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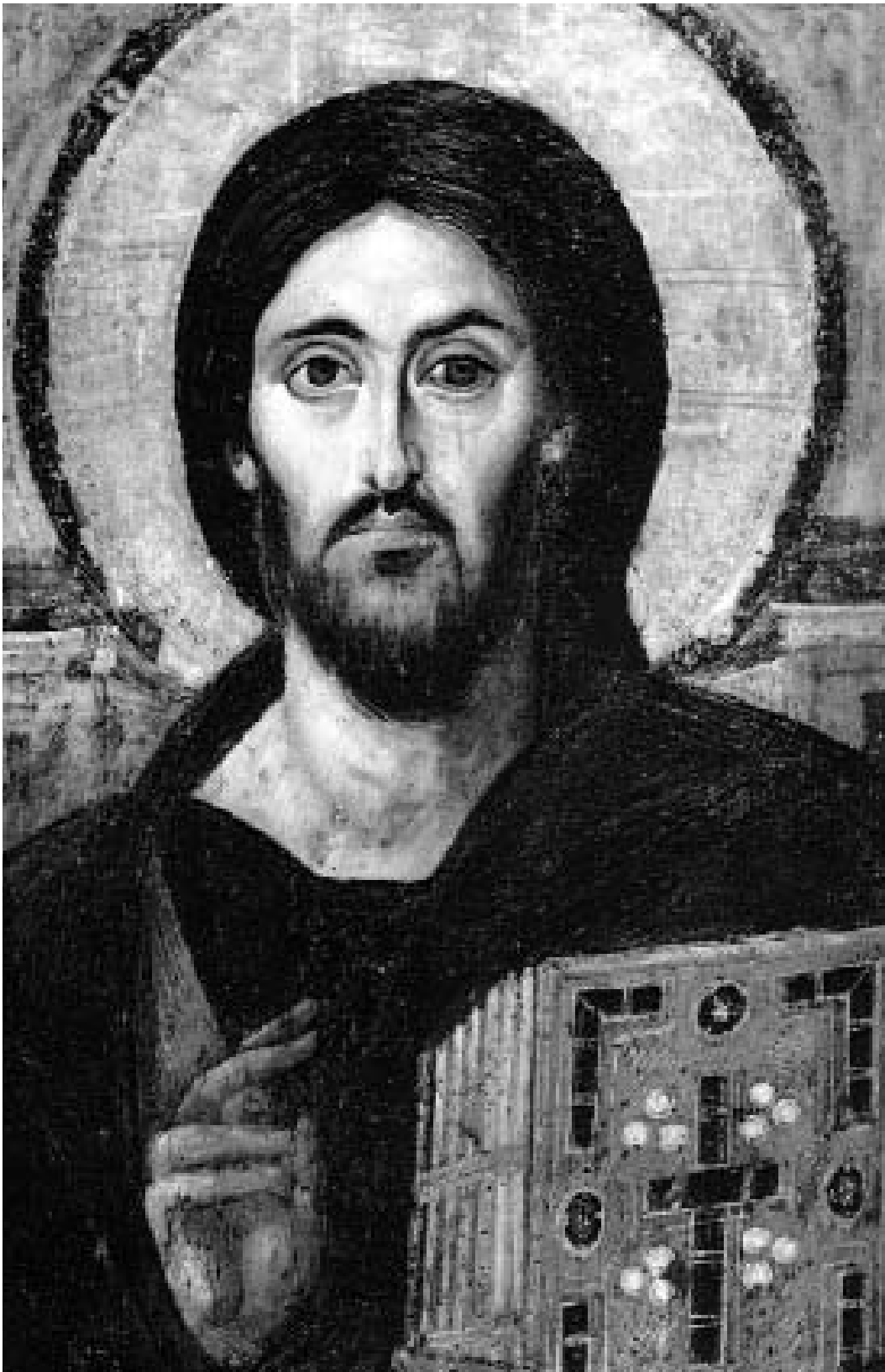
# ROAD TO EMMAUS

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# PERSPECTIVE AND GRACE: PAINTING THE LIKENESS OF CHRIST

Conversing with Emilie Van Taack, the well-known French iconographer, teacher, and student of Leonid Uspensky, on a sunny spring morning in Paris, is a pleasure even for the non-artist. Emilie's rich expertise and warm explanations illumined the principles of iconographic perspective, and left us with a sense of the immanence of the kingdom of heaven.

RTE: Emilie, please tell us about yourself and how you began painting.

EMILIE: My mother and I were chrismated when I was four years old by Fr. Evgrav Kovalevsky, whose church at that time was under the jurisdiction of the Russian Church Abroad. His church also ran the Theological Institute of St. Denis in Paris, where Fr. Sophrony Sakharov (a spiritual son of St. Silouan), Vladimir Lossky, and Dom Lambert Boudoin, a Benedictine, all taught in the first years. Leonid Uspensky had also taught at St. Denis, lecturing on the theology of the icon and teaching painting courses. Fr. Evgrav himself was a good painter and there were other students of Uspensky, such as the nun, Mother Seraphima, with whom my artist-mother studied icon painting. Later, she studied under Uspensky himself, who, by that time, taught in his own workshop.

Fr. Evgrav Kovalevsky, Uspensky, and Fr. Gregory Krug had been very close friends since 1931-1932. They were part of the Russian emigration of the '20's and, together with Vladimir Lossky, they ran the Brotherhood of St. Photios, where they tried to recover the meaning and true practice of iconography. During the Second World War, Uspensky was slated to be sent to a German forced labor camp, so he hid in his flat and devoted his time to painting icons. After the war, he began to take students. When his flat became too crowded, he taught at the Church of the Three Hierarchs of the Moscow Patriarchate, and this is where I learned.

