

❖ **SACRED DOORWAYS**
A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO ICONS

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LINETTE MARTIN



Paraclete Press
BREWSTER, MASSACHUSETTS

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Martin, Linette.

Sacred doorways : a beginner's guide to icons / Linette Martin.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 1-55725-307-2

1. Icons—History. 2. Icon painting—Themes, motives. 3.

Christianity and art—Orthodox Eastern Church. 4. Christian art and symbolism. I. Title.

N8187 .M37 2002

704.9'482—dc21

2002011555

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

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ISBN 1-55725-307-2

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Published by Paraclete Press
Brewster, Massachusetts
www.paracletepress.com

Printed in the United States of America.

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PREFACE

Some eight years ago, one of my students, Linette Martin, came up to me after class and asked whether there was a good beginners' guide in print to the making and meaning of icons. I mentioned one or two titles, but none apparently quite addressed what she had in mind. Imagine my astonishment when, some eighteen months later, she told me she was writing an icon book herself and showed me the preliminary draft.

Linette was always a surprising, original, and very gifted person. She had been a dancer, a journalist, a biographer; and during the years I knew her, she was busy creating a medieval garden and keeping open house for the dozens of overseas students who came her way in the course of her husband's pastoral work. She was also a committed student of the History of Art. She was certainly one of the best students I have ever taught: enthusiastic and well read with perceptive questions and observations. Her class presentations often had a down-to-earth, practical quality. She produced samples of minerals and dye-stuffs, showed textiles she had spun and dyed herself, and once even amazed us by knitting an icon of the Virgin and Child. How, from what, and why things were made fascinated her, and to read about it was never enough—she had to have a go herself.

Her premature death, in her sixty-second year, was a great blow to her family and friends, including myself. After the funeral, I told her widower that I would be happy to do what I could to prepare the manuscript for publication. Work still needed to be done by way of correction, focusing of ideas, and augmentation (in places, the historical section was a bit thin, and the theological and

iconographic elements needed filling out). My main contributions are in chapters 2, 7, 8, and 9; and I have also added chapter 12 “The Theology of Icons.” I hope there are not too many outstanding errors of fact or interpretation and would be grateful if readers could alert us to these, as we hope to incorporate further corrections in any second printing.

I trust that my editorial efforts have in no way altered the basic character of the author’s work. Her particular “voice”—with her brilliant down-to-earth metaphors and illustrations, her humor, and her keenness to communicate clearly and vividly—had to be preserved. Also, there is the spiritual dimension: Linette not only had studied icons and made stalwart efforts to visit collections, exhibitions, and monuments, she lived with icons and prayed with icons. No one meeting her could be unaware that she was a woman of prayer, and I think that comes across in her writing, too.

Finally, a word about what this book aims to be and what it is not. It is first and foremost a practical book, by a student for students, not a technical work for scholars, professional art historians, and theologians. We hope it will appeal to people new to the subject, those who have been intrigued by seeing icons in collections or churches, who have perhaps encountered Byzantine frescoes and mosaics on their travels and would like to know more. Basically, this is a book about how works of art were made, about materials (Linette’s special enthusiasm), and a guide to the most important subjects found in Orthodox iconography, and what they mean. This last necessarily involves understanding something about the beliefs of Orthodox Christians, which the icons celebrate and express, and we hope there is a sufficient theological dimension provided. The chapter on prayer is very much a personal statement deriving from Linette’s own living experience; she was not Orthodox herself, but had a warm

appreciation of Orthodoxy, and what we have here is consonant with Orthodox faith and practice.

Conversely, this does not set out to be an art history book, one offering a fully illustrated account of the development of Byzantine and Slav religious art in a chronological sequence. Many such books are available, including some excellent introductory ones, and these are included in the bibliography. Here, we have provided only summary indications of historical context and the evolution of style.

I express some reservations about the inclusion of the section on alchemy in chapter 3. This tendency to read arcane meanings into color is not germane to Orthodox tradition. Linette had an interest in the influence of alchemy, though, and her knowledge was derived mainly from Western sources. Yet Linette's interest in materials may be seen as an additional—if speculative—perspective.

