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BEAUTY AS A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

Icons, Authenticity, and Reproductions

While attending a service at New York City's St. Nicholas Cathedral our attention was drawn to a beautiful standing cross of the Crucifixion, so detailed and alive that we exclaimed aloud on approaching it. We soon learned that this was the work of a young hieromonk, Fr. Silouan Justiniano, whom we had met only days earlier. As a member of the brotherhood of the Monastery of the Holy Cross in East Setauket, Long Island, Hieromonk Silouan is not only an accomplished iconographer, but a clear and welcome voice mediating sacred art to the contemporary world.

PART ONE

Beyond Appearances: From Classical Technique to Sacred Painting

RTE: Fr. Silouan, please tell us about yourself and the road that led you to iconography.

FR. SILOUAN: I was born into a Protestant home in Puerto Rico; my father was a Pentecostal minister. Most people think of Puerto Rico as Roman Catholic but after 1898, when Spain ceded Puerto Rico and the Philippines to the US, Protestant missionaries arrived. Their simple devotional style, in particular the dynamic charismatic movement, fit well with the warm Puerto Rican temperament and Protestantism spread rather quickly. The Puerto Rican people had grown tired of the clericalism of the old regime, so for the common man Protestantism meant a new freedom of religious expression,

a more immediate and personal access to the divine. When I was eleven years old, my father moved us to the United States where he led an Hispanic Assemblies of God congregation while working nights in a Mexican restaurant to support us. He also worked at printing and coining companies, until he eventually became the director of the Hispanic Cultural Society in Danbury, and went on to pursue a master's degree in education from the University of Connecticut. He then taught in Connecticut's public high school bilingual education program.

While working in Danbury High School, he met a substitute teacher, an Orthodox priest, Fr. Timothy Cremeens, who was also a former Pentecostal Assemblies of God pastor. They talked and Dad came home and told me about the meeting and about Orthodoxy. At the time I was finishing up my undergrad at the School of Visual Arts in New York, and I was intrigued.

RTE: Had you seen yourself as an artist from an early age?

FR. SILOUAN: In Puerto Rico I was too young to have a sense that I would be an artist, and too busy hanging out under the mango trees and in the sugar and banana plantations, having a good time with my friends. Once I moved to the United States in the mid-80's, I discovered the art world. At the time the hip-hop music scene was at its heyday and graffiti was a major part of that youth culture, so when a couple of my friends showed me their drawings I thought, "Wow, I want to do something like that." The next day they started me off by having me copy their styles.

RTE: So, graffiti is formalized to some degree?

FR. SILOUAN: It is, ironically. It's so contemporary that you don't think of it as relating to traditional workshop apprenticeship, but if you ask to learn from a graffiti artist, he will first have you trace, and then copy his drawings free-hand, before you go on to develop your own style. At least this is how it was in my case. Also, like other traditional forms of art, graffiti artists have their own local styles—Queens, Manhattan, Brooklyn, and so on. My friend also introduced me to the works of Raphael and Michelangelo—this was my first encounter with art history. In high school I enrolled in all the art classes I could, and decided to pursue a college education with a concentration in painting.

My first year of undergraduate work was in Baltimore at the Maryland Institute College of Art. I then transferred to the School of Visual Arts in New York

City, where I completed the Bachelor of Fine Arts. My four years of undergrad were not only a honing of skills in terms of figure drawing and painting, but a time of struggle, of getting to know myself and what I really believed about God. I remember talking to a fellow student at the time and finding myself having to argue for the existence of the soul. I took the reality of the soul for granted, and to discover that this was up for debate was a shock for me. I wasn't yet ready to take on my parents' religion; I wanted my freedom, but I had a lot of learning to go through. My faith had not yet fully blossomed.

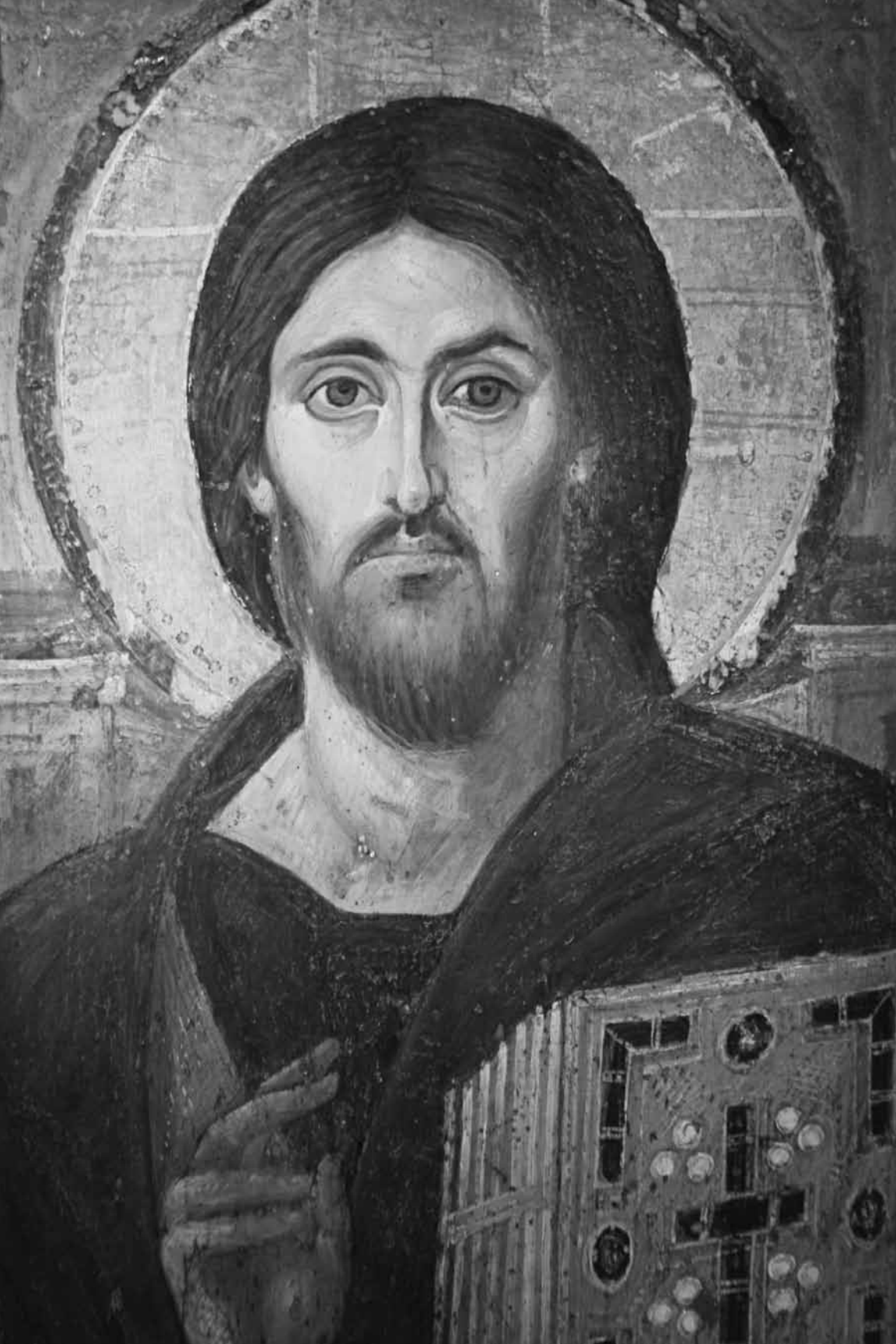
Thank God, while I was making that decision, my father encountered Orthodoxy through Fr. Timothy. I visited his church—St. George's in Danbury—for liturgy, and then spent time going back and forth between the Orthodox and Protestant services to compare the two. I couldn't define it theologically, but I knew that one was real and that in the other, something was lacking. When it was time for graduate school I finally moved to New York to attend the Master of Fine Arts program at Hunter College, and became Orthodox through the St. Mary Magdalene OCA mission that was meeting at Union Theological Seminary.

RTE: Did your father become Orthodox too?

FR. SILOUAN: Yes, he is a ROCOR priest with the St. John Climacus mission in Puerto Rico. In fact, I'm going to Puerto Rico this coming October because he has organized an exhibition called, "In Search of the Sacred Image" with some of my early and present work. I will also give some talks on icons.

RTE: Wonderful. How did your conversion affect your painting?

FR. SILOUAN: My goal had been to exhibit and sell my paintings professionally and perhaps to teach painting at a small art college or institute, but it soon became apparent that what I was expressing as an artist wasn't consistent with the Orthodox worldview I was learning through the Church. I'd become disillusioned with the secular post-Renaissance understanding of art, and it was around this time that my spiritual father asked me to paint the *plachanitsa* (the *epitaphion*) for Holy Week. That was my first icon. At the time I was working with oils, and since this was an image of Christ in the tomb that was going to be painted on cloth, it seemed logical to use oil, since it would withstand wear and tear. Egg tempera wouldn't have worked, since it requires a rigid surface prepared with gesso, hence embroidery is traditionally



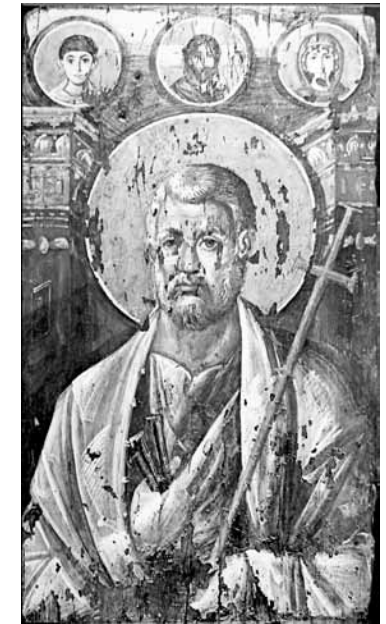
used in this context. Anyhow, the process of looking at the icon and trying to translate that into a new work was transformative. It quickly became apparent that it wasn't that simple or easy, it wasn't just "copying," but the process involved constant creative dialogue with the tradition. Smart, clear choices needed to be made for things to work formally and symbolically. From then on, there was a deeper and deeper engagement with iconography.

My training in art school was not that of traditional painting techniques. They taught the basics of oil painting in a post-impressionist wet-on-wet style, which is direct painting without the layering process that characterizes egg tempera. As I became more interested in iconography I began doing research on egg tempera, going to sources like the 12th-century *On Divers Arts* by Theophilus the Presbyter and *The Craftsman's Handbook* by Cennino Cennini, from the early 15th century, both of which describe various medieval techniques pertinent to the icon. Through study, consulting living iconographers, and much practice, I gathered enough knowledge to start.

RTE: Before we go on, can you explain briefly why egg tempera replaced the early encaustic hot-wax medium? The sixth-century icon of the Lord from Sinai is riveting, as are the Egyptian Fayum portraits.

FR. SILOUAN: I don't know what unfolded historically for that change to take place, but I am certain that it was providential because the translucency of egg tempera is a very lucid symbol of the theology of divine light in the icon, whereas encaustic

painting tends to be more opaque, with a tactile, impasto texture. You have to use a heated metal palette and dry pigments mixed with molten wax as your paint. To model the form, these are manipulated with warm brushes or heated metal tools, and finally the surface is fused with heat. It's a rather



St. Peter, 7th century. Encaustic (pigment in wax) on wood, 92.8 x 53.1 cm. St. Catherine's Monastery, Sinai.

Opposite: Christ Pantocrator, 6th century. Encaustic (pigment in wax) on wood, 84 x 45.5 cm, St. Catherine's Monastery, Sinai.

challenging medium, you have to work quickly. The end result can be impressionist at times. When you look at the early Egyptian Fayum portraits and the encaustic icons of St. Peter (St. Catherine's Monastery, Sinai), Sts. Sergius and Bacchus (Museum of Western and Oriental Art, Kiev), the Virgin between St. Theodore and St. George (St. Catherine's), and the famous Christ Pantocrator (St. Catherine's), all from around the sixth century, you see that they are more naturalistic than later iconography. This was a very early stage, in which we see the tradition beginning to articulate the principles of icon painting that will be formalized in Byzantium: first we see the catacomb wall paintings, then encaustic, and eventually egg tempera becomes prominent.

I believe that egg tempera providentially became the standard medium because it allows the icon to convey the permeation of uncreated light through nature. In an icon the saint is depicted in his glorified state, shining with light and surrounded by light. The translucency of egg tempera is an analogue to this idea. Light passes through the layers of pigments, bounces off the gesso and returns to the viewer, giving the painting an inner glow. In short, here we see the symbolic significance of the inherent properties of the medium.

RTE: Is it similar to how light enters the human eye?

FR. SILOUAN: Yes, and you have a sense of color functioning almost as stained glass.

RTE: That's a wonderful image. So after your beginning steps in iconography and egg tempera, what unfolded for you?