*Opposite: Christ Pantocrator, 6th century, Sinai*

My mother hoped that I too would become an icon painter, but I didn't want this. I knew that I had some ability because, although I had never taken lessons, I could draw, but my interest was philosophy. After I returned from a year's study in Greece, I began my philosophy studies at the Sorbonne, but mother was so eager and insistent that I finally agreed to go to Uspensky to learn how to draw well and to paint frescoes, which I was very attracted to.

When I spoke of my two interests to Fr. Placide Desseille – a Trappist monk who became Orthodox on Mt. Athos in the seventies, and who with Fr. Emilianos, abbot of the monastery of Simonos Petra, founded Athonite metochions in France – he told me, “Uspensky is very old. Leave your philosophy for now, and learn from him. Afterwards, you will see what you need to do.” After a year of drawing, Uspensky told me that if I wanted to improve, it was time for me to begin to paint, and that if I wanted to paint frescoes, I had to paint icons first, because it is the same thing. So I began to paint icons with him, but it was a long time before I understood exactly what an icon is.

RTE: And what did you come to?

EMILIE: Generally, it is said that an icon must follow very strict canonical rules, but this is not true. There is only one rule, Rule 82, decreed by the Council in Trullo, part of the Sixth Ecumenical Council. This

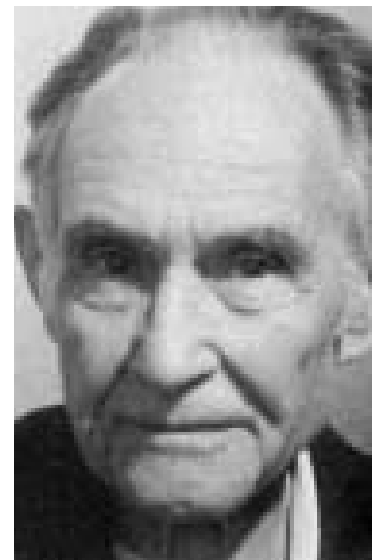
is the iconographic canon, in which it is stated that icon painters must follow older painters, that they must be in this stream of tradition, but exactly how they are to do this is not described. What is stated is that an icon must show both the humility of the Man Jesus and His glory as God; that is, *it must manifest the Incarnation*. In an icon of the Lord, you must be able to see that this man who is represented is not only man, but also God. You must see the Person of Christ. The Council made this rule because at this period there were still some symbolic representations, like in the early Church, representing Christ by a fish, or as a shepherd, or as a lamb –



Emilie Van Taack

not the hypostatic representation of the Person of Jesus Christ. The Council said that all of these symbolic representations are like the shadows of the Old Testament. Since we have been illumined by the truth of the New Testament, we no longer use these old and outdated symbols, but we must present Christ Himself, Who incarnated into a human body and can be represented in the body. This is the only canon, the only rule of the Church.

We have to learn from the old, but we do not have to copy the old *exactly*. We speak about this when we teach drawing; the drawing is important, but we are not trying to make a perfect reproduction. What we have to take from these old icons, step by step, is the inner sight of the face of Christ that is revealed to every



Leonid Uspensky

soul. There is a very beautiful text from St. Macarios the Great about the spiritual man, who, little by little, draws his own being by looking at the image of Christ in his soul. He is painting this likeness on himself. Through spiritual life – frequent Holy Communion, prayer, through all the commandments of the New Testament, as one does the will of God, God imprints this likeness of Himself on your soul. You already have His image, you are made in the image of God, but too often we are not aware of this because we haven't yet established the likeness. This is why people do not believe in God anymore. They do not see this likeness often enough on the face of Christians, which is the true Predication.

In defining what is “canonical” in icon painting, we have, of course, many beautiful old canonical icons to refer to. But canonicity is difficult to define. I cannot tell you what is canonical, because the icons themselves define the canons. It is a circle, and we must accept it like this. By looking at these beautiful icons, studying them, copying them, little by little they help you to see in yourself this image of Christ, and then you will be able to paint it without looking to the old, because you will have it in your own heart. This is a saving situation, because in this way we cannot possess the canon: it is a free gift that God gives or takes back as He wills.

## Uspensky: Drawing and Technique

RTE: That is very satisfying. Can you speak now a little of what you learned from Uspensky?

EMILIE: Yes. This is very important. Uspensky, like all good iconographers, knew that drawing is everything, but not drawing in the technical sense. This is very important. In icon painting, technique is actually a great danger. Technique is given by God, of course, and we have nothing against technique, but it is a dangerous tool because with technique you do what you want, as you want, when you want. You do not necessarily do what God wants, as God wants, when God wants.

A developed technique that allows you to do *just as you like* is a problem, just as it is not particularly good to have very fast cars or planes, which are only a means of indulgence that allow us to do what we want. If we don't have this technical ability, we have to ask God to give us what we need, and it is the will of God that decides these things.

It is exactly the same in iconography. What is the deep beauty and strength of these old painters, St. Andrei Rublev and others? They have great talent and technique, this is quite true, but their spiritual life was far vaster than their technique. Technique is this [*holding her hand near the floor*], spirituality is this [*her hand above her head*]. And now we have technique like this [*above her head*] and spirituality, not even this [*near the floor*]. This is a problem.

Each of us has a different talent given by God. If we are talented, we don't have to work at all, we just keep our non-knowing being, our awkwardness – we don't know how to do something, but we have to do it, and just try our best, suffering very much, feeling clearly that another would have done much better than ourselves, and unsatisfied with what we actually do.

Of course, it is obviously necessary that we be able to draw (it is a sign of the election of God for this task, but not automatically), but if we are like a non-artist, this is a very good basis for iconography, that we don't know.... When we have less skill, this is good. When a line is beautiful it is because of the Holy Spirit. It is because your soul and your heart have become humble and smooth, not because of your technique. Of course, you can learn the technique of drawing a beautiful line – you can spend hours and hours every day doing the same line, and after two years you will do a

beautiful line, but this line will be empty, it will be only technique. Technique has to be cast far from the icon. If an icon is this, this icon is a work of death. It will bring death to the soul.

