



THE ICONS OF THEOSIS CHAPEL: PART I

By Nancy Rebal

An icon is considered a visual theology, to be used as a window to open the worshiper to the holy and the eternal.

When you look at an icon, the icon looks back. Icons are doors, gates, windows, but not in the Renaissance sense of a painting as a window into another world. The saint depicted is on, or in front of, the picture plane. Icons are thus places where the Divine enters the space of the beholder. (Icons from Sinai 121)

As a sacred pictorial language, icons are said to be ‘written’ rather than painted. The forms are the result of collective interpretations of the Church’s teaching by anonymous artists throughout its two thousand year history. Each artist writes an icon according to the canon, but is allowed to be an intuitive participant in the evolution of the form:

Dr. Annemarie Weyl Carr, Professor of Art History Emerita, Southern Methodist University, is an authority of Byzantine icons. She made the following observation in a dialogue regarding the writing of these new icons for The Church of Conscious Harmony (CCH):

It is just awesome to think of your taking on the Sinai Christ. This is what icon painters used to do [ancient Byzantine ones, that is, not today’s who are mostly concerned with form] ... The content is so huge. Some day I’d love to know what it was like to take on that content.

Sinai Christ

Every element of the icon has meaning and precedent, nothing is simple decoration. The earliest image of a particular form is called the prototype and is copied reverently. The earliest icons were painted in encaustic, (hot wax). A tradition has developed of icons being painted on wooden panels using egg tempera paint. However, in the 15th century, oil paint became a commonly used medium. The icon board is a panel of solid wood, usually poplar and sometimes covered with linen. Many coats of a gesso ground are sanded smooth before the paint is applied.

Every icon has a surrounding margin, usually a raised border to isolate it from the temporal world. The 23K gold leaf ground signifies the location of the images outside temporal space and time. The essence of the gold is enhanced with candlelit contemplation:

In the nocturnal light of church vigils, the gold of icons does not so much flatten as enliven.... gold-ground icons make the holy powerfully manifest. Their dazzling radiance closes off the panel and returns the light and image of the saint to the viewer with renewed intensity. (Icons of Sinai 32)

The icon's function is to aid contemplation. Byzantine icons...are invitations to pilgrimage, asking for an 'existential reading' on our part and demanding purity of heart and spirit. Their proper function is initially didactic and eventually anagogical (spiritual, mystical). They are meant to probe man's soul, to incite him to transcend the maelstroms of the surrounding reality, and to ascend into the realm of higher truths. (Byzantium 336)

To paint the Christ icon is to ponder the heart of the Christian story.

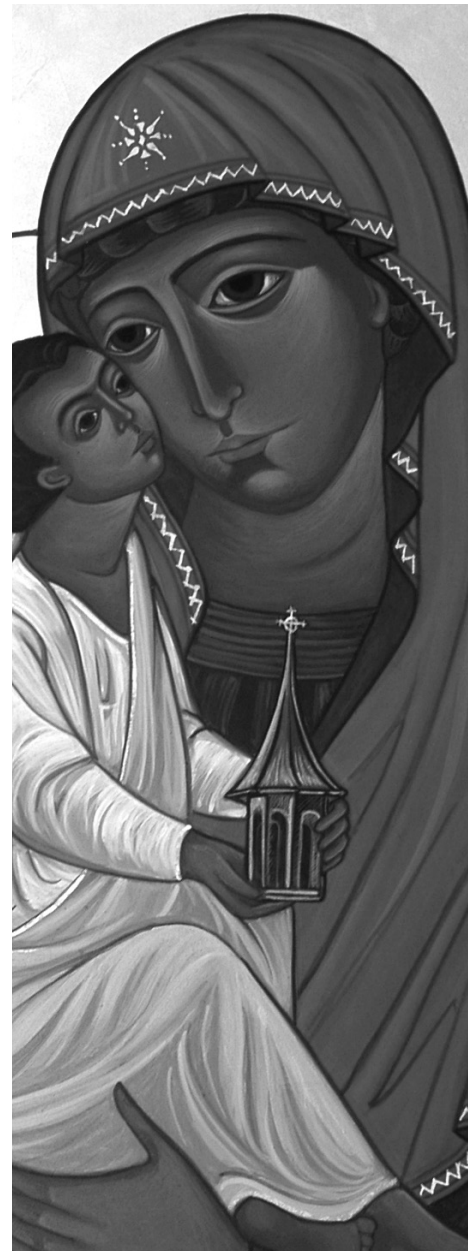
The icon of Christ, which is the crown of all icons, renders palpable the mystery of the Incarnation of the Logos, not simply as a reminder, but as an organic part, an extension, and a perpetuation of it. (Byzantium 336)

Christ's Incarnation closed the gap between Creator and creature, and man's body became the 'temple of the Holy Spirit,' as the holy Apostle Paul wrote (1 Corinthians 6:19). And yet, there remains a certain tension between body and soul ... 'What is this mystery in me? What is the meaning of this blending of body and soul?' (Byzantium 339)