FR. SILOUAN: Over the next few years I realized that my vocation was monastic. Fortunately, upon finishing my master's thesis, I was awarded a grant by the Joan Mitchell Foundation to start me on my career as a painter. In fact, this helped me to pay my school loans so that I could go into the monastery as a novice, so in that sense, the grant did start me on my way as an iconographer. Artistically, those years of moving from secular art to iconography was a search for a way to depict the sacred.

Classical Techniques and Sacred Painting

RTE: I've sometimes heard iconographers say that you don't have to be an artist in the classical sense to be a good iconographer, but it seems to me that

learning time-honored techniques of working with line and color would be a huge benefit.

FR. SILOUAN: I agree. In order to communicate the prototype in a living way, you have to master the traditional principles—line, form, rhythm, the depiction of nature in a way that aims toward capturing the living essence of the subject rather than purely the surface appearance. Art school helps with this, but most art schools are geared either towards Naturalist or Modernist painting, and here we get into the difference between religious or sacred art.

RTE: Which is?

FR. SILOUAN: When we speak of "religious art" we have in mind a work that depicts religious subject matter in an academic or naturalistic style, predominantly determined by individualistic concerns of the artist, rather than by a divinely inspired pictorial canon. It tends to have a historical emphasis, as if giving us a slice of the ordinary world, as a scene of a movie. It also tends towards sentimentality, psychological drama, and theatricality of effects, based on the physical properties of natural light. There are modernist abstract versions of "religious art" in some churches, but in these the subject becomes overwhelmed by the idiosyncratic, and the often unintelligible, aesthetic experimentation of the artist. Religious art in function leans more towards the idea of an autonomous art object, mainly appreciated aesthetically, rather than towards a liturgical function, in which we physically engage with it in veneration. It is also disassociated from an understanding of nature as theophany and symbol, permeated with the glory of God, and to be read as a book containing a spiritual message.

On the other hand, in sacred art the artist works through a very precise methodology and style, a pictorial language established by tradition that embodies and communicates an intelligible symbolic message. Sacred art mediates between the heavenly and earthly, the Divine and human spheres. It asserts a correspondence between the two, "as above so below." This correspondence of prototype, or archetype, to sacred image is clearly expressed by the Lord when He says, "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect." (Matt. 5:48). In Exodus we read the Lord's command to Moses, concerning the building of the Tabernacle according to its heavenly archetype, "... And look that thou make them after their pattern, which was shewed thee in the mount." (Exodus 25:40) Through the sacred image,



in its function as symbol, we encounter the presence of reality pictorially re-presented. Sacred art is “significant,” that is, its beauty engages, not only the senses with aesthetic delight, but also the intellect, for it communicates an intelligible metaphysical content, doctrine, or message. The message is ultimately the incarnate Logos, Christ, the Archetype of deification, in whom all beings find their ground and derive meaning, the Beauty from which all beauty shines forth.

Training yourself to master the formal principles is not about forever copying styles. One of the most valuable things in my training was figure drawing, where you learn to depict the body in movement, faces, and gestures. The gesture drawings were all about capturing the living moment. They had to communicate life—*chi*, or spirit, as Chinese painters would say. Learning the classical fundamentals of drawing and painting in order to depict nature is not only helpful, it’s an invaluable tool, not to be seen as antithetical to iconography, if used correctly. It helps you to interpret what you see and get the essentials down with freedom. This is also part of learning the iconographic principles. The key is not to get trapped in naturalism, but to aim to dig out and intuit the idea, inner principle, or the “this-ness” within what we see, and to pictorially manifest it.

The formal principles of iconography are based on this kind of intuition and can lead to its acquisition. Once you internalize the principles, then you can communicate your unique connection to the prototype, whether it be the Lord or one of the saints, in painting the icon. You are in obedience to the tradition, but in that obedience your temperament is not going to be taken away because everyone has a different way of doing things, and each can be right. If you are sincere about wanting to communicate the essence of the prototype that you are representing, it will come through. That is part of remembering that the tradition is a living tradition, that you are cooperating with the grace of the Holy Spirit, and like the multiplicity of tongues at Pentecost, there is a diversity of styles within the iconographic tradition.

RTE: Can a person who has desire and will, but not much natural talent, become an accomplished iconographer?

FR. SILOUAN: Yes, I think so. The most effective route is to take the copying as a step towards a living expression of the tradition, but not to get stuck

Opposite: Leonardo da Vinci, 1452-1519. Christ as Salvator Mundi, ca. 1499 onwards. Oil on walnut. 65.5 x 45.1 cm (25-3/4 x 17-3/4 in.) Private collection.

there. Tradition is not aping form. It's internalizing it, living it, and then expressing it. There are liturgies happening all over the world every Sunday and every time the Gospel is proclaimed, it's unique. The icon is the preaching of the Gospel with color.

Beyond Appearances: Pioneer Modernists

RTE: How did you assimilate what you learned at art school with your call to iconography? We sometimes hear about negative aspects of modernist painting, such as relying on the imagination and an emphasis on individualism, but is that always fair?

FR. SILOUAN: Some of the criticism is true and ultimately there was a paradigm shift with the Renaissance. Generally speaking, we can say that nature was no longer seen as a theophany, but rather it became more and more viewed as a mechanism disconnected from its sacred content, a collection of scientific specimens to be measured and dissected, studied empirically. Painting then became primarily a matter of things as they appeared to the eyes, subject to the laws of perspective, anatomy, etc. By the time the 19th century arrived, western art had reached a crisis. There was a crumbling of the obsession with representationalism, the imitation of nature. There is only so much you can do in depicting appearances, and by the time of Monet and the Impressionists, it was already apparent that there was a need to go beyond what had become the usual formulas of historical painting, still life, and landscape, as seen in the exhibitions of the Parisian Salon.

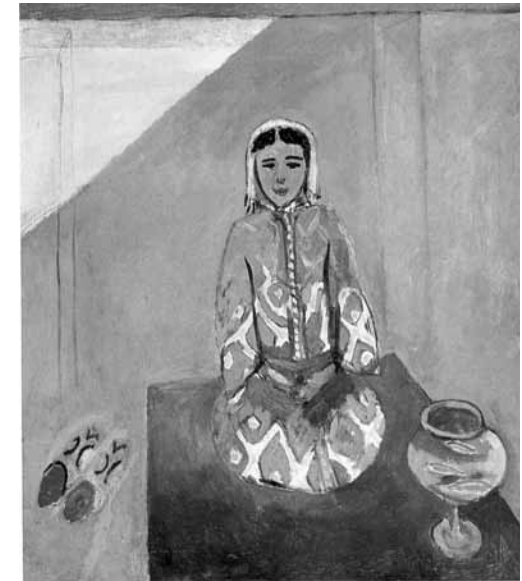
RTE: Particularly after Da Vinci, Rembrandt and the Dutch school. It must have been difficult to advance much further.

FR. SILOUAN: Yes, and, as you probably know, in 2005 the art world discovered a lost Da Vinci. It is a painting of the Lord, entitled *Salvator Mundi*, which had been over-painted. We knew it had existed because there were copies of the original, but when they cleaned up this particular one they understood this was the original Da Vinci. Of all the pictures of the Lord in western religious art, this is probably the best I've seen. You see an enigmatic, powerful gaze that is captivating. It is far beyond a trite surface depiction, although it is a religious painting and not a traditional icon as we understand it. This shows that in some cases, naturalistic and non-liturgical painting is able to

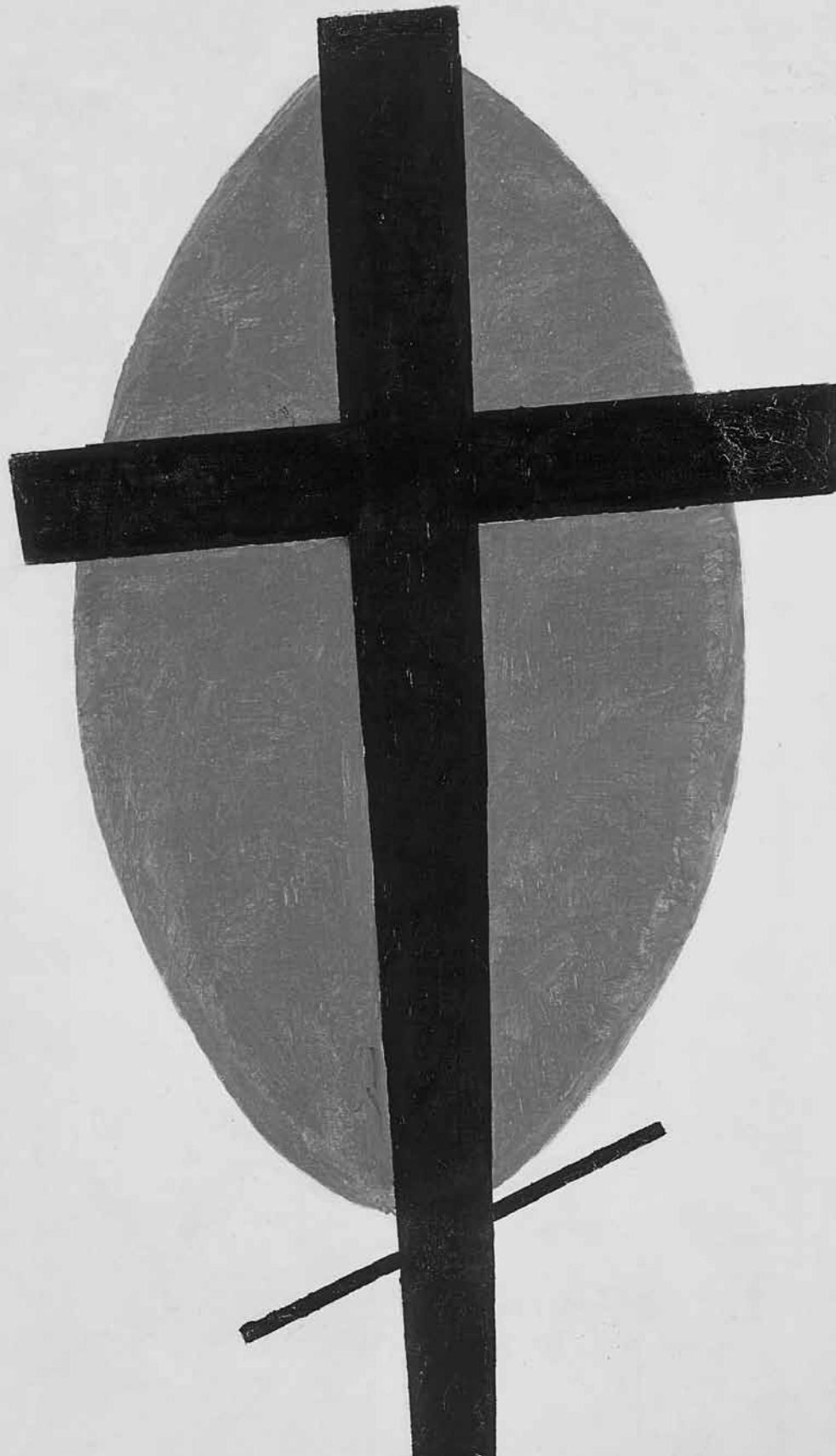
bring us to the threshold of the sacred. The threshold points the way, but it is not the nave, the sacred space of encounter. Yet, an art capable of bringing us closer to awareness of the numinous is not to be derided as inconsequential.

Anyhow, once you do something that profound, what else can you do? In western art it seems like these are exceptions to the rule, not because there is a lack of artistic genius, but primarily because of a loss of worldview, of traditional perspective. That is, a blindness to the Sacred, to the fact that there is a transcendent Reality, an 'above' that is to be found here 'below', as we read in the prayer to the Holy Spirit, "...Who art everywhere present, and fillest all things," or likewise "...Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven." Without this perspective we forget that the loftiest function of art is to mediate these two reciprocal spheres of being, to give us access to the Divine in the realm of culture.

So as I said earlier, by the time of the Renaissance this theocentric perspective was replaced by humanistic rationalism which appears reflected in the naturalism of European art. Eventually the formulas of imitative representation became exhausted, and by the time the French Salon des Refusés (those rejected by the conservative Salon de Paris) came into being, it was evident that painting was in crisis. Then photography was born and once you have an index of nature as accurate as a photograph, you have the final death knell, so to speak. Appearances were no longer enough for painters and the various avant-garde movements began their resistance to slavish naturalism, seeking ways out of the dead-end. In the initial stages of modernism, then, we see a desire to get at the essence of things, nature's inner objective metaphysical reality, the immutable core, rather than its transient surface.



Henri Matisse, 1869-1954. *Zorah on the Terrace*, 1912. Oil on canvas, 56 x 48 cm. Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow, Russia.