The proper work of the icon is to give the light and life of Christ, and this life we cannot take from ourselves, we have to take it from above. If we are to be a good channel for this light and life, we must be like St. John the Baptist, "*He must increase, but I must decrease.*" This is the way.

And what is the work of the painter? It is *kenosis*; there is absolutely no other way than to let Providence empty us of ourselves. This Greek word, which means "emptiness," is used in theology to mean the way God has emptied Himself by becoming man. We, in turn, have to do the same: empty ourselves of our natural human abilities and of our ego.

But we also need a teacher, a friend. Just as if we live our spiritual life alone, we won't see ourselves well, we have to work on icons with another... Working alone is only for hermits, for the very experienced, and even St. Gregory the Sinaite says that a hermit should write something every day, so that your writing will show you where you are at. You must be with another who tells you when to stop, when to go, because we can't see ourselves. If you don't have this distance, you will not have a secure spiritual life. It is the same in iconography.

What is important in the old icons is that they show us what an icon should be because they are a vision of the Kingdom to come. I believe that what an icon is, is the inverse perspective, both physically and spiritually. This inverse perspective is not well understood, it is not generally practiced – sometimes it is only approximated and admitted for the buildings and landscapes. But in iconography and in faith, it must be applied to the human body in its entirety, and to the soul as well – to the entire human being.

## Inverse Perspective and Spirituality

RTE: Can you explain inverse perspective to us non-artists? Why is it important?

EMILIE: Inverse perspective can explain the entire character of iconographic art. Why? Because the icon is not the fruit of imagination, it is not the fruit of man's art, it is not the application of a Christian theory that I put into practice. *It is the plastic<sup>1</sup> expression of a vision from above that is given by*

<sup>1</sup> Plastic Arts: Visual arts that involve the use of materials that can be molded, modulated, carved or shaped, such as clay, paint, plaster, wood and stone.

*the Holy Spirit*, and it is this inverse perspective that makes the Gospel different from all other literature. If you take the Beatitude, “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” this is the inverse perspective of human rationale, but this was given by God, this is the Word of God. It is revelation from above, a revelation of the eschatological being as shown in Christ and it is impossible for the human mind to come to such a thought alone.

It is the same with the Incarnation – impossible to imagine if you hadn’t been told. How could a man imagine that the almighty God who created this universe would become a man, that He would enter it not by breaking into it with His omnipotent strength (and thus destroying it), but that He would enter quietly, through the womb of a virgin? So, if you understand this inverse perspective of the Gospel, you understand who Christ is.

As Fr. Sophrony says, the commandments of the New Testament are not moral prescriptions. We are only told that we must become like Christ, in His likeness, and how. If you understand who Christ is, then you understand everything, you have everything, and you embody it in your own unique way. The saints are simply who they are. They aren’t universal models for everyone, and it is the same with the icon. It is the inverse vision – the vision seen from above – a perspective onto created things and the human person through the eyes of God. You cannot invent a real icon; it is a revelation.



RTE: Why then do we have to look to the old icons, if the person is painting from their own (hopefully purified) vision of Christ, and receiving their own revelation?

EMILIE: Why do we look to the old icons? It is very like the theology of the Fathers. These men had an experience of God, and we know that if theology is anything other than the expression of a direct experience of God (or at

least a recounting of the words of those who did experience God), it is worthless. So, all the dogmas and definitions are material expressions used by the Fathers to express this experience of God, to prevent the words of divine revelation from being interpreted in a wrong way.

In the Fathers we look for the expression of their experience. We do not yet have this vision ourselves. (Perhaps we have many things that we don’t yet know about, and it’s good that we don’t know, because everything is given to all, but in a hidden way, to be revealed at the proper time.) Looking to the old icons, we take their vision, just as an academic theologian takes the phrases of the Fathers and repeats them because he himself has not yet had this vision. When they write correctly, they say, “The Fathers had this vision and we took it from them.” And we do exactly the same with the icon.

### The Technique of Inverse Perspective in Iconography

RTE: Thank you. You’ve described the spiritual dimension very clearly. Could you explain now what inverse perspective in iconography means in the technical, artistic sense? I have one definition here, and I’m wondering if you agree with it:

*“In inverse or Byzantine perspective, the viewer is the point of view of the objects in the icon and experiences multiple points of perspective. The intent of using this form... is to allow the viewer a window into the Kingdom of God and to bring them into relationship with the Almighty. In choosing not to use the illusion of linear space and of external light and shadow, and by placing the point of perspective on the viewer, the Divine spills out over the confines of the frame and rushes out to embrace the heart of man...”*

Is this saying that modern linear perspective is like us looking into a picture, “entering” a picture as we look at all modern pictures, with our attention focused on certain details; whereas in an icon, the image of God and the saints gaze out at us, as if we are the subject?

EMILIE: Yes. I agree with this definition. With inverse perspective, as Saint Irenaeus of Lyons says about the Incarnation, “we are taken hold of by God,” but there is a little point missing here to make it perfectly clear. In linear perspective, our modern way of painting, the eye of the viewer is focussed on infinity, on the vanishing point: he is attracted outside of himself, he loses himself in the infinity of the horizon. With inverse perspective, the

The frescoes on this and the following pages were painted by Leonid Uspensky at the Moscow Patriarchal Church of the Three Holy Hierarchs, Rue Patel, Paris.

attention of the viewer is turned back to himself, to the inside of his soul, converted to his own heart and also to his conscience, and of course, to the present instant – that is, to the time for salvation.

The inverse perspective, in its pure material meaning, is not the inverse of what we moderns mean by perspective. Do you remember the concept of Durer and his black box? After the Renaissance and Durer, there was a very big change in our perception of perspective. Durer thought that everything real, to be truly represented, should be expressed scientifically, mathematically, and consequently, that every line could be projected onto an axis. So Durer made the black box, a kind of primitive camera. He didn't look at reality as he saw it, but he had this box with a small hole to see inside, where there was an objective lens that projected the image of the real scene onto mirrors. Mirrors are flat, so the image was projected onto this square axis, like a graph, and could be mathematically copied. So, now, since the Renaissance, we are used to thinking that this is a true perspective. You see it developing in the early Renaissance paintings, but the inverse perspective of the icon is not the inverse of this perspective, because this Renaissance perspective came long afterwards.

