise embodies our faith in wood and paint and shimmering gold. Jeana Visel gives us a well-grounded and insightful way to think about this traditional art form in new ways and its possible integration into Western worship. Visel’s approach is enriched by the personal experience of being an accomplished icon writer herself. This book is a must for all who are interested in the integration of liturgy and the arts.”

—Martin Erspamer, OSB
Saint Meinrad Archabbey



Icons in the Western Church

*Toward a More
Sacramental Encounter*

Jeana Visel, OSB



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Introduction

Despite a variegated and sometimes violent history, the icon has long held a place of honor in the Eastern tradition of Christianity. Venerated in churches, carried in procession through towns, and greeted with affection in homes, the icon in its original context speaks to the presence of God among us in the material world. The Greek word for icon, εἰκόν (*eikon*), literally means “image,” “representation,” or “portrait” and can refer to a wide array of religious images ranging from panel paintings on wood to frescoes, mosaics, embroidery, or even shallow carved relief or sculpture. Typically, however, an “icon” refers today to a portable image of Jesus, angels, or the saints, usually painted on a wooden panel, and used for prayer.¹

1. Leslie Brubaker, “The Sacred Image,” in *The Sacred Image East and West*, ed. Robert Ousterhout and Leslie Brubaker (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 3. For a more basic description of what an icon is, see also Thomas F. Mathews, *Byzantium: From Antiquity to the Renaissance* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1998), 43; Irina Yazykova, *Hidden and Triumphant: The Underground Struggle to Save Russian Iconography*, trans. Paul Grenier (Brewster, MA:

Above: Carved ivory icon of the crucifixion. Walters Art Museum.

In this study, I occasionally make reference to statues or other forms of religious images; when I use the term “icon,” I am referring to portable panel paintings. Moreover, to say that the icon has flourished in the East is to refer to the geographical areas where Greek was the primary language in contrast with the Latin-speaking West. Though also a vast simplification, I speak of the East as referring broadly to the Orthodox form of Christianity, with the West referring to Catholicism.²

In the course of this book, I explore the question of what it means to embrace icons in the West, suggesting that for theological and ecumenical reasons, Catholics who would create or use icons need to know and give greater respect to the icon’s Eastern tradition. In the first chapter, I explain what an icon is as understood from its roots in the Eastern Church. In its original context, the way an icon is created is linked to a deeper theological worldview. This theology is manifested in canonical

Paraclete Press, 2010), 1–26; Antonino Marino, *Storia della Legislazione sul Culto delle Immagini dall’inizio fino al trionfo dell’Ortodossia* (Rome: Pontificium Institutem Orientale, 1991), 39–43; Thomas F. X. Noble, *Images, Iconoclasm, and the Carolingians* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 28–31.

2. I do want to acknowledge that a number of Eastern Catholic churches follow the Eastern style of liturgy but remain in communion with Rome. Their theology, history, and culture make them in many ways aesthetically similar to the Eastern Orthodox Church. The Oriental Orthodox Churches, sometimes referred to as “Pre-Chalcedonian Churches,” which acknowledge only the first three ecumenical councils, also bear a resemblance to the Eastern Orthodox Church. Much of what I say about icons in the Eastern tradition applies equally to each of these churches, despite their very real and important differences.

guidelines for icons and behavioral expectations held for iconographers. I also trace the basic historical development of the icon and its reception into the tradition. An introduction to some of the currents contributing to eighth- and ninth-century iconoclasm lays a foundation for comparison with later iconoclastic movements in the Western Church. I also show how icons have come to be an essential part of Eastern liturgy and devotion.

In chapter 2, I outline how icons came to be received in the Roman Church through medieval artistic exchange and how, in the West, the icon gave way to a different tradition of devotional art. In some ways, the Catholic tradition appears quite dissimilar from that of the Orthodox; for example, where the canonical icon depicts the world of heaven, the Western *memento mori* image aims to depict death in order to remind the faithful of the fleeting nature of human life and the importance of preparing for heaven. In other ways, however, the two traditions are similar; images in both East and West have been connected with miracles, relics, and access to the sacred. I conclude with an examination of how the Roman Church regulated images through the early modern period.

In chapter 3, I continue to explore the Catholic use of images in prayer and worship, analyzing how Vatican II came to promote an ideal of “noble simplicity.” Intertwined with the emergence of modern art, this ideal in many ways has shaped more recent church art and architecture, as seen in church documents providing guidelines for sacred art. I argue that while the implementation of liturgical reforms brought some great advances to the experience of liturgical prayer, in the transition, in too many cases, meaningful, recognizable sacred art also was lost. I then examine how

icons begin to fit into the Catholic world redefined by Vatican II.

Chapter 4 provides an argument for why the Western Church can and should embrace icons as part of our theological and historical patrimony. Here I delve more deeply into the Eastern understanding of what an icon is in order to examine how icons could function more clearly in Catholicism. Of particular import is how the Eastern sense of sacred presence in icons is paralleled by the Western understanding of sacramentality. How are the saints or Christ present in their icons? I attempt to tease out whether the icon is more *sacrament* or *sacramental*, arguing that while it shares in the definitions of both, the icon tends toward being a sacrament in the broad sense of the word. Having established some foundation for perceiving the sacrality of icons in both East and West, I then explore how the Catholic Church understands and affirms the idea of venerating icons.

