

LUVAH

JOURNAL OF THE CREATIVE IMAGINATION



EDITED BY FARASHA EUKER

Luvah: Journal of the Creative Imagination

Luvah, ISSN 2168-6319 (online), is a scholarly, peer-reviewed journal of philosophy, theology, and literature. Luvah provides a space to reflect on modernity, tradition, and metaphysics.

Executive Editor

Farasha Euker

Editorial Board

Keith Doubt

Wittenberg University

David Fideler

Concord Editorial

Maja Pašović

University of Waterloo

Angela Voss

University of Kent

Amy L. Washburn

City University of New York

Copyright © 2011–2013 Farasha Euker

Some rights reserved. Unless indicated otherwise, all materials are copyrighted by *Luvah* and licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0

Unported License.

<http://luvah.org>

In Search for the Sacred Image

Hieromonk Silouan

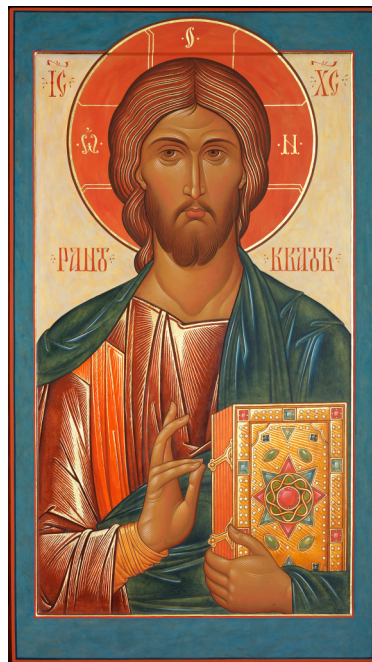


Figure 1: *Christ Pantokrator* (2013), 17 3/4 x 31 1/2 in, egg tempera on wood.

But the “beautiful” which is beyond individual being is called “beauty” because of that beauty bestowed by it on all things, each in accordance with what it is. It is given this name because it is the cause of the harmony and splendor in everything, because like a light it flashes onto everything the beauty-causing impartations of its own well-spring ray. Beauty “bids” all things to itself... —St. Dionysios the Areopagite, *The Divine Names*, IV: 7¹

The word “sacred”... denotes something set apart, devoted to a deity, a holy offering. In early Christian language it was applied in its synonymous form, *sacramentum*, to any action or object which as a mirror or vehicle or form of the Divine was regarded as revealing the Divine... The sacred is something in which the Divine is present or which is charged with divine energies. The very idea of the sacred presupposes to start with the presence of the Divine or the existence of God. Without the Divine—without God—there can be no holiness, nothing sacred... —Philip Sherrard, *The Sacred in Life and Art*²

In this article, *In Search for the Sacred*, I will be sharing with you my journey as a painter, towards the sacred art of the icon. We will be stopping here and there along the way, to consider some aspects of Modernism, in particular abstraction, in light of the traditional philosophy of art as found in Eastern Orthodoxy. This will help us see how they tend to overlap and yet differ in their concern for the Sacred, Reality, symbolism, and theurgy. Finally, this discussion will also touch on the contemporary “art,” and the way Tradition can help to revitalize it creatively. It has been quite a journey, but it’s not over yet, for its fulfillment is the acquiring of the divine likeness, when we become true icons, and no longer “see dimly as in a mirror, but then face to face.”³

So let us start with some childhood memories...

Towards Discovery

Procession and return, a divine mystery. So it is hardly a surprise to find myself back in Puerto Rico, where it all began for me. Nevertheless, I could have never imaged that forty years from my birth here in San German, I would return to have an exhibition. Nearby, in Gamboa, I remember playing under the huge mango tree and hiding out in the thick passion fruit bushes. It was also a thrill to walk back home from the Antonia Martinez elementary school with my sister, stopping to get some candy at the store for a penny or a nickel. The oblivion of play, enjoying nature, and at times, the fear of getting hit with the Guayava⁴ stick, was the only thing that seemed to matter. At the time art was the last thing in my mind. I only have vague memories of the carvings of Santos, seen here and there from time to time, the vegigante carnival masks, or maybe a Campeche and *El Velorio* (1893) by Francisco Oller. Other than that, art had not yet made a strong impression on me.

1 In *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, translated by Colm Luibheid, Paulist Press, Mahwah, N.J., 1987, pp.76-77.

2 Philip Sherrard, *The Sacred in Life and Art*, Denise Harvey (Publisher), Evia, Greece, 2004, p.1.

3 I Cor. 13:12.

4 Spanish for the Guava plant.

It wasn't until we moved to the US in the mid-eighties, that drawing and color began to grab my attention. Soon after our arrival to Connecticut I met two young men, Shane and Sotero who introduced me to Graffiti. Once I saw their imaginative sketchbooks, full of calligraphic dexterity, I was hooked, and immediately asked them to teach me the tricks of the trade. They agreed, and so began the journey.

At the high school library I also discovered the masters of the Renaissance. This triggered an interest in art history and opened up to me the mysterious world of painting, which soon became my main preoccupation. My encounter with the Renaissance marks the beginning of the yearning for an authentic painting tradition, and for a timeless content in art. It was a shift from the irreverence of street art to the reverence of the museum.

There was something simultaneously sensual and yet somehow numinous in these works. In particular the works of the early Renaissance, pointed to things more subtle, universal, but what was it? At times an unearthly beauty shined through, in spite of all the naturalism. Yet, in the end, although the subject was religious, focus on the outward appearances and sentimentality got in the way and won the day. Yet, although gently, the sacred still whispered from the distance. Yes, this was exactly what was beckoning me through beauty, the sacred.

But before this yearning for the sacred was to become stronger and its call louder, there was a lot of time of experimentation and searching that went on during my undergraduate studies. Modernism quickly followed my initial interest in the Old Masters. Expressionism, Surrealism, and abstraction, all became labs in which to explore the creative imagination. With abstraction, nature was abandoned, and the focus became the process of painting itself. At first the aggressive stroke was taken up as a sign of authenticity, the asserted presence of the painter, an index of unique subjectivity. Then, along with organic forms, geometry also slipped in.



Figure 2: *Theotokos* (Virgin Mary, 2012), 17 3/4 x 31 1/2 in, egg tempera on wood.

Symbolism and Abstraction

As divergent as all these modernist tendencies might at first seem to appear, we should not overlook their common undercurrent, the Symbolism of the 19th century. In this movement we find a drive to somehow bypass the limitations of naturalism, its overriding focus on outward appearances, as seen in the academic painting of the day. It was a turn from the senses, to the embodiment of the hidden states of the soul, moods and ideas, which were to be communicated in a new pictorial language, relying on the inherent qualities of line, form and color. Here we have the echoes of Romanticism; on the one hand, its subjectivism, the primacy of the artist's creative idiosyncrasy, his emotional life and imagination; on the other, its interest in the sublime, the attempt to depict the powerful, and often terrifying presence of the infinite, the transcendent, in nature. Often these concerns were dealt with through loosely handled allegorical, mythical and religious themes, and gradually interest in medieval, folk and primitive art enter in. These Symbolist ideas would continue in the 20th century and play a major role in the development of abstraction. In short, what we find here is a revolt against the rationalist and positivist outlook that had become predominant ever since the Renaissance and embodied in Enlightenment philosophy. It was felt that this materialism had reached its climax, by the time of the industrial revolution. Consequently, seeing the side effects of these developments, some painters realized that "man cannot live by bread alone," and so there was a need to respond to the spiritual hunger of the day.

The pioneer of abstraction, Wassily Kandinsky, would respond to this hunger by publishing a little book in 1911 called *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, which I discovered in these years of experimentation in college. Shortly thereafter I also encountered the ideas of Mondrian, Malevich and others, who in various ways articulated ways to surmount the limitations of naturalistic representation and make of the work of art an embodiment of spiritual content. Kandinsky would say:

...It must become possible to hear the whole world as it is without representational interpretation... Abstract forms (lines, planes, dots, etc.) are not important in themselves, but only their inner sound of life... *The world sounds. It is a cosmos of spiritually active beings. Even dead matter is living spirit.*⁵

Likewise, of the importance of revealing the inner essence of things, their ideas, in the Platonic sense; and abstraction as true realism, the Romanian sculptor Constantin Brancusi says,

They are imbeciles who call my work abstract; that which they call abstract is the most realist, because what is real is not the exterior form but the idea, the essence of things...⁶

5 Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc, eds. and authors, *The Blaue Reiter Almanac; Documentary Edition*, ed. Klaus Lankheit, N.Y., 1974, pp. 164-65, 173. (italics in original) As quoted by Roger Lipsey, *An Art of Our Own: The Spiritual in Twentieth Century Art*, Shambala, Boston & Shaftesbury, 1989, p.42.

6 In Guilbert, Claire Gilles, "Propos de Brancusi (1876-1957)," in *Prisme des arts*, 12, 1957, 5-7., p. 6. As quoted in Lipsey, *op. cit.*, p. 242.

The artist should know to dig out the being that is within matter and be the tool that brings out its cosmic essence into an actual visible essence.⁷

Braque, Picasso's collaborator in the development of Cubism, gives a telling statement to a journalist in 1908 or 1909, explaining the spiritual orientation of his work, his attempt to expose the Absolute and the importance of subjective interpretation in this task:

I couldn't portray a woman in all her natural loveliness... I haven't the skill. No one has. I must, therefore, create a new sort of beauty, the beauty that appears to me in terms of volume, of line, of mass, of weight, and through that beauty interpret my subjective impression... I want to expose the Absolute, and not merely the factitious woman.⁸

It gradually became clear to me that when these artists spoke of penetrating into the essence of things, of things cosmic, transcendent, universal, or the Absolute, it was another way of speaking of the sacred in art. Their ideas betrayed a search for the sacred, or a longing for the divine, in early modernism, in particular in the work of the pioneers of abstraction. Yet, some modernist movements would refuse to communicate their revolt in mystical terms, preferring to take the side of technology, utilitarian ideology and a machine aesthetic. Others would attempt to merge the two tendencies, as seen in the Bauhaus. In any case, ambiguity became part and parcel of the avant-garde, and this is exactly what became an essential factor of the notion of the "spiritual" in modernism, its ambiguity, or rather, vagueness.