The perspective that is inversed in the icon is the antique perspective, and the way the ancients represented perspective was completely different. There is a very interesting book by Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, where he describes this antique perspective very well, following the natural perspective of the structure of the eye. The eye is like a sphere, and when light comes into the eye, it enters through the crystalline lens and the image is projected upside down on the retina. It is put upright through the optic nerve, that is, it is inversed... and then the image given to the brain is that which was projected onto the half-spherical surface of the retina. This means that the perspective that I see – *that is given to me by God, as He created it and me and wants it to be thus for me* – is half-spheric, not on a flat surface like Durer's box.

So to describe the antique perspective as opposed to the modern linear one, we have to say that painters projected their images onto a sphere. This means concretely that the higher the objects – and especially buildings – the more they seem to be seen from underneath. It is actually a bit more complicated, but leave it like this.

It is this perspective that was inversed in the icon, because this was the worldly perspective of Byzantium and late antiquity. In the inverse

perspective, what is near is smaller and what is far is bigger (the inverse of our natural perception) and you will notice that icons generally represent buildings as seen from above.

After iconoclasm, the Church decided to inverse the perspective, to break the ties between iconography and worldly painting and worldly perception, because of the accusations of iconoclasts that icons were often too carnal, too fleshy, too worldly, too sensual to be compatible with the expression of the divine glory. You can see this carnal element in many of the encaustic icons painted before iconoclasm, which are still preserved in Sinai or in Italy.

Now, let us look at the famous sixth-century icon of Christ Pantocrator from Sinai. The two buildings in the background are still seen from below, and this is typical of the antique perspective – it is not yet inversed. Nevertheless, it is very important to note that, on this tremendous icon, the face of the Lord is in inverse perspective: a witness of this fact is the difference between the two eyes, which is so often misunderstood – despite the fact that one can find a thousand marvelous significations as to the effect of this difference and the effect made upon the viewer. We can interpret it as we need to for the glory of God. I don't think that it was consciously painted so, but the vision of the Lord in the heart and soul of the man who painted it was naturally in inverse perspective, and he painted the likeness of the Lord with this perspective.

RTE: Does this mean that anyone who painted from what they thought the Lord looked like, if they'd had a real experience of Him, would naturally have done it from an inverse perspective?

EMILIE: Yes, I think so! If they have the plastic, psychological and intellectual means to assimilate and integrate what they perceive! If they are true to what they perceive. But often prejudices are much stronger: think how difficult it was for many painters to integrate the impressionist revolution, how long it was resisted! But you can also find paintings where a few signs of the true experience appear, even if the representation as a whole is quite far from it. In these matters, as in spiritual life, it is a question of discernment, there is no rule.

But it is almost impossible to realize this without the help of grace. It is better to say then that it is a gift of grace – an unpremeditated quality that is put on paper – which can be accepted or not by the painter with the conditions I indicated above.

RTE: When we look at this icon from Sinai, what objectively makes it “inverse perspective?”

EMILIE: It would take a long time to explain it without drawing it at the same moment... What I can say now shortly is the following. What is in front – eyes, eyebrows, nose and mouth – is proportionally smaller than what is behind – the lateral part of the face, cheeks, ears, forehead, beard, hair, chin, which are much larger than they “should be.”

It becomes very clear if you compare it with paintings of Piero Della Francesca, who wanted to paint the human face – especially the face of Christ – in opposition to perception which, to his mind, was not the truth and could not express the truth. In a very seriously calculated way, according to the mathematical linear perspective, he drew that which was in front bigger, as well as that which is behind, smaller. So Piero represented the face of Christ with a very big nose, big eyebrows, big mouth and a little forehead, little chin, almost no cheeks and so on...Christ looks like a primate...Look at his painting of Christ’s Baptism. It is quite obvious. This was to correct the natural and sensible perception: his way of painting the “true Christ.”

### Perspective in the Shroud of Turin

EMILIE: Icons slightly deform real perception in the inverse direction. I say slightly, because, of course, the face must stay fully human. But this deformity is so objective that the people who want to demonstrate that icons copied the Shroud of Turin (to prove that the Shroud is older and the origin of every icon), schematically identify the outline of the image of Christ on the Shroud – as it is naturally seen, in opposition to the photographic negative of it, which is supposed to show the natural aspect of Christ to the eyes of contemporaries – with the outline of the face of Christ on certain icons, such as the Pantocrator of Chilandar. But this shows only that the inverse perspective is applied in both cases, nothing else.

RTE: So, if our natural perspective is God-given, how does that fit in with the Church’s decision to inverse it to express eternity?

EMILIE: Our natural perspective is fallen. In the icon it is not our *katastasis*, our “state of being,” as the Greeks would say. It is not our earthly state of being that is represented, because this state of being will disappear at the

Second Coming of Christ. The icon represents the ever-present world to come. This is *another* state of being, just as the Gospel is another state of being, an inverse perspective. Like Piero, we try to represent the “true Christ,” but we look for Him in another direction, inside our heart.

The iconoclasts protested against sensuality in icons, and with the triumph of the iconodules the Church took this into consideration. The practical conception of icon painting was settled very quickly, by the ninth and tenth centuries. As far as we know, these norms were already in place by the beginning of the eleventh century.

So, after iconoclasm, this inverse perspective became a conscious practice, something willfully done. Before that it was just a spontaneous way of

rendering a true perception of Him; the face of Christ, as we see it *when we are in communion with Him*.