The Sinai Christ

The CCH Blessing Christ icon is a rendition of a 6th century original still kept at Saint Catherine Monastery at Mount Sinai. Because of the remote location, the icon escaped destruction during the Iconoclasm and the extreme dryness of the area has allowed this early image to be extremely well preserved. It was presented to the monastery as Emperor Justinian's personal votive offering. Though often referred to as a Christ Pantocrator, Ruler of all, this is an anachronism first used in the 9th century. The earlier inscription found above this Christ's shoulder reflects His benevolent demeanor: Christ Philanthropos (Lover of Mankind) (*Icons of Sinai 52*).

The Sinai Christ is well known for its enigmatic expression. The face is clearly asymmetrical and seems to change expression. One side of His face is serene, contrasting with the unexpected raised eyebrow of the other. Much has been written about this, many agreeing that it expresses His dual nature. He is both human and divine at the same time.



Virgin of Snowmass



Virgin of Vladimir

In answer to this artist's question about the titling of this icon, Dr. Carr writes:

The beautiful 'Philanthropos' is a more plausible epithet (though of course one must bear in mind that 'Philanthropos' is the epithet applied to the rulers who succeeded Alexander the Great, so it has a dimension of rulership, too) ... The figure was untrammelled, open to each viewer's vision. It is one of the most amazing shape-shifters in the world--if you put it next to the colossal head of Constantine on the Capitoline Hill in Rome, it looks like a fitting parallel; if you put it next to a Fayyum portrait of a youth, it looks like a fitting parallel; if you put it next to a late antique philosopher portrait, it looks like a fitting parallel; if you put it next to a Roman funerary portrait, it looks like a fitting parallel; if you put it next to Zeus, it looks like a fitting parallel. Ruler, Father God, chosen Son, philosopher, beloved dead--they are all there. And there are the tear-ducts--the flesh around them is the most piercingly tender lavender-pink--one of those cases where a color in itself makes words just pale.

The asymmetry of the pupils of the eyes can be disconcerting. As this artist studied the Sinai Christ, the question of the meaning of this kept arising. The skill of the iconographic was obvious, so how were the pupils so visibly askew? A personal answer suddenly seemed true: Christ as the manifestation of an eternal truth: As above, so below. His dual nature allows a dual focus, the painting bearing the visual reflection on this mystery. Other writers have noted this as an attribute of His dual nature; its personal revelation during contemplation was a memorable moment in this artist's contemplative life.

Christ's right hand is upraised in a blessing gesture. The two raised fingers signify His dual nature: fully God while fully Man. The three lower fingers together signify the Trinity. In His other hand is the Book of the Word. The CCH Christ holds the CCH sanctuary Bible in His arm.

The Virgin of Snowmass in the Hills


This Virgin and Child is of the prototype of the Virgin of Vladimir, an icon of 12th century Constantinople, now found in the Tretjakow Gallery in Moscow. She is called the Virgin Eleousa, (mercy or loving kindness), the Virgin of Tenderness. Holding her Son closely, her sorrowful gaze into the infinite registers a foreshadowing, and acceptance, of her Child's calling, seeing beyond to spiritual transcendence. The poignancy of the figures has made this an often-copied image, one being the Virgin of Snowmass of St. Benedict's Monastery, Snowmass, Colorado, of which this Virgin of Snowmass in the Hills is the direct descendant.

The stars on her cloak symbolize her virginity before, during and after the birth of Christ, (only two of three are visible in this rendition). The Christ is a child, but bearing infinite wisdom. Intimately held in His mother's arms, He IS the Incarnation of the Word. This rendition of the Christ Child is derived from a 15th century icon by Sano di Pietro.

In discussions about the creation of these two new icons, their dedication to CCH and connection to the Snowmass Monastery is acknowledged. To signify the relationship of CCH to St. Benedict's Monastery, the Christ Child in this new icon holds the steeple of the Snowmass Chapel. The representation of the CCH altar Bible in the Blessing Christ's arms marks its grounding in Austin.

The decision was made to refrain from any inscription on the images, to keep the relationship on a preverbal level. This varies from a common tradition that an icon is completed by inscription. In taking this permission, the artist again quotes Dr. Carr regarding the Sinai Christ:

But in this case, not even the sigla IC XC (Jesus Christ) was placed on the image, much less any epithet, and the figure was untrammelled, open to each viewer's vision.

May these icons be windows for the new visions of new viewers. 

Nancy Rebal is the artist of the icons of Theosis Chapel.



Sano di Pietro Virgin

References

Byzantium, Faith and Power (1261-1557), Helen C. Evans, editor, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 2004.

Holy Image Hallowed Ground, Icons from Sinai, Robert Nelson and Kristen Collins, editors, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles 2006.