



A JOURNAL OF ORTHODOX FAITH AND CULTURE

# ROAD TO EMMAUS

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## *Together Out of Time: Mosaic Work in Moscow*

by Natalia Kareva

*Natasha Kareva helped launch the signal issue of Road to Emmaus with her drawing of our logo. Her beautiful mosaic work is known throughout Russia, and we asked her to describe her artistic life, technique, and philosophy for our readers.*



*Natalia Kareva*

Although I was baptized when I was a year old, I don't remember it, of course, and we were not church-goers. Once, however, when my brother was in a distant village for summer vacation, an old countrywoman came up to him on the street and said, "You have an older sister. She must wear this." She put a little cross into his hand and left.

I was seventeen then, and was studying art history as part of the Moscow art institute curriculum. We studied the masters and even knew details of ancient religions, but we didn't read contextual commentaries on Christian art or even know precisely what the subjects were about. After some time I understood that

I must read the Bible to learn about

these pictures. God sent me the Gospels first, a wonderful Slavonic-Russian volume from 1860, and I began to read it secretly at night. I saw that this was a way, a system of how to live right. So simple, so clear. In my childhood we had been presented with several different systems, the Red Pioneer system and school systems that also studied how to live, but I was uncomfortable with these forms because I felt they were something false, like a game, and that we must show something of substance in our lives. From the Gospels I learned the Christian moral virtues – not to kill, not to lie, not to steal – and I also understood that the people who had lived before us were not more stupid than we are. Generation after generation lived by this Christian form. Our Soviet leaders said that their new system was absolutely the right one, that



*Natalia as an art student*

everything before them was wrong, but in reality, theirs was completely abnormal. I remember writing in my diary at the time that I was not interested in showing a new system in my art or my life. It was more interesting for me to understand the old system and to try to become a part of it.

During the Soviet period I was a portrait painter, and even now people are the most interesting subjects for me. I engraved illustrations for books and did landscapes – trying to find opportunities for work that did not oppress my soul, things that I could do with interest and love. There were landscapes of ancient Russian towns, and later a series of engravings of old churches and monasteries of the Golden Ring of Russia for tourists. In the Soviet times this was called “Cultural Art.” Although I was a member of the Soviet Union of Artists, which you had to belong to in order to work openly, I couldn’t do the propagandist works, but found my own niche, a place for my soul where I could work earnestly.

At the beginning of Perestroika I was depressed. I had left my husband, I had no money, and I already understood that the future would not be better, as everyone hoped, but only worse. I stopped engraving and lost interest in my creative work. There was too much ambition and exhibition in the professional world and I understood that I must do something for my life and soul, that I had to make another foundation for living the last part of my life.

I saw this very clearly one morning when I was in Moscow’s Komsomolskaya Square where the three great train stations converge. A great crowd was moving around me, people from all over the Soviet Union. I looked at their faces but I couldn’t find their eyes – they were only masks reflecting their problems, where to buy food, where to buy something in Moscow. I saw no spiritual faith in that huge mass of humanity and I suddenly felt such horror, so many people without souls. I understood at that moment that we were all living without God and that I must go to Him.

God began sending people



*“Kazan” engraving on linoleum*



*Detail of “Peter I at Battle of Poltava” engraving on metal*

to help me. When I visited Optina I understood that I couldn’t live anymore by the old ways, that I must change my life. I began reading Church history and the writings of the Fathers and elders, how to pray, how to stand in church. I understood that the most direct way to come to God was through monasticism, and I thought that perhaps I should become a nun, but God showed me what life in the monastery is like through an Orthodox nun who became my friend. I said to myself, “No, I am not ready.” But later I also understood that this was not my way. I am an artist and I must serve God as an artist. To be a nun is another vocation. God led us to different professions, and even a soldier may work for God. If He has given me this small gift, I must realize it first. But, maybe later, when I am older and have more wisdom...

When I understood that I must change my way of life, I began painting icons in the “Byzantine canon.” It is a different system of perspective and technique, but because I have a very good professional foundation I did not think it would be difficult for me to work in another style. But my soul was not yet ready. I began to paint, but there was something that was not right, something that stopped me, and I understood that I must begin from another point, that I must study and pray and become a good Christian first. It was not enough to paint with prayer in my heart, I must also be able to feel deeply. I stopped drawing and painting for a few years – in reality it was a period of crisis for me – and I began to go to church more often, to read church literature, to visit monasteries.