In chapter 5, I explore ways that the Catholic Church could better integrate icons into its living tradition. Drawing on Denis McNamara's categories of liturgical, devotional, and historical art, I suggest how the icon could function in each of these ways while remaining true to the ideals of Vatican II. I also examine how the icon might fit into the diversity of art that already exists in the Catholic Church, recommending some level of catechesis to help Catholics better understand the differences between icons and other kinds of sacred art.

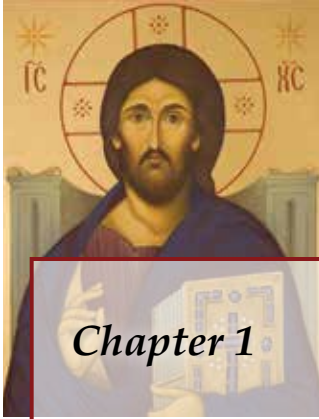
Chapter 6 provides an exploration of some of the ecumenical implications of a greater Catholic embrace of icons. Because of their Eastern roots, icons intrinsically are a point of engagement between Catholicism and Orthodoxy. Given

the vicissitudes of our shared (and divided) history, however, respectful sharing between the traditions is not always easy. I argue that Western engagement with icons must be taken up with utmost respect for the Orthodox tradition, analyzing some of the effects of more recent Catholic attempts to use icons for different purposes. I then turn to how Catholic use of icons may affect relations with Protestant denominations. Tracing historical developments that have shaped Protestant views on religious images, including Reformation iconoclasm, I explore some of the reasons for recent Protestant interest in icons and other images. Ultimately, I suggest that icons constitute an excellent ecumenical meeting point for Catholics, Orthodox Christians, and Protestants. Studied, created, and used with respect, icons comprise an important part of the common Christian tradition, offering a worthy point of departure for further theological dialogue.

It is my hope that this study will engender further dialogue about the importance of quality images used for prayer and liturgy. In such a visual culture as our own, when we are bombarded with images that propagate knowledge of violence, lust, and greed, we stand in need of holy images. It is my belief that, in a mysterious way, icons have the power to help heal our brokenness. In the peaceful gaze of Christ and the saints, icons teach us to see with new eyes the dignity of the human person and the presence of God among us. It is this learning to see again with love that can bring about Dostoevsky's words from *The Idiot*: "Beauty will save the world."

Abbreviations

BLS	<i>Built of Living Stones</i>
CCC	<i>Catechism of the Catholic Church</i>
DPPL	<i>Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy</i>
DS	<i>Duodecimum Saeculum</i>
DV	<i>Dei Verbum</i>
EA	<i>Environment and Art in Catholic Worship</i>
EE	<i>Ecclesia Eucharistia</i>
GIRM	<i>General Instruction of the Roman Missal</i>
GS	<i>Gaudium et Spes</i>
LA	<i>Letter to Artists</i>
LG	<i>Lumen Gentium</i>
OE	<i>Orientalium Ecclesiarum</i>
OL	<i>Oriente Lumen</i>
PG	<i>Patrologia Graeca</i>
SC	<i>Sacrosanctum Concilium</i>
UR	<i>Unitatis Redintegratio</i>



Chapter 1

Icons in the Eastern Tradition

Although traditionally associated with the Eastern Orthodox Church, in recent years, icons have become more popular among people of Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions. More and more, one may encounter icons of Christ or the saints displayed in both homes and churches. Courses on the theology and practice of painting icons are multiplying, and museum exhibitions of icons or art inspired by icons have become relatively common. What is this trend, and how are Christians to understand it? To begin to explore these questions, it is necessary to study the nature of the icon in its original Eastern context.

What Is an Icon?

In the Eastern tradition, an icon makes dogmatic statements in visual form. Thus the Orthodox speak of a “language,” “grammar,” or “semantics” of iconography. Indeed, in a strict sense, the artist does not simply paint but rather is said to “write” an icon by using particular methods to convey particular forms that fall within an accepted canon

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of images. Just as the Gospel is the verbal Word of God, so the icon aims to convey the truth of Jesus.¹ Similarly, the “language” of an icon is inseparable from its narrative content. In many periods of history, the iconographic image was seen as educative, especially for the illiterate. Yet even beyond making statements of faith, the icon is an art form concerned with sacramental encounter with God. As Irina Yazykova writes,

An icon brings the good news into the world by showing the face of Jesus Christ: God became man. Moreover, through Christ, the icon also reveals to us the true image of humanity transfigured and deified; it is the image of the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom that is to come and that will restore the harmony now marred by sin. . . . If an icon depicts a saint, its real purpose is to bring us face to face with someone in whom Christ’s goodness shines forth.²

An icon usually depicts frontally a holy person confronting the viewer. In the very personal space between the person of faith and the icon, an exchange happens. One sees the image but also *is seen*. As Ernst Kitzinger describes it in his landmark 1954 essay on the cult of images, in the icon, “the distinction between the image and the person represented is to some extent eliminated, as least temporarily.”³

1. Michel Quenot, *The Resurrection and the Icon*, trans. Michael Breck (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1997), 53.

2. Irina Yazykova, *Hidden and Triumphant: The Underground Struggle to Save Russian Iconography*, trans. Paul Grenier (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2010), 2, 4.