The challenge was to respond to this hunger for the sacred, to address the spiritual side of man, in what had become a desacralized world, a society high on the promises of scientism, without a coherent and communally accepted metaphysics. The modernist avant-garde hoped to do so without the restrictions of institutional religion, or recourse to Revelation, as embodied in Tradition. For them these had become the breeding ground of outdated and inefficient formulas, shallow moralism and sentimentality. For some, religion itself had not been spared. It had also succumbed to a materialist mentality.⁹ So they found recourse in the occult, spiritism, and the syncretism of various forms of eastern religion as expounded by Theosophy and Anthroposophy. From within this context they formulated their ideas concerning the "spiritual" in art.

7 As quoted by Aidan Hart, *Constantine Brancusi: His Spiritual Roots*, p. 2. <http://aidanharticons.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/Constantin-Brancusi.pdf>

8 Lipsey, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

9 Joseph Chiari notes, "The modernist attitude in art became self-consciously coherent and vocal towards the end of the nineteenth century and is a typical product of western society, afflicted by the peculiar dichotomy due to the fundamental opposition between Christianity and anti-Socratic rationalism which has turned more and more into scientism and pure and simple phenomenalism. This dichotomy has resulted in the partial disintegration of Christianity and in the growth of a type of rationalism which has finally reached the stage of being an end in itself." Joseph Chiari, *The Aesthetics of Modernism*, Vision Press Limited, London, 1970, p. 9.



Figure 3: *St. Martin of Tours* (2007), 9 1/2 in. X 12 in, egg tempera on wood.

Theurgy

There also arose belief that painting had what I would call a “theurgic,” or transformative divine power. In making the divine manifest in the immanent, it could in fact heal, nourish, fill the hunger of individual souls and society at large, until gradually art became life and life art, and from this union a great Utopia would arise. As Kandinsky would say: “Such periods, when art possesses no outstanding representative, when the transubstantiated bread remains inaccessible, are periods of decline in the spiritual world.”¹⁰ So perhaps, abstract painting, it was thought, could become this “transubstantiated bread,” or “Eucharistic” medicine, by making the Absolute present, somehow embodied and assimilable. Mondrian would say of composition in Neo-Plasticism, “The rhythm of relations of color and size makes the absolute appear in the relativity of time and space.”¹¹ The painter then was seen as a priestly and prophetic figure in this kind of modernism. The painting, in turn, it was hoped, would act as a kind of “sacrament,” and the Utopia would replace the Heavenly Jerusalem at the end of history. What we have here is a kind of *soteriology*, an attempt by these pioneers of abstraction to come up with an alternative means of salvation, outside the realm of religion, in fact, art replaces religion. They wanted their paintings to become, as Franz Marc would say, “symbols that belong on the altars of a future spiritual religion.”¹²

¹⁰ Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, 1912. From the translation found in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings On Art*, ed. by Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo, Da Capo Press, N.Y., 1994, p.135.

¹¹ Piet Mondrian, *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality*, 1919. From the translation found in *Theories of Modern Art*, ed. by Herschel B. Chipp, University of California Press, Berkeley, California, 1968, p. 323.

¹² Kandinsky / Marc (1974), *op. cit.*, p. 64.

Subjectivism

I admit that these ideas, in my naïveté, seemed attractive and convincing to me at the time. I wanted painting to embody the eternal in the particular, to have spiritual impact, to be transformative, to be a *locus* of divinity. So in the best way I could I tried to put into practice some of the ideas formulated by these theoreticians. But gradually enthusiasm dwindled and disillusionment settled in. Mondrian would say of the two human inclinations in art, “One aims at *direct creation of universal beauty*, the other at the *aesthetic expression of oneself*, in other words, of that which one thinks and experiences, The first aims at representing reality objectively, the second subjectively.”¹³ A balance between the two was to be maintained. He also added, “One must create as objective as possible a representation of forms and relations.”¹⁴ Yet, it soon became apparent that for all the talk about the “universality” or “objectivity” of spiritual content, there was really nothing that tied the work of these early modernists together. In other words, “representing reality objectively,” became overwhelmed by the subjectivity of divergent stylistic interpretations. In theory subjectivity was meant to hold second place, but in practice it quickly took the lead. As Kandinsky would say, “When religion, science and morality are shaken, the two last by the strong hand of Nietzsche, and when the outer supports threaten to fall, man turns his gaze from externals in on to himself.”¹⁵

Shutting his eyes, turning in on to himself, the painter withdrew from sense impressions, but in so doing he mistook the accidents of the self for the essence of things. Doubting and rejecting tradition, he forgot the universally acknowledged understanding of man as microcosm, consisting of body, soul and spirit, thereby mirroring the corresponding parallel structure of the cosmos. Therefore, to “see” into the essence of things, their spiritual radiance, or grounding in divinity, he must do so in the spirit, that is, the intellect (*nous* in Greek, *intellectus* in Latin), man’s highest faculty, the “eye of the heart”, illumined by the Holy Spirit. With this faculty, as we are told in the *Philokalia*, (a collection of writings on the mystical life, by the spiritual masters of the Orthodox Church), “provided it is purified—[man] knows God or the *inner essences* or principles of created things by means of direct apprehension or spiritual perception.”¹⁶ But, instead of tapping into the spirit, and being guided from “above,” he stopped short, with the middle psychic realm, the soul’s emotions, fantasy, deductive reasoning and the accretions imprinted there from “below.” Enthralled with what he saw there, in this middle, subtle realm, he developed his own idea of what constituted the “spiritual,” or how it could be embodied, symbolized. But these “symbols” became an arbitrary visual language that could not be read, they bore no true connection to the objective spiritual reality they attempted to signify. “Inner need” as Kandinsky would say, or for Malevich “supremacy of feeling” guided the way. Your guess was as good as mine, each had what they felt was an authentic, “original,” way of representing the sacred. Even though they liked to make frequent allusions to the objectivity of their task and the primacy of the Absolute, outside subjectivity there seemed to be no true grounding in Reality.

Finally, in the course of history, it became apparent that no Utopia would arise and that abstraction had no medicinal efficacy. Instead of a general direction towards the spiritual in art,

13 Chipp, *op. cit.*, pp. 349-50 (italics in original).

14 *Ibid.*, p.350.

15 Lindsay / Vergo (1994), *op. cit.*, p. 145.

16 *The Philokalia Vol. Two*, Faber and Faber, London and Boston, 1981, p.384.

with a few exceptions there has actually been a gradual increase of relativism, individualism, cynicism, formalism; a constant pursuit of novelty, the ingrained persistence of “art for art sake,” and now with the advent of so called Postmodernism, what some see as the death of art.



Figure 4: *Venerable Bede* (2008), 8 x 3 1/2 in, egg tempera on wood.

Contemporary Art

Let me digress for a moment and ask: Has the spiritual hunger we have seen in early modernism subsided? What has happened in the realm of art? Is anyone truly satisfied, or are we just playing along, scared to point out that the emperor has no clothes? What is the relevance of all the fragmentary theories, based as they are on subjectivism?

For an iconographer, engaged in a sacred art established on Tradition and the objectivity of Revelation, there arises the problem of the state of contemporary gallery art. Let me clarify that the aim here is not just to be condemnatory about all secular, or non-liturgical art. As can be seen in early abstraction, non-liturgical art, in its yearning for the spiritual, at times overlaps with the aims of overtly sacred art. Gallery art *can*, in its best moments, overcome the limitations of individualism, touch the depths of our common humanity, contain great beauty, take us to the threshold of the mystery of the sacred, and have an edifying, powerful impact. Rare though these moments can be, they are still possible.

However, those instances will become even scarcer if the spiritual dimension of art is forgotten as a thing of the past, and the artist's faculty of spiritual vision, his *intellect* (nous), is not purified. Our art will continue to wither if we don't address the whole man as created in the image and likeness of God. In other words, the principles of sacred art continue to be relevant for us today, whether we realize it or not, and can help bring about a revitalization of non-liturgical art. The problem is that most take the contemporary notion of "art" for granted. There is a general forgetfulness of what art has been understood to be in past civilizations. We function as if in a solipsistic vacuum, within the "white cube" of the gallery. As Aidan Hart says,

To gain a more profound insight into the state of things we need to ask what is the most fundamental value which has been lost, and which therefore needs to be restored, albeit in a vital way. I think the answer is very simple. If we look at the art of cultures throughout time we see one recurring theme: they saw their art as a mediator between some higher realm and their own world. Their art was based on three premises: that there exist some higher realm; that this world is an image of or even an incarnation of that realm; and that the most sublime role of art is to mediate between these two realms. The very word art means to fitly join together. Sacred art mediates between two realms: The Divine source of all that man aspires to—harmony, strength, beauty, rich variety—and the culture which creates it. Such traditional art is a sort of mining operation, a quest for the treasures hidden within the material world, a search for that quintessential essence and spark which illuminates all things from inside.¹⁷

Sacred art is not an exception to the rule, but rather has been universally acknowledged as a norm in all major civilizations and religions from time immemorial. Just think of the art of the Egyptians, Assyrians, Greeks, Chinese, Indians, and Byzantines, to just mention a few. These were civilizations governed by spiritual principles and their application touched all activities and facets of life. Man has always known that art, or *techné*, the manufacturing of objects,

¹⁷ Aidan Hart, *New Art: Old Icons- Modern Art Seen in the Light of Sacred Art*. A lecture given at the Shrewsbury Art Gallery and Museum, for the Shrewsbury Art Festival, 11 July, 2003. p. 1.

the work of skill, besides serving physical necessity also manifests the sacred, in order to bring about the union of man and God. Hence, functional and symbolic values coincide. What we are talking about here forms part of what has been called the normal or traditional philosophy of art,¹⁸ which, as Ananda K. Coomaraswamy says, “is not the property of any philosopher, or time or place: we can only say that there are certain times, and notably our own, at which it has been forgotten.”¹⁹ Without this mediatory role of art, as its highest standard, all comes undone. This understanding of art might appear to be anachronistic, but to this day still forms part of living Tradition, as can be seen in the sacred art of the icon in the Orthodox Church.