This book provides only a few illustrations, a starting point. I recommend that readers obtain from libraries or bookshops some of the illustrated albums and monographs on icons published in the twentieth century. These will enable them to see examples of all the different icon subjects that we have labored to describe and interpret, but have been unable to illustrate. I also regret that considerations of time precluded providing the sources of all the nonbiblical quotations and providing references to examples of all the types of icons discussed. Nonetheless, I hope enough has been provided to enable readers to “unpack” the meaning of the icons they see, and so appreciate them at a deeper level. Byzantine artists used to speak of “writing” an icon (the literal meaning of the word “iconography”): the icon as visual equivalent of the *word* of Scripture and Tradition. This books aims to help you *read* them.

BOUQUETS

My thanks to librarians in Oxford and elsewhere who were imaginative and helpful. My thanks also to Dr. Paul Binski (University of Manchester) and Corina Bos (Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam), to Fr. Alexander Fostiropoulos for explaining haloes and the hand icon, to Prince Sergei Urievitch for telling me how to memorize pictures, and to the educator Charlotte Mason for simplifying the technique.

Above all, my thanks to Dr. Nicholas Gendle for patiently dealing with my questions in class, for inspiring me to love icons, and for giving hours of his valuable time to read and correct the manuscript. If there are still mistakes in it, they are mine, not his.

Oxford, 1995

Linette Martin

PUBLISHER'S ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Our acknowledgment and deep thanks to Dr. Nicholas Gendle for his fine hand in editing and introducing this book. Not only did he provide needed information on the theology and history of icons, he also filled in gaps and corrected errors. His scholarly attention to this book is exactly what Linette Martin would have appreciated, making this beginner's guide to icons a strong foundation for anyone interested in the symbols, materials, history, and theology of icons.

INTRODUCTION

The other day someone said to me, “People recognize that a picture is an icon, but they don’t know what it means so they just switch off.” I remember what that experience was like: Icons seemed to speak to me in a foreign language, and I suspected I was missing something interesting.

Sacred Doorways is a first alphabet that will help you to read the language of icons. With a subject as complex as a thousand years of art history, one has to start somewhere. If you are a professional art historian, you already know much that is in this book, but if you are someone who simply is intrigued by icons, this is the place to begin.

Among Orthodox Christians, icons are described as being “written” rather than painted or carved; that is because they are designed to communicate. This book will help you to discover what they are saying.

LIVING DOORS

The art of icons is not dead; icons are still being made and still being used in Christian worship. Television news stories from Russia or Eastern Europe sometimes give a glimpse of the Orthodox Liturgy. The images leave us with an impression of darkness and brightness, incense and candles, deep voices chanting, and icons. The pictures are not there just to be looked at as though the worshipers were in an art museum: They are designed to be doors between this world and another world, between people and the Incarnate God, his Mother, or his friends, the saints.

If a door is to do its job, it must have throughput in two directions. As we move toward an icon, it moves toward us with a warm and precise Christian content—if we understand the language that it speaks. The primary

purpose of an icon is to enable a face-to-face encounter with a holy person or make present a sacred event, but icons are also “theology in color.”

The trouble is that the pictorial language of the Orthodox Church is unknown to many people in the West. They realize that something is being communicated but they do not know what it is.

Icons communicate precisely. They stand in opposition to deconstructionist art theories in which everyone who looks at a picture is free to make up their own ideas about what it means. Icons communicate Christian truth in a visual form. Narrative icons are complementary to the written Bible. Portrait icons mediate something of the living presence and power of the holy person(s) depicted.

TIME TO LOOK

Today we are more aware of visual communication than at any time since the Middle Ages. Five hundred years ago, Johann Gutenberg developed movable type, and people learned to get information from printed pages instead of from pictures. Now visual communication is becoming more important again. Early in the twentieth century there was mass advertising, then there were movies, and then television; today, videos and interactive media are a normal part of people’s lives. It is time to acknowledge the power of visual communication: It is time to look at icons.

This book allows us to appreciate an icon’s symbols, themes, and physical components without feeling that we must first plunge into Orthodox theology. For some, an appreciation of icons may lead further. For many, the enrichment that we have from understanding more about these beautiful pictures will be enough. Whenever possible I have avoided writing in art-historical language: Here you will find a saint described as “having a halo,” rather than “a nimbed figure.”

Research for this book has been fascinating: It took me from medieval lapidaries, optical correction, East Asian trade routes, and Byzantine guilds, to experiments with egg tempera and rabbit-skin glue. How a lifelong Anglican like me got hooked on the art of the Eastern Orthodox Church is, as they say, another story.