This is what we can call one of the positive dimensions of modernist painting, where you have the pioneers of abstract painting like Kandinsky, Mondrian, and Malevich, attempting to embody the “spiritual” (whatever that meant to them) or transcendent sphere of being in the immanent material substance of the work of art. The Romanian sculptor Brancusi is also a representative of this orientation in modernism, which can be seen as an aspiration for sacred art in the midst of a desecralized culture. But this is where it also becomes problematic because the “spiritual,” without the forms of a vetted tradition to guarantee objective correspondence between symbol and the concrete reality it manifests, quickly becomes subjective and nebulous, a kind of psychic realm that each individual artist finds for himself and attempts to give an arbitrary embodied form. In addition, many unfortunately had a confused metaphysic, tending towards a dualistic attitude. In seeking to “abstract,” meaning to “draw out,” the essence, the physical clothing of nature was severely undermined, and eventually completely discarded, hence, the preference by some of the term “non-objective” for their works. This imbalance comes from the lack of the incarnational dimension of their metaphysics.

The desire to capture Reality and to make it imminent is ultimately the desire for sacred art—the icon—therefore what you have in some branches of modernism in those early decades is a tendency to look towards “primitive” art for answers, since it embodies the traditional perspective. In Russia, in addition to Kandinsky and Malevich, you also have Larionov and Goncharova, experimenting with some formal aspects of the traditional icon. Naum Gabo would also find the lessons of the icon useful for Constructivism. And again, Russian icons had a strong impression on Matisse, who visited Moscow in 1911. In the icon the avant-garde found a powerful example to demonstrate how art



Sample of Wassily Kandinsky's "post-impressionist" work: Gabriele Munter, 1910. Oil on canvas, 45 x 45 cm. Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich, Germany.

Opposite: Kazimir Malevich, Mystic Suprematism (Black Cross and Red Oval) (1920-22) Oil on canvas 100.5 x 60 cm. From collection of the heirs of Kazimir Malevich.

doesn't just have to mimic nature. It's not just about outward appearances; it's more than that, and you can get a very acute expression of the inner man and the essence of nature through a simplified, abstracted and stylized representation. So, at the same time and for the same reasons, Picasso was also looking at African masks and the German Expressionists were looking at medieval woodcuts. We don't generally think of Orthodox painters like Photis Kontoglou or Leonid Ouspensky as being related to modernism, but they both spent time in Paris, and the artistic environment there in the early 20th century was one in which things primitive, naive, folk, Byzantine and



Theophilus Hatzimichalis, *Athena & Artemis*, 1927-34. Oil on canvas 79 x 90 cm (31.1 x 35.4 in.). National Gallery, Athens, Greece.

Medieval, were valued as examples of authentic forms of expression, outside the limitations of academic realism. It's hard to imagine that this didn't have an influence on them.

FR. SILOUAN: He reminds me of the folk art influences in some of Kontoglou's work. Although not an avant-gardist per se, Hatzimichalis' work is an example of those qualities appreciated by the modernists in Paris in the early 20th century. I'm also reminded of Henri Rousseau, another naive painter regarded as a self-taught genius by the Parisian scene. In any case, Hatzimichalis' strong supporter and patron Teriade actually helped him to exhibit his work in France in 1936, and the public reception was positive. So as a naive painter he fits into the context just delineated, though not directly. He mainly embodies Hellenism, rather than a concern with the ideas of an international avant-garde, but that's all for the better. As folk art his work carries a sense of authenticity in the simple and bold representation of nature without any artifice—just getting at the heart of the matter.

RTE: Where would you fit in Theophilus Hatzimichalis, the 20th-century Greek Orthodox primitivist?

FR. SILOUAN: He reminds me of the folk art influences in some of Kontoglou's work. Although not an avant-gardist per se, Hatzimichalis' work is an example of those qualities appreciated by the modernists in Paris in the early 20th century.

In those same years I also experimented with Expressionism and Surrealism. Expressionism is also about communicating states of soul, the inner man, in some visual way, while Surrealism is another form of tapping into unconscious levels of being that you usually don't experience in your conscious interaction with life. At the time I didn't realize that this was all a subjective and muddled "spirituality." Before we deal with any notion of the "spiritual" we first have to get the right anthropology, that man consists of body, soul and spirit. Most so called "spiritualities" tend to get stuck in the middle realm. They fail to consider how the soul's imaginative faculty acts

Anyhow, these trends of modernism we have been talking about got me interested in the spiritual dimensions of art, and in my first year of college I bumped into Kandinsky's small volume, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, where he speaks like a prophet about the hopeful and inevitable movement towards the new art of abstraction. He also mentions how in the materialist crisis of the time there was no "transubstantiated bread" to be found to sustain man's spiritual hunger, thereby making an allusion that the new art can supply this "Eucharistic" need. I also ran into some ideas of the Dutch painter Mondrian, who had an eschatological vision of art and envisioned a time in which art would disappear into life as it made manifest the equilibrium arising from the Absolute. That is, he believed the new painting, in his case neo-plasticism, would transform society; society would become art itself, thus making painting obsolete, in the tranquility and repose that would arise in utopia. I guess these ideas can be seen as a kind of soteriology in modernism, an aspiration for salvation.



Wassily Kandinsky (1866, 1944). *Composition IX*. 1936 (120 Kb); Oil on canvas, 113.5 x 195 cm (44-5/8 x 76-3/4 in); Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris.

These early modernist pioneers of abstraction led me to think about the possibility of the transformative or "theurgic" power of art. In other words, in making immutable Reality immanent, the work of art becomes a manifestation of the work of God, a mediating vehicle of, and an encounter with, divine energy. This was what I wanted to get to, and without knowing it at the time I was being drawn to the icon and its mysteriological or sacramental dimension.

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as a wax tablet, in the middle realm of the soul. It is not only a receptacle of sense impressions, but it can also be imprinted from “above” or from “below.” That is, it can either be guided by the spirit (*nous*) inspired by the Spirit, or by demonic provocation, each molding the soul with its corresponding energy. Art will inevitably reflect this archetypal imprinting.

It wasn't until I came to Orthodoxy that I understood that there is not only the psychic dimension, but also the spiritual or noetic side of man, which is renewed and illumined by the Holy Spirit (the Spirit of Truth) through our participation in the mysteries¹ in the life of the Church. As the soul gives life to the body, so likewise, the Holy Spirit gives life to the spirit of man and transforms him, leading him gradually, through humility, to an objective apprehension of reality. This involves seeing the correspondence between reality and Reality—He who is. As the Lord said, “You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free.” That is, free from the delusion arising



Henri Rousseau, *Tiger in Tropical Storm*, 1891. Oil on canvas, 161.9 x 129.8 cm. National Gallery London, UK.

¹ The Mystery of mysteries in the Church is the Holy Eucharist. Since it is common to speak of only “seven sacraments” in the Church, I tend to prefer the use of the word mystery rather than sacrament, in order to prevent the limited connotations that the word sacrament sometimes implies. On the other hand, I use the term “mysteriological” to speak about the icon, so as not to imply that the icon is to be equated with the Eucharist, as one of the “seven sacraments.” But we should keep in mind that the whole of life in Christ is one great mystery—a multifaceted sacramental life. Ultimately sacrament and mystery are fluid terms meaning the same thing.

Philip Sherrard explains, “In early Christian language *sacramentum* or *mysterium* was applied to any sacred action or object, in fact to anything which as mirror or form of the Divine was regarded as revealing the Divine. The number of mysteries is therefore potentially limitless, for everything in the cosmos in some manner mirrors or enforms the Divine, and is thus a *mysterium*.” (*The Sacred in Life and Art*, Denise Harvey (Publisher), Evia, Greece, 2004, p. 22.)

Metropolitan Kallistos Ware also says, “God has ‘deified’ matter, making it ‘spirit bearing’; and if flesh has become a vehicle of the Spirit, then so—though in a different way—can wood and paint.” He also clarifies, “[When] we talk of ‘seven sacraments’ we must never isolate these seven from the many other actions in the Church which also possess a sacramental character, and which are conveniently termed sacramentals... Between the wider and the narrower sense of the term ‘sacrament’ there is no rigid division: the whole of Christian life must be seen as a unity, as a single mystery or one great sacrament, whose different aspects are expressed in a great variety of acts, some performed but once in our life, others perhaps daily.” (*The Orthodox Church*, Penguin Books, London, 1997, pp. 33, 276.)

Opposite: Piet Mondrian (1872-1944). Composition C (no. III), with Red, Yellow and Blue, 1935. Oil on canvas, 56.2 x 55.1 cm. Private collection, on loan to Tate © 2012 Mondrian/Holtzman Trust c/o HCR International Washington DC.

from attachment to appearances, which causes us to see the phenomenal world and the soul disconnected from the multiple levels of being. With the aid of the Holy Spirit, we can live spiritually, in the true sense of the word, not solely relegated to the material sphere, bodily inclinations, sense impressions, worldly reasoning and emotions, that is, psychically or in a “soul-ish” way, as St. Paul says. In short, the truly spiritual man sees not only with the bodily eyes, but primarily with the purified eye of the heart, the *nous*, and apprehends the cosmos declaring the glory of God.

Wrestling with Subjectivity

RTE: How did this new awareness affect your art?

FR. SILOUAN: I found that the clearer things became, the more cynical I was about my previous painting. In the abstract-expressionist understanding, the gesture of the painter becomes the sign of subjective authenticity, the statement of “I am”. In other words, “This mark that I am making is a true representation of my inner world.” So the mark-making, the slash of the brush, the piercing of the canvas, became a wrestling match with subjectivity. By the end, I was doing paintings of gestural representations, but not gestures themselves. Instead of working directly on the canvas, I clipped segments from magazines, collaged them, and then painted those collages into abstract paintings. So I was removing myself from the painting because the gesture had become as meaningless for me as naturalism had.

RTE: Perhaps this is similar to the frustration of free verse. Though few were trained in the fundamentals of poetry, many of us tried to write, and we were almost universally trapped in subjectivity.

FR. SILOUAN: Yes, and this is a disservice to the art and literature students in our schools that still work under the modernist paradigm. But, if you look at the work that Picasso, Kandinsky, and Mondrian did before their abstract periods, for example, they were trained to a high classical level. They weren’t working in a vacuum of nonsensical subjectivity; they had immense skill in the structured discipline of the academic method. Their already honed skills enabled them to do what they did on a more intellectually rigorous and conscious level.

In the end I realized that the subjective gesture no longer necessarily conveyed authenticity. You had to believe that you were doing something authentic, so ultimately it came down to a kind of faith. There are so many subjective and fragmented notions of art that I tended to compare them to Protestantism: different directions and angles, but no overriding vision. The only common denominator amongst the various sects or movements was a rejection of tradition, coupled with a belief in the notion of inevitable progress and extreme individualism. There was a desire for the transcendent, but after the pioneers of abstraction, this becomes more and more rare, an exception rather than the rule. The cult of novelty, formalism, “art for art’s sake,” then becomes predominant, which is a form of sensationalism. Yet, the desire for the transcendent can never die in man, so we can find it simulated even in the visual forms of pop culture.

RTE: Can you give an example?

FR. SILOUAN: Yes, for instance, you can see advertisements that use light as if it is a halo, to signify the spiritual radiance of a product; then amorphous, ethereal and vivid colors are used to imply a kind of visionary experience; or then again colors reminiscent of those from a medieval manuscript, or a Tibetan Thangka painting, to portray the subject as being beyond the duller reality that we live in, in a heavenly existence. Then there is the smoothing out and blurring of imperfections in the images of exotic nature and models, an attempt to suggest an idyllic paradisiacal state. What we have here is a kind of surrogate, “consumer spirituality.” Even Disneyland can be seen as an attempt by secular man to create a “sacred space,” set apart from the drudgery and bleakness of the everyday, where he can escape into a “parallel reality,” or rather, fantasy. Man desires the otherworldly ecstasy, to go out of himself towards the divine, but when he lacks the true vehicles of actualization to fulfill his intense longing, he then creates simulations, psychedelic hallucinations.

I thought to myself, “Perhaps I can focus on, isolate, and abstract from its original context, this visual language surrounding the consumer product, meant to convey ‘spirituality.’ Perhaps I can revitalize this language, or revalorize it somehow, and bring it to a level where it might have spiritual impact on the viewer, a cause to pause and look at the face of their true desire.” So I began working with very rich colors while using surfaces that were very smooth. I called them “screen-paintings,” an allusion to the computer, TV monitor and video still, which they tended to resemble. As I said before,



these were based on collages clipped from magazines, pictures taken from TV, and rave party flyers. First, I would paint an initial image, then apply very thin strips of tape; an additional image would then be painted on top, and finally the tape was removed. This caused the two images to ambiguously merge into one another, having a pulsating optical effect. It became a field of pulsating color, done in a photo-realistic way, but it was still an abstraction, since there was no definable object depicted. It was handled as if it was a perceived reality, but when you looked at it, it wasn't anything that you could pin down as something you really experienced.