What has happened, the reason we see such malaise, is because there has been a gradual supplanting of this world view for the primacy of individualism, self-expression, the cult of originality and the notion of the evolutionary progress of stylistic forms: notions which entail a rejection of the conviction that things in this world mirror and participate in a higher realm—“as above, so below”—or as some still pray every day, “Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven,”²⁰ and as the Lord says, “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your heavenly Father is perfect.”²¹

We now have, as some have called it, a “tradition of novelty,” which is obviously an oxymoron. Instead of aspiring toward the divine Archetype, thereby sustaining a vertical orientation, we would rather be pleased with what is skin deep and fleeting, being relegated to the horizontal sphere of things. That is, we have supplanted timelessness by historicism, the replenishing, ever renewing fountains of Tradition with cultural determinism, the heavenly with the earthly. Hence, no cruciform balance between the human and divine occurs in art, and we are deprived of entrance into the mystery of the Sacred through the door of the Incarnation.

Let us now take a look at some of the consequences that arise from this shift in orientation, and see parallels and differences among some of the presuppositions of abstraction and the icon. They touch on the difference between religious and sacred art, the notion of originality, the importance of Tradition, and the incarnational role of sacred art. This will help to put into context and clarify the ideas beginning to unfold in our narrative.

18 See Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *On the Traditional Doctrine of Art*, Golgonooza Press, Ipswich, UK, 1977.

19 Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, India, 1974, p.52.

20 Matt. 6: 9-13.

21 Matt. 5: 48.

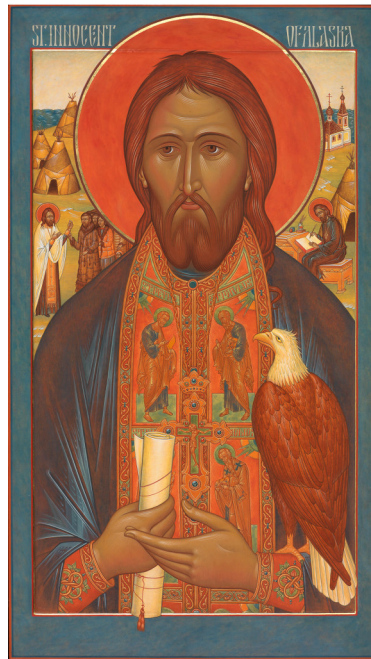


Figure 5: *St. Innocent of Alaska* (2012), 17 3/4 x 31 1/2 in, egg tempera on wood.

Religious vs. Sacred Art

The Renaissance marks the fundamental turning away from the traditional doctrine of art which was part of the integrated culture of medieval Europe. This is clearly seen in this period in the deprecating attitude that arises towards medieval painting.²² Byzantine painting, or the *maniera Greca*, as the Italians would call it, that is, the sacred art of the icon, began to be treated as a grotesque product of the so called “dark ages,” of those “primitives” who did not have the skill, the scientific knowledge of mathematical perspective, or anatomy, to depict things according to nature.

Therefore, the notion takes hold that a religious subject matter is sufficient as sacred art, even though it might be depicted as any other profane subject. That is to say, the unique style of sacred art, its tendency towards “abstraction”, hieratic formal qualities and symbolism, meant to embody a spiritual vision, is replaced by an empiricist view of nature, and its pictorial equivalent, illusionist, mimetic representation. Hence, in religious painting, although at times it strikes a powerful pitch of devotional feeling, and betrays unquestionable artistic virtuosity and “genius,” nevertheless, the religious subject remains essentially externally considered. In the Baroque all becomes emotional euphoria, drama, corpulent bodies.

In religious painting we begin to see the saint depicted no longer as man deified, transfigured, resplendent in his divine likeness, but as just an ordinary man, in coarse mortality; not as triumphant in the face of suffering, but psychologically crushed by the pain of his struggle. Christ in His crucifixion and burial no longer appears as the one that conquers, but rather as the one defeated, decomposing in the grip of death. In the end, nature seems opaque,

22 See Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*, Translated by George Bull, Penguin Books, Middlesex, UK, 1965, p. 45.

disconnected from the light of divinity, mainly a conglomerate of mechanistic and sensuous phenomena. As Titus Burckhardt puts it,

An art cannot properly be called “sacred” solely on the grounds that its subjects originate in a spiritual truth; its formal language also must bear witness to a similar origin... Every form is the vehicle of a given quality of being... there are therefore essentially profane works of art with a sacred theme, but on the other hand there exists no sacred work of art which is profane in form, for there is a rigorous analogy between form and spirit. A spiritual vision necessarily finds its expression in a particular formal language; if that language is lacking... then it can only be because spiritual vision of things is also lacking.²³

Beauty & Ambiguity

This lack of vision leads to an ever stronger aestheticism, a focus on what pleases in a purely visual and sentimental level, without concern for meaning, intelligibility, and responsibility. The presuppositions behind the work, the truth or falsehood of what is being expressed, its effect on the individual or society, no longer matters. “Self-expression” for its own sake, “only what we like” counts. This sensationalism forgets that beauty can be ambiguous. It can either elevate us to the heavens, when we see it as the splendor of divinity; or hurl us to the abyss, when we place it beyond good and evil, get stuck on surfaces, mistake it for seduction, and turn it into a fetish.²⁴

It is hard to disagree with Plato who once said, “I cannot fairly give the name ‘art’ to anything irrational.”²⁵ Plato spoke of the kind of rhetoric that did not aim at truth or the good, but rather remained irrational in purpose, in solely seeking to please and flatter. It therefore became sophistry, no longer worthy to be named “art,” that is, a skill guided by the illumined intellect, since it had been debased to a sole regard for earthly appetites.²⁶ In other words, according to the traditional doctrine, art requires proper knowledge, first of metaphysical principles, then of craftsmanship, that is, of the proper ordering in the making of things, according to intended purpose. The purpose is the general good of man as a whole, the meeting of his physical and spiritual needs, the realization of his intended end, according to the light of truth. This understanding always keeps in mind that man is primarily a spiritual being, made after the image and likeness of his Divine Archetype, with whom he is to be united. Unfortunately, in our predicament, without having a purpose, chance is as good a determining factor as anything else, and many find pleasure in deformities.²⁷

23 Titus Burckhardt, *Sacred Art in East and West: Its Principles and Methods*, Translated by Lord Northbourne, Perennial Books Ltd., Pates Manor, Bedfont, Middlesex, UK, 1986, p. 7.

24 Sherrard, *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19.

25 Plato, *Gorgias*, 465A. Plato also says, “Law and art are children of the intellect” (*nous*). *Laws*, 890D.

26 Plato is paralleled by St. John Chrysostom who says, “But the arts ought to be concerned with things necessary and important to our life... For to this end God gave us skill at all.” St. John Chrysostom, “Homilies on the Gospel of St. Matthew,” Homily 49, Chap. 5, *NPNF*, ed. Philip Schaff, Vol. 10, p. 307.

27 Coomaraswamy, *Is Art a Superstition, or a Way of Life?*, in *The Essential Ananda K. Coomaraswamy*, ed. by Rama P. Coomaraswamy, World Wisdom, Bloomington, IN, 2004, p. 163.

Elsewhere Plato adds, “Beauty is the splendor of Truth.” But we have reached the point where beauty is seen as having nothing to do with the knowledge of Truth, that is, God, the Cause of being of all that is, the Ground of their innermost essence, the Source of their harmony, goodness and perfection. It rather becomes solely a matter of pleasant bodies and a luxury, not a necessity of life as the air we breathe. Stuck on the senses, we fail to see that Beauty addresses our intellect (*nous*); through the awareness of its ordering of created beings, we also perceive the ordering found in ourselves, and find that we are being invited back to the abundance of life of the Source of all that is. Lamenting this symptom of cultural disequilibrium, the painter Cecil Collins says around the 1970’s,

We are spiritual barbarians, and therefore open to this immense self-deception which is its inevitable result. Art is not talent, it is knowledge. Beauty is a form of cognition. And when beauty is debased from cognition to sensation the next step is perversion. The perversion of this experience of beauty in our civilization is a clear fact.²⁸

Originality²⁹

In the initial impetus of the pioneers of abstraction to develop a symbolism that “expressed objective metaphysical truth”³⁰ (Hart) can be seen a desire to retain aspects of the traditional doctrine of art. In this respect, their works at times even emulated the style of traditional cultures, mainly its directness of expression, abstracting tendencies, and disregard for naturalism. Some of them in fact saw themselves as “neo-primitives.” This experimentation, however, became mainly a research for new, more authentic, pictorial possibilities, the playground for the modernist concern for originality. For all their appreciation for “primitive” sacred art and the medieval period, they failed to grasp why their canonical forms, although varying in style according to cultures, and temporal circumstances, remain intact for centuries, without drastic change, only undergoing slight variation. And this due, not to deliberate attempts at self-expression, but to the unconscious and organic outgrowth of national and individual artistic temperament.