As I said a moment ago, you find this inverse perspective physically printed on the Shroud of Turin. It is obviously an inverse, because it is quite clearly the negative of the positive. For me, the Shroud is a confirmation of the revealed character of this inverse perspective and the necessity to apply it to the human body and to the face. It demonstrates that the inverse point of view upon reality implies inverse perspective in the iconographic way, and it obviously proves the eschatological objectivity of the vision



expressed by the icon. On the positive (the Shroud as it is seen), what corresponds to the shadows in icon painting remains white, and what is lit is dark. The effect on the viewer is the following: the “white shadows” seem larger and more in front, or at least on the same level with the “dark lights.” The face is as if it is spread out on a surface. And the effect of inverse perspective is given. (The Shroud has its own way of expressing the inverse perspective.)

This is why many painters, and especially the Flemish – I think of Memling, Van Der Weyden, and Van Eyck, who copied the Shroud during the 14th century – draw the face of Christ *as if he was fat*: the face is unusually enlarged.

The early iconographers didn't paint Christ as He was seen in His earthly life by non-believers, and we do not paint Christ through the eyes of the nonbelievers on earth. We paint Christ as He showed Himself at the Transfiguration because this is the real Christ, the Christ of eternity with His glory no longer hidden. He came to earth in the humble form of a man with His Divinity hidden, to protect the freedom of the people. If they had seen He was God, they would have been compelled to acknowledge Him. But after the Resurrection, Christ appeared with the same features as He had had in the Transfiguration. St. Luke says that at the Transfiguration the features of His face changed, and we also know that after the Resurrection He was not recognized. Even St. Peter and the disciples on the shore of Lake Tiberius didn't recognize Him. It was only after St. John, who loved Him and recognized Him with his heart, said, "It is the Lord," that St. Peter saw that it was Him.

RTE: Then, does the Shroud of Turin show His resurrected features, or His features with the "glory hidden" that worldly people saw.

EMILIE: The positive image seen on the Shroud shows the resurrected figure, it is a "Made Without Hands" icon. But the negative image of the Shroud, made by taking a photo of it, does not, I think, show the real image: to my mind, it shows a sentimental, humanistic, dramatic, sensual and humanly-made version of the icon, an inverse of the inverse perspective (and I am not sure that this is nearer to what we call history) – it is something artificial. It is for these reasons also that western Christians and especially Catholics like it so much! But every thing that awakens the heart of man to the love of Christ is obviously good and useful to some extent.

And so now we paint Christ "*as He is*," as Saint John says, the Resurrected Christ. Perhaps many of these pre-iconoclast painters were aware of this, but perhaps not. The post-iconoclast painters are much more aware because of the obvious decisions, the conscious change in the Church's iconographic standards. We have nothing written about it, but it was probably a consensus, perhaps decisions following certain Councils, although we have no remaining evidence – but, of course, it was the Holy Spirit Who brought it about.

But even if the earlier painters did not have inverse perspective for the buildings, it was the face of Christ that was much more important. Can I recognize Him or not? This was the question. So, they were obliged to paint

Him in that way, in inverse perspective, so as to recognize Him. Because if it's not like that, it is not Him.

### "Nature from Above"

EMILIE: This is a very deep link that I don't understand quite well – the inverse perspective and the reality of the person. Perhaps it is impossible to see the human person without this inverse perspective because the essence of a human being is something that is within God. What the person is, is hidden in God. We know that we are a human person because God is a person, revealed through His humanity, and if we know God, we know the people around us as persons. If we do not have this perception of the humanity of God, we cannot perceive and feel the people around us. Perhaps the relationship between the inverse perspective and the human reality is something like this. We have to take the point of view of God to know ourselves and others.

It is impossible to express the hypostasis of Christ without the inverse perspective, because it is "the sight from the boat." By this, I mean what the apostles saw from the boat on Lake Tiberius, when Christ approached, walking on the waters. They thought that He was a spirit, that is, someone who is not in submission to the rules of fallen nature and, of course, they could not imagine that this was possible with a real human body. Though in a body, Christ is free from all fallen or even natural limitations. His humanity is only ruled by the Holy Spirit. The inverse perspective expresses the way the Kingdom of Heaven is governed by the Holy Spirit, a total freedom from *our* ideas or perceptions. It is the rule of the Kingdom.

RTE: Yes. You see from the lives of saints that their often contra-worldly acts and statements were inspired by the Holy Spirit, and are a kind of inverse perspective of fallen nature, which is why they always surprise us, just as you said the gospel is in inverse perspective, in words. It wasn't what people expected the Lord to say.

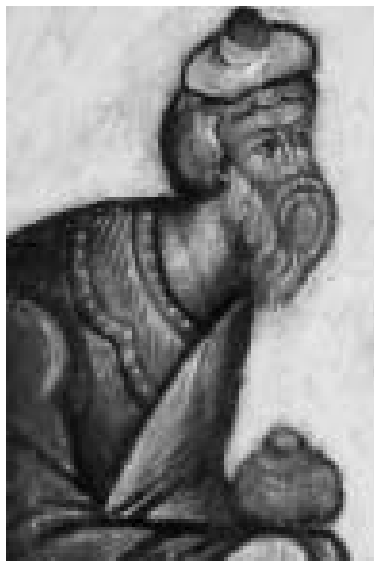
What is interesting to the non-artist is that when one first becomes Orthodox, the icons appear very stiff, formal and impersonal. But when you've been Orthodox awhile, you suddenly understand that you can't pray any longer in front of the sentimental and sensual western paintings of the Virgin and Child. You might feel a spark of inspiration, but you can't really pray there; the icon has become something else for you.



EMILIE: What you are saying is very important, that the criterion is prayer. A good icon, an icon that does its job, is an icon that puts you into communion with God immediately. Prayer is born from your heart in front of this icon. For the well-known icon of the Mother of God *Glykophilousa* at Philotheou Monastery, there has even been an akathist written to the Mother of God as the Mother of Prayer. It is obvious that this icon itself acts as the Mother of Prayer. Icons such as this are given by revelation from above and are really wonderworking. An icon should always be spiritually wonderworking; this is proof that it is a good icon. This was the meaning of the vision of Saint Alypius, a holy icon painter from the Kiev Caves: he saw a Dove coming out of an icon of the Mother of God. This says to us that the Holy Spirit dwells in icons and also comes to us from them, by them and through them.