❖ ONE
What Are Icons?

Computers have icons. Each one is a simple sign with a specific meaning that evokes a response. There is one that means “wastebasket,” another “page,” another “document.” When we know what each one is (most are easy enough to recognize), we know what to do with it. The icon points us to something beyond itself. Highways have icons. They are signs simple enough to recognize at speed, like “hump-back bridge” or “double hairpin bend.” When

we recognize the sign, we do something, or if we are bad drivers we do nothing.

A religious icon is the same as a computer icon and a highway sign. It is graphic art: information concentrated in visual iconography. A Christian of the Orthodox Church would protest that a holy icon is far more; as a Western Christian I would say it is not less. The icon points us to something beyond itself; we recognize it and are expected to respond. That response may be belief, or disbelief, or praise, or wonder, or prayer, or encouragement, or terror about the Last Judgment or questions about Christian doctrine. The icon insists that we respond as much with the mind as with the emotions. Icons are not directed only to the gut; they are the thinking man's art.

That is what makes an icon different in motive and in effect from some other religious pictures, and that is why some people dislike icons: They prefer Christian art to be decorative and undemanding. The Orthodox Church teaches that an icon is a two-way door of communication that not only shows us a person or an event but makes it present. When we stand in front of an icon we are in touch with that person and we take part in that event. The historical event of the Nativity is here and now to us, when we look at a *Nativity* icon. What we call "our world" and what we call "the spiritual world" are opened to each other.

According to the ancient teaching of the Christian, and Eastern Orthodox, Church an icon is a door. If you cannot believe that it is a door, never mind. For you, I hope that icons come to be seen as beautiful and rich pictures, showing God and his work in a visual language that can be understood.

ANY MATERIALS, ANY SIZE, AND NOT ONLY RELIGIOUS

Today, we think icons portray only religious subjects, but one and a half thousand years ago the subject was not always religious. If a picture was of an emperor or an important official, the craftsman who made it would call it an icon, and in that broad definition (icon = image) he was right. The picture of the emperor announced that the authority of the emperor was present. A national icon in the present day from any monarchy in the world is the picture of the monarch on a postage stamp.

In the New Testament, the Greek word εἰκὼν is translated “image,” “likeness,” “portrait.” The Old and New Testaments use the word “image” to describe all of us being in the image of the God who made us (Gen. 1:26; Matt. 22:20; Col. 1:15). In that sense an icon has written this book and an icon is now reading it. There is a Jewish saying that thousands of angels go before every human being, crying, “Make way, make way for the image of God.”

A religious icon can be of Christ, the Virgin Mary, an angel, or a saint; it can be of an event from the Old or New Testament, or of a saint’s life. It is painted on a wooden panel that is small enough to be portable, and placed on a shelf in someone’s home for domestic devotion. Icons like that were made by the thousand and were an enriching focus of devotion for countless thousands of Christians, from famous theologians to the so-called “simple faithful.” Icons were not only painted on a wooden panel. They were also made in mosaic, textile, enamel, fresco, ceramic, ivory or bone, silver or gold, bronze, and various semiprecious stones. They could be large and built into a wall-to-wall icon screen across the inside of an Orthodox Church or they could be as small as 2 inches (5 cm) square and hung around someone’s neck.

The size made no difference and the materials made no difference. They were all icons as long as they were made in the canonical visual language of the Eastern Orthodox Church.

The visual language is not changeless and rigid, as though someone decided, a thousand years ago, that a picture of Christ or the Virgin should be done according to a precise recipe that generations of craftsmen just followed without thinking. The visual language of icons has developed over centuries because it is a language. Just as a spoken language develops but remains itself, so does that of icons. Most people in Britain and the United States speak English. Though it is not exactly like the English spoken by Geoffrey Chaucer in the fourteenth century, it is recognizably the same language. It has developed but it is still English, and with a little help, modern English speakers can learn to read Chaucer. In the same way, the visual language of icons has developed over one and a half thousand years (and still is developing), but it is still recognizably itself. With only a little help Western people can learn to read it. The word for visual language is *iconography*. To an art historian an icon is a picture made in the visual language, the iconography, of the Orthodox Church.