3. Ernst Kitzinger, “The Cult of Images in the Age before Iconoclasm,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 8 (1954): 101, as reprinted in Ernst Kitzinger, *The Art of Byzantium and the Medieval West: Selected Studies*, ed. W. Eugene Kleinbauer (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University

From the perspective of faith, particularly in the Eastern tradition, the holy person depicted is in some way understood to be *present*.⁴

Painting an Icon

The sacrality of the icon for the Christian East means that painting it involves a process endowed with special care.⁵ The first part of the process is preparation of the panel. Typically, the panel icon is painted on a board, usually made from a nonresinous wood. Often the back of the panel is reinforced with splines made of a harder wood to stabilize the panel and reduce warping. Some panels have a raised edge called

Press, 1976), 90–156. In this book, I will reference this work using the 1954 numbering, 83–150.

4. Michel Quenot, *The Icon: Window on the Kingdom* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996), 79.

5. Technical preparation of an icon varies; I share primarily the process I learned under the direction of Russian master iconographer Ksenia Pokrovsky and her assistant Marek Czarnecki of the Izograph School of Iconography during their Hexaameron Six Days of Creation workshops in 2008 and 2010. I continue to work with Marek Czarnecki, usually from a distance. For more on technical preparation of an icon, see Marek Czarnecki, *The Technique of Iconography: Method and Teachings of Xenia Pokrovskaya and the Izograph School of Iconography* (Sharon, MA: Izograph Studio, 2003); Egon Sendler, *The Icon: Image of the Invisible*, trans. Steven Bigham (Torrance, CA: Oakwood Publications, 1999), 187–239; Quenot, *The Icon: Window on the Kingdom*, 83–119; Leonid Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons*, trans. G. E. H. Palmer and E. Kadloubovsky (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1982), 51–55; Gianluca Busi, *Il segno de Giona* (Bologna: Dehoniana Libri, 2011), 200–317. For a compilation of various ancient methods, see *The Painter's Manual of Dionysius of Fournà*, trans. Paul Hetherington (London: Sagittarius Press, 1974). Aiden Hart's *Techniques of Icon and Wall Painting* (Leominster, Herefordshire, Australia: Gracewing, 2011) is perhaps the most complete handbook currently available.

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a *kovcheg*, which in Russian means “ark.” This edge allows the painter to stabilize the wrist while working in the central part of the image without disturbing wet paint with one’s hand. Historically, the *kovcheg* also functioned to protect the central image when icons were stored in stacks. The framing aspect of the *kovcheg*, moreover, marks the edge of sacred space within the artwork, like the frame of a window. The surface preparation of an icon panel involves sealing the wood with animal hide glue, then applying a piece of open-weave fabric to add stability and further prevent warping. The artist then applies many layers of gesso, a white substance made of chalk dust, marble dust, hide glue, and a bit of linseed oil and honey for flexibility. After it has dried, this stable surface is sanded to cool, hard smoothness.

A drawing of the image, usually taken from a traditional prototype, is then inscribed on the panel. Painting calligraphically with India ink over the drawing ensures that it will be a visible guide through the layers of paint to come. If the background or a halo is to be gilded, the artist may

The initial stages of painting an icon involve preparing a panel with gesso (left) and inking a drawing onto the board with smooth, calligraphic lines (right).



apply gold at this stage. Gilding with gold leaf can be done in different ways; generally the two options are “oil gilding” and “water gilding.” Ultimately gold leaf is laid onto the surface in sheets; depending on the process used, it may be burnished or detailed before being sealed with varnish.⁶

While contemporary icons may be made out of any materials, traditional egg tempera paint is made by adding powdered earth pigments to egg emulsion. Usually gleaned from soil or crushed minerals, natural pigments are durable and many will not fade. Some minerals, like blue lapis lazuli, are rare and extremely expensive; others are common. Soil-based pigments reflect the specific terrain from which they were taken; the geographical source of some early icons can be identified from the particular shades of color used. Mixed with egg emulsion, the pigments make a smooth paint that in time will harden and fossilize. By adjusting the

6. On water gilding, see Sendler, *The Icon: Image of the Invisible*, 195–96.

Gold leaf for gilding comes in small sheets, either loose (as pictured at left) or as “patent gold,” which stays attached to its paper backing until applied. Oiling a completed icon (right) protects the surface and deepens colors.



proportion of egg emulsion to pigment, the artist can create colors that range from sheer transparency to bold opacity.

The icon is painted in layers, moving from dark to light, from the least important elements to the most critical. The very process of painting mimics the deifying spiritual journey of the human person. Gradually being filled with the light of Christ, the Christian shares in the experience of the Transfiguration. The base layer is called *roskrish*, which is Russian for “opening up,” “unveiling,” “manifestation,” or “appearance.”⁷ Beginning with the background, architectural features or other peripheral details, and then clothing, the artist adds layers of lighter tones that give definition and character. Finally the hands and ultimately the face are painted. The base tone for skin is called *sankir*, meaning “flesh.” Reflecting the earthy beginnings of humanity in Genesis, this tone usually is a cool olive green. The next layer, beginning to articulate the broad areas of the face, is a warmer orange, representing the uncreated light of God illuminating the form. The artist then paints with even brighter light, adding layers of yellow ochre and then ultimately white as the features of the face and hands emerge and gain character with *ozhivki*, “enlivening lines.” Sometimes the light of God is depicted visually by the use of gold *assiste*, a process of painting lines with gold.