Then I was blessed by Hieroschemamonk Raphael to paint icons. At that time he was the spiritual father of Valaam Monastery and I went to talk to him at the podvoriye in Moscow. I felt so natural with him, light and free as I could

remember having been only in my childhood. He is a painter himself and I knew that I had finally met a person who could hold my spirit. When I think of Fr. Raphael now, I know that he is a light of the Church, and that his prayers hold me up so that I don't fall into despair.

I began painting small icons, but I found that I had become very tired after twenty years of engraving on metal and linoleum plates, of sitting in a fixed pose for hours and doing detailed work like a jeweler. It had also become difficult with my eyes and I understood that for my age I had to begin moving more in my work. Because I have loved the mosaic technique all my life and the ancient Christians used it, I decided to also. So, when my friend, Fr. Sergei, offered me the chance to paint the walls of a chapel of the Exaltation of the Cross in his village on the Volga, I offered to do a mosaic of the Crucifixion.

At first we planned the mosaic – the Crucifixion with five figures. Then I did a painted line-drawing, a cartoon, of the mosaic – it was about nine square meters. I painted the line-drawing and then bought the corresponding colors of bricks of baked clay, ceramic, and glass. The technique of mixing and hardening them has not changed over the centuries: earth pigments and acid metals are mixed with sand and baked in a kiln. You get bricks of different colors, some of them are like colorful ceramics while others are clay colors like earth browns. For halos and some backgrounds and clothing we use glass with gold leaf.



*Bricks for mosaics*

One difficulty is that you don't know what to buy until you actually break the bricks – there is always a different color inside than out. The outside is muted and dirty, but the inside may be brilliant. After I bought the bricks I hired three helpers who worked full time breaking them up into smaller sizes, called modules – small ones for faces, larger ones for dress, and the largest for landscapes. You must use a variety of sizes or the wall will be absolutely flat and uninteresting.

One of the most important moments is when you decide on the pallet, on what colors you are going to use. To do this you put the painted cartoon on the table and place the different pieces of the colored modules on it to see



*Hieroschemamonk Raphael*

what looks right. Once you have chosen your colors you begin a so-called “dry composition” without plaster. You put the small stones in their places and then get above them on a ladder to look at the mosaic from a distance so that you can make the fine adjustments. When you've finished the dry composition you begin to cement them in. For the very small lines, like on the faces, you can affix the little pieces together first with plasticine. The classical method is to make a backless frame on the table and put a metal mesh at the bottom to hold the cement. Next you mix the cement and pour it into the box. From there, you take a piece of transfer paper with the outline of the drawing and lay it into the frame, tracing the lines on the wet cement. Then you quickly place the stones – as you had previously arranged them – before the cement dries. Of course, this can only be done for one small area at a time. I work with as much space as I can finish in a day: the next day I mix more cement and start again.

After the workers chip out and shape the first modules, I take each small piece and hand-grind or chisel all six edges to make it fit. I work with a hammer in my hand – each piece is individually shaped to fit the place for which it is intended. Because the pieces are not uniformly shaped or polished smooth, the mosaic looks alive. The light reflects differently from each piece of tile and the surface seems to move like a real picture. This is the quality of the Byzantine-Roman technique. There is another technique called Florentine mosaic where you polish the face and the larger pieces, but that gives a different result.

When you've finished, you must let the work sit for awhile, so that after a few days you can look at it with fresh eyes. You always see places that aren't



*Painting cartoon for mosaic*





*Breaking the bricks into modules*



*Setting the dry composition*



*Mosaic of the Mother of God, Convent of the Glorification of the Mother of God, Borovskoe, Siberia*

right in size or color so you must take your hammer again, chip them out, and redo those sections.

For the Crucifixion, I had three full-time helpers. It took five months. For a much smaller one square meter mosaic of the Mother of God for a woman's monastery in Siberia, it also took five months without any help. The sixty square centimeter mosaic of the Holy Trinity took three months, working ten or twelve hours a day.

People sometimes ask me if I have had spiritual experiences with my work. Actually, I am very happy when all spiritual events connected with the mosaics stop and don't happen to me at all; I always pray that nothing happens. Usually I meet great resistance when I start to work, as if some dark power doesn't want me to. For instance, when I began to draw the cartoon for the Crucifixion, I slipped on the ice, fell and broke my right arm. I had to finish the cartoon by a certain date, and after I had gone home and cried over my broken arm, I decided that I must secretly and quietly learn to draw with my left hand. (Natasha laughs) If the devil pushed me, I might be conquered, but I couldn't stop drawing. Finally, even with the plaster on my arm, I figured out a technique by which I could draw and paint with my right hand.