To an Orthodox Christian a holy icon is an image that is made according to the iconography of the Orthodox Church and that has been blessed by an Orthodox priest with the proper prayers. When you see an icon in an art gallery, can you tell? Perhaps. A picture that has been blessed does not glow with holy light; its status is hidden. Orthodox Christians will tell you that a holy icon is a picture made by a believing craftsman. When you see an icon, can you tell the painter was a sincere believer? Sometimes. There have been thousands of craftsmen working in and beyond the Byzantine Empire since the fourth

century. If their personal faith flickered low they could still have followed the proper iconography and produced good, or at least adequate, work. On the other hand, an icon infused with prayer will have an indefinable “plus” quality that may come across even to a not particularly spiritual beholder.

❖ TWO
Their History

A useful starting date to remember is A.D. 330. That was when the Roman Emperor Constantine moved his court from Rome to a fishing town on the shores of the Black Sea. The little town had been there since the seventh century B.C. and was called *Byzantium*. The Emperor enlarged it to be a suitably imperial city and renamed it New Rome. Then it was named after him, Constantinople.

At its greatest extent, the Byzantine Empire stretched from the Euphrates to the Straits of Gibraltar. Over the centuries its fortunes and boundaries ebbed and flowed. The city was captured by Turks in 1453 and renamed *Constantiniya*. It was not until the twentieth century, with the modernization by Kamil Atatürk, that the Turks took the Greek words *eis ten polin*, meaning “toward the town” and bent them into the name “Istanbul.” From the date 1453, hear in your mind’s ear the cry of a muezzin from a minaret, “*Alla . a . a . . hhh akh-ba . a . a . h . . .*” Constantinople had become what it is today: a Muslim town between Europe and the Middle East.

The visual language—the iconography—of icons began to develop even before Constantine and was established in the Byzantine Empire between 330 and 1453, the period of time that art historians call Late Antique and Medieval. After 1453, it was affected by the Western Renaissance to some extent, but its special qualities survived. In the West, icons were largely unappreciated until the twentieth century. In the mid-nineteenth century Byzantine items owned by the British Museum were stowed away in the basement with folk artifacts from Peru and Mexico. As recently as the 1920s a writer dismissed “Byzantine Madonnas and saints, conventionally featured, conventionally clad, conventionally colored, which are so definitely characteristic of western art in its cradle.” Now people are discovering that Orthodox Christian art is not an outdated style whose only purpose was to inspire Duccio, but is something beautiful in its own right. There was no precise date when the visual language began because it grew out of Roman art; there was no date when it ended because it is still a living art.

WHEN WERE ICONS FIRST MADE?

The earliest surviving icons are to be dated to the sixth and seventh centuries, and are almost all now preserved in the monastery of St. Catherine of Sinai. The remoteness of this outpost of the Empire preserved them from the systematic destruction of sacred art ordered by the iconoclast emperors after 720. All are in a technique and medium called “encaustic wax,” in which powdered mineral colors were blended in hot wax, laid on with glass rods. By the time of the restoration of the icons in 843, this technique had been lost, and we are only now beginning to learn some idea of how it was done.

However, literary sources make it clear that icons were being made from the late fourth century. For example, St. John Chrysostom speaks of having a portrait of St. Paul on his desk to inspire him when writing homilies on the Epistles. Already at that time, there was a small minority of churchmen (e.g., Eusebius of Caesarea, Epiphanius of Salamis) who had reservations concerning the legitimacy of images. Antipathy to Christian art did not begin with iconoclasm, though the fact that there was no controversy till the eighth century shows that the overwhelming majority of believers had no objections. By the late sixth century, indeed, icons were the principal focus of popular devotion among all classes throughout the eastern Roman world.

PERIODS OF BYZANTINE ART

The history of Byzantium from Constantine to minarets is a large swath of time and is difficult to perceive unless it is subdivided. Visualize it in time-blocks set end to end like a row of rectangles. The first is Early Byzantine, 330 to 726. If you find it difficult to memorize dates, think of them as the times of a train that you need to catch.

The time-blocks are: Early Byzantine, the Age of Iconoclasm, Middle Byzantine, the Latin Usurpation, Late Byzantine, Postbyzantine.

Early Byzantine Period

The dates are 330 to 726. People living in Constantinople called themselves *Romaioi* (Romans) rather than Byzantines, and for the first generations the official class continued to wear togas and speak Latin. The move to the new town brought a change of address, but kept a continuity of culture. The art of Christian Constantinople showed continuity with the art of pagan Rome because it was made *by* the same people and *for* the same people. The same patrons employed the same craftsmen who designed things in the same pictorial language that their grandfathers and great-grandfathers had used.