This whole process comprises preparation for “the coming of the saint.” Michel Quenot says that this is the moment the icon receives its “*presence*.”⁸ According to Egon Sendler, adding the inscription, giving the person represented a name, is the moment the painting becomes an icon:

It is by the inscription that the image receives all its spiritual dimensions, its sacred character. . . . [T]he name is not simply a distinctive sign or title; it is a communion with

7. Czarnecki, *The Technique of Iconography*, 20.

8. Quenot, *The Icon: Window on the Kingdom*, 85.

the bearer of the name. Through the inscription, the icon is linked to its prototype, the person represented in it.⁹

In the Old Testament, the name of God (YHWH, meaning “I am Who I am,” Exod 3:14) was seen by the Hebrews as being so powerful that only the high priest could speak it and live.¹⁰ The name of Christ, likewise, is powerful. Early Christianity, particularly, recognized that miracles could be wrought by invoking the name of Jesus. According to Quenot, “The name of Christ is inherent to His Person; it actualizes His active presence which we are unable to see.”¹¹ The saints, intimately joined to the Body of Christ in heaven, make the face of Christ present in their own.

Inscriptions also play a very practical role. It is important that icons be clear, accessible, and identifiable, with inscriptions written in a language people understand. If an icon is of a new saint, the title given functions as a sort of Church *imprimatur*.

Canonical Guidelines

Because the Eastern Church takes sacred images so seriously, iconography is subject to canonical guidelines and episcopal oversight.¹² The canons of iconography are not promulgated via one central document but rather are the collection of various principles and Church teachings on the

9. Sendler, *The Icon: Image of the Invisible*, 214–15. For more on the development of using inscriptions on icons, particularly those identifying Christ, see Karen Boston, “The Power of Inscriptions and the Trouble with Texts,” in *Icon and Word: The Power of Images in Byzantium*, ed. Antony Eastmond and Liz James (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2003), 35–51.

10. Quenot, *The Icon: Window on the Kingdom*, 85.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*, 67–68.

traditional way a holy person or a particular scene is to be depicted in an icon. The first official canon, dating to the Acts of the Council of Trullo from 691–692, mandates that artists no longer depict Christ as a lamb but portray his humanity to depict the incarnation.¹³ While those of the Western Church might see this kind of ruling as constrictive, Yazykova writes,

The canon, rather than depriving the icon painter of freedom, more accurately holds up an ideal and a goal. The canon orients the icon toward a prototype. Properly understood, a prototype is more than just a pattern to copy: for the faithful, it represents something approximating the “true likeness” of embodied holiness. Reference to a prototype helps prevent iconographers from losing their way.¹⁴

Rooted in Scripture and coalescing in the ninth century with the conversion of the Slavic peoples, the canon “represents a central core of meanings that ensure that the iconic image is filled with the appropriate doctrinal and theological content.”¹⁵ These standards typically have been passed on through artists’ manuals (in Greek, *hermeneia*), which, especially in the late Byzantine period, were used actively as reference books.¹⁶ The most famous of these is the *Painter’s Manual of Dionysius of Fourna*, compiled at

13. *Ibid.*, 26; Thomas F. X. Noble, *Images, Iconoclasm, and the Carolingians* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 27. The Council of Trullo is also known as the “Quinisext,” or “Fifth-Sixth,” in that it added canons to the decisions of the Fifth (533) and Sixth (680) Ecumenical Councils. See Noble, *Images, Iconoclasm, and the Carolingians*, 26–27, regarding other canons of this council.

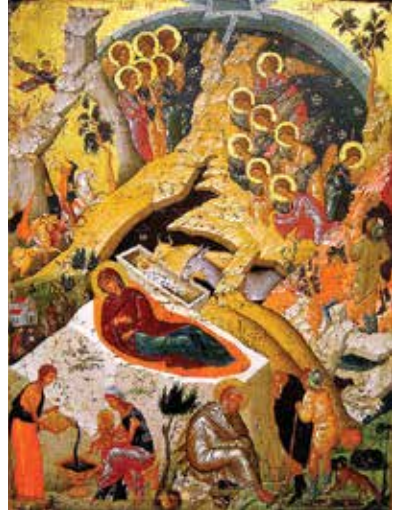
14. Yazykova, *Hidden and Triumphant*, 10.

15. *Ibid.*, 4, 10.

16. Paul Hetherington, introduction to *The Painter’s Manual of Dionysius of Fourna*, trans. Paul Hetherington (London: Sagittarius Press, 1974), iii.

Mount Athos probably between 1730 and 1734.¹⁷ The oldest Russian manual is the 1552 *Usarov and Antoniev-Sisky Painters' Manual*, connected with the Synod of the Hundred Chapters, which aimed to reform sacred art.¹⁸

Canonical icons have certain characteristics.¹⁹ The geometry of the composition is balanced, with forms and the proportions of the figure distributed in certain ways through the space.²⁰ Colors often have symbolism, and many figures are always depicted in clothing of a particular style and color. Because the holy person depicted now is in heaven, outside time, multiple scenes may be represented simultaneously on the same icon, with one event often revealing something of the meaning of another.²¹ The figure is



In icons, multiple scenes may be shown at the same time, as in this image of the nativity. In the life of God, all time is present.

17. Hetherington, introduction to *The Painter's Manual of Dionysius of Furna*, ii; Quenot, *The Icon: Window on the Kingdom*, 68.

18. Konrad Onasch and Annemarie Schnieper, *Icons: The Fascination and the Reality*, trans. David G. Conklin (New York: Riverside Book Company, 1997), 236–37. The 1551 Synod of the Hundred Chapters also is known as the Stoglav Council.

19. See Quenot, *The Icon: Window on the Kingdom*, 66–72; Yazykova, *Hidden and Triumphant*, 2–10; Mahmoud Zibawi, *The Icon: Its Meaning and History* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993), 50–58.