Perhaps, this blind spot was due to their belief in the inevitability of progress in the stylistic development of art forms. In other words, they saw things as subject to the laws of evolutionary determinism. Mondrian would say, “For it is the spirit of the times that determines artistic expression...”³¹ And in his essay of 1937, *Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art*, he wrote, “One can rightly speak of an evolution in plastic art.”³² Ironically, in this regard, their underlying premises did not defer much from the materialism they derided, in particular, its rejection of the timeless dimension of the pictorial principles of Tradition. In a way they were fighting fire with fire, in trying to arrive at an “objective metaphysics” of symbolic forms.

Nevertheless, this continuity of form in sacred art is there, not merely as a witness to primitive inadequacy, rigid conservatism, or sacerdotal restriction. Rather, on the one hand, since

28 Cecil Collins, *Why does Art today Lack Inspiration?* In *Every Man An Artist, Readings in the Traditional Philosophy of Art*, ed. Brian Keeble, World Wisdom, Inc., Bloomington, IN, 2005, p. 203.

29 See the chapter, *Art and Originality*, in Sherrard (2004), *Ibid.*, pp. 54-67.

30 Hart (2003), *op. cit.*, p.2.

31 Chipp, *op. cit.*, p. 323.

32 *Ibid.*

it functions as a visual language, its symbolism must be consistent, in order to retain its intelligibility and clearly convey its meaning throughout generations, within an integrated culture. On the other hand, simply because there was no need for alteration, since it effectively manifests Revelation, and the archetypal dimension of the things depicted, that is, their grounding in divinity, that “spark which illuminates all things from inside.”³³ In other words, in sacred art we find the fulfillment of the modernist search to express the spiritual vision of the inner essence of things.³⁴

In the Orthodox tradition we call the “archetypes” of created beings their *logoi*.³⁵ These are the inner principles, reasons, divine words, or ideas (*eidos*), residing in the Logos, the Wisdom of God, giving creatures their unique particularized existence, sustaining and directing them towards their fulfillment or intended end (*telos*). An icon depicts nature from this “heavenly” or intelligible perspective, unfolding its ideal³⁶ content and hidden beauty, transfigured, having attained its fulfillment in incorruption and deification, as God intended, rather than its outward transient and corruptible form.

The word “archetype,” or prototype, could also simply mean the saint or event depicted. These are venerated in the icon, since in their holiness they lucidly reflect the supreme Archetype, the Holy Trinity. But in speaking of the interrelatedness between image and divine Archetype, that is, the mediatory role of the icon, we should not forget that this bond is grounded on the Person of Christ, the Son of God, true Archetype of true Archetype, and perfect Mediator—the God-Man. In the Incarnation of Christ, the Logos, we have a “union without confusion or division” of the divine and human natures, of heaven and earth. He is the “express image of the Father,” the heavenly Icon, model of all icons, after whose image we have been created and whose likeness we are to attain. Our fulfillment is found in living up to our *logos*, our true nature hidden in the Logos, in returning to our Source and thereby becoming His living icons.

Here we see a hierarchy of being, He Who Is, Who alone is holy, those who in partaking of Him derive fullness of life, both man and nature, and the manifestation of their transfigured state in the depiction of the icon. Therefore, the canonical forms in sacred art embody and are mysteriously connected to an ontological reality that is immutable, thereby deriving from it its stylistic stability for centuries, needing no revision based on willful subjective vagaries. In this sense, sacred art is truly “original” in that it, as the etymology suggests, fulfills its function of redirecting us ever closer, to the Origin of the subjects depicted, to the “Ground of their being,”³⁷ the divine Archetype.

33 A. Hart (2003), *op. cit.*, p.1.

34 Burkhardt says, “Granted that spirituality in itself is independent of forms, this in no way implies that it can be expressed and transmitted by any and every sort of form. Through its qualitative essence form has a place in the sensible order analogous to that of truth in the intellectual order... Just as a mental form such as a dogma or a doctrine can be the adequate, albeit limited, reflection of Divine Truth, so can sensible form retrace a truth or a reality which transcends both the plane of sensible forms and the plane of thought.” *Ibid.*, p.8.

35 In this essay we prefer to use the word “archetype” rather than “prototype,” but they are interchangeable terms.

36 “Ideal” here is not to be confused with a sentimental mindset that wishes to conform reality to a dream. The “ideal content” pertains to the intuition of the *intelligible*, rather than the *sensible*, apprehension of nature. Hence the icon is an embodiment of an idea (*logos*), rather than the idealization of facts.

37 St. Maximos the Confessor says, “And He recapitulates all things in Himself, for [all things have] *their be-*

Incarnation

It is worth noting that the essentialism of modernist abstraction suffers from a dualistic tendency, setting up an extreme opposition between matter and spirit. In so doing, it undermines the *incarnational* dimension of sacred art. This is evident from its denial of the phenomenal world of nature in preference for “non-objectivity,” for an “abstract reality” as Mondrian would say, or a “flight into infinity” as Malevich would put it. In the end it tends to see nature not as sacred, but as a barrier, more opaque than translucent or reflective of divine energies. Their theories, for all practical purposes, lead to a disconnection between the two spheres of reality, the immutable and mutable, which interpenetrate each other in reciprocity. They tend to see these almost, if not completely, as mutually exclusive, not as two aspects of one whole Reality.

In abstraction as in naturalism the question remains the same, what constitutes Reality. But as the Hermetic formula has it, “Nature loves to hide.” Brian Keeble explains, “In other words, what constitutes the essential reality of a thing is not obvious to sensory perception. For nature is a kind of generative ‘play,’ a form of cosmic magic so sustained in attunement to the senses that it produces the illusion of being permanent—of being a fixed reality.”³⁸ The “fixing,” or capturing of this ever playful veil of nature, moved by the gusts of the divine presence, became the fascination of painting in post-Renaissance Europe. Its concern with the imitation and accurate representation of perceived reality, can be seen in various forms throughout its history. In the 19th century, by the time of the invention of photography, the theme had reached a point of crisis. Impressionism and Cubism came as alternative possibilities in capturing transient phenomena, but finally abstraction opted to go beyond vision and disregard nature altogether. In this regard Keeble says,

Nature, true to its nature, proved as illusive as ever and in abstraction disappeared! It was then but a short step to concluding that abstraction is the appropriate manner of expression for the ineffable content of spiritual perception because it seems to accord intimately with subjectivity. Here nature is redundant after all and our senses hopelessly deceptive in being unable to provide any sort of language appropriate to spiritual discourse. But if there is no possible analogy between the natural world we perceive and the veiled, spiritual reality we seek—between, that is, creature and Creator—then why at least in our creaturehood are we so evidently fitted through our senses for a world that turns out to be unnecessary? Why seek to be transformed by supra-human reality if all that is needed is an act of psychological volition? In natureless abstraction the mind acts as if reality is given out from the human subject. But intelligence is nothing if it is not meant to *take in* reality.³⁹

*ing and their continuation in Him, and through Him all things participate in God, both in remaining stable as they were created and in moving toward the purpose for which they were created.” St. Maximos the Confessor, Scholia on the Divine Names, PG 4: 353B. As quoted with brackets and italics in Nikolaos Loudovikos, *A Eucharistic Ontology: Maximos the Confessor’s Eschatological Ontology of Being as Dialogical Reciprocity*, transl. Elizabeth Theokritoff, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Brookline, Massachusetts, 2010, pp. 59-60.*

³⁸ Brian Keeble, *Art: For Whom and For What?*, Sophia Perennis, Hillsdale, N.Y., 2005, P. 57.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

So we are reminded of the saying, “And seeing you will see and not perceive; for the hearts of this people have grown dull.”⁴⁰ Therefore, the irony is that, although the theories of the pioneers of abstraction contain vestiges of the traditional doctrine, nevertheless, they also bear the seed that undermines one of its fundamental principles, the possibility of the incarnation of the divine Archetype in concrete nature. And by the same token, the possibility of a true symbolism that conforms to Reality and transcends arbitrariness. In their search for stability and the eternal, in a world that to them was becoming increasingly materialistic, faster, unstable, as it advanced towards technocracy, refuge was ultimately sought, from the mutable world of matter, in another form of instability, subjective volition, rather than in any immutable “objective metaphysical truth.” They shut their eyes to the apprehension of the sacred in nature.

II Disillusionment

So, returning to our narrative, after looking at the consequences just mentioned, I reached the conclusion that abstraction was not the most effective way to arrive at an image of the sacred. By the time I was in the last year of my graduate studies my work had gone from a belief in spontaneous expression, the brush stroke as a sign of authenticity, to questioning the possibility of expressing spiritual content in painting at all, by means of a purely subjective, so-called originality. In short, spontaneity had become arbitrary, mere formalism. It was a time in which there was no more room to take presuppositions for granted.

The appropriation of found images now dominated things. Instead of painting from nature, or inventing forms through the painting process, everything now became calculated and premeditated, conceptual, so to speak. I began to paint in a photo-realistic style, from previously composed collages, arranged from cut fragments of magazine images, computer generated rave party flyers, and photos taken of garbled TV channels. The images suggested fragments of reality, but most were blurred and ambiguous enough to remain “abstract” in overall effect. In their geometric arrangement, they called to mind windows in the virtual world of computer screens. The fluidity of paint, and the gestural stroke were at times referenced, but they become cartoons of themselves, artificial signs. These paintings became an indulgence in simulacra.

This was all a contradiction and response to Abstract Expressionism, and the formalism of Greenberg’s theory of so called “pure” abstraction. By the time Clement Greenberg shows up into the scene of American art criticism, abstraction had become predominantly self-referential. For Greenberg, abstract painting, in order to retain its integrity as an avant-garde project, had to be purified, emphasize its flatness, kept from any trace of theatricality or illusionist space, subject-matter, illustrative or literary narrative. Colors spoke of nothing other than themselves. Painting had to do with its inherent properties and nothing else.⁴¹ Any reference to the outside world, or pop culture, was forbidden as “kitsch,” the buzz word used to dismiss a work of art as riddled with bad taste and false sentiment.⁴² Metaphysical

⁴⁰ Matt 13:15

⁴¹ See Clement Greenberg, *Clement Greenberg: Arrogant Purpose, 1945-1949*, Vol. II, ed. John O’Brian, Chicago University Press, Chicago, IL, 1986, pp. 188-89.

