

Christian Art and Iconography

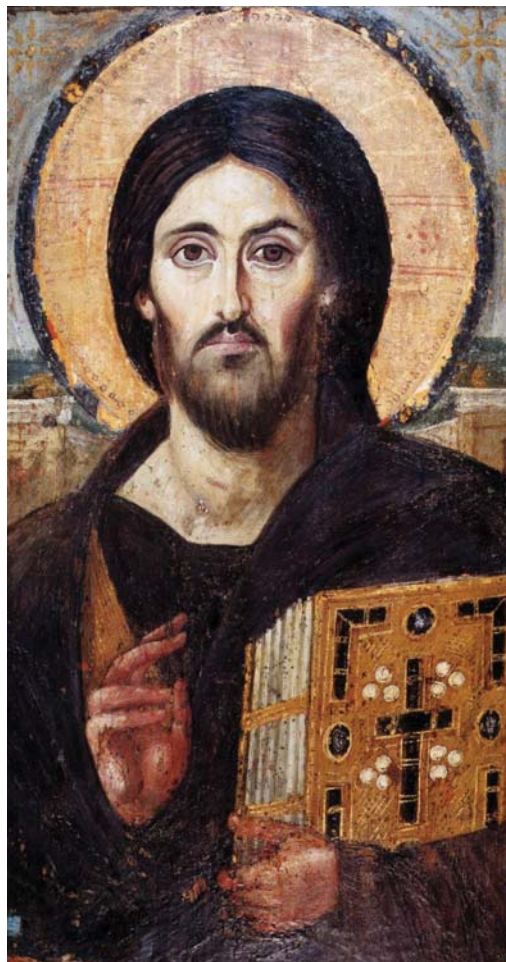
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Iconography, a unique form of ancient Christian art, derived from the ancient eastern Roman Empire and byzantine cultural milieu. Iconography is one of the most ancient, established and unique forms of Christian art, whose legacy can be claimed by the entire Christian world. Originating from the Eastern Roman Empire this system of art developed in different parts of the Western and oriental Christian world, with modifications, adaptations and inculturations.

The word icon comes from the Greek word *eikon* or *ikona*, which generally means 'simple image or picture'. Iconography here exclusively refers to the art of painting an icon on wooden panel or walls; and it is also a branch of science dealing with the study of Icons. Some of the scholars prefer the verb 'writing', exclusively instead of 'painting' to denote the act of painting an icon; citing the reason; an icon is something to be read by those who encounter it and not just an object to be 'seen'.

Iconoclasm and Iconophile

The popular use of icons in the churches brought about series of theological discussions which eventually lead to condemnation and destruction of icons which is called Iconoclasm



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and though late, subsequent arguments in favour of icons also emerged. Iconophiles were of the opinion that the same God who gave the second commandment in the Old Testament is God offered to Israel divine revelations (Theophanies) and ordained or asked them venerate images that pointed symbolically toward salvation by the incarnate Word: such as the bronze serpent in Numbers 21, the Ark of the Covenant,

and the Cherubim. Theologians like John of Damascus and Theodore of Studites; during the eighth and ninth century paved the way for a comprehensive theology of icons. Icons were also used to depict the dogmatic position and teachings of the church. For instance the icon of Christos Pantocrator, depicts Christ in his divine and human personalities. Thus it clearly portrayed the teaching that Christ is both fully human and fully divine.

Icon painting is an artistic system with its own philosophy, technique and ideals. Down the centuries and through different schools, the artistic system has developed and made in practice a variety of stylistic solutions and patterns. St Photius defined icon painting as an art of divine inspiration, that the hand of the icon painter is guided from above, and that the wondrous works achieved in all periods are the fruit of the Holy spirit. Therefore Icon writing is not only an artistic endeavour but also a theological contemplation twined with creativity and spirituality.

The use of lines and its peculiar character differentiate an icon from other similar traditions. The use of choice of colour always have theological and dogmatic significance. Lines projects the forms toward the viewer, lifting them off the surface of the icon. Line plays a decisive role in unifying various elements in a composition rhythmically in a manner in which exertion of energy can be possible from the form. In iconography forms are not static representation of a reality but it is a movement, a rhythm. Kordis writes, 'All form is movement, everything is energy. They are not a passive and abstract object that stands opposite the spectator in its own time and space. It is something active that moves toward the viewer and demands a response in order to meet the icon and what is depicted therein. The Byzantine art create specific movements that enable what is depicted to come in communion with the surroundings and the viewer thus participates in a visual engagement'.

People may find icons to be not well painted in proportion. Proportionality and perspective in iconography differs from schools to schools. some of the schools understand proportionality as a new system which depicts 'the glorified bodies' more than the actual bodies which are visible to our naked eye. Proportionality here becomes a sign of transformation and transcendence. The use of Transverse principle is a unique feature of iconography. A figure is painted not using one dimensional technique rather a transverse lines in relation to the surface of the icon, which reveals the dialectical relationship of a figure with the surface and projects it toward the viewer. Fluidity is an another unique feature of iconography. In an icon everything within a form flows and interpenetrates every other element. Nothing is static or discordant. Everything communicates and exists in a wondrous unity.

A movement lead by orthodox thinkers like Evgeny Trubetskoy, Pavel Florensky and Leonid Ouspensky in 20th century in Russia, tried to establish new interpretation of icons insisting upon the spiritual, otherworldly and abstract aspects. Thereby the use of icons in the orthodox tradition came into be established as a unique and characteristic feature of orthodoxy. they have developed special cannons and strict discipline in treating icons. apart from the rigidity of faith icons are used all over the world by those who appreciate the artistic beauty of this unique art form.

Icons are part of the cultural and artistic tradition of the entire Christianity and for those of the secular world. Anita Strezova is of the opinion that, 'Icons attempted to represent the spiritual world through the material, the invisible through the visible, thus taking the character of a Sacrament.' Consequently icons creates not only an artistic style which is based on realism but also on abstraction. Thus, it continues to amuse the art world and demands deep attention and academic interest.