20. For more on proportions and geometry of icons, see Sandler, *The Icon: Image of the Invisible*, 87–118.

21. Yazykova, *Hidden and Triumphant*, 6.

represented within transfigured reality and so is depicted healed of any physical defects that may have been known in his or her life. While never destroying the individual personhood of the one pictured, the saint is painted with idealized order, particularly visible in the flow of fabric and neatly arranged locks of hair. Light, too, is transfigured and is shown as coming not from an external source but from within the person. True shadows have no place in an icon because the icon represents the space of “eternal day,” portraying “the uncreated light” described by Gregory Palamas, expressing the “divine energies that suffuse the whole world.”²²

The characteristic of canonical icons probably least understood by the West is the use of inverse perspective. Rather than objects in the background getting smaller as they appear farther in the distance, as in everyday depth perspective, in the icon, things at a distance get larger.²³ This is seen most obviously in furniture or architectural features. But it is also the reason why figures themselves can seem “distorted.” What in ordinary view would fall out of our line of sight is in a sense flipped forward and made visible; from a frontal position, we see folds of garments, locks of hair, and the bone structure of the body as they would appear viewed from the top or sides. We are seeing from multiple angles at once, and yet it is a coherent reality and not fragmented cubism that we behold:

Everything . . . is so arranged that it enters into the viewer’s field of vision. All lines converge—in terms of both their meaning and their geometry—in the spectator’s

22. *Ibid.*, 8; Sendler, *The Icon: Image of the Invisible*, 165–83.

23. Sendler, *The Icon: Image of the Invisible*, 119–48; Yazykova, *Hidden and Triumphant*, 5.



In icons, the use of inverse perspective means all lines converge in the space of the viewer, rather than at a horizon line. This stylization is seen particularly in architectural details, such as in this icon of St. Bede. (Icon by the hand of the author.)

prayerful gaze. Iconic space unfolds in all directions around the person who prays and draws that person into this space, where objects can often be seen from three or even four sides at once.²⁴

Along with the use of light without true shadow, inverse perspective gives icons their sense of form without volume, shape without spatial depth, all on a flat plane.²⁵ It reflects for the Eastern church the icon's role as a window to the spiritual dimension, a sacred space that, rather than shrinking one's world, opens up into the mystery of God's infinity.

The Iconographer

Given the sacramental nature of the icon, in medieval times the Eastern Church saw the vocation of iconographer to be something akin to priesthood, with similar standards for behavior.²⁶ Today, iconographers can be lay, monastic, or clergy, married or celibate. Yet the weighty task of the artist is to cultivate a deeper relationship between the viewer and the "true likeness of Jesus," creating an icon that will help the viewer become an icon of God. Writing icons was seen

24. Yazykova, *Hidden and Triumphant*, 5.

25. *Ibid.*, 2–3.

26. *Ibid.*, 37; Quenot, *The Icon: Window on the Kingdom*, 68.

by the church fathers as “the art of the arts,” and a “process of doing spiritual work.”²⁷ It is understood that every icon in some way reflects the spiritual state of the artist, of the Church of the time, and of the wider world in which the iconographer lives.²⁸ As the artist’s own holiness is in some way made visible through his or her work, so the moral character of the iconographer needs to be proven pure.²⁹ According to the 1551 Stoglav Council held in Moscow,

An iconographer shall be reverential, humble, not given to vain talk or clownery; not quarrelsome or of an envious nature; shall not be a drunkard, or a thief, or a murderer; most important of all, he must guard to the utmost the purity of his own soul and body, and whosoever is unable to endure in this state till the end, let him marry according to the law. The artist should regularly seek the advice of a spiritual father, listening to his counsel in all things and living accordingly, fasting, praying, and leading a life of restraint and humility, devoid of shame and disgrace. . . . If any master painter, or one of his students, should begin to live in a manner contrary to the rules . . . then the Church hierarchs are to place such persons under discipline, must forbid them from painting, and not allow them to [even] touch their paints.³⁰

While the Eastern Church is known for a level of asceticism among the faithful in general, the demanding standards held for iconographers have meant that many painters over the years have been monastics.

27. Yazykova, *Hidden and Triumphant*, 10.

28. *Ibid.*

29. *Ibid.*, 38.

30. As quoted in Yazykova, *Hidden and Triumphant*, 37.

Historical Development of the Icon

Historically speaking, images have been part of Christianity from its beginnings.³¹ Common Christian symbols like the fish, anchor, and lamb, as well as scenes from the Old and New Testaments, were painted on the walls of the catacombs. Kitzinger, writing before the wider world's discovery of the early encaustic icons preserved at the Monastery of St. Catherine on Mt. Sinai, sees early Christian art as being limited to a decorative function, reflective of a general "rejection of material props in religious life and worship" or anything that could be construed as an idol.³² Ouspensky, however, is convinced that the first devotional images go back to the time of Christ, citing Eusebius's mention of "portraits of the Savior, of Peter and of Paul," and a statue of Christ ostensibly erected by the woman healed

31. For description of sources and the rise of early iconography, see Mathews, *Byzantium*, 43–52; Yazykova, *Hidden and Triumphant*, 15–17; Quenot, *The Icon: Window on the Kingdom*, 23; Kitzinger, "The Cult of Images in the Age before Iconoclasm," 88–95; Lossky and Ouspensky, *The Meaning of Icons*, 25–28; Noble, *Images, Iconoclasm, and the Carolingians*, 10–15; Averil Cameron, "The Language of Images: The Rise of Icons and Christian Representation," in *The Church and the Arts*, ed. Diana Wood (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), 1–42; Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 36–46.