Many Christian motifs were adapted from the art of ancient Rome. Pagan *genii* had been shown with wings, so angels were shown with wings; pagan figures of divine power had been shown with haloes, so Christ was shown with a halo. As the Good Shepherd, he looked like a young Apollo or Hermes; enthroned as the Pantocrator, like Jupiter, the Ruler of the Universe, mature and bearded; in triumph he was like the sun-god in his chariot. Angels were dressed like court officials and the Virgin Mary like a Roman matron. Christian artists simply took the art of the day and injected it with new, specifically Christian meanings.

Gradually, Christian art began to develop a distinctive style. At first it had been a new religion shown in the old visual language; then it was a new religion that slowly evolved its own language. If you could flip through a series of pictures dated every twenty-five years beginning at the fourth century, when Christianity became the official religion, you would see a distinct style shift in the seventh

century. Figures become tall, thin, and flat; the folds of clothing are a pattern of lines with no attempt at making you think you are looking at real fabric flowing around a real body. The faces are masks as stylized as the makeup of Japanese Kabuki theater. A picture like that was not just a reminder of a saint or an angel: it was intended to show that the saint or that angel was a present spiritual reality. The style-shift showed a shift in the Church's understanding of what an icon was and what it could do.

The new understanding enriched worshipers' spiritual lives as they prayed in front of panel icons in their homes, as well as their churches, where they saw the same iconography in large frescoes and mosaics. But to teach that an icon was a door between this world and the world of the spirit was potentially dangerous. There were cases of superstitious practices, for example, in which paint was scraped from a household icon to be given as medicine to a sick member of the family. It should not be surprising that some people got the Church's teaching so terribly wrong: Wherever God works, the devil works, and there is no aspect of Christian truth that has not been distorted sometime, somewhere, by someone.

Just at the time when the cult of the icons was at its height came a dramatic new addition to the religions of the world: It was Islam, a religion that began when Christianity was some six hundred years old.

The Age of Iconoclasm

The dates are 726 to 843. After their being an accepted part of Christian devotion for more than four hundred years, a shadow fell across the art of icons. For Muslims, to make a realistic picture of animals or people was wrong because the craftsman was behaving as though he were God, and God is the only image maker. To make an image of Christ was wrong to Muslims because they did not

believe in the Incarnation, though Jesus was honored as one of God's prophets. Islam spread rapidly.

In response to the new religion, the Christian emperors might have carefully reinforced the Church's teaching about icons; they might have made a clear distinction between the Christian acceptance of an icon of the Incarnate Christ, and a Muslim's denial of the Incarnation; they might have encouraged their right use. Instead, Emperor Leo III ordered icons to be banned and his son enforced the decree more viciously. Yet, by standing *against* icons, they were standing *with* people who denied the reality of the Incarnation.

In defining the proper position, John of Damascus, an eighth-century monk, wrote:

I boldly draw an image of the invisible God, not as invisible, but as having become visible for our sakes by partaking of flesh and blood. I do not draw an image of the immortal Godhead, but I paint an image of God who became visible in the flesh.

Causes of Iconoclasm

Why did the emperors ban the icons? It was a time of grave military crisis and domestic (especially economic) instability. The Empire was threatened by Persia, by steppe nomads, and by the final blow, the new power of Islam. The spectacular expansion of the new religion in the Middle East began with the flight of the prophet Muhammad in 622; by 722, a new empire, the Caliphate, was established in Damascus, and all the Byzantine provinces in the Levant and North Africa had been permanently lost.

A totally unexpected disaster of this magnitude was bound to have religious as well as political and military repercussions. If Christianity was the true faith, and the

Byzantines God's chosen people, why was he apparently abandoning them? For what sins were they being punished? Leo III's answer was clear: idolatry. He contrasted what he had seen as icon worship of the Christians with the image-free practice of the victorious Muslims.

There can be no doubt it was the imperial decision alone that began and carried through the destruction of sacred art.

The shock of the ban caused many tears. Though there had been ongoing debate about idolatry for generations, legal proscription of icons was new. Making or owning an icon was forbidden for over a century. There was a respite after a Church council talked through the issues and decided in favor of the icon lovers; then the ax fell again for another twenty-six years. Churches decorated between 726 and 843 had theologically neutral pictures of trees, animals, and birds, or a plain cross, one of the few religious symbols of which the iconoclasts approved.