So then I was at a crossroads, because if you don't ground art in some level of ultimate reality, arbitrary abstraction pretty much becomes as real as anything else, and anything else we see becomes as abstract as an abstract painting. Once I realized that, I thought, "Well that's it. What I've wanted to do all this time is actually contained here in this sacred object called the icon." Grounded in objective reality, through the precise science of its symbolic forms, an icon manifests the ultimate ground of being of all that is—the Holy Trinity. Through it, in a direct, imminent form, we encounter divinity. Transcending the limits of psychic subjectivity, it sings an anonymous hymn of praise.

Creativity and Threshold Art

RTE: Can we come at that now from another direction? I've heard some Orthodox insinuate that because the ultimate goal of art is to mediate the divine, an Orthodox artist should always be an iconographer. Young artists might respond that this discourages creativity and personal expression, which is also God-given. How do we draw the lines here?

FR. SILOUAN: It's a dilemma because we are working within a society and culture that has divorced art from life and the sacred. Even the question of "personal expression," although we take it for granted as a given artistic right, is symptomatic of a culture that has lost the traditional perspective. The idea of "personal expression," a secular idea, is actually a recent phenomenon in the history of cultures throughout the world, in which art had a specifically magical, ritual or cultic function. As Orthodox Christians we tend to live in two spheres at the same time, neither here nor there at times.

Opposite: Vincent Van Gogh, 1853- 1890. Olive Trees with the Alpilles in the Background, 1889. Oil on canvas, 73 x 92 cm (28.7 x 36.2 in). Museum of Modern Art, NY.

We hold traditional perspectives in some respects, but use secular standards in others. At times we even rely on secular presuppositions to judge Tradition, without realizing it. We tend to suffer from a lot of these blind spots. This, I think, is very apparent when it comes to the question of art.

Art has become something that a “special” kind of man does, whereas traditional art was considered as a thing possessed, to one degree or another, by everyone. There wasn’t a differentiation between “artist” and artisan as we have it today. Traditionally art meant a specific kind of knowledge and skill, or wisdom, in doing or making, which provided for the necessities of life, whether physical, intellectual or spiritual in nature. The term “art” was not applied to a limited category of made objects over others, in the way that we today would call something “fine art” to distinguish it from a craft. The arts derived their name based on the kind of application or specific discipline, such as agriculture, architecture, carpentry, pottery, drama, poetry, rhetoric, teaching, etc. In a traditional society every man is some kind of artist, having a specific vocation, divinely bestowed, to provide for the good of the community.

But when we disassociate this understanding of art from technology, on the one hand we get those who use the name “artist” to justify their solipsistic creations of unnecessary, irrational and spiritually harmful objects, and on the other, people doing mundane tasks without any relation to their vocation or personal temperament, in dehumanizing factories from the sheer need of getting a paycheck.² We then end up with an ill and fragmented society, with stark distinctions between “lofty” and “mundane” activities. Hence, the interrelatedness of the contemplative and active life, the personal and communal dimension, is severed. Under these circumstances work is deprived of its spiritual import, as having the possibility to serve as a “support” for inner activity leading towards self-reconstitution in the midst of our struggle with the frailties of life. It just becomes dreaded physical labor and nothing else, and art nothing but a leisure luxury, an end in itself with no edifying value. The tendency is to think of work as a curse, the consequence of the fall, forgetting that it has a providential medicinal role, not meant to oppress but to aid us in our struggle towards deification. As St. James says, “...faith without works is dead...” (James 2:26)

I think it was Aristotle who said, that “the general end of art is the good of man.” This is hardly the concern of those who have an “art for art’s sake” attitude or who are solely concerned with “personal expression.” When we

divorce life from metaphysical principles, when all is desacralized, we live a schizophrenic life solely relegated to practicalities and the pursuit of “what I like”, but “man does not live by bread alone.” In a traditional society when you fashioned a weapon, wove a rug, or made anything else to meet a need, you did it with an understanding of how this necessity of life touched on a metaphysical reality—a divine source. In other words, there was always an underlying symbolic meaning where, as Coomaraswamy puts it, “functional and symbolic values coincide,” for the “primitive” or traditional man.

We find around the world, for example, weapons identified with a shaft of lightning with which the solar deity slays the dragon. This is an ancient symbol which typifies the conquering power of the Sun of Righteousness, Christ, over the deceitful Ancient Serpent, Lucifer. Traditionally, when you made a weaving, you understood that the warp of vertical fibers represented the divine-raying of uncreated light at the dawn of creation, coming down into and passing through the multiple levels of being, represented by the parallel layers of the woof. For us making a weapon or weaving is taken as a mundane, profane act, but for traditional man even the so-called profane activity was modeled after a heavenly archetype, and therefore became a sacred act. I think keeping some of these factors in mind can help put into context the question of “personal expression” in art for an Orthodox Christian. It ultimately arises from a loss of the traditional perspective.

RTE: I’ve recently been looking at Viking tools, weapons, and long-boats, and every one of them was created for an intensely physical function, yet almost all are beautiful as works of art. Even Scandinavia’s first simple turf-walled barrow Christian churches, such as those in Greenland, were supported inside with exquisitely carved wooden beams, posts, and doors.

FR. SILOUAN: They were fashioned accurately, to perfection, and met the need, therefore they were beautiful. So, this beauty has nothing to do with taste. What we apprehend here as beautiful is the attractive power of perfection, the goodness of appropriate ordering. This is a cognitive judgement, based on the formal information perceived in the object, and not just a matter of mere sensation, that is, aestheticism. It has been said that if something, whether made by man or found in nature, is found to be “what it purports to be” then it will be beautiful, “independent of all comparison.”³

³ See “Is Art a Superstition, or a Way of Life?” by A. K. Coomaraswamy, in *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art*, Munshiram Manoharlal Pub., Pvt. Ltd. New Delhi, India, 1974, pp.75-6.

² [Ed. note] Solipsistic refers to the philosophical idea that only one’s own mind is certain to exist.



Constantine Brancusi (1876- 1957)
Bird in Space, 1940. Polished Bronze
 on Marble and Limestone Pedestal,
 h.258 cm. Nationalgalerie, Staatliche
 Museen, Berlin, Germany.

Its ugliness arises from the inadequacy of expression or lack of conformity to the idea that gives shape to the tangible features—it is a perceived deficiency. But, this is only one side of the multifaceted and complicated issue of beauty.

However, I think there is a need to return to the awareness of beauty not as a luxury, in a materialistic sense, but as an ontological reality, as a necessary part of life as the air we breathe. Whether we intend to or not, we've gotten to the point where, like Marx, we say, "Beauty is something to think about only after we've filled our bellies, and sat back to relax in luxury." But Beauty is the ground of man's being. Man in his perfection, living according to the goodness of his true nature, is resplendent in beauty, clothed once again, as in Paradise, with the garment of holiness. This is man having attained his intended end, deification—union with Beauty. Let us not forget that *philokalia* means the love of beauty. God is Beauty. As Plato says, "Beauty is the splendor of Truth." And here the Truth means the Logos, the Son of God. St. Dionysius the Areopagite very distinctly and clearly says that one of the names of God is Beauty. St. Dionysius has been called by the holy fathers "a beholder of divine mysteries" and, whoever the author of the writings bearing his name was historically, it is an undisputable fact that he expresses the tradition of the Church. All the beauty around us is just the radiance of that Beauty.

Yet, due to our blindness and attachment to appearances, beauty can be ambiguous and become a snare. Satan can appear as an angel of light. That which appears to the eyes as beautiful, but does not lead to truth or goodness, is a seduction. And that which sounds beautiful in eloquence, but is false, is sophistry or flattery. Then what we perceive at times as "beautiful" is just the bouncing back from perceived or heard phenomena, of what we have projected onto them from our passionate desires. A few questions then arise: Will beauty be a reflection of the divine or merely an aesthetic quality? Will the work of art be established in goodness and truth, or will it be seen as an autonomous object, "art for art's sake"? Will the message be intelligible?

We have to help people see the question of "personal expression" within the framework of a traditional understanding of art and beauty, which I've just briefly touched on, so that they can put what they are doing creatively into perspective. Once they have that, they'll say, "Whoa, that's exactly what I wanted to do." Or perhaps, "That's not what I intended to say, it's incompatible with my convictions, I need to revise this kind of visual language." We should help them to realize what it is that they want to communicate. Perhaps some of them will say, "I don't want to paint icons," and they don't

have to, but for those who do, the correct understanding will be there and they can clearly choose. It's all a matter of becoming aware of the presuppositions we take for granted.

RTE: What is the place then for those who would like to paint landscapes or portraits, or to make social, historical, political or even religious statements?

FR. SILOUAN: Aidan Hart, the English iconographer, has described this as “threshold art,” an idea I believe he derived from Philip Sherrard who wrote in *The Sacred in Life and Art*, “A work of art which can bring us to the threshold of mystery is not the same as a sacred work of art, which discloses the mystery itself and makes us share in it.”⁴ It can also be called, “art in the narthex”, in between the sacred and profane, in the sense that although it is not liturgical, it nevertheless helps people come to a fuller understanding of the spiritual content in man and nature, and points to the ultimate function of art, which is the glorification of God and the immanent manifestation of divine energy. This art can prepare us and lead us to the “narthex” proper of an encounter with divinity in a mysteriological level—the icon.

RTE: Yet if threshold art is one's calling, and a bridge that needs to be made, would we be right in calling it a “lower” form?

FR. SILOUAN: The term “lower” shouldn't be seen as a moralistic judgment, a way of deprecating that threshold realm. It is rather a way of making clear distinctions in the different levels in which art can function. The “higher,” of course being the liturgical function, which is meant to aid us in prayer, repentance, glorification, participation in the Church's mysteries, and ultimately, deification. In spite of the profane direction art has taken, disregarding things of spiritual or eternal import, in preference for novelty, aestheticism and shock value, the artist, as a man created in the image and likeness of God, will always hunger and have a longing for his Archetype. Therefore, there will inevitably be exceptions to the rule; artworks that, although not liturgical, participate to some degree or another in the principles of sacred art, having at times a sublime, numinous quality, yet also exhibiting aspects of the struggle and anxiety of man in the fallen world.

In this respect Aidan Hart has discerned two categories in threshold art: an art of essence and art of compassion. The Romanian sculptor Constantine

Brancusi is an example of the first category. His sculpture is not merely the simplification of things in nature for its own sake, but an attempt to unveil the essence, the inner reality or divine name, of what he is depicting. He said, “Reality lies in the essence of things and not their external forms. Hence, it is impossible for anyone to produce anything real by imitating the external form of an object.”⁵

This view parallels the patristic understanding of the stage of illumination called “natural contemplation” in which we apprehend through purity of heart the *logoi*, inner essences, of created beings in creation. It is an awareness of all things having their ground of being in the Logos, Christ, being sustained and led to their fulfillment in Him. It is the perception of the world as a burning bush, aflame but not consumed by the uncreated light of Divinity. Brancusi's statement parallels the thought of St. Maximos the Confessor who says, “Do not stop short of the outward appearance which visible things present to the senses, but seek with your intellect (*nous*) their inner essences (*logoi*), seeing them as images of spiritual realities...”⁶ The icon represents the world as perceived in this state of illumination. It can be said that “art of essence” attempts to do the same in a non-liturgical context.

But some might ask, “Do you mean I have to reach this lofty state of illumination before I can hope to depict nature from this perspective?” I realize that this idea of getting at the “essence” of things can be a little daunting, if not a bit nebulous, especially for a person working from a secular perspective, without the advantage of canonical forms that contain a pictorial equivalent to this spiritual vision, as we see in the icon. I think it's important that the artist, although not working within a liturgical context, still maintain a life of prayer, participate in the mysteries, become familiar with the theology of the Church, and acquire a patristic mind. These things will lead him to the purity of heart necessary for clarity of vision. But meanwhile there is striving, and although he might not think he sees clearly or deeply into nature, nevertheless, in participating in the mysteries, he *is* in the road of illumination, he *will* see unexpectedly.

I think Aidan Hart's definition of what is meant by “essence” is helpful on a practical level for the artist. He says, “By essence I don't think we are meant to understand some confinable and definable thing. It is rather the mysteri-

⁵ As quoted by Aidan Hart in his article, “Constantine Brancusi: His spiritual roots” p. 2, (at www.aidanharticons.com).

⁶ *Ibid.*, Aidan Hart on Brancusi, p. 4.