Western painters were not in the line of this change of consciousness, and this is quite logical because the western Church didn't sign the Sixth Council – its decisions were never formally approved nor understood by the West – and so they weren't fully able to understand the Seventh Ecumenical Council that overturned iconoclasm. The West never understood icons; they could not understand that it was the hypostasis of Christ that was painted, not just the figure. Of course, there are some common characteristics of the figure of Christ that we all hold to: He must have brown hair, the little light beard, some outer characteristics.... these are important and without them it is impossible to render Him, but even more important is that the hypostasis of Christ must be painted. There are icons that have more or less of the likeness, but the icon of Sinai realizes this likeness to a degree never achieved in any other icon of Christ! It is a very fine example of what the likeness should be: all of the "qualities" of our Lord, the God-Man, are shown, particularly both His humility and His almighty power.

We must be able to say, "Yes, it is Him," because we know Him, and now we meet Him. In the words of the Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom, we can



say: "We have seen the true Light, we have received the heavenly Spirit, we have found the true faith..." we know Him "personally!" And what is incredible is that you can hear this from people who have never seen an icon before. The icon is inside of us, and we recognize Him. This is exactly what you were saying about the difference in western paintings.

There is another difference between the east and west in that the western painters took models, often themselves or their mistresses. Even Durer's painting of Christ is a self-portrait.

RTE: Yet even in icons there is a great variety of difference.

EMILIE: Certainly, from one icon to another there are many differences because there is not just one way to express something. For example, some art historians say that it is a myth to speak about "the icon." There is not one icon – they cannot find a unity of expression because the real unity is not plastic, it is somewhere else, just as the expression of the experience of God can differ very much from one theologian to another, from one school to another, because we are all different. The ability of the plastic means (whatever they are) to express this life depends entirely on the spiritual life of the painter. But in itself the experience is the same.

RTE: I know a young Greek monk who painted an icon of a little-known saint, recognizable, but technically extremely primitive, with rather bright garish colors, but he painted it with his whole heart. Later that icon was shown to a well-known monk-iconographer in Russia, whose students began laughing when they saw it. But their teacher stopped them saying, "No, this is a real icon. You can pray in front of this."

EMILIE: Voilà. This is just what I meant. Uspensky said that the icon is a portrait painted from nature, but not this nature, the nature from above. This is because when you paint, you are in real contact with this living person. To paint the true face of an icon you have to know and believe that Christ is God, God Incarnate, but even more than this, you have to believe that the One you are painting now is alive, that He is in front of you and that, through prayer, you are in communion with Him. "God is not the God of the dead, but of the living." This is absolutely fundamental. This holy person, the Lord or a saint, generally invisible to us, comes in His icon and blesses and answers prayers through the icon, giving His presence. The icon

is the presence of God on earth. At the end of the Gospel of St. Matthew the Lord says, “I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.” The fathers interpreted these words as being about liturgy, about Holy Communion, but we do not celebrate the liturgy without icons. It is forbidden.

RTE: Really?

EMILIE: Yes. You must have a gospel, a cross, and an icon to celebrate liturgy. And you have to understand the Gospel from the point of view of the icon. The Gospel is an icon in words, and in the Gospel you have the Lord’s aural presence; in the icon you have His visual presence, and when you eat Him, you are in communion with Him with your body.

He is so merciful, that He not only gives us the reality of His Body and His Blood, His own substance, but because He knows that we are poor, living in bodies and in sensibility, and that even though we receive Him fully in Holy Communion, we still will not be happy unless we see Him – because of this, He gives us icons. He wants communion to be total.

But more deeply, because in the Kingdom we will be totally immersed in Him, when He will be “everything in everyone.” And in order to already be the Kingdom on earth, the holy liturgy must satisfy every need and transfigure all aspects of human life and being; that is, manifest our entire nature as completely saved, demonstrating that we are already saved in Christ.

RTE: A few years ago we interviewed an Albanian woman who had grown up without a concept of God, but who, as a child, knew from within herself that there was “a thing,” as she called it, a power that somehow held everything together. Once she understood that she could call it “God,” and that He was a person, she felt that she couldn’t rest until she’d seen His face. When she finally entered an Orthodox church for the first time and saw Christ in the icon “Made Without Hands,” she knew immediately that this was the Face she had been searching for.

EMILIE: Yes. Although I can’t claim to understand it fully – St. Irenaeus of Lyons says in the fourth book of *Adversus Haereses* (20:5) that the salvation of man is the vision of God: “For as those who see the light are within the light, and partake of its brilliancy; even so, those who see God are in God, and receive of His splendour. And as His splendour is life-giving, those who see God will have a share in life.”

There is also the text of St. Paul, in the Epistle to the Ephesians (5:12-14): “...for whatsoever doth make manifest is light,” and consequently gives light too. But the first Epistle of Saint John (1:5-7) is clearer: “...God is light... If we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship one with another.” This is very important. This is why St. Irenaeus said that the vision of God is salvation – because it is impossible to see the light if you are outside of that light, and are not yourself showing forth the light. To see means to be in communion, that is to participate in the same glory, becoming - let us say, in a way, consubstantial, not by nature, but by grace.

RTE: Isn’t this also what the Fathers say in very prosaic terms to people who try to do good in the world without a real connection to God? Not only can they not see the real consequences of their works, but that the works themselves may not endure, as if they are built on sand.

EMILIE: Voilà. The only way to do real good is to create with God, to collaborate with Him, and this is the great power of icons. I don’t fully understand all this, but I think it is very important. St. Theodore the Studite says that if you don’t venerate the image of God, you will not see Him after death – you will not find joy in “the light of His countenance,” as the service for the departed souls says.