Because the icon-cult had penetrated the home, the ban was not enforceable the length and breadth of the Empire. In some households and monasteries icons were hidden, handed down in secret, and honored. The few icons we have today that were made before and during the Age of Iconoclasm are ours to enjoy because people broke the law or lived too far from Constantinople to worry the imperial officials. The great majority of surviving pre-iconoclastic icons are preserved in the remote monastery of St. Catherine at Sinai in Egypt.

Visual communication is powerful; art can rouse people to rage. Neither secular nor religious iconoclasts say, "It's only a picture." They understand the power of visual communication and destroy what they fear.

Icon lovers liked to repeat the apocryphal story of the conversion of Bulgaria in the ninth century. According to the story, Boris of Bulgaria asked a Greek painter to make

a fresco to impress his hunting guests. “I don’t care what the picture is,” he is reputed to have said, “as long as it is memorable and terrifying.” The painter Methodius made a *Last Judgment* fresco; Boris looked and was converted. Christian doctrine, presented visually, can have a profound and lasting effect.

It is not necessary to be an Orthodox Christian (or even a Christian) to appreciate icons, but it helps to be able to understand the belief of the Orthodox Church. Icons show us people and events of sacred history as people and events that leap out of the past into the present. Above all, icons show us the Incarnate God, the materials of the image becoming a channel between two worlds. The images are

an essential medium through which the holy may be approached and grace channeled, like a two-way mirror. . . . The icon is the real equivalent to, and venerated with the same honor as, the Gospel. The one communicates religious truth through words, the other through visible forms and symbols. Both equally are modes of revelation. (Nicholas Gendle, *Catalogue: Icons in Oxford*)

In the eighth and ninth centuries, pictures of Church councils establishing right doctrine were replaced with pictures of imperial chariot races in the Hippodrome. Mosaics and wall paintings of Christ and the Virgin, prophets and saints were whitewashed, hacked down, or literally defaced. Panel paintings and textile icons were burnt. Say the dates 726 to 843 and hear in your mind’s ear the splintering of painted panels and the knock of hammer on chisel, obliterating mosaics and painted plaster.

It was only religious art that was forbidden. Secular art continued to be made in classical style while churches were stripped and whitewashed. A nonreligious picture in classical style did not frighten the iconoclasts because it

carried no risk of idolatrous abuse and did not claim to be a bridge to the heavenly world. When icons were finally and officially accepted, Byzantines called it the Triumph of Orthodoxy. Orthodox Christians still celebrate the event every year.

After the Age of Iconoclasm it took some time for icon workshops and art techniques to revive. There was little significant production till the last quarter of the ninth century—then, a great revival in the tenth.

Middle Byzantine Period

The dates are 844 to 1204. In art history books the three and a half centuries are named for the dynasties of emperors; you will read of icons described as being in Macedonian style, or Comnene style. To keep it simple, think of the Middle Byzantine period as one long time-block that stretches between two crises of Byzantine history, from the end of Iconoclasm to the invasion of Western Crusaders.

By the end of the ninth century, the two superpowers of the Middle East, the Byzantine Empire and the Islamic Caliphate, had fought themselves to something of a stalemate. Sporadic battles continued along the eastern frontiers, but during the period of the Macedonian Dynasty (887–1035), the emperors were able to consolidate their dominions in Asia Minor and the Balkans, reform the administration and the legal and financial system, and once again encourage the arts of peace. By about 1000—the reign of the ferocious Basil II, known as “the Bulgarian Slayer” for his savage reconquest of Bulgaria—the Byzantine state was at its medieval apogee, stretching from the Adriatic to the Euphrates.