32. Kitzinger, "The Cult of Images in the Age before Iconoclasm," 89. Regarding the "discovery" and first publishing of the Mt. Sinai images, see also Jeffrey C. Anderson, "The Byzantine Panel Portrait before and after Iconoclasm," in *The Sacred Image East and West*, ed. Robert Ousterhout and Leslie Brubaker (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 27–28; *Holy Image, Hallowed Ground: Icons from Sinai*, ed. Robert S. Nelson and Kristen M. Collins (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2006).



Early icons bear a clear resemblance to second-century Egyptian wax encaustic mummy portraits.

of the issue of blood.³³ Some of the earliest surviving icons, from the sixth century, reflect continuity with traditional images of pagan gods, before which devotees would light candles and burn incense. Other early icons bear a clear resemblance to the wax encaustic mummy portraits from Fayum, Egypt; the Fayum portraits depict an idealized version of the dead person, who was expected to be resurrected. Early Christian icons also appear to continue the Roman tradition of portraiture.

Old Testament prohibitions against venerating images, paired with a concern not to fall into pagan practices, engendered

an early sense of unease with devotional practices involving images,³⁴ yet it seems clear that Christian sacred images were widespread by the fourth century. Lighting lamps and burning incense before imperial images was a fifth-century custom;³⁵ by the sixth century, such devotion to icons was common, both in homes and public places, and

33. Lossky and Ouspensky, *The Meaning of Icons*, 25.

34. Mathews, *Byzantium*, 45; Kitlinger, "The Cult of Images in the Age before Iconoclasm," 86–89; Brubaker, "The Sacred Image," 14–15; Anderson, "The Byzantine Panel Portrait before and after Iconoclasm," 24–27; Yazykova, *Hidden and Triumphant*, 17–18.

35. Kitlinger, "The Cult of Images in the Age before Iconoclasm," 98.

a letter from Bishop Hypatius of Ephesus to Julian of Atramyton provides the first reference to *proskynesis* (“veneration,” literally, “kissing toward” and sometimes including a full prostration³⁶) to images in churches.³⁷ In the civil world, icons, especially of the Virgin Mary, became part of imperial ceremony. They were seen as legitimating rulers, protecting cities, and shielding soldiers in battle as *palladia*.³⁸ The protective function of icons reflected a growing belief in the miraculous power of certain icons, such that some even thought that consuming scrapings from an icon could heal the sick.

36. *Proskynesis* is derived from a Persian practice of greeting each other with a kiss, bow, or prostration and giving respect to a person of higher rank. Greeks mistook this for honoring a person as a god; when taken into the Roman Empire, *proskynesis* was used to show tribute to the emperor in a way that would elevate him to the status of a god. In the Eastern Church, *proskynesis* refers to bowing or kissing an icon or relic to show the veneration of honor, in contrast with *latría*, the adoration of worship due to God alone. See Lily Ross Taylor, “The ‘Proskynesis’ and the Hellenistic Ruler Cult,” *Journal of Hellenistic Studies* 47, Part 1 (1927): 53–62.

37. Mathews, *Byzantium*, 45; Kitzinger, “The Cult of Images in the Age before Iconoclasm,” 94.

38. Kitzinger describes a *palladium* as a “public cult object recognized by all,” which instills courage in those who use it and fear in the hearts of enemies (“The Cult of Images in the Age before Iconoclasm,” 110). For the growing power and use of icons, see Noble, *Images, Iconoclasm, and the Carolingians*, 32–34; Kitzinger, “The Cult of Images in the Age before Iconoclasm,” 110–12; Averil Cameron, “Elites and Icons in Late Sixth-Century Byzantium,” *Past and Present* 84 (August 1979): 3–35; John McGuckin, “The Theology of Images and the Legitimation of Power in Eighth Century Byzantium,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (1993): 39–58; Antony Eastmond, “Between Icon and Idol: The Uncertainty of Imperial Images,” in *Icon and Word: The Power of Images in Byzantium*, ed. Antony Eastmond and Liz James (Aldershot, Hampshire, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2003), 73–85.

Iconoclasm

Such visible outpouring of honor, trust, and devotion, seemingly aimed at material objects and not merely the holy one depicted, sometimes slid into the realm of superstition and gave rise to charges of idolatry. Certainly something greater than superstition was at issue when the first major wave of iconoclasm hit in 726, with Emperor Leo III speaking against icons and removing the Christ icon over the Chalke (“bronze”) Gate of his palace in Constantinople.³⁹ Monks and civil officials were killed for their protection of icons; monasteries were sacked. Churches and homes were stripped of icons and relics, and many icons were literally defaced if not completely destroyed. Syrian monk John of Damascus, writing from what ironically was now the safety of the Umayyad Empire, beyond Byzantine borders, responded immediately with a passionate defense of icons, which over the next fifteen years he developed in three treatises. Exploring the concepts of image, idols, and

39. Description and analysis of the iconoclastic controversies are vast. See Kitzinger, “The Cult of Images in the Age before Iconoclasm”; Noble, *Images, Iconoclasm, and the Carolingians*; McGuckin, “The Theology of Images and the Legitimation of Power in Eighth Century Byzantium”; Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, 144–63; Marino, *Storia della Legislazione sul Culto delle Immagini dall’inizio fino al trionfo dell’Ortodossia*; Alice-Mary Talbot, ed., *Byzantine Defenders of Images* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1998); Moshe Barasch, *Icon: Studies in the History of an Idea* (New York: NYU Press, 1992). Andrew Louth’s translation of St. John of Damascus, *Three Treatises on the Divine Images* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003), as well as his *St. John Damascene: Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) are classics; Daniel Sahas, *Icon and Logos: Sources in Eighth-Century Iconoclasm* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985) provides an introduction and translation of related conciliar texts.



