The Truth does not change

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In an earlier chapter we looked at a variety of possible causes to the iconoclastic controversy. That religious images were misused is certain. In his book,[1] *The Icons of Their Bodies*, Henry Maguire suggests that the evidence for religious misuse can be determined by comparing pre- and post-iconoclastic images.

According to Maguire many, if not all, pre-iconoclastic images of saints, especially those in private domestic use, had come to lack details that would make it easy to identify specific saints **[52].** Post-iconoclastic icons, on the other hand, are much easier to identify; at the very least, the name of the saint now appeared in the image. When considered with other evidence of abuse,[2] the lack of specificity in pre-iconoclastic icons suggests that it was the actual material image or icon itself that was seen as mediating the miraculous rather than the saint it was suppose to depict.[3]

We know from the arguments of the those who supported the use of icons in worship and from the official canons of church councils that the appropriate veneration paid to an icon passes to the saint represented, and, because Christians "live in Christ", to the Incarnate Second Person of the Trinity --the True Image of the Father-- Jesus Christ. In other words, the saints themselves, through Christ— are powerful and helpful, not their images.[4] By insisting on icons that clearly identified the specific saint represented, the church was able to redirect the people's inappropriate magical use of images to the proper Christian understanding of the role of the saints.[5] The importance of close supervision by the church of image making was expressed by the Second Council of Nicaea (787) when it decreed that "the composition of religious imagery should not be left to the imagination of the artists, but formed on principles laid down by the church and by religious traditions."[6]

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Small amulets of holy images were particularly prone to magical uses. Often there was no inscription to identify the saint represented. The mounted rider with a halo was a common image; it's identity is uncertain although St. Sisinnios, guardian of infants, is named on one with magical symbols surrounding the image. The inscription on the left amulet above makes no sense. Such nonsense inscriptions or incantations were commonly used in pagan magical ritual. The female figure being speared represents a child-killing demon. *Image:* "The Icons of Their Bodies," Henry Maguire, 123

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It was this tightening of church control over the creation of images that contributed to the development of a Byzantine style.[7]

Category, "likeness", tradition

The most basic control imposed by the Church in the creation of religious images was the categorization of saints **[53]** into evangelists, apostles, bishops, monks, soldiers, angels, and, of course, the Theotokos and Christ.[8] These categories are distinguishable by dress, pose (or indication of movement), and three-dimensionality (the degree of shaded form). Bishops, for example, wear their ecclesiastical vestments; soldiers, battle dress; and monks and nuns wear religious habits. Because the apostles accompanied Jesus daily in his life on earth they are often depicted realistically and thoroughly animated because their relationship with Christ was natural and physical. Bishops, of course, can have only a spiritual relationship with Christ and so are usually shown in a spiritual way, more static and abstract, with flattened bodies and perhaps dressed in 'wall paper' patterned vestments. Monks live an ascetic lifestyle sacrificing even the freedom of going where they want and so are normally shown motionless with an austere flatness and imposing frontality that emphasizes the privations of monastic life. They may even have a gaunt appearance. Soldier saints and angels often have a pose that appears more active than other personages because action is of their nature. The Theotokos, when

shown with other saints, is sometimes depicted with a greater degree of three-dimensionality, emphasizing the human nature she gave to Christ.[9] An artist, therefore, knew right off which basic characteristics to emphasize when beginning to make an image of a saint.

Beyond category, each saint's specific identity was further clarified by rendering the head and face according to specific facial features: a distinctive hairstyle, beard, and cheek bone structure **[54]**. Saint Paul, for example, was always depicted with a baldhead and medium length, pointed beard to differentiate him from the other, original apostles. Saint Gregory of Nazianos is recognized by his balding head, sunken cheeks, and spade-shaped beard.[10] It was sometimes difficult to tell the difference among women saints **[55]**, however, as they usually wore head coverings which concealed the hairstyle --and, of course, they did not have beards.[11] The woman's dress or some other attribute might be the only clue as to the woman's identity. Unless there was an important reason to do otherwise, women saints are all usually depicted as young, beautiful, and having round faces.[12]

To our 21st century eyes conditioned to Renaissance illusionist images, all Byzantine figures appear abstract and unnatural but to the Byzantines they were realistic and "life-like." Byzantine writers often referred to this or that icon as looking "just like" the person. This is puzzling to us. It is easier to understand, however, if we consider that the Byzantines were often unable to identify images of saints painted in a more natural, illusionist, western style. 'Likeness' to the Byzantines was a question of simple identification or definition. An illusionist portrait in the western style **[56]**, subject to the artist's imagination, presented the Byzantine viewer with way too much unique visual information and thus confused or camouflaged the 'true' identity of the saint. 'Likeness' to the Byzantines refers to the standard characteristics of a particular saint's portrait that made it easy to accurately and quickly make an identification. When a Byzantine said that an icon "looked just like saint so-and-so" he meant that he was able to easily identify the figure according to the 'type' that was recognizable as saint so-and-so. Saint so-and-so was always shown that way.

