

A Summary of Medieval Greek and Russian Icons

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The Ancient Greek portrait tradition was passed on by the Alexandrian School of Egypt, as shown by the Fayum Mummy Portraits, to the Byzantine Icon painters. We have no examples of ancient Greek painting, though Roman mosaic and fresco paintings from Pompeii, give us some idea of the skill and style involved. The Egyptian mummy portraits were painted from life, with gold laurel wreaths applied after death, when the panels were attached to the mummy case. We have hundreds of examples from several locations in Greek Egypt dating from the early centuries AD.

The earliest Byzantine icons, which were painted in the Alexandrian style in encaustic (using a wax medium) or egg tempera were destroyed in the Iconoclasm controversy 726 - 843 AD. A few early icons survive from opposite ends of the Byzantine Empire, at Rome and Mt. Sinai. A study of these old paintings and their medieval descendants shows a similar method has been passed down from Ancient Greece and Egypt to medieval icon painters. The 18th century tracings and reproductions of old handwritten handbooks demonstrate this quite clearly.

Following the Iconophile restoration, in 843, the earliest known form of an icon became the traditional 'prototype', and set the model to be followed by succeeding generations of artists in their own style of portraying each individual saint. The designs or prototypes were passed down by monastery, workshop and later, written handbooks and traced pattern book collections until they were transcribed and published. In the 18th century editions that we know about are; Dionysius of Fournas, the Handbooks of the Postnikov Collection, the Stroganov Tradition and the Golshakov Edition. These publications took place just as the icon tradition was passing out of popularity into a more western influenced art. Translation into English happened in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as icons appeared on the art collector's market, out of context of their original theological meaning, see Kelley,¹ Melnick², and Hetherington.³

¹ Kelly, Fr. Christopher :. trans & ed. An iconographer's Patternbook: The Stroganov Tradition, Oakwood Publications, Torrance CA 1993

² Melnerick, Melnick, Gregory trans & ed. An Icon Painters Notebook: The Golshakov Edition, Oakwood Publications, Torrance, CA 1995.

³ Hetherington, Hetherington, Paul. The Painter's Manual of Dionysius of Fournas, Oakwood Publications, Torrance, CA 1974

How They Painted Icons

Traditional Icons were painted on gessoed wooden boards in egg tempera, with earth and alchemical colours then varnished with linseed oil. Variations in technique were minor across the Byzantine Empire from Russia to Greece and to early Italy.

Wooden Boards were prepared, carved and gessoed.

Depending on the availability of local timber, they used cypress, linden (basswood), birch, oak, ash, beech, and even fir in the north. After the trunk of the tree was split, the boards were cut from the thickest and densest part at the center of the tree. The grain had to run vertically on the board, and a hollowed out part is called the *kovcheg*. It is cut on the surface toward the center of the trunk with a drawknife or chisel. The resulting raised frame was less common in Greek icons but normal in Russia for the 12th - 18th century.⁴ They become less common again in later icons.

A thin layer of fish glue (isinglas) or skin glue, sealed the board, front and back. Then a thin fabric (after the 14th century) was applied to the front, with more glue. Then a mixture of glue and chalk gesso was applied with a wide brush or plaster knife. After 5 - 10 layers it was allowed to dry well and sanded with wet pumice stone.⁵ (Now fine sandpaper and emery cloth can be used).

The design was drawn in lead or silverpoint or transferred with pounce (red ochre) from tracings of old pattern books on oiled paper. Thin ink or an outline of thin red and black (or burnt umber) paint made the drawing permanent.

Gilding was done with linseed oil and a drying agent to adhere the gold leaf to the board. A bole or clay ground was sometimes used, which made it possible to burnish the gold or impress designs in the gold. Sometimes a string soaked in gesso allowed a gesso build up under the gold for a raised halo.(Now a restoration technique uses gilding varnish to adhere the gold.)⁶

Pigments were imported and prepared

The Ancient Greek four-colour palette consisted of black, white, and yellow and red ochres. Alchemical colours, such as vermillion, ultramarine blue, as well as chrome

⁴ Sendler, Egon, The Icon, Image of the Invisible: Element of theology, Aesthetics and Technique, Oakwood publications Torrance CA 1981p 188

⁵ Sendler p 192

⁶ Sendler p 196

green, or blue and violet earths, were often added for clothing and jewellery. The Egyptian mummy portraits in egg tempera and encaustic foreshadowed the icon technique using the Greek palette. The methods of tempering with egg yolk and melted wax mediums have changed very little in 2500 years.⁷ The ancient colors and methods persisted into the Icon tradition until Iconoclasm, when the encaustic technique was lost. This allowed the egg tempera method to flourish without competition, when Icon veneration was restored in the 8th century.