Many icons and other religious images were defaced or destroyed during eighth- and ninth-century waves of iconoclasm.

worship, he makes the primary argument that the incarnation made it permissible to create images of Christ and the saints. He contends that accusations of idolatry are rooted in a fear of matter, which God has made holy. Moreover, as God is Creator, and humans are in the image and likeness of God, so we ought to create images.

Church councils were called. The 754 Council of Hieria laid out the iconoclast position, arguing that icons separated Christ's human nature from his divinity; only the human could be depicted. Moreover, it sought to reinforce the sacrament of the Eucharist as the primary locus of worship. In 787, Empress Irene called the Second Council of Nicaea, which responded with the iconodule position that the honor given to the image passes on to its prototype; indeed, it was taught, holy images ought to be venerated with love wherever they were found:

We preserve untouched the entirety of the Holy Tradition of the Church, whether expressed verbally or non-verbally. One of these traditions commands us to make pictorial

representations, in as much as this is in accordance with the history of the preaching of the Gospels, and serves as a confirmation that Christ in reality, and not as mere apparition, became man. . . . On this basis we define that the holy icons, in exactly the same way as the holy and life-giving Cross, should be presented (for veneration), . . . so long as the representations are done well; and they shall be shown in the holy churches of God, on sacred vessels and liturgical vestments, on walls, furnishings, and in houses and along the roads; and these icons will be of [Jesus, Mary, angels, and saints]. . . . [T]he more often these latter, the more often will those who lift up their eyes to them learn to commemorate and to love their prototype; and will be inspired to press their lips to their representations in veneration and honor [*dulia*] of them, but not in actual worship [*latria*] of them, which . . . is reserved only for him who is the subject of our faith and is proper for the divine nature.⁴⁰

Armenian emperor Leo V revived iconoclastic policies in 813, meeting opposition in Abbot Theodore of Studios and Patriarch Nicephorus and gaining little popular support. An 815 council again proscribed images, but violence continued. Finally in March 843, with the Synod of Constanti-

40. From the "Definition of the Holy Great and Ecumenical Council, the Second in Nicaea," as quoted from Sergei Bulgakov, *The Icon and Its Veneration* [Ikona i ikonopochitanie] (Moscow, 1996), in Yazykova, *Hidden and Triumphant*, 18–19. For the complete "Definition," see Sahas, *Icon and Logos*, 177–81. Note also Yazykova, *Hidden and Triumphant*, 185n5, regarding *latria* and *dulia*: "In the discussion of icons, these Latin terms are paired together. . . . They are derived from Greek and are used to differentiate the difference between worship (given to God alone) and veneration (respect shown to the saints or an image)."

nople, Empress Theodora and Patriarch Methodios brought about the definitive restoration of icons, celebrating with a procession of icons to Hagia Sophia known as the "Triumph of Orthodoxy." The Orthodox Church continues to celebrate this moment as a yearly feast on the first Sunday of Great Lent. Clearly political and economic factors, as well as theological conflicts, contributed to the iconoclast controversies. Yet after 843, as Robin Cormack puts it, "The icon was not just a tolerated object; it was the sign and symbol of Orthodoxy, a distinguishing feature of the full, agreed dogma of the eastern church."⁴¹

Icons in Liturgy and Life

After iconoclasm, use of icons became more central in the life and practice of the Eastern Church, especially as the Byzantine tradition spread to the newly formed states of eastern Europe, especially Russia. Indeed, icons came to be seen as "the acknowledged setting for any liturgical service."⁴² Standards for painting became more defined as various schools of iconography came into their own,⁴³ and

41. Robin Cormack, *Painting the Soul: Icons, Death Masks, and Shrouds* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997), 46, as quoted in Noble, *Images, Iconoclasm, and the Carolingians*, 50.

42. Nancy Patterson Ševčenko, "Icons in the Liturgy," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 45 (1991): 45.

43. The high point of the Byzantine icon is generally acknowledged to be the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries during the Komnenos and Palaeologus dynasties. With the 1453 fall of Constantinople to the Turks, the tradition of icons continued elsewhere, as they were shared across cultures. Russian iconographers first studied under the Greeks, then developed their own styles and schools, including the Novgorod, Pskov, and Moscow Schools. See Yazykova, *Hidden and Triumphant*, 20–23.

iconographic images were incorporated into church architecture in new ways. Walls now were covered with mosaics and frescoes as well as panel icons. The earlier practice of putting panel icons on the chancel screen marking the sanctuary space gradually gave way to a rule to do so and thus led to the development of the iconostasis.⁴⁴ What started as one row of icons soon grew to two, and by the fifteenth century the structure included up to five rows of icons, each representing a particular theme. By the sixteenth century, small foldable iconostases existed that could be used at home or when traveling.⁴⁵

After iconoclasm, usage and devotion to icons needed to appear more rationally justified; thus, conditions for the veneration of images in churches were organized into a programmatic framework that allowed the Church both to guide and limit worship:

[Icons] had a predetermined location in the churches and also were given a specified function in church ritual. The church thereby expected to direct the attention of the faithful first and foremost to official liturgy, which was the primary means of ecclesiastical self-representation. Image and liturgy related to each other in such a way that the liturgy contributed to the control of the image and prevented any paramagical excesses. . . . In this way the church gained control of a medium that once threatened its authority. An activity that had been carried on outside

44. On development and meaning of the iconostasis, see Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, 233, 238; Lossky and Ouspensky, *The Meaning of Icons*, 60–68; Quenot, *The Icon: Window on the Kingdom*, 47–63; Mathews, *Byzantium*, 59–64; Christopher Walter, “The Origins of the Iconostasis,” *Eastern Churches Review* 3 (1971), reprinted in *Studies in Byzantine Iconography* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1977), 251–67.