It is, therefore, a fundamental principle in the making of Byzantine icons that they not be innovative. The artist must repress any creative urges to

replace the traditional representation of a saint with his own vision as the icon must be an accurate copy of its prototype. Mary Brigid Pederson sums up very well the underlying principle for this rule: "…because the Truth of faith does not change, that which is said about the Truth in paint cannot innovate either."[13]   An icon must be a 'true' image of the saint who is an image of the True Image of God. To innovate, then, is a serious offense: "An image changed to suit an individual's taste is as dangerous as a doctored Scriptural text."[14]

Authenticity

How do we know if the first icons upon which all the copies are based are 'true' images?

In the case of Jesus Christ, it is the images he supposedly left behind. The most famous image of Jesus is believed to have been miraculously generated after he cleaned his face with a moist cloth.[15] In later developments of that particular story or legend, the image reproduces itself on a tile behind which it had been hidden for safety. The image is called the *mandylion* **[57]** and numerous copies of it were made.

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Mandylion

One of numerous copies, of course.
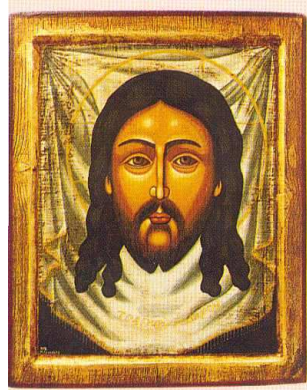
Stories of icons "not made by human hands" or that "self-replicate" form the basis of the traditions of likenesses for many saints. Icons or images not made by human hands are called *acheiropoieta*. Like the mandylion story above, self replication often confirms their sacred authorship.[16] Sometimes the authenticity of an icon of a saint is verified not by self replication but rather by a person's previously experienced dream or vision. For example, a person may come across an icon he had not seen before but he immediately recognizes the saint in the image from a vision he had of that saint some time before.[17]

Icons of the Theotokos (Mary) also have their acheiropoieta but the most famous story of authenticity of the image of the Theotokos is, for the most part, quite natural. There is a legend that St. Luke painted the first portrait of the Virgin on a panel of wood taken from a tabletop in the Virgin's home. Furthermore, she "sat" for the portrait –with the Christ child on her lap. (Interesting, as Luke didn't know Jesus until the Messiah was 30 years old!)

The experience of the holy presence in original acheiropoieta can only be authentically extended through copies if the new icons are laboriously copied from previous ones --extending back to the original acheiropoieta. The closer the copies are to looking like the miraculous original the more authentic they are. An icon painter –even today—is conscious of the ne-

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cessity of being faithful to the original prototype. "Fidelity to a sacred prototype means fidelity to a transfigured reality,"[18] a reality redeemed from a state of corruption by Christ. The *writing* of icons –the process of drawing and painting an icon— is viewed as a prayerful act in Orthodoxy requiring meditation on the part of the artist for his work is considered a part of the sacred tradition of the church.[19]

Today, there are books of line drawings from which artists can work or even trace in order to produce a 'true' likeness of a saint. It's likely that books of sketches existed as well during the Byzantine period. More complicated historical scenes would often come with detailed written instructions for the artist. There exists an illuminated (illustrated) Old Testament in which the paint on some of the pages has worn off revealing detailed written instructions in the picture spaces.[20] We also know that sometimes mosaics or icons were created using stencils from other works to make sure the new image was true to the prototype.[21] Many artists, of course, went to Constantinople to study the craft and would have filled sketchbooks with sketches and notes from the icons they studied there.

The Byzantine style

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The Byzantine style utilizes *shapes* as opposed to *forms*. *Shapes* are flat outlined spaces whereas *forms* reflect a concern for three-dimensionality and are solidly shaded from light to dark. Now that you know that fact, which of these two paintings is painted in the Byzantine style?