⁴² See Clement Greenberg, *Avant-Garde and Kitsch*, Partisan Review 6 (Fall 1937), pp. 34-39.

content was rejected as ideology. This was exactly the kind of painting I wanted to avoid, this kind of puritanical abstraction. Abstraction had gone full circle from a yearning for spiritual content, a concern for “meaning,” to a total disregard for it, the vacuity of formalist materialism.

Although I had reached the conclusion that abstraction, based on a dualistic rejection of nature and the notion of progress leading to formalism, could not effectively convey the sacred, I still wanted it to point to its cultural memory, its vestiges, still vaguely seen in pop culture. In the use of flashes of light, saturated diaphanous color, the infinite spaces of virtual realities, allusions were constantly being made in advertisement to the other-worldly, visionary experiences, a vague transcendence. It is the mock spirituality of consumerism, and the hallucinogenic ecstasy of the rave party. Nevertheless, it was at least a visual language that alluded to the desire to go out of oneself, to transcend the limits of subjectivity, man’s yearning for the sacred in the profane.

These paintings then were an attempt at making more apparent these pseudo-mystical allusions found in some of the visual devices of advertisement and to revalorize them by bringing them into the context of fine art and the history of abstraction. In their use of photo-realistic devices, they also allude to an enduring theme in the history of painting, the question of what constitutes a true depiction of Reality, which in turn is the concern of the sacred image. Both photography and abstraction once held claims of superiority in this regard and now, as signifiers of a history of an idea, they were made to clash in the same painting. In Greenberg’s terms, all of this was a contamination of abstract painting by pop references, but ironically, on the other hand, it was a way of giving meaning to these visual devices, and vacuous formalist abstraction itself, by the short circuit of their conceptual synthesis, thereby perhaps resuscitating what was dead in both of them. It is an attempt at an “aesthetics of redemption” in the midst of the postmodern so called “death of art.” But the redemption was to come another way.

A New Discovery

This brings us to the cross roads and a new chapter begins. After studying for a few years the history and doctrine of the Eastern Orthodox Church, I became convinced that it contained the fullness of the Apostolic Tradition, that it truly was the, “One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church,” as the Creed says, founded by the Lord Jesus Christ. Soon after becoming Orthodox, two interrelated questions arose: How was I to participate in the life of the Church, was I to get married or become a monastic? And, what was I to do as an artist?

Part of the answer came in reading the classic of Orthodox spirituality the *Philokalia*, mentioned earlier, an anthology of writings on prayer and the mystical life. This text opened up my eyes to a wealth of traditional wisdom, founded on the practical experience of spiritual masters and centered on a theology of Beauty. *Philokalia* is a Greek word meaning the “love of the beautiful, the exalted, the excellent, understood as the transcendent source of life and the revelation of Truth.”⁴³ Herein I discovered that holiness, the acquiring of the divine likeness,

43 G.E.H Palmer, Philip Sherrard, Kalistos Ware, *The Philokalia*, Vol. I, Farber & Farber, London & Boston, 1981, p.13.

was the regaining of that Beauty that once clothed Adam in Paradise, and that monasticism was the path I needed to take to get there. A path in pursuit of union with uncreated Beauty. It became clear to me that monasticism was my vocation, in fact, an art. Upon finishing my MFA thesis at Hunter College I entered the monastery.

Monasticism also meant abandoning my involvement in secular art, but this was not much of a disappointment, since by then I had also found what I had been looking for all along, the icon. I had reached the conclusion that it was not necessarily impossible to convey intimations of the sacred in secular art, and to be able to create such a work, that served as a “threshold” pointing towards the sacred, was no small achievement. Yet, as Philip Sherrard says, “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.”⁴⁴ Therefore, the most direct way to engage in the practice of a sacred art form was to work within a tried and tested, established, tradition. In any case, whether in a liturgical or secular context it required inner transformation, purification of the intellect. Therefore, entering the monastery also meant the beginning of new creative activity in icon painting. In the icon I found the fulfillment of everything I was searching for in art—the sacred image.

I had discovered the icon a few years before entering the monastery when I first attended an Orthodox Liturgy. Some hung, others were placed on stands, and even the walls of the church were painted. Icons in the midst of, and surrounding, reverent ritual. Seeing them play their role, not solely as autonomous art objects, but as supports for contemplation, and objects of veneration, made it all come together for me. Hymns were chanted, the oil lamps glowed, the candles burned slowly, the waft of incense smoke filled the air, a palpable solemn mystery, the unfolding of beauty, with the scent of the Sacred. The whole person, all of the senses were to be engaged in worship. Every detail worked to uplift the soul and bring into the heart a foretaste of the festivities and delights of the Heavenly Jerusalem. It is not so strange then, to hear St. Dionysius say, “God is known both through knowledge and through unknowing...and *touching and sense-perception*...”⁴⁵ Let us now take a look at some aspects of this sacred art.

From Above

The icon has always been present from the earliest times in the life of the Church, arising from Tradition and being established by divine intervention. Hence, the first icons of the Theotokos (Mother of God) were painted under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit by St. Luke with the aid of an angel, who supplied him with three boards to do the work. We also learn, from the church historian Eusebius (265-340), that the first icon of the Lord was an image made without hands, a cloth known as the Holy Veil. It bore the Lord’s countenance, which

⁴⁴ Sherrard (2004), *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁴⁵ Italics mine. As quoted by Eric D. Perl, who also says, “‘Of God there is sense-perception’: this stunning but wholly consistent affirmation cannot be overemphasized. It overturns all conventional misrepresentations of Neoplatonism in general, and Dionysius’ thought in particular, as a ‘gnostic’ repudiation of the senses and the sensible world. Since sense perception is an apprehension, a taking into oneself, of reality, however multiple, dim, or echoic it may be, it is an apprehension of theophany, of God as given to consciousness, for that is what reality is.” *Theophany: The Neoplatonic Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite*, SUNY Press, Albany, N.Y., 2007, pp. 92- 93.

was miraculously imprinted unto it, after He pressed it unto His face. These images then became the prototypes for many subsequent icons of the Lord and the Theotokos.

Embodied Revelation

Fundamental to the doctrine of the icon is the Incarnation. There would be no veneration of icons, without first there being the human image of the Son of God, the brightness of the Father's glory and "the express image of His person..."⁴⁶ As the Lord told the Apostle Philip, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father."⁴⁷ The icon is not possible before God becomes man. For before this Mystery of mysteries takes place God cannot be depicted, as we learn from Scripture in the book of Exodus.⁴⁸ However, once the Logos, the Son of God and second Person of the Trinity, takes on a body, then with all confidence we can depict His likeness, without fearing the charge of idolatry. As St. John the Theologian says, "That which was from the beginning, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life"⁴⁹ ...And every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist..."⁵⁰ If before his coming it was an offense to depict the Divinity, now that He has come, to reject his image would be a denial of His Incarnation.

Therefore, the icon is far more than just an autonomous aesthetic object, but it is rather the embodiment of divine Revelation. That is to say, the proclamation of the Incarnation, and the life which springs from it in the Holy Spirit, which is what the Church makes manifest throughout the world, also referred to as Holy Tradition. That is why the icon is venerated as we would the Cross or the book of the Gospel. In short, there is no opposition between the manifestation of Revelation in the form of written words or painted images. Only God is worshiped, but to people or things that direct our way of return to Him, we show respect, or veneration, as worthy of due honor. When we venerate an icon we do not merely venerate gold, wood, or paint, but the person depicted (the prototype).

Symbol

The icon participates in what it represents.⁵¹ As St. Basil says, "The honor of the icon is conveyed to the prototype."⁵² Some might think in hearing these words that the prototype is "somewhere else," beyond the icon. But we should bear in mind that the prototype is present *in* the icon. The icon and the prototype are as it were one in the other, without losing the

46 Heb. 1: 3.

47 John 14: 9.

48 Exod., 20: 4.

49 I John 1: 1.

50 *Ibid.*, 4: 3.

51 Aidan Hart, *The Sacred in Art and Architecture: Timeless principles and contemporary Challenges*, 2005, p. 2. <http://aidanharticons.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/SACRED-IN-ART-AND-ARCHITECTURE.pdf>

52 St. Athanasius says, "He who bows to the icon bows to the King in it..." As quoted in Daniel J. Sahas, *Icon and Logos: Sources in Eighth-Century Iconoclasm*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, Canada, 1988, p. 145.

distinction of their natures.⁵³ Therefore, we can affirm, without contradicting St. Basil that the veneration not only “passes to” but is indeed given to the prototype *in* the icon, in which it is truly present. Here we are not talking about a mere logical inference, but rather about the unfolding of a dynamic participation and an immediate encounter. The icon truly manifests Christ, the Prototype, by virtue of the fact that it bears the likeness and name of His Person, and as we venerate it we encounter His true presence. It is the same with the icons of the saints.