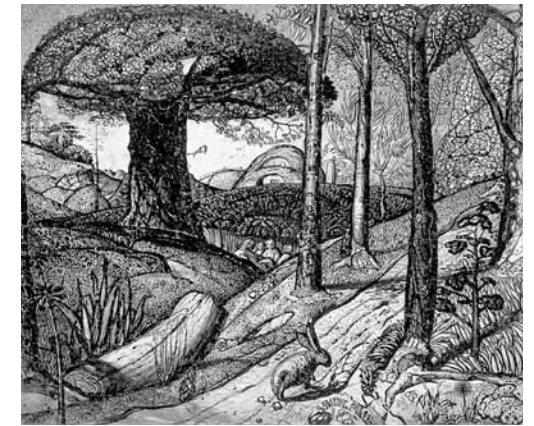
⁴ *The Sacred in Life and Art*, Denise Harvey (Publisher), Evia, Greece, 2004, p. 16.



ous heart of the subject, that which simultaneously sustains its unique “this-ness” and yet reveals its unity with all else. It is an essence which thrives in relationship. Its beauty resides both in its giving-ness—it wants to be known—and its elusiveness—it can never be entirely known.”⁷

RTE: So, just as a good landscape teaches one to look closer at nature, threshold art bridges the natural and the sacred?

FR. SILOUAN: It should teach us to look at nature as theophany, participating in the eternal, as grounded in the Logos. That is one possible dimension of threshold art. I think the landscapes by Samuel Palmer from the period around 1824-26 are examples of this; he worked with what he had. Although disconnected from the iconographic tradition, he nevertheless attempted to surpass the limitations of naturalism intuitively with positive, uplifting results. Perhaps we can also mention Cecil Collins as an example of work in which nature can be seen as if in its primal, unadulterated state and a longing for a return to the innocence of paradise. Chagall tends to have similar concerns. Aidan Hart also gives Van Gogh as an example, who said, “I want to paint men and women with that something of the eternal which the halo used to symbolize, and which we seek to confer by the actual radiance and vibration of our colors.”⁸



Samuel Palmer, 1805-81. *Early Morning*, 1825. Pen and dark brown ink with brush in sepia mixed with gum, 1825, 18.8 x 23.3 cm. Ashmolean Museum.

As mentioned earlier, there is also the threshold art of compassion—works that deal with man’s suffering. These are not done out of negativity, but with empathy towards the suffering person, to somehow communicate the possibility of redemption. It is an art of hope. As examples, in literature, Aidan

As mentioned earlier, there is also the threshold art of compassion—works that deal with man’s suffering. These are not done out of negativity, but with empathy towards the suffering person, to somehow communicate the possibility of redemption. It is an art of hope. As examples, in literature, Aidan

⁷ Ibid. p. 3.

⁸ *The Letters of Vincent Van Gogh*, ed. Mark Roskill. Fontana, 1983, p. 286.

Opposite: Photis Kontoglou, *The Ark of the Church*.

Hart points to the writers Dostoyevsky in Russia and Papadeamandis in Greece. He also classifies Rembrandt and Giacometti under this category.

Maybe the secular work of the prominent Greek iconographer George Kordis can be included here as an example. He derives his inspiration from the literary work of Kontoglou, Papadeamandis, Seferis, Karkavitsas and Elitis. His unique style is a synthesis of Byzantine pictorial features with those derived from movements of the 20th century, in particular, I would say ex-



Cecil Collins, 1908-1989. *The Sleeping Fool*, 1943. Oil on Canvas, 435 x 534 x 70 mm. Tate Gallery, London.

pressionism. Hence, his aim is to create a kind of painting that is traditional and modern at the same time, in the hope of reaching the contemporary viewer with a visual language that he can understand and that expresses his needs and concerns. In his artist's statement Kordis tells us that in his painting he aims to express the isolation, separation and autonomy characteristic of modern life, but this is then countered and made to come

together in love. The themes of eros, the struggles of relationship, are clearly seen in his depiction of melancholy young couples. So we can say that he offers an exploration of the theme of suffering in modern life as isolation, but offers us communion and love as a healing medicine.

RTE: This Byzantine-expressionist synthesis is intriguing, but the struggles and suffering of modern life are sometimes difficult to live with as art. Where does that leave those of us who prefer our icons in the prayer corner, and our walls covered with landscapes and identifiable human images?

FR. SILOUAN: Perhaps, another way of putting what you are saying is that we naturally differentiate sacred from profane space, making distinctions in our immediate environment about what kind of art belongs where, given their different functions. I'm sure there are many other dimensions that threshold art can encompass as well. But the key is that even non-liturgical art should be uplifting, aware and pointing towards the sacred, according to truth and

goodness, valuing joy, humility, hope, and aspiring towards unity, harmony in life. If these things are taken into consideration, the work will inevitably lead to beauty. Without deprecating other forms of non-liturgical art, the sacred environment of liturgical art is the higher manifestation. Keeping those categories in place helps artists (and art lovers) clarify the metaphysical presuppositions they are working from. Understanding the traditional doctrine of art can help put their work in context.

Icons and the Universality of Sacred Art

RTE: Can you give us a starting place to explore these presuppositions?

FR. SILOUAN: I have found Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, for many years Curator of Indian Art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, very helpful with this. He wrote a great collection of essays, *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art*, and a second volume, *On the Traditional Doctrine of Art*. In his writings Coomaraswamy expounds on the universal understanding of art in primitive and traditional cultures before the Renaissance, both Asiatic and Medieval European. There was a general understanding of what the function of art was in these societies, and in the traditional Orthodox understanding we find its continuity.

RTE: And he was able to explain the Orthodox Christian tradition of art?

FR. SILOUAN: Aspects of it, very clearly, mainly as it relates to the universally acknowledged mediatory role of art, as mentioned earlier. Some people might find his works problematic because he comes from a Hindu background, but he also had European connections and was a scholar of high caliber, having an authoritative command of European sources. In a way he was in between two worlds, struggling with the decline of traditional culture in his native land of Ceylon as a consequence of Western influence, and the dominance of industrialization. His mother was British, so he studied in England at the University of London, later becoming the Director of Mineralogical Survey of Ceylon. After that he curated in Boston from around 1917 to 1947. He clearly shows how when you look at the icon and the traditional Oriental forms of representation, it is no coincidence that there are many similarities, since they were working from parallel metaphysical presuppositions. Both treat art as symbol, having a sacred function, as divinely inspired, as



mediating divine energy, as non-mimetic, as a border between a “lower” and “higher” sphere of being, and supports for contemplation, depicting nature as transfigured and man deified.

While there are certain irreconcilable differences in detail—and I’m not saying that we are to embrace all of Coomaraswamy’s metaphysics—in terms of art history he clearly points out how the presuppositions of the icon relate to other cultures around the world. In fact, in the introduction to *Fine Arts and Tradition* by Photios Kontoglou, Constantine Cavarnos, himself a Boston native during Coomaraswamy’s tenure at the museum, explicitly points out that Kontoglou’s traditional understanding of art parallels that of Coomaraswamy.

In other words, our understanding of Reality as Orthodox, and the way we express this artistically, is not merely an isolated, historical-cultural interpretation, but rather an objective universal fact. Awareness of the Sacred around us and within us has touched everyone, whether you want to admit it or not, since man, as microcosm and noetic being, is meant to iconize Christ, mediating between the Uncreated and created spheres as Prophet, Priest, and King. Many pagan cultures understood this role and apprehended the truth to one degree or another, according to the level of purification and receptivity. They also retained within themselves a memory of the primordial state in Paradise, a longing for deification, and also handed down the tradition of a promised deliverer, although in different levels of clarity. Yet, they did not have the way of actualizing their deification, a privilege we now have after the Incarnation, through the mysteries in the life of the Church.

We tend to mainly remember that the “gods of the nations are demons,” but we quickly forget that they also had “altars to an unknown God,” as St. Paul pointed out in the Areopagus in Athens. This is a patristic understanding, as can be seen in St. Justin Martyr, St. Nektarios and St. Nikolai Velimirovich most recently, among others. So for those illumined by Holy Baptism, there is greater clarity, “the veil is taken away in Christ”; yet the uninitiated in the mysteries are not utterly deprived of the grace of intuiting God—the Sacred—through the beauty of nature, and their *nous*, the divine image within man. If you want to express this transcendent realm, there is a very specific visual language, a precise science of forms based on noetic vision, features of which have been consistent throughout history in world cultures.

Opposite: Nataliya Sergeevna Goncharova. St. George the Victorious, 1914. From the series, Mystical Images of War, on paper (lithography), 320 x 247 cm. Collection of V. Gevorkyan.

RTE: This reminds me of Christopher Alexander's pattern languages. Alexander is Professor Emeritus of Architecture at UC Berkeley, who in *A Timeless Way of Building* and *A Pattern Language* describes 253 patterns or ways of building that are universally accepted. For instance, human beings find a room most comfortable when there is light from at least two different directions (windows on two walls, or window and skylight, etc.), or the fact that every door to the outside needs to have a "transition entrance"—a step, porch, rug, overhang, trellis—something to help you psychologically make that transition. It feels wrong to enter a door directly from the street.

FR. SILOUAN: Yes, man and the cosmos are harmonious arrangements, beautifully composed by the divine Craftsman, so these examples demonstrate how we are naturally inclined to order. This is further proof that there is a Reality that is not just purely subjective, and this is seen in the timeless patterns of the sacred art around the world. The online *Orthodox Arts Journal* is educating people to better understand what liturgical art is all about within Orthodoxy. I hope to write something soon about the traditional doctrine of art, to help those who are having trouble in discerning how to engage in artistic work as Orthodox Christians.

PART TWO

The Iconicity of the Icon

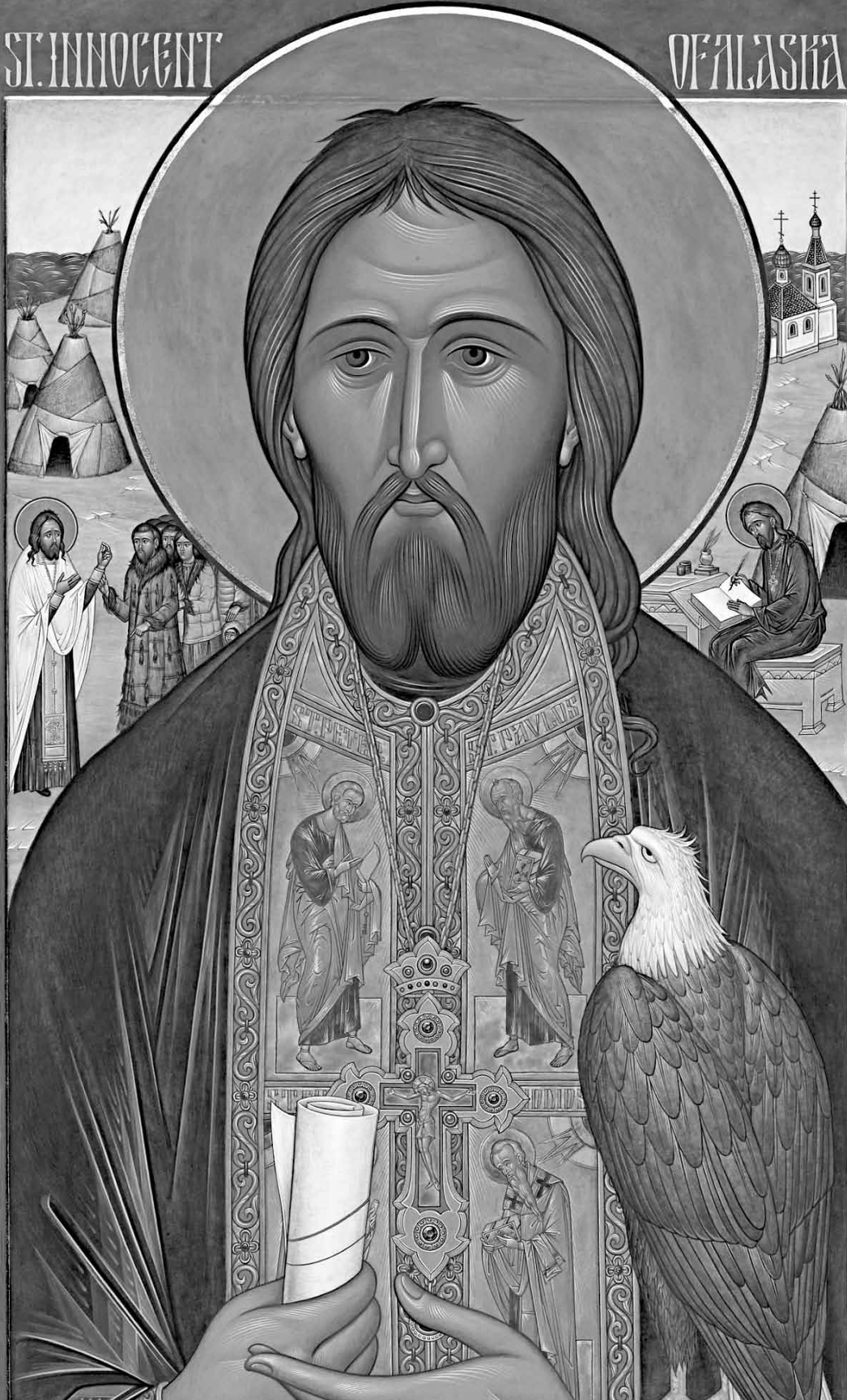
RTE: Can you tell us now about your paper, "The Degraded Iconicity of the Icon"?⁹

FR. SILOUAN: I've been struggling with the topic for years. When I first discovered icons, simultaneously I noticed that there was a profuse use of reproductions. From my first year in graduate school, I thought, "There is a problem here and somehow we have to discuss it, but how can we do so fruitfully without being divisive or having misinterpretation lead to extremism?" It took more than a decade until I bumped into an article on reproductions by Mary Lowell. As good as it was, I thought that there was room for amplification, and when I talked to my father, he said, "Go ahead and write it. What are you going to lose?" Father Maximos, the abbot of my brotherhood, Holy Cross Monastery in Setauket, NY, is open to brainstorming topics of interest and we have a lot of good discussions as a brotherhood, so I knew this would be a way to work out these ideas. We had a lot of debate and rewriting, but the fathers are supportive and it came out well.