The Byzantine style that resulted from all this is a perfect mixture of naturalism and stylistic abstraction; "perfect" because it seems to express in visual form the central tenet of Christianity: God, by taking on human flesh in the Incarnation, redeemed human flesh[22] so that it is now both human and divine; physical and spiritual. Byzantine images communicate that doctrine. Westerners can more fully appreciate Orthodox icons if they keep the doctrine of the Incarnation in mind.

The 'words' that visual artists use to create images are often called the *elements of art* or the *elements of design*. There are seven that are usually named*: line, shape, color, texture, form, space,* and *value* (lightness/darkness). Every work of art is made up of these elements regardless of

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the medium (paint, stone, chalk, etc.) used. As well, every work can be described and critiqued by referring to how the artist has used these elements. When we discuss the Byzantine style, for example, we necessarily have to comment on the elements of *shape* and *form* the artists used. Now, generally speaking, *shapes* rather than *forms,* are more often emphasized in Byzantine icons. What is the difference? Well, when an artist employs a *shape* rather than a *form* he is simply drawing an outline of an area. He adds little or no shading to make that area appear to have three-dimensions. *Forms*, on the other hand, are shapes that may or may not have sharp outlines but are shaded from dark to light to appear rounded or as if they occupy three-dimensional space. In general, Byzantine artists employed *shapes* rather than *forms* when rendering bodies. Why? Because in lacking a strong illusion of three-dimensions those *shapes* suggest a spiritual realm. The rendering of heads in Byzantine icons, in contrast, often emphasize *form* slightly more than their bodies perhaps because the heads of saints shaded to look three-dimensional suggests life in the flesh –human life. It was through the skillful manipulation of the elements of art that Byzantine artists were able to suggest the 'truth' of a redeemed humanity –a deified humanity.

The presentation of the doctrine of the Incarnation is of foremost importance in Byzantine/Orthodox imagery. The unity of the human and the divine, the natural with spiritual, is essential. However, whenever the human figure is depicted in any work of art --even if slightly abstracted-- the suggestion of a sensual physical existence is overwhelmingly communicated. To suggest spiritual reality, therefore, an artist must deploy the elements of art in such a way as to suggest a contradiction to our experience of natural reality. Our experience of spatial relationships, for example, must be forcefully violated in order to render a visual experi-

ence that appears other-worldly. In Byzantine art, then, *space* is flattened **[59]**. The natural world is depicted as if crushed flat. We cannot imagine walking into it or around in it. It cannot be experienced in the normal way. The shapes are familiar to us as faces, bodies, and objects but they seem to float as if suspended in front of us, more spiritual than physical.

The element of *light* is employed in a very controlled manner in Byzantine images in order to express the sense of spirituality. Uneven or dramatic lighting is never used perhaps because unevenness could be associated with a corrupt or fallen world. Instead, shapes are lit uniformly, each body or object appearing to "glow from within"[23] which communicates a

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Unlike Renaissance lighting *(left)* which normally suggests that light is entering from one side of the picture thereby creating natural looking highlights and shadows, Byzantine images appear to glow from within suggesting a transformed, deified humanity.

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feeling of stability and equilibrium. There is no 'side lighting' used as we would find in Renaissance or western painting, which would dramatically emphasize the three-dimensional forms of the bodies.

Gold leaf [24] backgrounds and skies are characteristic of Byzantine icons and mosaics **[60]**. Probably more than anything else these gold backgrounds suggest a heavenly or spiritual environment for the holy personages to inhabit. One of the first changes made by Renaissance artists who were more interested in the natural world was to drop the heavenly gold of the skies in traditional icons in favor of natural blue.

Bodies are almost always posed frontal or in a flattened three-quarter view in Byzantine images **[60]**. They also usually appear very close to the viewer which invites personal engagement.[25] There is usually no emotion expressed on the faces and the mouths are closed "as a way of expressing wisdom through silence."[26]

The facial features of eyes, nose, and mouth in Byzantine images have a fairly fixed canon of construction **[61]**. The nose, in particular, is a good indicator of whether the style is Byzantine. It's constitutive shapes are basically the same from portrait to portrait. Overall it "is rendered as fine and elongated. It is the axis of the face."[27] The nose also acts as the basic unit of measurement for the proportions of the head and halo (see illustrations). The irises of the eyes are normally somewhat squished with the re-
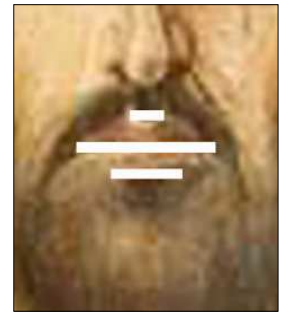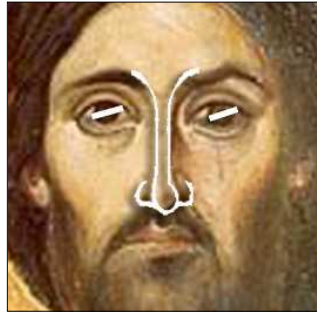
sulting horizontal axis lines of the two eyes adopting a parallel tilt. The mouth in a Byzantine image is usually rather small and, as we already mentioned, closed. A short dark line usually appears just below the lower lip. The bottom lip is often noticeably smaller than the upper one. There are other aspects of the style of the face and head in Byzantine images we could describe but these are the most obvious.