The icon is not merely a *sign* that points to the idea of Christ, but rather, it is a *symbol* which in actuality reveals Him. Symbol (from the Greek *Symbolon*) means to cast or bring together, to unite in one. In the symbolic manifestation of the icon, there unfolds the union, the interpenetration, of all levels of Reality. Herein we encounter simultaneously the Uncreated in the created, and vice versa, the one in the other, in a mutual indwelling. Since, in the incarnate Person of the Logos, there is a union of divinity and humanity (“without confusion or division”),⁵⁴ we, in venerating His material icon, paradoxically kiss and handle divinity. Hence, the icon is a sacramental reality, or rather a mystery, a material means by which we partake and participate in the uncreated energies 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. The divine nature remains the same; the flesh created in time is quickened by a reason-endowed soul. Because of this I salute all remaining matter with reverence, because God has filled it with His grace and power.”⁵⁵

The icon affirms the goodness of creation, its ontological sacredness. In the Wisdom of Solomon it says, “For from the greatness and beauty of created things the Creator is seen by analogy.”⁵⁶ In other words, in their beauty every creature imparts knowledge and is a word to be read in the book of Creation, the cosmic symbol of the divine Craftsman. Creation is in fact an incarnation, in a lower level, before the Incarnation par excellence. As St. Maximos says, “For the Word of God and God wills always and in all things to accomplish the mystery of His embodiment.”⁵⁷ Every creature is a ray of the radiance of the Logos, His “embodied” manifestation, a theophany. The icon depicts a theophanic vision, Creation as translucent, bathed in uncreated light, as Moses saw the bush, burning but not consumed, by the fire of divinity. We gaze at the mystery and yet fail to see it, but as St. Maximos tells us, “The mystery of the incarnate Logos is the key to all arcane symbolism...”⁵⁸ In Jesus Christ we have, the God-Man, the Symbol of symbols, Archetype containing all archetypes. Therefore, the reason or meaning of all things, both visible and invisible, “the purpose for which each thing

53 St. Theodore the Studite says, “...since the image of Christ is said to have Christ’s form in its delineation, it will have one veneration with Christ, and not a different veneration.” St. Theodore the Studite, *On the Holy Icons, Third Refutation of Iconoclasm*, SVS Press, Crestwood, N.Y., 1981, p. 106.

54 This is a reference to the Definition of Chalcedon. See T. Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, Penguin Books, London, 1997, p. 26.

55 St. John of Damascus, *On the Divine Images: Three Apologies Against Those Who Attack the Divine Images*, SVS Press, N.Y., 1980, p. 23.

56 Wisdom of Solomon 13:5

57 St. Maximos the Confessor, *Ambigua* PG 91, 1084BCD. See also Maximos the Confessor, *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ: Selected Writings from St. Maximus the Confessor*, trans. Paul M Blowers and Robert Louis Wilken, SVS Press, Crestwood, N.Y., 2003, p. 60.

58 *The Philokalia*, Vol. Two, op. cit., p. 127.

was created,”⁵⁹ the obscure passages in Scripture and the book of the Cosmos, are found in Him.

Deification

The great “mystery hidden from the ages and unknown even to the angels,”⁶⁰ the Incarnation and its cosmic consequence, that is, deification (*theosis*), union of the created with the Uncreated, is often seen as the afterthought of divine folly.⁶¹ But the Father did not send His only begotten Son solely as a remedy for an unforeseen catastrophe, the Fall of Adam. No, it goes without saying, He makes no mistakes. There is something more profound here. From before the ages, beyond being, He is the Pre-eternal Archetype of Man, ever and always intent on his becoming incarnate in the fullness of time. Emmanuel, God with us, the Christ, is none other than the Heavenly Man. As St. Paul says, “The first man was of the earth, made from dust; the second Man is the Lord from heaven.”⁶² This divine-human, self-revelation of Emmanuel, is the principal and primordial intent of all creation, from the beginning.

Therefore, before Creation ever was, man was intended to become god by grace, creature in union with Creator, a symbol. From before the ages, he was meant to be conformed in likeness to the Image of the Father, namely the Son—the God-Man. As the Psalmist says, “Ye are gods, sons of the Most High...” And in the words of St. Athanasios, “God became man, so that man may become God.”⁶³ In man as microcosm, the entire cosmos participates in deification. To the extent we refuse to participate in divinity, do we correspondingly desecrate creation. That is why, “the whole creation groans” as it “eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God...because...itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God.”⁶⁴

Paradise was only the beginning of the inexhaustible treasures of deification which are now open to us. Yes, man was meant to be a symbol reflecting the great Symbol, the Logos incarnate. He was meant to be a sacred image, an icon of the Creator, resplendent, shining forth and clothed with the light of uncreated Beauty.

Prophetic & Priestly Craftsmanship

The icon through symbolic realism prophetically proclaims the renewing of creation in deification and incorruption, becoming a witness to the accessibility of divine participation here

59 St Peter of Damaskos, *Book II: Twenty –Four Discourses*, in *The Philokalia*, Vol. Three, Faber and Faber, Inc., London and Boston, 1984, p. 275.

60 Col., p. 1: 26. The verse as quoted here is an interpolated version from an Orthodox hymn.

61 St. Maximos the Confessor says, “This was why He made us, in order for us to become partakers of the divine nature and sharers in His eternity; and that we might appear like Him through deification by grace. It is for the sake of [deification] that all things that are have been constituted and are maintained in being, and that things that are not are produced and come into being.” St. Maximos the Confessor, *Letters* 24, PG 91: 609CD. As quoted with brackets by Loudovikos (2010), op. cit., p. 83.

62 I Cor. 15:47.

63 St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, Sec. 54, SVS Press, Crestwood, N.Y., 1953, p. 93.

64 Rom., 8: 19-22.

and now, and when “God shall be all in all”⁶⁵ in the age to come. It gives us a foretaste of the “new heavens and the new earth” of transfigured matter. As the fruit of union between divinity and matter, it shares in uncreated glory, as the Lord’s garments shone with divine light in His Transfiguration. For in fact the whole of creation is the Lord’s luminous garment. The icon uplifts us to the apprehension of this mystery. Therefore, “Miracles such as icons giving off fragrant oils are really a sign of the return to the norm, where matter is transparent once again to the workings of the Spirit.”⁶⁶

The iconographer performs a liturgical activity in his craftsmanship. Liturgy, from the Greek *liturgia*, means the work of the people, and presupposes the cooperation of human and divine energies. Thus, the iconographer in priestly and Eucharistic fashion, in cooperation with the Holy Spirit, takes raw materials, from the mineral, vegetable, and animal kingdom, and transfigures them through craftsmanship, offering them back to God in thanksgiving and glorification. In his mediatory role, as microcosm, the iconographer becomes the vehicle through which matter glorifies God.⁶⁷ As St. Leontius of Cyprus says:

The creation does not venerate God directly by itself, but it is through me that the heavens declare the glory of God, through me the moon worships God, through me the stars glorify Him, through me the waters and showers of rain, the dew and all creation venerate God and give Him glory.⁶⁸

Tradition

The icon, unlike modernist attempts at symbolism, is not a subjective and arbitrary pictorial statement, but the embodiment of centuries of communal artistic effort, refinement and clarification of vision, the continuity of Tradition. In his essay, *Why does Art today lack inspiration?*, the English painter Cecil Collins, reflecting on the loss of focus in art and the importance of Tradition says,

Now Tradition does not mean the Royal academy, the establishment, as is sometimes thought. It is rather that continuum of knowledge which deals with the meaning and purpose of man’s life, and with the possibility of rebirth. It is a knowledge ever new, fresh, immortal, always present, not subject to time, which is the basis of all the great civilizations. It must also be the basis of ours. To understand what modern art is, we must understand that we are in disequilibrium.⁶⁹

It goes without saying that order is the remedy to this problem, it can only be found in the truthful, balanced, rearrangement of life. The Lord once said, “I am the way, the truth and the life...”⁷⁰ Pilate asked Him, “What is truth?”⁷¹ Not realizing that he stood in front of Truth

65 I Cor., 15: 28.

66 Aidan Hart (2005), p. 2.

67 See Aidan Hart, *The Renewal of Sacred Art Timeless Principles and Contemporary Challenges*, 2013, p. 5. A talk given at St. Mary’s University College in Calgary, Canada in May 2013. <http://aidanharticons.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/RENEWAL-OF-SACRED-ART.pdf>

68 St Leontius of Cyprus, PG, xciii, 1604AB; transl. Kallistos Ware. As quoted by Aidan Hart (2013), Ibid.

69 Cecil Collins, op. cit. p. 203.

70 John 14: 6.

71 John 18: 38.

incarnate. Becoming a monk is a mystery, a form of dying to a former life, a life of disequilibrium, in order to resurrect in a life of order, in Christ. Likewise, sacred art involves a form of dying in which is discovered a new life of creative possibilities mysteriously contained in Tradition. Here we are dealing no longer with a vague, so called “spirituality,” based on the constantly shifting and muddled states of psychic volition, but rather on the revelation of the immutably Real, the Truth. As Philip Sherrard says, “The artistic process begins with the artist’s intuition of this world, his immediate experience of it, something which is not possible until he has gone through an inner development..., in other words a kind of dying... and participation in the world of spiritual realities... Thus in this traditional view of art, the artistic operation begins and ends not with the individual but with the supra-individual world of Great Realities.”⁷²

In other words, humility becomes the path of true liberty and realization. Being a supra-individual activity the sacred work of art is not signed by the artist. And in those instances when it is signed, the name is prefaced with the words, “Through the hand of,” in order to emphasize that the work was done in cooperation with the grace of the Holy Spirit. In speaking of “a kind of dying” of individualism we do not mean an obliteration of the true personality, but in fact its affirmation, as a unique contributor in the rich variety of the ecclesial community. The more the icon painter cooperates with the timeless pictorial principles found in the canonical forms, the more does he discover the variety of choices, the freedom he has within it, and paradoxically the more does his creativity organically flourish. After all, if we look at the history of the icon we discover that there are many national schools, and within these, many master iconographers with unique styles. It is as if there are different stylistic dialects, but the same language, which attests to unity in diversity within Tradition.

As each sermon is never the same, even though it contains the same Truth, and we would not expect the priest to just read the sermon written by another (even if it be by a great Father of the Church), so it is with the iconographer guided by the Holy Spirit. He is not to merely mimic the “look” of the older models, but to internalize them, interpreting the subject with enlivened, heartfelt conviction, stemming from a humble encounter with Tradition. Although he will not be willfully asserting his “self-expression,” nevertheless, inevitably, his unique temperament will be seen in the icon. As he integrates within himself the timeless pictorial principles, handed down to him by previous masters who have attained purity of vision, he then begins to see through their eyes, acquires their mindset, and his intellect becomes trained in the vision of the sacred. He begins to see in the Spirit.