RTE: Such support is remarkable and not always forthcoming, even in monasteries.

FR. SILOUAN: In *The Authentic Seal*, Elder Emilianos has an article about the qualities an abbot should have to build up a monastic community. He notes that monastics have different temperaments, that they should be encouraged to hone whatever skills they have, and to have the freedom within the structure of the cenobitic life to do so. After we debated the questions, I wrote the text out and the fathers helped me with editing and clarification so that I could present the icon's iconicity theologically rather than rhetorically: what it is as an art object; the aesthetic dimensions of the icon; how it fits into the liturgical context of church worship; and how it is a symbol of the Incarnation. I was trying to come to some conclusions about whether or not a reproduction is the appropriate means of communicating all of this.

⁹ "The Degraded Iconicity of the Icon: The Icon's Materiality and Mechanical Reproduction" by Hieromonk Silouan Justiniano can be read online at the website of *The Orthodox Arts Journal*, www.orthodoxartsjournal.org



RTE: What did you come to?

FR. SILOUAN: Throughout the paper it is kept in mind that there is an ideal icon, and there is a graduated scale, so to speak, of whether an image meets the standard of an ideal icon or not. The ideal icon has what I call “fullness of iconicity”—it lives up to its full potential. That is, it retains not only the canonical pictorial forms, but also, as a concrete object, the material qualities of its traditional craftsmanship, thereby living up to its anagogic¹⁰ and symbolic function, within the liturgical aesthetic experience. This also involves the use of the best, most beautiful, materials available, preferably natural or organic, since these, unlike most synthetic products, in their inherent properties best reflect the glory of God in Creation. The idea of “fullness of iconicity” stresses that the material properties that make up the icon are not arbitrary, but essential for it to function to its maximum potential.

The reproduction then, although lessening the full potential of the icon, nevertheless is still an icon. This is where we have to be careful because we don’t want to make people feel that because they have a reproduction, they don’t have an icon. No, you have an icon. Insofar as it bears the image and name of the prototype it is an icon, but it’s not fully what it should be ideally, since its traditional material properties are lacking. (By the way I am not

¹⁰ The icon is “anagogic” in that, as the word etymologically implies, it *uplifts* us from sense perception and natural appearance, to a spiritual understanding or conception, not only through images, but also through its material properties. We can interpret the icon as we interpret a text of Scripture since it is a pictorial theology, the Gospel in color. According to the Church Fathers, there are four levels of interpretation: literal, tropological (moral), allegorical, and anagogical. The first is the historical reading, according to the letter; the second pertains to moral improvement; the third, to an inner meaning beyond that of the letter; the fourth, to things most sublime—hidden and celestial mysteries. All these levels are also found in the icon. It leads us from the outward depiction of the subject or saint, towards repentance, directing us in awareness of the image of God within us, to aspire for the purity of divine likeness. It reveals the inner dynamic of the soul as it unfolds within the life of the Church; and in the contemplation of the “mystery hidden from ages,” the Logos incarnate (the Prototype) we apprehend the deification of man in the eschaton, when God will be all in all. The anagogic potential of materials and images, as St John of Damascus says, “to reveal and make perceptible those things which are hidden,” is indispensable since our soul is veiled by the body.” (*On the Divine Images*, SVS Press, N.Y., 1980, p.74.)

St. Dionysius the Areopagite also says, “We lack the ability to be directly raised up to conceptual contemplation [spiritual understanding]. We need our own *uplifting* that comes naturally to us and which can raise before us the permitted forms of the marvelous unformed sights...” Therefore, “ecclesiastical traditions... explain spiritual truths with terms drawn from the sensual world, and super-essential truths in terms drawn from nature, clothing with shapes and forms the shapeless and formless, and by a variety of different symbols fashioning manifold attributes of immaterial and supernatural simplicity.” (As quoted by F. Ivanovic, *Symbol and Icon: Dionysius the Areopagite and the Iconoclastic Crisis*, Pickwick Pub., Eugene, Oregon, 2010, pp. 76-77.)

Opposite: *St. Innocent of Alaska*, 2012. Fr. Silouan Justiniano, Egg tempera on wood, 7-3/4 x 31-1/4 in. St. Innocent’s Retreat Center, Franklin NY.

addressing how God chooses to work through icons or icon reproductions. I was in a liturgy recently where there was a reproduction of the Mother of God, “Softener of Hardened Hearts,” that was drenched in myrrh. God can do whatever He wants under any circumstance.)

Once we clarify that we are not on a soapbox claiming that reproductions are not real icons, we can then discuss what we are dealing with. We all know, whether we verbalize it or not, that when we venerate a reproduction, it is trying hard to appear authentic, yet is not convincing.

RTE: Yes, and you elaborate this in the paper: “We betray our dissatisfaction by creating mock antiques, attempting to make reproductions more real. We mount them on wood, add red borders, apply cracked varnish with distressed gilding to conjure an ancient icon....”

FR. SILOUAN: So when we have people valuing reproductions we shouldn’t chastise them for it, but we have to keep in mind that if the icon is supposed to function as a liturgical object, it has parameters of what it should be made out of and how these materials should be used. The materials are symbolic. They are not arbitrary. When you use a reproduction and a manufacturing process that doesn’t take the symbolism of the icon into consideration, you bring elements of profane manufacture into sacred space. This then “blurs” iconicity.

RTE: Also missing is the co-creativity between the Creator and the iconographer, and the prayer that goes into painting.

FR. SILOUAN: This is the priestly dimension of the iconographer, his liturgical act of transforming the raw materials of nature in cooperation with divine energy. Through the icon the goodness of matter is affirmed, as it is brought to a unique level of participation with the glory of God. We offer the mineral, vegetable, and animal creation back to Him in a Eucharistic fashion: “Thine own of Thine own we offer unto Thee.” Hence the icon becomes a foretaste of the transfiguration of matter, “the new heavens and the new earth” of the eschaton.

But we also have to bear in mind that technology is not to be seen as evil per se; even in painting an icon we are still manufacturing. Technology is any practical knowledge that you use to fashion, mold, or shape matter. It is a tool that the Lord has given us to deal with our physical necessities within our fallen predicament, a medicinal tool that helps us in our frailty. Also,

bear in mind that the word for art in Greek is *techne*, from which we get technology. The Latin equivalent is *ars*, which means to fit together, and from which we derive the word art.

How this tool is used, whether or not the craftsman has an awareness of how the inherent properties of materials, within the liturgical context, will convey or reflect the mystery of the Logos in all things, determines the symbolic opacity or transparency of the work. Opaque, in that pragmatism will override the symbolic purpose of the work, and therefore mainly display earthbound necessities, relegating us to a purely “horizontal” perspective; transparent, in that the work, through the harmonious convergence of functional and symbolic values, will clearly reflect the glory of God in its beauty, in an anagogic manner uplifting us in prayer above earthly cares. And of course, there are various degrees between these two poles, reflected in its level of beauty.

Paradoxical Interdependence

RTE: Will you explain a little more about how the use of natural materials in icon-painting contributes to this transparency? Our contemporary desire for anything natural indicates that we are hungry for it.

FR. SILOUAN: This contemporary desire for anything natural is no surprise, since after a while, the profane spaces we create for ourselves: drab urban sprawl, electronic virtual worlds and synthetic manufactured goods, can become a bit suffocating. Profane space leaves us cold, disconnected, feeling unfulfilled; we naturally gravitate towards the beauty of nature and the warm embrace of sacred spaces. With the Old Testament pattern of the making of the Tabernacle and the Temple of Solomon, we see that these environments, and the holy objects contained therein for liturgical use, were made from the most precious materials available. These were offered to the Lord as vessels of His presence and grace. The natural materials traditionally used for a liturgical purpose as conveyors of His grace (gold, silver, precious stones, bronze, oil, wax, wine, water, etc.) have an inherent beauty that best reflects heavenly Beauty. As it says in the Wisdom of Solomon, “For the greatness and beauty of created things the Creator is seen by analogy.”

In the icon we also have a vessel, a tabernacle or temple, through which we are connected with the prototype depicted—we encounter the presence of Christ. There is a mysterious participation between the prototype and the



likeness that bears its name. As St. Basil says “the veneration paid to the image passes to the prototype,” so we touch, kiss, and handle divinity by virtue of the fact that in His Person there is a “union without confusion or division” of the divine and human natures. As St. Theodore reminds us, though not becoming mixed or one in nature, “The prototype and the image have their being, as it were, in each other...”¹¹ Here he describes what can be called a paradoxical-interdependence between image and prototype. In venerating his human depiction we venerate the body of God. As St. John of Damascus says, “God’s body is God because it is joined to His Person by a union which shall never pass away...”¹²

So, the icon is a symbol, not just a sign pointing to the idea of Christ, but the coming together of two realities, a border mediating between the divine realm and ours. Remove the material icon and we no longer see, kiss, or touch God. It goes without saying then, that in light of this function as vessel of divine presence, not just any kind of material suffices in the manufacturing of an icon, but only the most precious materials should be used.

RTE: We often understand symbols as shorthand signs, like a logo, you are obviously talking about something much deeper.

FR. SILOUAN: A symbol is a thing, act, word, or image that participates in the reality that it represents. The words of Scripture are symbols—“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4). So, when we read Scripture, we’re being nourished spiritually because we are tapping into a reality—divine energy—through letters. The same unfolds in the prayers we read and the dogmatic definitions of the Church. The Creed, for example, is referred to as the “Symbol of Faith”. Believing its content with your heart, and confessing it with your tongue and lips, connects you with the reality that it expresses. This is basically the mysteriological reality of life in Christ in the Church. We tend to just focus on the “seven sacraments” formula, but participation in divine energy through symbols in the Church cannot be solely confined to seven. Life in Christ is a great Mystery with many mysteries through which we partake of Him in unique ways. As St.

¹¹ *On the Holy Icons, Third Refutation of Iconoclasm*, SVS Press, Crestwood, NY, 1981, p. 108.

¹² *On the Divine Images*, SVS Press, Crestwood, NY, 1980, p. 23.

Opposite: Christ as Archetypal Craftsman from the 13th-century Bible moralisee of Vienna. Codex Vindobonensis 2554. Osterreichischen Nationalbibliothek.

Paul says, there are diversities of gifts, many activities, but the one Holy Spirit working in all and through all. The Church fathers say that just as we venerate Scripture, we venerate icons, and again, are nourished spiritually. They are a ladder ascending to the Divine and when you venerate them, you venerate the saint or Christ Himself; in a sacred and mystical manner you encounter and touch them. It's not simply a didactic "illustration" pointing to a reality, but completely detached from what it represents.

RTE: In your paper you described it as "paradoxical interdependence".

FR. SILOUAN: Yes, as I touched on earlier, St. Theodore the Studite said that one presupposes the other. He says, "With the removal of one the other is removed, just as when the double is removed the half is removed along with it. If, therefore, Christ cannot exist unless His image exists in potential, and if, before the image is produced artistically, it subsists always in the prototype: then the veneration of Christ is destroyed by anyone who does not admit that the image is also venerated in Him." In other words, if the Lord was incarnate, you can depict Him, and if there is an icon, He was incarnate. If you claim there cannot be a depiction then you reject the reality of the incarnation. If you deny one, you deny the other. So as I said earlier, if there is this paradoxical interdependence, and the symbol is connected to the reality, awareness, respect and veneration of this mystery would be demonstrated in the use of the best possible materials as vessels of this grace.

RTE: Protestant Christians often have difficulty with this because it brings up images of the Israelites worshipping the golden calf or of the richly decorated temples of Hinduism. Isn't there a difference between man creating out of a need to worship, and a true symbol that unites spiritual reality and the material world?