45. Lossky and Ouspensky, *The Meaning of Icons*, 60.

the official church was now incorporated within it, its features controlled by the church.⁴⁶

Priests began to lead veneration of icons in liturgy using a particular order, and the liturgical calendar came to determine which icons of saints would be put on a stand⁴⁷ for *proskynesis* each day.⁴⁸ Yet many iconographic images within liturgical space are not directly involved in ritual action *per se*. Images on the walls and iconostasis tend to set the tone for the liturgy and “make the content of the liturgy visible and concrete.”⁴⁹ Though icons are often incensed during liturgy, and the faithful regularly light candles before them in church, according to the liturgical calendar only two feasts actually include icons in the official rituals of the day: the Sunday of Orthodoxy, commemorating the end of iconoclasm, and the feast of Akathistos, commemorating the Constantinopolitan victory over the Avars with the assistance of the *Theotokos*.⁵⁰ Thus Nancy Patterson Ševčenko submits that any consideration of the use of icons needs to define liturgy in a wide sense to include not only what takes place in church but also interaction occurring in monastic cells, in the home, and even on the battlefield.⁵¹ Icons often

46. Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, 172, 183.

47. The stand for an icon in the church is called a “proskynetarion” and is placed where the faithful can “greet the saint” on their entrance with a kiss, possibly a bow, a short prayer, and the sign of the cross, repeated up to three times in honor of the Trinity. See Quenot, *The Icon: Window on the Kingdom*, 46.

48. Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, 172, 229.

49. *Ibid.*, 229.

50. Brubaker, “The Sacred Image,” 10. It should be noted that many miracle working icons have their own feast days; some have more than one (communication with Marek Czarnecki).

51. Ševčenko, “Icons in the Liturgy,” 45.

have been carried in processions—as early as the ninth century but definitely by the eleventh century; during the Byzantine era, confraternities dedicated to particular images would process their icons around the city weekly.⁵² Military ceremonies have also used icons, and during battle campaigns it was not uncommon for the opposing side's icons to be taken captive as booty.⁵³ Pilgrimage to visit particular icons, especially to those known to be miracle working, has long been part of tradition as well.

Without a doubt, then, liturgy and shared devotion are integrated in Eastern Christianity; icons are present in both private and public spaces. In the home, most Eastern Christians have an icon corner where members of the family and guests alike may “greet” the saints in prayer. Devotion involving icons often starts at baptism, where an infant may receive an icon of the saint whose name he or she bears. Marriage includes a gift of icons from godparents and a blessing with icons by the fathers of the spouses, and icons also are part of funeral rituals.⁵⁴ Go to any Orthodox church with young families, and one likely will see mothers teaching babies how to kiss the saints depicted in the icons. Belting comments on how such devotion has served laypeople:

Meditation in front of religious images was an activity that enabled lay people to play the role of saints and to live temporarily like a saint. The practice of image devotion involved the same images that had been used by the saints and had inspired their visions. By training their own imagination, urban people sporadically entered the saints'

52. Brubaker, “The Sacred Image,” 10.

53. *Ibid.*

54. Quenot, *The Icon: Window on the Kingdom*, 43.

community, at least in the prescribed exercise of daily devotion in which images offered the first stimulus. Images helped overcome the limits of religious experience, which were imposed on the laity because of their secular life with its many practical needs.⁵⁵

Perhaps more clearly in the East than in the West, mysticism is always the goal if not the rule, and prayerful devotion to saints already in heaven and yet still present in their icons is seen as a religious practice open to all.⁵⁶

John of Damascus writes, "I saw the human face of God, and my soul was saved."⁵⁷ Fundamentally, to pray before the saints in the Eastern tradition, whether at home or in a more public space, is to encounter the saints before God and to join with them in prayer to God. Such prayer never can be fully regulated. As Sebastian Brock writes in his conclusion concerning the iconoclast controversy,

I would like to suggest that the real but unvoiced issue underlying the whole iconoclast controversy has nothing at all to do with Christology, and very little (directly at least) with the legitimacy of images. It is rather a question of how far the divine is allowed to impinge on the human world.⁵⁸

In the chapters that follow, we will explore how this "divine impinging via icons" happens in the West.

55. Belting, *Likeness and Presence*, 362.

56. *Ibid.*, 410–11; Yazykova, *Hidden and Triumphant*, 55.

57. As quoted in Yazykova, *Hidden and Triumphant*, 5.

58. Sebastian Brock, "Iconoclasm and the Monophysites," in *Iconoclasm*, ed. Anthony Bryar and Judith Herrin (Birmingham, UK: Center for Byzantine Studies, University of Birmingham, 1977), 57, as quoted in McGuckin, "The Theology of Images and the Legitimation of Power in Eighth Century Byzantium," 48.