Tradition does not mean conservatism, formalism, or an academic mechanical copying of stagnant and ossified ancient forms. Rather, it is a living, ever renewing and overflowing stream, having an immutable origin, but touching time and shaping culture. It has been called the “life of the Holy Spirit in the Church.”⁷³ As the Spirit moves where it wills, so does Tradition.

72 Philip Sherrard, *The Marble Threshing Floor: Studies in Modern Greek Poetry*, London: Valentine, Mitchell, 1965, pp. 19-20, 233.

73 In this regard Lossky says: “...Tradition in its pure notion there belongs nothing formal. It does not impose on human consciousness formal guarantees of the truths of faith, but gives access to the discovery of their inner evidence. The pure notion of Tradition can then be defined by saying that it is the life of the Holy Spirit in the Church, communicating to each member of the Body of Christ the faculty of hearing, of receiving, of knowing the Truth in the Light which belongs to it, and not according to the natural light of human reason.” Lossky, Vladimir, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, SVS Press, Crestwood, N. Y., 1974, p. 152.

Being Inseparable from Truth, it requires no external criteria. No form can limit it or stand above it, no one culture can usurp its place. Its relevance is eternal. Yet there are cultural, artistic forms more lucid than others as symbolic conveyers of Tradition. Hence, whatever is suitable in a given extra-ecclesial civilization can be incorporated into iconographer's work, for, in fact, its suitability attests to the fact that it already conveys Tradition, although not to its full potential. Incorporation into more lucid forms removes the dust of superfluous elements and makes up for what was lacking. When the Spirit wills, changes can and do occur in the mode of manifestation of Tradition.

Purified Vision

The organ of perception that guides this art, as mentioned earlier, is the highest faculty of man, the intellect (in Greek *nous*), the eye of the heart, or man's spirit, which understands divine truth by means of immediate experience, or intuition. In other words, this is a supra-rational faculty, which permeates all of man. Therefore, there is no need to set up an opposition between the liberating, irrational imagination, against suffocating rationalism or the reverse, if you prefer. In sacred art both imagination and reason are guided by the purified intellect, as a charioteer steers two horses. Otherwise these can be quickly tyrannized by dark forces, the passions or demonic activity, which go unnoticed. If a painter's soul is imprinted and captivated by these, then his work will embody and in turn imprint other souls with these damaging energies, no matter how restrained and conceptual, or wildly expressive and emotional it might appear. In short, outward difference in style, aesthetic surfaces, is only part of things.

The question is: To what source are the forms connected? What do they embody or manifest? Or, to put it another way, are the forms based on the vision of the physical eye, the soul, or the intellect? Each kind of vision will produce different kinds of pictorial forms. The success or failure of each work of art can then be assessed on the kind of vision it seeks to re-present. This is to judge the work on its own terms. But it goes without saying that after we determine whether or not it succeeds on its own terms, it should be seen in light of how it serves the general good of man and his intended end—deification. And, in this regard proximity, or distance from vision according to the Spirit becomes the standard and determining factor.

But as we have said, since the intellect permeates all of man, even those forms that are predominantly based on the senses, psychic impressions or ratiocination, will still have glimmers of the sacred. Yes, in spite of the fact that they are non-liturgical. In fact, there have been and will be times, although they be few, when it will be clear that a work of art is the fruit of an illumination, an inkling, even revelation, that could have only been given by the Spirit.⁷⁴ Although we might be blind, the sacred cannot be escaped. Man, being ontologically grounded in divinity, will always reflect this fact, whether he wants to or not. Nevertheless, exceptions do not make the rule. There are revealed paths to be taken.⁷⁵ The task is to remove the profane

74 P. Sherrard notes, "To affirm this is not to propose, in a way that is fashionable, that the artist enjoys some special status that exempts him from conditions that apply to 'ordinary' human beings, and so from the need to practice a spiritual discipline... to deny it...would deny the freedom of the Spirit." Sherrard (2004), *op. cit.* p. 40.

75 "...the Spirit-or God-is, unlike unregenerate man, a self-determining agent, and can Himself determine the conditions in which and according to which He acts. But man can act as the Spirit acts only in condition

masks of “self-expression” we have created, for what we take to be the authenticity of “self” might just be the dust that blinds the intellect.

The heart of the artist, his intellect, is to be purified if he is ever to make his art truly numinous, a sacred work of art. Hence, only in participating and knowing *from within* the ever renewing life of Tradition, does the icon painter transcend the hindrances of subjectivism. Thereby his work can be instilled with a vitality that will not only show glimmers, but also uncover the sacred in its intensely bright radiance. If he does not know in love, in union,⁷⁶ the Archetype, then he will not be able to imitate in outward form the “heavenly pattern”⁷⁷ that he sees within the chamber of the heart.⁷⁸ As the Lord says, “Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.” In Tradition we find the revealed means, based on the direct experience of the saints, prophets, apostles, martyrs, ascetics, and sages, of actualizing our participation in divinity. The sacred art of the icon is nourished by this abundance of experience and from it derives its timeless pictorial principles, in particular the vision of the uncreated light, as described by the *hesychast* Fathers, of which St. Gregory Palamas is the foremost example.⁷⁹

Pictorial Principles

As we have seen, the icon is pictorial theology. It is a reified vision of the sacred, a re-presented theophanic vision, revealing the mystery of deification in its symbolic form. The style of the icon can be spoken of as “abstract” in its stylized, schematic depiction of nature, architecture and objects. In its emphasis of line and tendency towards geometry, we can see that the concern is not with sensible apprehensions, but with intellections, that is, seeing with the eye of the heart, the intellect,⁸⁰ the inner meaning, the ideal content, and inner Beauty in all things. As St. Maximos the confessor reminds us:

that he is reborn in the Spirit; and to be reborn in the Spirit requires in its turn the fulfilment of certain other conditions.” Sherrard (2004), *Ibid.*, p. 132.

76 “It is no longer I who live, but Christ that lives in me.” Gal., 2:20.

77 Exod., 25: 40.

78 The icon painter begins his training by copying patterns, but the highest goal he strives towards in the mastery of his art, is to be able to work with intellectual sight without depending on models. A perfect example is found in Epiphanius the Wise’s description of Theophanes the Greek in the act of painting. He tells us that Theophanes had no use of “existing models” and painted instead from “his inner spirit” which “encompassed distant and intellectual realities while his spiritual eyes contemplated spiritual beauty.” As quoted in, Cornelia A. Tsakiridou, *Icons in Time, Persons in Eternity: Orthodox Theology and the Aesthetics of the Christian Image*, Ashgate, Surrey, England, 2013, p. 261.

79 Cornelia A. Tsakiridou description of the theophanic vision in Palamas’ writings is helpful, as it contextualizes the pictorial principles of the icon within *hesychasm*. She says: “According to Palamas, theophany de-materializes objects and makes them transparent. When in this condition things do not cast shadows. The permeating light creates an open and dynamic visual field. Objects are seen through each other and on an equal scale—perhaps without the usual division of foreground and background that order our perception of things. Vision becomes panoramic, and perspectives multiply... Things have an inner luminance or brilliance that makes them appear at once physical and immaterial, opaque and yet diaphanous, solid and still ethereal...” Not all of these features will appear successfully in a given icon, but the ones which are persistent in the pictorial principles of iconography are: luminescence, absence of shadows, de-materialization, transparency, multiple perspectives. C. A. Tsakiridou (2013), *Ibid.*, pp. 257-258.

80 As Meister Eckhart puts it, “Subtract the mind, and the eye is open to no purpose.” He also adds, “It is with the mind, indeed, that one sees.” Here the “mind” is the intellect. Meister Eckhart, Evans ed., I, 288. Cf. BU 1.5.3.

Do not stop short of the outward appearance which visible things present to the senses, but seek with your intellect to contemplate their inner essences (*logoi*), seeing them as images of spiritual realities...⁸¹

The word “abstract” tends to have a connotation of mechanical lifelessness, but the word in this context should be taken to mean “an act of drawing from,” or retrieving something that is covered under in order to reveal it. In this sense what the icon uncovers is the *logoi* as mentioned in the beginning, the ontological grounding of all things in divinity. The “abstract” and symbolic forms of the icon are *anagogic*, that is, they are meant to *uplift* and direct us to the same intellectual contemplation, or noetic vision, from which they arise.

Of the *anagogic* stylization in icons Prince Eugene Trubetskoï explains, “having a religious theme...does not suffice to make...an icon an object suitable for liturgical use. *It’s mode of expression must be spiritual*, that is, such as to make it anagogic, pointing to a reality beyond the physical...”⁸² What might appear to be expressive *distortions* actually have this goal in mind. For example, elongated bodies that appear weightless, refinement, reduction in size or exaggeration of anatomical features, point to the ascetical life and the transfiguration of the body in the saints. *Flatness* also helps to “de-materialize” objects or strip the image from a sense of coarse corporality, “by reducing space to a minimum, and by suppressing perspective and physical light.”⁸³ The perspective of an icon does not consist of one central vanishing point, in the distance. Rather, what we find is *multiple perspectives*, many vanishing points, some of which are found along the picture plane, on the foreground. The event is not seen from one static point, but from many different angles, simultaneously. The image comes towards us, rather than receding to the background, it enters our space and we see things as if through the eyes of God, beyond the limitations of time and space, all at once. Likewise, events in the icon are not subject to the limits of historical chronology (*chronos*), but rather stand outside of time, in the theological “moment” (*kairos*). Multiple events appear together anachronistically, persons that did not participate in the same historical event, suddenly stand side by side. Mountains bow down and buildings turn towards the saint or sacred event, trees appear to dance, move to and fro, as if by the gust of the Spirit.

