

Icons: The Sacred Art of the Orthodox Church

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“He [Christ] is the image of the unseen God ... the firstborn of all creation, for by him all things in heaven and earth were created ...” (Colossians 1: 15)

“Those who believe in me do not believe in me only, but in the one who sent me. And those who see me see the one who sent me.” (John 12, 44-45)

“Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. So how can you say, ‘Let us see the Father’? Don’t you believe that I’m in the Father and the Father is in me?” (John 14, 9-10)

The word “icon” refers to the traditional form of sacred art developed within the Orthodox Church to serve three main purposes:

1. Illustrate sacred scripture, the lives of the saints and liturgical texts.
2. Support personal prayer and contemplation.
3. Create a sacred environment for the liturgical celebrations of the church.

The English word “icon” is derived from the Greek word for “image.” The term “iconography,” also derived from the Greek, means “the making of images.” Not every image an artist may produce, however, qualifies as an icon. In the Orthodox Church, an icon must embody spiritual characteristics that help open our hearts and minds to the “Kingdom of God,” a reality that is in this world but not of it.

To create icons that open us to what is not of this world, Orthodox artists have traditionally turned to stylization of human features in place of naturalistic (e.g., “photographic”) rendering of the human anatomy. Figures are also made to appear two-dimensional rather than three-dimensional as a way of breaking with conventional “reality.” Thanks to the use of two-dimensionality in icons, the holy figures represented often seem to float weightless, as if earth’s gravity has no hold on them. In addition, the use of gold for haloes and backgrounds reminds us to see the world not in its current brokenness, but as transfigured by God’s grace and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The Orthodox Church was forced to think long and hard about its established use of images during what is known as the Iconoclast Controversy (726-843 C.E.). In response to the anti-icon party, the Seventh Ecumenical Council (787 C.E.) defined that the traditional use of icons was to be maintained “... so that the incarnation of the Word of God is shown to be real and not a mere appearance ...” The Orthodox Church affirmed that since God had truly become “taken flesh” in Jesus Christ, then God could be represented through the image of Christ. The Council also directed that the same forms of reverence (e.g., the offering of incense and lighting

of candles) shown to the book of the gospels should also be shown to “the venerable and holy images, in paintings, mosaics and other suitable materials in the holy churches of God.”

Despite one last outbreak of iconoclasm (815-843 C.E.), icons were permanently reinstated under Empress Theodora in 843. The Orthodox Church throughout the world annually celebrates this event as the “Sunday of Orthodoxy” on the first Sunday of the Great Fast.