FR. SILOUAN: Idolatry is always going to be a problem; it's the result of our clouded vision, of getting stuck on the "horizontal" level, and losing sight of the "vertical" level of things. When these two spheres meet they form a cross and the icon is in the center, where the two meet. But it's meant to lead you upwards, vertically, and to be taken as an end in itself. This involves effort on our part, in cooperation with the divine energy already present in the icon. Our attitude and faith will determine whether we will get stuck on the pigments or see past them into the Heavenly Kingdom. As St. Paul says, "To the pure all things are pure."

We can make idols out of—or aesthetically fetishize—anything. The double-edged sword of beauty is that we can either see an image as a means of ascent, a ladder to connect with God, or we can get trapped in it—just as you can get trapped in the formalism of religion. You might rattle off hours of prayers and yet be far from God, so the problem of idolatry is not exclusive to the depiction of the sacred images meant for veneration. It's a human problem in general of seeing anything as an end in itself, autonomous from the reality that it mediates. We would rather indulge in surfaces rather than make the effort to understand what they communicate. Veneration is not solely an activity of the bodily eyes, but an ascetic effort of lifting up the mind and heart towards noetic sight.

The Old Testament command not to make graven images, we normally interpret as a complete ban on images, but when we read closely we find that images of angels and natural vegetation were to be found in the Tabernacle and Temple of Solomon. The command was meant to prevent man from developing a distorted notion of God, thinking that in fashioning an image of his intuited idea of divinity, he thereby somehow captured, limited, or circumscribed Him. The command was a pastoral preparation. The Lord had not yet become incarnate, and therefore, in His divinity, was beyond circumscription or depiction. He is beyond being. He's not the "biggest guy" in the universe—He's beyond being, and we need to remember that any name we give Him is limited. Therefore, He has thousands upon thousands of names, but none of them really captures Him, they only speak of the unlimited levels of activity of His uncreated energies. We have to remember that "I AM" is no-thing. We have to think of Him in apophatic terms—otherwise we conceive of Him as a creature that we idolize. Yet, now that He has taken on a body and the fullness of humanity except sin, we can depict His human form.

RTE: That's difficult, because we have a tendency to clothe every idea in familiar terms. We can't grasp the immaterial unless God shows it to us.

FR. SILOUAN: Yes, as St. John of Damascus says, since our "soul is veiled by a body," we need images, symbols, "to reveal and make perceptible those things which are hidden." And I'm also reminded of how St. Paul says that in the age to come we will see "face to face" rather than through a reflection on a mirror. The mirrors of the ancient world were polished brass, and reflections were wavy, blurry. When we finally see "face to face", the icon that we fashion now will not be necessary.



I guess you can speak of an idol as a distorted image or reflection of the reality of the Incarnation. You find different levels of “distorted” icons in traditional cultures around the world. When you look at the “idols” of the nations you will find that they will approximate the fullness of Revelation to different degrees. So even though they erred, they at least had a sense that we can actually encounter the divine in the immanent, that is, in an incarnational way, through an icon. Perhaps it can be said that they suffered from an overly cataphatic approach, an overemphasis and getting stuck on the multiplicity of divine names, hence “polytheism.” In order to prepare the people of Israel for the Incarnation it was necessary to purify them from distorted reflections by an apophatic emphasis through prohibiting the fashioning of images of the Godhead.

However, once the Incarnation took place, and Christ, the Father’s “express image” appears, then, in a sacred and mystical manner, there was a circumscription of the Uncircumscribed. Everything, between the two extremes of the formless to the coarsest matter, all levels of being, is transformed by that divine act. And now we are able to depict the Lord, not only by spoken or written words, but also with the beautiful variety of materials that nature offers us: wood, pigments, gold, silver, precious stones, etc. Through material depiction, just as through the words of the Gospel, we can have an immediate encounter with Him. As we would venerate the Gospel, we venerate the icon, and this veneration in the liturgical experience of the Church engages all of our senses. As I have said before, this is a view of matter, nature and the body that is theophanic. As it says in Genesis, “Then God saw everything He had made, and indeed, it was very good.” Every created thing is good, not to be disdained but to be seen as revealing and manifesting divinity, permeated with the Sacred.

Pictorial Theophany: Pigments, Colors and Transparency

RTE: You spoke earlier of the importance of natural materials, but will you explain how substances like wood, gesso, clay, and particularly minerals and pigments participate in communicating this theophanic awareness? And if natural substances are crucial, are synthetic materials ever allowed?

Opposite: Theotokos of White Lake, 2012. Fr. Silouan Justiniano. Egg tempera on wood, 17-3/4 x 31-1/4 in. St. Innocent’s Retreat Center, Franklin, NY.

FR. SILOUAN: The materials are important, since they have symbolic value. In the paper on the iconicity of the icon, I mention how in the mysteries we use materials (wine, wheat, oil, water, wax) that are unalterable, since these are not chosen arbitrarily, but through their inherent properties they communicate different aspects of what is occurring mystically. There is a correspondence between the inner, spiritual reality and outward physical properties of the symbol. Or as was mentioned earlier, symbolic and functional values coincide. Also, as St. Dionysios the Areopagite tells us, there are many passages of scripture that use the qualities of bronze, gold, silver, precious stones, etc., to express immaterial realities, leading us in an anagogic manner, to the conceptual contemplation of the manifold manifestations of the uncreated energies of God.

The same happens with the icon. In its traditional medium of egg tempera we find that functional and symbolic values coincide. The inherent properties of the medium, its translucent quality, and the way the image is built up in successive layers, symbolically speaks about creation as theophany, shining forth with the uncreated light of Christ. The materials used in the icon, gold (metal), pigments (mineral), wood (vegetable), egg (animal), can be seen as different spheres of nature, a microcosm of creation. And in the process of craftsmanship, in one way or another, the four elements (earth, water, fire, air) also contribute to bring things to completion. It goes without saying that natural pigments have always been an integral part of the traditional medium. Their inherent beauty is hard to match by synthetic products, so they better serve to symbolize the reflection of uncreated Beauty in Creation.

As the saying goes, “art imitates nature in her manner of operation.” In other words, in imitation of the divine Craftsman, the icon painter in his noetic act of craftsmanship, through logos, orders the material elements into an intelligible symbol. The Craftsman is the Logos, the Word, Wisdom and Power of God. As Wisdom of the Father, He is also the divine Intellect (*Nous*), in whom reside all the ideas, *logoi*, mystical names, or inner essences of created beings. Once these are uttered by the Word in the primordial creative act, they begin to exist in an immanent form in creation, as they shape the *materia prima* of the formless chaos into the infinite variety of unique creatures which compose the ornament we call the cosmos. These creatures in their uniqueness and infinite diversity are reflections, radiances, symbols of the Logos, their Archetype, and the mystery of the Incarnation is the key to deciphering their spiritual meaning.

The icon unveils the beauty in creation that we can't see because of our spiritual blindness. In the Transfiguration, the Lord's garments shone with the splendor of His divinity, so likewise, right now, as we speak, all of material creation as His garment shines with the beauty of uncreated light. The resplendence of divinity was with the Lord all along as He walked amongst us in His humanity, but the disciples were blind to it, they needed to have their spiritual eyes opened, and so the Lord removed the veil covering their eyes in Mt. Tabor. In a similar manner the icon reveals to us, through the transformation of raw materials in a priestly manner, the beauty of “the new heavens and the new earth,” of the future eschaton-creation shining forth with uncreated light as in the Transfiguration. Let's now see how this is communicated through the various materials of the icon.

So the act of painting reenacts creation, representing levels of being and depicting man's return to the divine likeness. The white surface of the gesso designates the mystery of the divine Intellect (*Nous*), in which the *logoi* (prototypes) are inscribed by His will. The divine inscription is the drawing. The application of the red clay (bole) for gilding represents Adam's corporeality and gold his *nous*, the divine image in him. The first layer of paint is the formlessness before the *fiat lux*. The paint is made by mixing egg emulsion with dry powder pigments. The egg is symbolic of immortality, generative power, and the Giver of Life, “Who is everywhere and fills all things.” As pigments are mixed into the emulsion, light is reflected, absorbed, or refracted, being embodied and becoming color. This is symbolic of the paradoxical “union without confusion” of the incarnate Logos. Each pigment has a unique property (a texture or “body”) given by its particles that affects us with its inherent energy. Through the translucent layering of color, subjects are purged of gross corporeality. They become vessels of light, appearing to be unrestrained by the limitations of matter, just as the Lord revealed Himself after the Resurrection. Also, the image is built from dark to light, calling to mind the coming into being *ex-nihilo* and the process of sanctification from the passions to deification. As I mentioned earlier, passing through the layers, light is reflected from the gesso, bouncing back to the eyes, providing optical richness, depth, and a glow like stained-glass, which is symbolic of the glorified body in the final Resurrection.

It becomes clear that not just any kind of material suffices and that a reproduction doesn't have the same symbolic value. In the traditional methods functional and symbolic values coincide in such an effective way that it



Venerable Bede, 2008. Fr. Silouan Justiniano.
Egg tempera on wood, app. 9 x 4 in.

doesn't allow for us to consider the choice of materials as purely arbitrary. And this brings us to the question of synthetic materials and whether they are allowable or not.

It's a matter of approach. Again, we have to be careful not to develop a fundamentalist attitude here. While only using natural pigments is wonderful, sometimes this is not possible. Using synthetic pigments can be very helpful, if we use them with an awareness of the sacred dimension of the icon. If we are unaware of this dimension of craftsmanship we can create symbols that are opaque; if conscious, then the greater the possibility that the symbols will be transparent windows to the sacred. Even in medieval times artists used synthetic pigments, one being vermilion, mercuric sulphide, which served as a version of the mineral cinnabar, a natural red pigment universally acknowledged as the most beautiful red. We find cinnabar in the background of some Novgorod icons, such as the famous 15th-century icons of the Prophet Elijah and St. George and the Dragon. By the eighth century medieval alchemists in Europe had come up with a process to manufacture vermilion, but the Chinese were most likely the first to have developed a variant method of production. Given the high cost of cinnabar, vermilion tends to become its standard replacement. If you compare it to the synthetic cadmium red that we have now, vermilion is organic and natural in its brightness compared to cadmium, which is in-your-face bright and harsh.

So, in cinnabar, vermilion, and cadmium red, there is a recognizable gradation of decreasing beauty, from the natural organic to the synthetic. It's not a matter of whether you use synthetic materials or not, but of how you use them. Is using a synthetic pigment going to help you work within the tradition and fulfill the function of the icon? For example, there was verdigris, which was made from pouring vinegar onto copper plates and letting it oxidize into a beautiful green color. You could then scrape the green oxide off and have a pigment. Unfortunately, this is the worst kind of pigment to mix with other colors. It reacts in strange ways, and so we came up with other greens which are better—more recently chromium dioxide, which is synthetic but not too intense. You can use it without it conflicting with the subdued tones of other natural pigments. The question is whether or not the icon becomes so synthetic in appearance that its physical properties begin to disregard the traditionally established anagogic function, stripping away the symbolic significance of the icon.

Depending on how the icon is manufactured, it will be either more opaque or more transparent. That is, it will either hinder or enable us to apprehend intuitively the mystery that it is meant to convey, since its function is to elevate us towards God in prayer. This happens not only through the images depicted, but also through the inherent properties of the materials used. An example of the anagogic aesthetic experience in the liturgy is found in the famous account of the visit of St. Vladimir's ambassadors to Constantinople, who in encountering the otherworldly beauty of Hagia Sophia could only express, "We knew not whether we were on heaven or on earth, for assuredly on earth such beauty cannot be found anywhere else..." This is the ideal standard of liturgical aesthetics we should aim towards. The aesthetics of an icon is not merely for the sake of sense gratification, an end in itself, but a means by which we ascend to an apprehension of the Sacred with the eyes of the heart—in a *noetic* manner.

RTE: Many of us felt this the first time we attended Divine Liturgy or stood in front of miracle-working icons or relics.

FR. SILOUAN: Yes, once we make that ascent it all comes together and you don't have to think about it, you just enter into prayer. One problem for us is the profusion of images in our contemporary environment, which tends to lessen the impact of the sacred image in our lives. It's hard to think of anything like a holy image in the midst of disposable copies. So ironically, in the midst of such a profusion of images, we are in fact dealing with the threat of a subtle kind of iconoclasm. Because we aren't guarding our hearts, we start treating the icon as just another image, an image in the abstract, disassociated from its palpable, tactile, material properties. That is, the icon becomes a disembodied "generic image," a mere amorphous illustration. This blunts the mysteriological dimension of the icon, the fact that we encounter and participate in divine energy through its material properties, and results in a distortion of its incarnational theology.

This results from lack of watchfulness and concern towards the sheer quantity, and quality, of images we consume. Hence, we become desensitized, our vision becomes clouded, and what constitutes an authentic image seems to be an irrelevant question. Everything is filtered through some manipulated, synthetic image or appearance, so that in this profane virtual space we become disconnected from the Sacred, and forget about the beau-

ty of unadulterated nature, and cease to perceive the world around us as a theophany. St. Basil says that "the veneration of the icon passes over to the prototype", but this can turn into a mantra when people use that phrase to bypass any concern for what the icon is made of. If it passes to the prototype, what do you care whether it is a reproduction or not? Such is the symptom of our society of the spectacle.