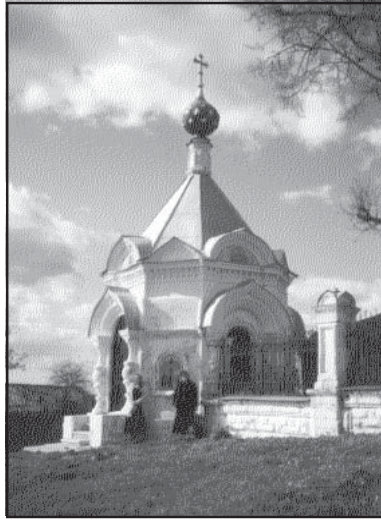
Another temptation was when we had finished and I had gone to the village to attach the mosaics to the chapel wall. One night after supper, Fr. Sergei sent me to take some cold soup to friends at the other end of the village. It was a beautiful summer evening, so calm and peaceful and I felt wonderful. As I walked through the streets everything was very still until suddenly I felt with my back that there was something behind me. I turned and at that very moment a huge Caucasian dog, bred to fight wolves, leaped for my throat. I threw up my arm to ward him off and he took a big bite out of it.



*Natalia at installation of mosaics*

Also, when I began the mosaic of the Mother of God in the middle of winter, the whole heating system in my studio stopped working. At exactly the same time, the water lines broke on the floor above me and flooded through my ceiling. There were five centimeters of water covering the floor, and many of my books, prints and metal engravings were ruined. I don't think this was a coincidence. I often remember the phrase, "With fear of God and with faith draw nigh...." When I begin any work I





*Chapel on the Volga enshrining  
Crucifixion mosaic*

think of this, and not only do I fear God, but I remember that the devil never sleeps. During the work itself, when I am in that deep place where the Church is one and I am a part of it, I feel myself absolutely safe. It is only when I begin or finish a work that I am vulnerable.

But there is also another finer, higher side to my work, “spiritual” if you will. Both the ancient Christian mosaicists and we contemporary artists have one line of tradition. When you follow the Byzantine canon of painting, the spiritual richness that exists in all times and places comes through it. We have one Church, one Christ, and one mutual exhibition through the centuries. We not only use the early Christian artistic techniques

but we repeat their ancient words in our prayers and this binds us together. We pray with them, and they with us, so we are together out of time.

The Byzantine style has a very strict canon and rules of technique. I like this style, but something happens to me when I work with it that also happened to the ancient Russian icon painters. They used this strict canon, but Russian icons are somehow more soft and even more alive. I love the archetypal Greek style and I use it, of course, because it is our common style, but when I work it comes out softer, with more warm and varied colors. It is the same with mosaic because I’m not making a decorative picture on the wall, but an icon you can pray in front of. Perhaps this is a difference between our Byzantine and Russian mentalities.

I’ve also been asked how personal expression enters into my mosaics and church art. I think it works off of genetic memory. When I began painting icons I felt differently about this, because, as I said, I was not yet part of the tradition. It has taken about ten years, but now I am able to stay deeply enough inside myself to feel my genetic memory. I never try to show my personal feelings. If I can come from this depth, the piece works without my thinking about it, and in reality, the work is from a deeper tradition.

Genetic memory is something that we all have. Adopted children often have personality traits or talents from parents they never knew, and members of different ethnic groups or races share characteristics and abilities. This is passed



*Engraving of Optina  
Elder Anthony*

from the generations before us.

For me, it is the same with Slavonic, our ancient Russian church language. I have never studied it but I understand it well. I can read books in Church Slavonic because it is my language, it lives in my genetic memory. It is absolutely my familiar native language, a special language with which we talk to God. And mosaic is the same – in working with it we reach back to something in Russia’s past that is also a part of me. Just as I remember and repeat words that were spoken by the saints and elders, when I paint a line I know that I am repeating a gesture used by our ancient Russian icon painters. I lose myself and my ego. At this moment I am not a part of my age or my century – I belong to the life of the whole Church, out of time. ✚



*Detail of Crucifixion mosaic*