### Introducing Iconography in the West

RTE: How do you introduce non-Orthodox Christians to icons?

EMILIE: I was once asked to speak to an ecumenical Christian group from my district about icons. The Catholic woman who organized this told me that it would be very easy, that everyone attending was already convinced of the truth of icons, and that I would have no problem. So, I prepared to say a few of the things that I’ve just said to you. These things are very dear to me, but when I saw my audience I realized that many of them were not only not reconciled to icons, but were even hostile. The atmosphere was heavy and it was impossible to speak to them in the way I had prepared, so I spoke instead about how our icon painting studio works, about the students, about how we copy icons and, in a gentle way, I tried to express a way of being, of relating to the icon as to a beloved person, rather than giving them dogmas and theories. I found in this group many different states of mind and spirit –

some were happy with what I said, while for others it was a struggle.

Finally, a woman told me that not only had I transgressed the ecumenical way of behaving by stressing the Orthodox differences, but that there is an interdiction of the Old Testament against making any representations; that the spiritual principles I had talked about are already in the Gospel, so there is no need for icons at all. I said to her, “Yes, of course, there is an interdiction against depicting God in the Old Testament, but He was not incarnate at that time. Later, He became flesh, and the heart of the argument of the iconodule fathers against the iconoclast was simply this argument of the Incarnation; that God became man in the flesh and so we can represent and paint His features.” She had nothing to answer, and I don’t know what the result was. I am certain that this woman has a serious relationship to God through the Gospel, but if she only reads scripture, she is only “half-saved.” She has her mind and ears that are saved, but not her flesh, her eyes, her touch. All this is not yet saved.

What I tried to show these Christians is that the icon is the way to a close relationship with another person. What is important in an icon is this other person. When we are in love we have a photo of the person we love, and when we are alone we may even kiss this photo and press it to our heart. We look at them often and rejoice just remembering them. This is the way of behaving with the saints, with the Mother of God, and with Christ. All of the very strict ascetic-saints on Mt. Athos always speak of the Lord and of His Mother familiarly, with great endearments... “*Christoulaki mas*,” our little Christ... “*Manoula mas*,” our sweet little mother! And this is our aim also. We want to live with God from now throughout eternity, we want to be with Him, we don’t want to be separate from Him.

Another important point here is the humility of the icon. One thing that makes the icon difficult for western people to understand is that they have a very high idea of art, of representation, and of themselves through representation in art. But the icon is very poor and very invisible. When I finished speaking to this Catholic and Protestant group, I put out a few reproductions of very beautiful old icons and everyone came up to see them. They said, “Oh, they are so modest, so humble, so effacing.” I rejoiced and I thought how important this was, because this is just the way that Christ came into the world: *He shall not strive, nor cry; neither shall any man hear his voice in the streets. A bruised reed shall he not break, and smoking flax shall he not quench... (Matt. 12, 19-20)*. If there is something

dramatic, shouting, violent in an icon, this is not a true icon, and it can’t work correctly. A true icon is like Christ, Who draws us to Himself from within. The heart of man has to come to him naturally, as something alive and free, and just so, there is this sweetness, humility, modesty, in the icon. The more truly triumphant the icons are, the more humble they are.

Patriarch Pavel of Serbia says that this sixth-century icon of Christ from Sinai that we spoke of earlier is his most beloved icon, because only here can you see the humility of Christ. I have seen this icon exhibited in Greece,



where there were many beautiful Greek Byzantine icons beside it, and each of these Greek icons had one aspect of Christ, but in this icon you feel that it contains all the aspects together, the real humility of Christ. This humility is also what makes the icon difficult for modern people to catch. It is foreign to the minds of people here, but they can and do open themselves to it if their hearts are ready. How is it possible to survive in this world without pride? We think it is pride that makes us strong, but it is the contrary. The icon is the proof that in humbling yourself you become omnipotent by participating in God’s omnipotence.

Fr. Sophrony once spoke of the Gospel of St. John (5:44) where Christ says, “*How can ye believe, which receive honor one of another....*” That is, it is impossible to have faith without humility. Humility and faith go together.

### Iconography: Teaching and Communion

RTE: Thank you. In view of this deep spiritual communion between the iconographer and the Lord that is the heart of the icon, how did Uspensky train you and how do you train your own students? If they copy other works, as is often the learning technique, how do they arrive at that unique expression of their own vision of Christ and the saints?

EMILIE: Yes, we now have many icons, which are simply reproductions of old icons. Uspensky insisted very strongly that we are not to copy, but this fact

can also be misunderstood. We have absolutely no reason to reproduce an old icon, because this means that we have no life in ourselves. What we want to do is not to reproduce an icon outside of ourselves; we have to take it inside and regive it. Even if we copy, we have to have this process. If we are living in a spiritual way, it will not be just a copy, it will be a living copy. For example, when you see these old copies of the Vladimir Mother of God, they are not really copies – they come from this icon, yes, but they are not reproductions. They are more like living generations: descending from one icon to the other, in relation, but not exact duplicates. Nowadays, we too often make close reproductions, but this is not good, because there is too much technique and not enough spiritual life. We cannot copy mechanically, we are to find this spiritual relation with the otherworld, with the saint or with Christ. But how do we do this?

The way Uspensky taught was that in the beginning he himself gave us an old icon. He and the student chose it together from a period when Church art was unmixed with later western influence and when there was a deeply spiritual and theologically aesthetic conscience. This is another instance of how important it is not to be alone, that we have a guide. I do the same with my own students. Then we take that one icon that we love and we copy it as exactly as possible. Of course, we transpose all the time, there is always transposition, but the aim is to go into the icon, to understand how it is drawn, how it is made. As we do this we understand that drawing real icons is very difficult, because we must go into this inverse perspective that we cannot quite humanly understand.