The Byzantine icon style underwent several variations including Coptic and Russian but, because of space, we will have to let an examination

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of those expressions wait until another time. The underlying spiritual principles, however, remain the same.

In the next chapter we will examine Byzantine *schemes* for the placement of images in churches and identify a few of the more common subjects and image *types* employed. ✠

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[1] Henry Maguire, *The Icons of Their Bodies: Saints and Their Images in Byzantium*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press 1996)

[2] Rings and pendants with images of saints were often duplicated through molds and sold in a geographical area and, through trading, spread around the empire. Even if an inscription did appear on the image there might also be included a nonsense word or phrase, which is usually evidence of magical use. The multiple appearances of the exact same saint's image in the same church building or on something like an article of clothing suggests that the more numerous the image the more powerful the magic conjured, especially so if there is little to identify the person represented.

[3] Maguire 101

[4] Their power comes from "the merits which they acquired on earth through the mediator between God and men, Christ Jesus." (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, *#956, 1994*)

[5] Maguire 100

[6] Frederick B. Artz, *The Mind of the Middle Ages: An Historical Survey*, (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, Phoenix Edition 1980), 127

[7] Keep in mind that the iconoclastic controversy was restricted to the 'Byzantine' world. The church centered on 'old' Rome wanted nothing to do with the iconoclasts. Also, it would be misleading to claim that the church was solely responsible for the development of the Byzantine 'portrait' style for it has some roots in religious panel paintings from Egypt which depicted pagan divinities in portrait poses, holding symbols of their power and with halos around their heads. (see *Icons from Sinai, Holy Image Hallowed Ground,* edited by Robert S. Nelson and Kristen M. Collins, [2006 J. Paul Getty Trust], 39.)

[8] Maguire 65

[9] Maguire Chapter 2

[10] Maguire, 34

[11] Maguire 28

[12] Maguire 31

[13] Panagia Icons, 20:52, September 26, 2007, <http://www.panagia-icons.net/id1.html>

[14] John Yiannias, *Orthodox Art and Architecture*, Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, 2005, 10:50 October 16 2007, <http://www.goarch.org/en/ourfaith/articles/article8025.asp>

[15] This is not the image left on Veronica's veil during the Passion but an image that Jesus sent to the ill king of Edessa who kissed the image and was cured.

[16] Annemarie Weyl Carr, *Icons and the Object of Pilgrimage in Middle Byzantine Constantinople*, (Washington DC; Dumbarton Oaks 2002), 15:29 September 25, 2007, <http://www.doaks.org/DOP56/DP56ch06.pdf>

[17] Maguire 11

[18] Yiannias

[19] Atelier Saint-Andre, *Aesthetic Outlines*, November 2, 2007, 11:04 September 26, 2007 <http://www.atelier-st-andre.net/en/pages/aesthetics/aesthetic_outlines.html>

[20] John Lowden, *Early Christian & Byzantine Art*, (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1997) 157

[21] Bob Atchison, *Mosaics of Hagia Sophi:, The Deesis - How It Was Made*, 1995-2007, 12:26 August 15 2007, <http://www.pallasweb.com/deesis/howmade.html>

[22] Indeed, all of creation is redeemed through the Incarnation.

[23] Sister Paula Howard, *About Icons*, Benedictine Sisters of Mount St. Scholastica, 8:25pm September 26, 2008, <http:www.mountosb.org/icon/index.html>

[24] Gold is pounded into ultra-thin sheets (leaves) and then glued to the surface of the painting.

[25] Howard, <http:www.mountosb.org/icon/index.html>

[26] Howard, <http:www.mountosb.org/icon/index.html>

[27] Atelier Saint-Andre, *The Byzantine Style*, (P.Grall) 3:41pm September 26, 2007, <http://www.atelier-st-andre.net/en/pages/aesthetics/byzantine_style.html>