Christ proclaimed, “I am the Light of the world.”⁸⁴ This also serves as a fundamental principle of the icon’s traditional craftsmanship. Hence, things are depicted as being surrounded and emitting uncreated light, luminous, objects do not cast shadows. Light in an icon does not illumine objects just from one direction, but from multiple directions, and even optically from within the image. The uncreated light is mainly symbolized by the gold⁸⁵ used on the background, on the halos, and radiating as thin rays on objects, but also by the inherent translucency of the traditional painting medium, egg tempera. This medium involves the mixing of dry mineral and organic pigments, with egg yolk as a binder to make the paint. The painting is done on a board primed with white gesso. The image is built up in stages, consisting of thin layers of color from dark to light, calling to mind the *fiat lux* of Creation, coming

81 As quoted by Aidan Hart, *Constantine Brancusi: His Spiritual Roots*, op. cit., pp. 4-5.

82 As quoted by Joseph Masheck, *Iconicity*, Artforum, January, 1979, pp. 34-35.

83 *Ibid.*

84 John 8:12

85 If gold is not used then colors such as, white, gold ochre, blue and red can take its place.

into being *ex-nihilo*, and the process of sanctification from the passions to deification. Passing through the layers, light is reflected from the gesso, bouncing back to the eyes, giving the image a stained-glass-like optical richness. Through this translucent layering of color, subjects are purged of gross corporeality. They become vessels of light, unrestrained by the limitations of matter, reminding us of how the Lord revealed Himself after the Resurrection.

The icon transcends appearances through a kind of “abstraction,” but one that does not completely abandon the objective world in a dualistic fashion. The icon’s pictorial principles are not to be seen as aesthetic escapism, but rather as a return to Reality. The style of the icon does not seek to destroy the outward form of nature or disdain matter, but in fact reveals it as *transfigured* by divinity, restored to its *logos*. As in the Lord’s Transfiguration the disciples’ eyes were opened to the radiance of divinity that was always present, so likewise, the icon opens our eyes. As we have said, it affirms the goodness of creation, its sacred, true nature, which goes unseen due to our spiritual blindness. As it says in Genesis, “Then God saw everything He made, and indeed, it was very good.”⁸⁶ Through its pictorial theology the icon reminds us that this goodness is our ontological grounding in divinity⁸⁷, that we can live up to our true nature in being conformed to our Archetype, thereby becoming living icons, gods by grace.



Figure 6: *St. Herman of Alaska* (2013), 21 x 33 in, egg tempera on wood.

⁸⁶ Gen. 1:31.

⁸⁷ As St. Paul says, “For of Him and through Him, and to Him, are all things.” Rom. 11: 36.

Conclusion

As you can see, what some of the pioneers of abstraction yearned for: a truly theurgic and symbolic art that goes beyond appearances, that reveals the “spark which illuminates all things from inside,” that unites the heavenly and earthly, making the eternal present in the immanent, all of this, I found in the icon. Even their vision of the painter, serving a prophetic and priestly role, is fulfilled here. Modernist abstraction yearned for the Sacred but found itself lost in the quagmire of subjectivism and relativism, ending in vacuous formalism. The icon, on the other hand, fulfills the highest mediatory function of art, whereby we are shown the path to the overcoming of the limitations of “self” in the rediscovery of ourselves in divinity, which is true freedom in the Sacred.

Let me clarify that in this critique of modernism not all is negative. Nor has our point been to simplistically or superficially dismiss all that has come after the Renaissance. Rather, we have focused on the general change of direction that has unquestionably occurred *away* from the traditional philosophy of art which places the Sacred at its center. Yet, even within this turn towards the profane in art some works still point to it, serving as “thresholds” to its mystery more palpably than others. In fact, in critiquing abstraction, I betray an appreciation for it and an acknowledgment of some of its potential. By now it should be clear that I am indebted to it, since it has led me to the icon. The irony is that the modernist avant-garde, in its appreciation for folk and “primitive” art, its challenge to naturalism, prepared the ground for the revival of the icon in the 20th century. It might have tried to cast aside aspects of, if not wholly rejected Tradition, nevertheless, in its failure to deliver its utopic promises, it has also led to a rediscovery of the very thing that it tried to do without. In fact, it can be said that it has contributed to the removal of false notions about Tradition, distortions which had obscured it in Western civilization. Hence, perhaps it did not fight against it per se, so much as against its misrepresentation, whether in the realm of science, art, or religion. For many, the crisis that this fight has left us with has helped them to remember (*anamnesis*),⁸⁸ and reawaken to the fact that there is a Primordial Tradition⁸⁹ to reconsider and embrace once again, for man is inextricably linked to it. The question is whether we are actualizing our participation in it, or not.

88 The noted liturgical scholar Gregory Dix gives us following definition: “...in the Scriptures of both the Old and New Testament *anamnesis* and the cognate verb have a sense of ‘recalling’ or re-presenting’ before God an event in the past so that it becomes *here and now operative by its effects*.” Dom Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, New Edition, Continuum International Publishing Group, London, 2007, p. 161.

89 As St. Nektarios, Bishop of Pentapolis, says, “All the nations preserved in their memory God’s promise concerning the arrival of the Saviour and Redeemer, and they hid this as a treasure and as an invaluable heirloom within the depths of their hearts. No nation ever forgot the promise of salvation. No matter how corrupt it became, and no matter how much it neglected the true God...Jews, Greeks, Romans, Egyptians, Chinese, Persians, Indians, Arabs, and even the inhabitants of the New World, all awaited the arrival of a Redeemer God coming in human form Who would teach the whole truth in order to obliterate evil, bring peace, make brothers of nations, and bring the Kingdom of Heaven on earth.” St. Nektarios, *Christology, Vol. II*, Trans. and Pub. By Saint Nektarios Greek Orthodox Monastery, Roscoe, N.Y., 2006, p. 27. Along the same lines St. Justin Martyr, says, “Those who lived in accordance with the Logos are Christians, even though they were godless, such as, among the Greeks, Socrates and Heraclitus and others like them... So also those who lived before Christ and did not live by the Logos were ungracious and enemies of Christ, and murderers of those who lived by the Logos. But those who lived by the Logos, and those who so live now, are Christians, fearless and unperturbed.” St. Justin Martyr, “First Apology,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol.1, p. 272.

But where does that leave us? First, let me clarify that what I am saying here is not that the only answer for the contemporary artist, in his dilemma within a culture of disequilibrium and malaise, is to start to paint icons. That was my calling, but not everyone has the same vocation. Nevertheless, I am convinced that if there is to be a change in direction it has to begin with the rediscovery of the Sacred and partaking of Tradition. The icon is part of the integrated traditional sphere of Eastern Orthodoxy, and as such has a living function within that context. Duplicating ancient religious artistic forms, however, within a cultural context that is no longer integrated, having lost a sacred worldview that permeates all aspects of life, will not suffice. Yet, the icon is a healthy challenge to the commonly accepted notion of “art.” It leads us to a reconsideration of the universally acknowledged or traditional philosophy of art, a few features of which we have touched on. The issue is a matter of reassessing presuppositions, to refuse to take things for granted, and to come to an understanding of what are the metaphysical principles we have given assent to, or refused, without even realizing it: presuppositions that have taken art to a dead end.

The icon is still a living reality because it is a manifestation of the immutable Holy Tradition. Although we see the abandonment of it as the predominant tendency in our so called “post-modern civilization,” nevertheless it is still to be found nourishing communities all around the globe. There is no question that it can also nourish the art of a non-liturgical context and bring to it a vitality, truthfulness, goodness, efficacious power; a beauty that can only be the scent of the Sacred. But the challenge is one that unfolds internally, in a process of uncompromising, honest self-assessment. It involves taking on a path of spiritual discipline, which is to say, taking a passage from false notions of “self” to the realization of true personhood: a passage from pseudo-spirituality to initiation into life in the Spirit. In short, it is a matter of inner transformation, a change of vision based on the primordial understanding that man has a heavenly Archetype, into Whom he can be conformed, and that things earthly are theophanic symbols of the heavenly. In regaining knowledge of this truth, rebirth can begin and we can be set free.

All of creation is sacred, but in our noetic blindness, having a profane perspective, we desecrate the world and ourselves. As St Paul says, “To the pure all things are pure.”⁹⁰ To the extent that we acknowledge, and become aware that, “in Him we live and move and have our being,”⁹¹ will we become perfected in our vision of the Sacred. But first, we must start the journey back towards participation in uncreated Beauty. The irony is that Beauty is closer to us than we are to ourselves. The icon is an aid in this journey and gives us a foretaste of our intended destiny. It depicts a world, not severed or estranged, but in union, in harmony, with the Sacred. It asserts wholeness, rather than fragmentation. It affirms the fullness of an objective Reality, transcending the lower levels of subjectivism, yet affirming our real personhood grounded in divinity. It is a mirror reflecting, manifesting the effulgence of uncreated light. Some call it a window, but perhaps it is better to call it a door of perception, through which we encounter those who have acquired purity of vision and perfection, the saints, those who have, through cooperation with grace, become images of the Sacred.

May we then in venerating them, and contemplating their beauty, be conformed to our divine Archetype in uncreated Beauty.

⁹⁰ Titus. 1: 15.

⁹¹ Acts. 17:28.

O Lord, sanctify them that love the beauty of Thy house...⁹²

Glory to the Holy, Consubstantial, Life Creating, and Indivisible Trinity, Amen.

About the Author

Fr. Silouan Justiniano is an Eastern Orthodox priest-monk and iconographer, from the Monastery of the Holy Cross in E. Setauket N.Y. He is currently a contributor to the *Orthodox Arts Journal* and was recently published in *Sacred Web: A Journal of Tradition and Modernity*.

⁹² Part of *The Prayer Proclaimed Behind the Ambo*, at the end of the Holy Liturgy in the Orthodox Church.