The late ninth and tenth centuries are sometimes called by cultural historians the “Macedonian Renaissance”: There was a great renewal of literature, philosophy, and art. The enormous resources of the state were put to great

programs of church-building, creating schools of higher studies, and commissioning vastly expensive mosaic programs. Ironically, the continuity of secular art during the Iconoclast centuries had led to a revival of classicism (partly because nonreligious art was not subject to the transcendental pressures that had led to a gradual sea change in the style of sacred art). The classical revival (based on the surviving illuminated books of Late Antiquity) led to the creation of exquisite ivories and lavish illustrated manuscripts (e.g., the Paris Psalter, the Paris *Nazianzen*, the Bible of Leo the Patrician in the Vatican). All these reflect the taste of the court: From now on, Constantinople sets the standards and taste to which the whole Empire aspires. However, one sees a more severe style in art in the *public* sphere (especially the apse mosaics of the cathedrals of St. Sophia in Constantinople and Salonica). The mosaics of Osios Loukas in Greece, a major mosaic program from around 1000, express an austerity and force that is not at all like the classical humanism so popular at court. Not many icons survive from this period, but some of the best (e.g., a famous *St. Nicholas* from Sinai) do show the new stylistic traits: modeling that shows figures as three dimensional, a return to idealized proportions of the human form, elegant flowing draperies, benign facial expression with a sense of inner life.



The so-called Comnene¹ Period (1055–1204) was one of slow political and economic decline. Great aristocratic families competed for the control of the Empire, which lacked the central control of a powerful autocrat. Expansion of local aristocratic estates proceeded apace, the treasury was depleted, and it became necessary to give large trading concessions to Venice. The incursions of

Normans and other Western adventurers, hungry for land, were less of a threat than the rise of the Seljuq Turks in the East. Their victory at Manzikert (1071) robbed the Empire at a stroke of much of eastern Anatolia, with all that implied of loss of manpower, resources, and tax revenue.

The eleventh and twelfth centuries in art represented a return to a more graphic, expressionistic style in which classical form gradually gave way to a rather flat, stylized manner: The figures are again tall and thin (but with more animation and expression than the ghostly figures in seventh- and eighth-century art), and landscapes are reduced to juxtaposed planes and angular outlines. By the second half of the twelfth century, we have an extremely mannered version of this style, with convoluted, bunched draperies, serpentine hemlines, agitated gestures, compartmentalized features, and in general, much stronger expression of emotion (evident in some frescoes—e.g., Nerezi and Kurbinovo in Macedonia, Lagoudhera in Cyprus—but also in icons). This is the first period for which a significant body of icons survives: the collection at St. Catherine's at Sinai offers an excellent cross-section of examples.

The mosaics at Dafni and the wonderful icon of the *Virgin of Vladimir* (about 1120) are harbingers of a humanistic revival. This was nipped in the bud in the capital by the catastrophe of the Sack of Constantinople by the Crusaders (1204). Byzantine metropolitan artists, lacking patronage from the Latin usurpers, moved into Orthodox successor states looking for patronage. The thirteenth-century kings of Serbia and Bulgaria were happy to oblige; at Mileseva, Sopoćani, and Boyana, for example, we see the art of Constantinople in exile producing grand, monumental frescoes of an unparalleled sculptural quality, devoid of the fussy mannerisms and agitated emotionalism of the late Comnene style.

The Latin Usurpation

The dates are 1204 to 1261. As Constantinople was the link between Asia and Europe, Venice was the link between Western Europe and Byzantium. In 1201, over 30,000 Western knights, squires, and infantry were encamped in and around Venice, on their way to Jerusalem. The Venetians demanded 85,000 silver marks to ship them down the Adriatic to Constantinople. The Crusaders made a bargain: They would fight for Venice in Dalmatia and would pay off the remaining debt with relics and other valuables.

Anyone who has been taught to think that Crusaders were all noble, brave, Christian knights has to think again. With the date 1204, hear in your mind's ear the sound of wagon wheels, splintering wood, the screams of massacre. Crusaders in Constantinople behaved like ram-raiders in a jewelry store, trundling away everything portable. Because they were thieves, they wanted gold and gems; because they were medieval thieves, they also wanted relics of saints. When they landed in Constantinople to "refuel," a series of misunderstandings with the Emperor Alexius led to diplomatic impasse, and soon they resorted to arms.

Constantinople can be considered the heart of the economic life of the Empire. It was there that for the most part the portable wealth and the principal branches of industry and commerce were concentrated; hundreds of thousands of working people lived within its walls. Of all this, after several days of pillage, massacre, and conflagration, hardly anything remained. (André M. Andreades, *Byzantium*)

The imperial center was scattered and relatives of the imperial family set up courts wherever they could:

Trebizond, Epirus, Nicaea. It was from Nicaea that Michael Paleologus recaptured Constantinople in 1261 and tried to revive the old glories.