Little by little we begin to really see, we improve, we take one, two, three different models to make an icon of a saint – or an element from this one, another from that one. For example, “How do I draw a hand in this position?” I can’t imagine it on my board because the board doesn’t fit exactly with my model, so I borrow this hand that I need from another icon. Over time you learn to take different elements, but to integrate them into a living whole. And little by little, you create in your heart a feeling of the person depicted, and in general, of the way the icon depicts, which is independent from all the models you have copied. The constitution of this inner pattern is the human contribution to the work of painting the icon.

After a long period, you find that this work that seemed so material and exacting was spiritual work, and that you have transformed yourself into the state, the *katatasis*, depicted by the icon. I see this spiritual work all the time in my students. It is not that they are doing spiritual work and this is

reflected in the work of the icon. No. In painting the icon, they are doing an ascesis that changes and transfigures them.

You sometimes hear it said of icon painters who were very spiritual, not that they prayed, but that their icon was a prayer. This is the reality. This is what really happens. It is a great miracle. If you paint an icon with this mind, you begin to unite with Christ, to pray, and to discover the truth depicted in the icon – not intellectually, but with your heart and with your body, because it is impossible not to paint with the body. You take the drawings in through your eyes and all your body feels this image, which you then give back out. If your body is fasting, you have a fasting icon.

This is the reason why icons are often like those who paint them; we paint them to our own image. This is a normal process. Little by little it will be less so, but in the beginning it is normal and even good because this means that the student is painting himself in every meaning. He paints upon his own being, he paints his own portrait – the eternal portrait, that is the true one – and of course at the beginning he projects his own features onto the portrait of Christ. Little by little the icon on the board will become the face of Christ, not his face, which means that slowly he himself is becoming like Christ, and this is the wonder of the work.

RTE: And Uspensky?

EMILIE: Because of his deep spirituality and experience, his rediscovery of icons, and his whole conversion through icons, Uspensky was able to leave the models completely. He insisted on not copying, and he was right. But I have come after him, and I understand that we also have to copy. He has said clearly what we have to do about not copying, so I have to say in which way we also must copy. He was a great man; we are small beside him, but we have been given his experience and the experience of the old icons, and we take from both of them.

RTE: So, here you differ from him philosophically.

EMILIE: Philosophically, but practically the same, because in practice he did exactly this – this is how he taught me. We chose old icons together to copy. But he didn’t want us to reproduce icons, which was forbidden. He was also very sensitive to the different kinds of people he had in front of him: for example, I was skilled, I had this talent which was absolutely of no value, but

it was still a skill and so it was very important for me to go deeply into the understanding of what an icon is. The more skilled you are, the more you have to copy. And the more perceptive you become, the more you see in the way that the old icons do, this is the best and most direct way to express what you have inside, what you feel is saving you!

And as I said, we learn to copy, meaning by this being guided by another, just as in monastic life, the best way to proceed is to live with a *geronda*. (Although, we have to remember to find the right spiritual father, the one good for ourselves.) Perhaps he won't even explain what to do, what spiritual life is... you just live with him, watch him, do what he does, and this is the teaching. We don't apply a theory, we just watch and copy, and this brings about a living transformation. It is the same with the old icons. So, we have to copy and not copy.

But it is difficult to give rules about this, because it is a living relationship, and all the time it is God who does these things. Of course, in the end, the spiritual father is absolutely nothing – it is God that does everything, and this is obvious.

I very much like this image from the psalmist – he is speaking to God and says, “*Thou leddest Thy people like a flock.*” The shepherd does not lead the flock from in front, he comes behind. One sheep



goes here, another there – they are free to go where they like, and the shepherd comes behind just to prevent them from going astray. This is the role of the master; you are to lead as God Himself leads.

Even in the beginning of iconography, how each student chooses one icon is incredible. In the icons coming from different workshops you can see all these different shapes of Christ, of the Mother of God and the saints! Each student can select the one that is similar to himself. Each shape of icon is something dear to the heart of a different person. Each icon is a personal relationship between God and this person, and it is absolutely marvelous. There are old beautiful icons for everyone – to lead them.

RTE: The much repeated idea of icons being windows then takes on new meaning when you realize that individual icons can catch people into heaven, even if they know nothing about art or perspective.

EMILIE: This is because all that we have to say about perspective is really of no importance. Real icons are not painted by human hands, they are inspired by God. Of course, in every icon there are many different levels. Some icons are completely holy, others are partly inspired, partly not. But everything is good if, at every level, it is done according to the will of God, inside the Church, and with a respect for the canons. If this is so, modesty always appears. We do what we can, and then it is God Who acts.

RTE: I know an elderly American woman who had been a devout evangelical Christian all her life, had never seen an icon, never studied church history, but the first time she entered an Orthodox Church, she sat quietly looking at the icons for a while and then turned to her husband and said, “I don't know about you, but I'm going to be Orthodox.”

EMILIE: And they weren't especially beautiful icons, I suppose, but when there is a general shape that is traditional, then it is a good instrument, and God will use it to make Himself present. So, iconography is very high, and at the same time very low, very close and very simple. Even a simple, non-technical icon can be a wonder-worker, and this is important in understanding the question of technique.

RTE: Would you go so far as to say that it is better for icon painters to have no previous training at all?

EMILIE: This can be true, but it can also not be true. It depends on the person and the situation. It depends also on the way you understand it. If you understand it correctly, you are counting on the strength given by God. If you understand it badly, this means that you might be negligent and proud, because it is also pride to say, “I will only be inspired by God.” Are you a prophet?

Potentially, of course, we are all prophets as Pentecost shows us. In Numbers 11:29, the first reading at the vespers for Pentecost, when the Spirit came upon the seventy elders gathered around the tabernacle, Moses says of Eldad and Medad – who also prophesied in spite of being left in the camp: “Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord

would put His Spirit upon them!” Of course, this only happens when God wants. I don’t know if I will ever be a prophet. I can be, by the grace of God, but perhaps I won’t be. So we have to be simple and modest, and just do what is before us. †