Mechanical Reproductions and Borders of Reality

RTE: Does this realm of degraded iconicity, then, refer only to reproductions or also to poorly painted icons, which St. Basil himself certainly knew. And while we are speaking of reproductions, aren't there better and worse reproductions?

FR. SILOUAN: To explore that, we have to define things a bit more. What do the materials in the icon symbolize? Why are they painted the way they are? By understanding this we won't gradually degrade or shatter the tradition by ignoring seemingly insignificant compromises. In a famous 1936 article called, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin, a Marxist literary and social critic, elaborates his theories of the shattering of tradition, which he is all for. He says that traditionally one of the most important conditions of viewing an original work of art, by which he means a cult object or sacred image, was that one had to visit it in its unique permanent location, or sacred space. If you wanted to see a specific icon, you had to make a pilgrimage. You venerated it there in its unique circumstances, and you didn't take a color copy of it home. The fact that it had a specific place, that it was a one-of-a-kind object, gave it a unique "aura", as he called it—an energy that was its own and gave the image a lot of power. As a Marxist, Benjamin didn't like that, because he associated it with tradition in a negative sense—oppressive and not democratic enough. He saw cinema as more positive, because the person in the theatre would have more of an engagement and participation in what was going on, which Benjamin saw as liberating. I don't agree with that interpretation, but I do agree to some extent with his understanding that in making a reproduction of an original work of art that exists in a unique context, you are attempting to "reactivate" it in different circumstances...



RTE: So reproductions are a way to reactivate the experience we had in front of the original, or the experience we wish we'd had, if we could have gone on pilgrimage?

FR. SILOUAN: Exactly, and that leads to a shattering of tradition, which Benjamin saw as being a positive revolutionary thing, while we see it as negative. For us, tradition is shattered when we become less aware of the icon as a sacred object by blurring the lines between sacred and profane space, or by disregarding how the icon as an image is different from any other kind of image. It has properties that make it unique. It's not just an "illustration," or a photograph. It is more than just an "appearance" amongst others.

The process of "reactivation" and "shattering" can be compared to what happens to an image when it is reproduced repeatedly in a copy machine—making copies of copies. Gradually, the constant copying (reactivation) distorts, breaks down (shatters) the image, and the recognition between it and the prototype lessens dramatically. Some would even posit that the copy becomes so distant from the original that it becomes disconnected from it and begins to have an autonomous life. It is taken as a referent of a reality, but it remains mainly an "appearance." And once again the problem of appearances comes up.

In my article, I quote Metropolitan Nikolas of Mesogaias describing some of the symptoms that arise from this cultural environment of appearances or "world of simulacra," which "has destroyed the essence and distinctive presence of that which is."¹³ Appearances become more and more predominant, to such a degree that they begin to determine social relations and how we interpret the world around us. Altered and manipulated images, distorted copies of copies lacking concrete referents, become the basis from which we construct our self-understanding. It reminds me of what St. Andrew of Crete says, "I have become an idol to myself." Our desires are projected out into the virtual world of images, we then consume these, attempting to arrive at a self-image to re-present to the world, and end up considering this distortion to be our true self. Since the Prototype is forgotten, or thought of as non-existent, there is no sense of how to arrive at our true image and likeness. In this kind of world there is no awareness of the possibility of a symbol of the Real. I guess some would call it a kind of post-modern maya. The illusory

¹³ Met. Nikolas of Mesogaias, *Anthropos Metheoros*, Athens, 2005.

Opposite: *St. Martin of Tours*, 2007. Fr. Silouan Justiniano Egg tempera on wood, 9-1/2 x 12 in. Chapel of St. Martin of Tours, West Point Military Academy, NY.

images we consume daily, from advertising, printed, or electronic media, become the standard by which we make decisions. We construct our lives based on ideas we find in the entertainment industry, the fantasies we see in movies, and take the shadow for the reality. If we are not careful the icon can be swallowed up by this kind of world and become just another simulacrum, a shadow of itself.

When we have a profusion of reproductions as cheap solutions, we begin to judge the icon based on the reproduction rather than by its original. We lose touch with what the hand-made icon is supposed to represent, and then it doesn't seem to matter whether it is fashioned traditionally or not. In other words, if the reproduction becomes the standard way of approaching the icon, we lose touch with the incarnational, symbolic, anagogic, and liturgical significance of the icon. We become dulled to the icon, which ceases to be seen traditionally, as a mysteriological object having inherent qualities.

RTE: So it's a Catch-22. For those of us who don't have many, or any, painted icons, the reproductions on our walls are still a reminder to "watch and pray", but satisfaction with that level of iconicity may curb the urge to go on pilgrimage to venerate the original.

FR. SILOUAN: Yes, it also seems to me that it can reduce the level of participation. The irony is that on a different level, as I mention in the article, reproductions have also contributed to the revival of icon painting. Reproductions are not only on our walls, but are also found in books and on the internet. Nowadays, I don't have to be at the mercy of a collection of drawings of a master iconographer to find a prototype. I can make an internet search and find a prototype, or find a good set of plates in a book that would display, for example, icons of angels from the 11th to the 16th century. In this way, I can learn about the history of icon painting of this particular subject. That's the positive side, but that doesn't replace the priestly, liturgical act of craftsmanship, which is the cooperation of human and divine energies in the making of the icon.

Historical Reproductions

RTE: Although we now see a proliferation of copies, art reproduction certainly isn't new.

FR. SILOUAN: No. Throughout history there has always been the possibility of making reproductions of works of art. Either a master craftsman would reproduce certain types of his own work, his students would reproduce his works as part of their training, or a third party would try to ape the style of the master for profit. Early manufacturing included founding and stamping; for example, making bronze sculptures with a casting process or the stamping of coins. There were other kinds of manufacture, but these two predominated.

RTE: You also had early Christian and medieval clay, cast, or wooden pilgrim's tokens made by the tens of thousands, including the images of saints, such as those of St. Simeon the Stylite on his pillar, which were made during his own lifetime and treasured throughout Europe and the Middle East. There were also ampullae, the small containers for holy oil, earth or water that were brought back as mementoes of pilgrimage. But you, or someone you knew, had to go there.

FR. SILOUAN: Exactly. Acquisition of these objects was almost always attached to veneration and participation. Other forms of reproduction include the "cylinder seals" of Mesopotamia, with which you could repeatedly roll a text or image onto a soft clay tablet, as well as woodblock prints from China as early as 220 AD. More recently we have the 15th-century European woodcuts. In northern Europe Albrecht Durer's woodcuts were among the first to be reproduced in large quantities for people who wanted to have a devotional image but couldn't afford a painted one. The master of the workshop would draw the design on a wood block, craftsmen under him carved it out, then inked and printed the image onto paper. As is well known, in 1450 movable type printing was invented in Europe by Johannes Guttenberg, but the Han Chinese had previously developed the technology between the years 1041-48. Eventually, engraving came along, and lithography appeared in 1796. Finally, with the advent of the industrial revolution and the invention of photography, mass reproduction became ever more prominent.

As I said earlier, the irony of this is that as much of a disservice as reproductions can do to the iconicity of the icon, they may also affirm the original. There are theorists who argue that instead of reducing the "aura" as Walter Benjamin would say, reproductions enhance it because when you see an icon reproduced in so many places and forms you are drawn to want to see the original. It has that possibility, but we shouldn't lose sight of the fact that reproductions can also dull you to the original.



Studies of the Theotokos and St. John the Theologian, 2004. Fr. Silouan Justiniano. Charcoal and graphite on paper, 12 x 16 in.

RTE: To be honest, many of us probably prefer good reproductions of venerable originals to well-meant but poorly executed painted icons.

FR. SILOUAN: Yes, degraded iconicity is not only a matter of reproductions, but of a lack of craftsmanship. You can have a painted icon that is so bad that it does a disservice to the sacred purpose of the icon. There is a need for the establishment of a school of icon painting that trains iconographers on a professional level, as they've done in England. Through the Prince's School of Traditional Arts, begun by Prince Charles, there is now the possibility of getting a post-graduate diploma, concentrating on iconography. Aidan Hart teaches this course.

RTE: I understand that the Prince's School is the only place in the English-speaking world where one can seriously study iconography outside of monasteries or with a few private teachers.

FR. SILOUAN: Yes, unfortunately, in America we don't have a connection to the beauty of ancient Byzantine monuments or those of medieval Europe. They are often not alive for us, nor do many people feel a need for them. Rather than ancient examples of sacred space, what's more accessible, and immediately palpable to us, is the transient strip mall. The architect Andrew Gould, who started *The Orthodox Arts Journal* and *New World Byzantine Studios*, has been exploring the idea of a school for a while. Part of the problem is that there is no market in America for Orthodox craftsmen and no interest in investing in the preservation of hand-crafted liturgical art. This is part of the problem that contributes to the proliferation of reproductions in our liturgical space and the lack of interest in making an investment to beautify our temples, even though we are the richest nation in the world. If you train craftsmen, where are they going to go? In Europe, Russia and Greece, there are actual monuments they can help maintain and restore, and Europeans have more of an organic connection to that world than we do. Perhaps we are oversimplifying things, but it seems to me that in the Orthodox countries of the old world you find more of an appreciation for the maintenance of traditional craftsmanship. I believe that our task now is to raise the awareness, appreciation, and sensitivity of Orthodox laity towards traditional liturgical art.

Nevertheless, the idea of establishing a school has been percolating for a while, and there is definitely a need for professional training, not just work-

shops here and there. Workshops are good and they can be a gateway to Orthodoxy for some people, but they tend to breed a hobbyist attitude towards icon-painting.

RTE: What do you think of the practice of some English-speaking iconographers calling themselves “icon writers” instead of icon painters?

FR. SILOUAN: Calling oneself an icon writer is an attempt to stress the point that icon painting is not art for art’s sake, but rather “theology in color.” It comes out of a sincere desire to differentiate sacred art from secular art, which must be done. At the same time, however, when we speak of the Greek word *eikonographia*, we are not only speaking about a description in writing, but also about a “graphic inscription,” so to speak, of an image, or any symbolic depiction. This word should not be solely relegated to the notion of writing. Thus, similarly, a *zographos* is not a writer, but a painter. To speak of “icon-writing” is an exaggeration, an overemphasis of the writing connotation of the Greek term. It goes without saying that the language of iconography is painting, and within it you are dealing with form, line, color, shape, tone, and so on.

RTE: Another question: Why do we sometimes prefer a good photo of a contemporary saint such as St. Nectarios of Aegina or St. John Maximovitch to many of the icons that are available?

FR. SILOUAN: Perhaps we connect with these photos, since they present the saints as another person inhabiting the same mundane world as ours, closer to our immediate time, and this gives us hope—sanctity is within our reach. They tend to be preferable to an icon at times because they seem to capture the mystery of their personality for us more palpably. Depicting contemporary saints is difficult, precisely and iconically, because there is so much photographic documentation of them. What seems to be a useful tool at times ends up getting in the way. The photograph shows us only the physical features, the face. But the icon is meant to reveal the saint’s spiritual countenance, the saint deified. If the iconographer is not capable of perceiving this mystery with the eyes of his heart, then the photo tends to get in the way and becomes a barrier, leading him to focus on naturalistic accuracy. And since, in terms of naturalism, a photo is more convincing, we prefer it rather than the icon done without inner vision—lacking iconicity. The painter also needs

a command of iconographic pictorial principles to successfully interpret and translate the outward appearance of the saint into a symbolic representation that embodies his inner vision. This is a huge challenge.

Another part of this creative act touches on the transmitted knowledge of iconographers throughout the centuries. That is, each iconographer will contribute whatever degree of inner vision he has to offer in the articulation of a prototype. For example, compare the depiction of the Old Testament narrative of the three youths in the Babylonian furnace in the Roman catacombs with the one at Hosios Lukas in Greece, and then again with a third image at Vatopedi Monastery. You will see a gradual honing of the subject and nuance in the way it is handled, until it reaches a point of clarity that was not present in the initial attempts. The same thing happens with icons of contemporary saints. There is a communal process of articulation in the tradition, each iconographer helping the other, from generation to generation, to arrive at a succinct expression of the deified image of the saint. This articulation could happen in a generation, but it could also take several hundred years.

RTE: Fr. Silouan, thank you for this brilliant overview of iconography. Do you have a final thought for us?

FR. SILOUAN: People shouldn’t feel that they are less Orthodox for using reproductions. Just be aware of what a reproduction is, and that the icon and its symbolism has a crucial role to play within the liturgical experience in affirming the goodness of creation and the Incarnation. If we keep sight of that we will stay awake to our calling—deification. ✦