The Late Byzantine Period

The dates are 1261 to 1453. In history books it is called the Palaeologan Period, named after the reigning dynasty, the Paleologus family. In 1261 a Byzantine, rather than a Western, emperor was reestablished in Constantinople, but the Empire was much depleted, both in territory and resources. In 1453 the last Paleologan emperor died defending his city against the Turkish army of Mehmet the Conquerer that was attacking the fortifications (by then all that remained of the Empire was Constantinople, the Peloponnese, and a few Greek islands). A contemporary historian writes how the emperor was identified only by his shoes and leg armor:

When all resistance had ceased, the Sultan entered our city. His immediate concern was the fate of the emperor, as he was extremely anxious to discover whether he was still alive. Some individuals came and declared that the emperor had escaped, some that he had gone into hiding, and others that he had perished in the defense of the city. An immediate search was ordered to locate the emperor's body among the heaps of the slain. They washed the heads of many corpses, but the emperor could not be identified. His body was finally spotted by means of the golden imperial eagles traditionally imprinted on the greaves and shoes of our emperors. (George Sphrantzes)

According to legend, the last priest was interrupted partway through the Liturgy; he disappeared into the walls of St. Sophia and will reemerge one day to continue it.

Initially, the courage and diplomacy of Michael VIII and his immediate successors enabled the Byzantines to hold the Latins at bay and retain a sizable lump of territory in northwest Asia Minor. But the advance of the Ottoman Turks was inexorable, and the ongoing crisis was exacerbated by weak government in Constantinople in the fourteenth century, and by dynastic and religious disputes. It seems amazing the end did not come sooner! Fortunately for the Byzantines, the capture of the Sultan Bayazit by Tamerlane in 1402 brought half a century's respite.

But despite the extreme political and military situation, the fourteenth century is the last golden age of Byzantine culture, with lively theological, philosophical, and literary activity. In art, we have the final "renaissance" of the native Byzantine classical tradition. In all forms of art, a renewed delicacy, refinement, and spirituality is evident, not least in fourteenth-century icons, some of the most beautiful ever produced. Elegant modeling of idealized faces and bodies, elaborated landscapes and (often fantastic) architectural backgrounds combine with a tendency toward miniaturization. There wasn't enough money in the imperial treasury for ambitious mosaics now, but a very rich, disgraced civil servant commissioned the swan song of the genre, the Chora Church in Constantinople (1320s). All in all, the cultural achievement of the Palaeologan Renaissance was a triumph of the human spirit over adversity.

The Sixth Period: Post-Byzantine

Even though Constantinople was finished as the cultural and artistic center of Orthodox Christianity, icons continued. The Turkish sultans were tolerant, allowing the Orthodox Church many privileges, including the making of icons. Since the tenth century, craftsmen had been traveling north to Russia where they were continuing to make icons according to the proper iconography. The art lived on

there officially from 988 to 1917, after which date many icons were destroyed in the Communist era. Even under Communism, Russian icons were still venerated, restored, and secretly painted. After seventy years of Communism—how short a time it seems now that it is over—a nation raised on atheistic materialism is openly returning to its icons.

Icon painters also worked in Venetian-owned Crete, the Ionian Islands, and other parts of Greece, the Balkans, Cyprus, and Asia Minor, where they painted for dispersed Greeks and even sometimes Western Christians. Cretan icons were popular in Northern Europe in the sixteenth century and were produced by the score. A century later there was little demand for them because Western taste had changed. Byzantine icons of the Paleologan period are as beautiful as late summer roses and, like late roses, they could not last. The cultural gateway between Eastern and Western Europe had been opened wider than it had ever been by centuries of east-west trade and through that gateway came the influences of the Italian Renaissance.

There is more to the changing styles of Byzantine history than this brief overview can indicate, but when we can see history in large time-blocks, we can place the details somewhere. Even if we never find out more of the details, we now have the thousand years or so of Byzantine history blocked out in a memorable shape. As for Byzantine art, it moves with history: not static, but developing as a spoken language develops—in essence constant, but in style, greatly varying.

RUSSIA AND ICONS

The wide influence of Christianity in Russia began in 989. In that year Vladimir Sviatoslavovich, Prince of Kiev, received Christian baptism. The story of what led him to take this step may be poetic truth rather than literal truth, but it bears repeating because of the point that it makes.