Colours used in various places and times also included white lead, Naples yellow (lead oxide), buckthorn yellow, yellow and red ochres, English red, red bole, natural Sienna, burnt Sienna, carmine, raw and burnt umbers, caput mortuum (close to violet) vermilion, madder, ultramarine, chromium green and other green earths, verdigris with honey and a little white or blue to stabilize it, malachite, ultramarine, indigo, vivianite (a blue ochre), azurite and ivory black. Mixed skin tones, were made with yellow and red ochres, black, and white, or sometimes green. This medieval palette required a great deal of alchemical knowledge to use properly.⁸ The trade in precious colours indicated the distances travelled by jewellers and alchemists as well as the trade in local earth pigments.

The icons were painted in the style of the time and place

The roots of icon painting began in the Ancient Greek tradition⁹ and the Fayum Mummy portraits of Egypt,¹⁰ carried it to medieval times, via Constantinople, Jerusalem, Sinai, and other Byzantine Empire locations. The techniques were fairly consistent across time from the portraits preserved in the deserts of Fayum to the 18th century technical handbooks. These handbooks were technically similar to those of Theophilus and Cennini in the 12th -14th centuries, with the addition of theology and colour symbolism relevant to Orthodox icon painting.

After the Fall of Constantinople to the Muslims in 1453, the Balkans and Crete continued the Greek Icon painting tradition but it gradually faded under the western

⁷ Doxiadis Euphrosyne, *The Mysterious Fayum Portraits, Faces from Ancient Egypt*, Harry N. Abrams, Inc, Publishers, 1995.p 98

⁸ Sendler p 205 - 217

⁹ Sendler p 233

¹⁰ Doxiadis p 99 -100

influence during the Renaissance. The blend of style and technical evolution were complimentary in the Byzantine tradition and preserved under the influence of the Russian painters like Andre Rublev. where evolution of the prototypes took place within the framework of strict rules, safeguarded the theological character of the image in the Russian Orthodox painting workshops and artist's villages.

Italy was part of the Byzantine tradition until 1054. The separation gradually allowed the Renaissance innovations in painting, following Giotto, and when the discovery of Ancient Greek statues revived the idealized realism of the classical traditions. It is interesting to compare the Orthodox iconostasis with the Gothic alterpieces of the thirteenth century Italian art. The Gothic influence of realism began to take place.

Moreover, in Flanders the realistic style of oil painting on stretched canvas and the use of lenses and mirrors created a new style that included one point perspective and the soft focus of lense realism from 1430 onwards. The new technique and new look arrived in Italy and Venice about 1500. (see Timeline in appendix II). Optical projections showed that a new way of looking at the world had become popular.¹¹ Using the visual evidence of Durer and Carravaggio's foreshortened lutes and optical artifacts in the paintings, as well as the written documents of Roger Bacon (d 1294) and Leonardo (d. 1519) David Hockney has documented the emergence of a "photo" realism in the Renaissance.¹² Thus the ancient style of portraying holy figures was preserved in Russia while in the Greek, Italian and western painting technique, various levels of innovation and realism occurred.

This discursion into realism supports the photographic realism of my icons, which the Russian Church would not approve, but were accepted in other times and places. I have translated the tradition one more time, and have not used the art to teach Eastern Orthodox theology, but to honour the memory of SCA saints.¹³

¹¹ Hockney David, Secret Knowledge: rediscovering the lost techniques of the old masters, Penguin, Putnam Inc., Toronto ON, 2001 p 13

¹² Hockney p 16 and 206

¹³ Mirriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary "Saint" 3. one eminent for piety or virtue
4, an illustrious predecessor

Four traditional styles of Icon Painting Technique¹⁴

Following the descriptions of Russian painting described by Sendler four techniques can be described.

1. *plav*: highlighting with “melted colors,” thin transparent layers, lightened with white in each layer. This was the technique of great masters.
2. *otborka*: highlighting with hatching lines. Simpler and also gives good results. (similar to the modern drybrush watercolour technique)
3. *prinplesk*: highlighting by dilution, is delicate to do well but good results come with practice.
4. combined: alternate the first and second procedures. First spread thin color, dry well and use hatching lines, then repeat the thin layer, and more hatching.

Folds, shadows, eyebrows and hair may be outlined with a mixture of red and black or burnt umber. The last touches of white brings the icon alive. The frame is finished by painting pen lines around the frame and halo and inscribing the name. The Icon is not complete until the prototype’s name is written.

All the painting techniques found in the 19th century Russian manuals are those which continue the Byzantine traditions from earliest times.¹⁵ Although it is possible for experts to distinguish Greek and Russian painting despite their common elements. Both techniques tried to represent the interior world rather than the realism of the outer world. When the Byzantine painters abandoned encaustic technique for egg tempera they had all the ancient Greek painting techniques available to them. They used these techniques to depict points of theology, church festivals and a relationship with the Divine.

Some Differences between Greek and Russian Painting

Greek Style Painting¹⁶ consisted of a background of transparent layers scumbled to show depth and opaque layers of the principle figure. Highlighting is done not by lighter layers, but often by layers of different colours. Different, even complimentary colours, shone through transparent layers, as shown in Theophanes the Greek, and

¹⁴ Sendler p 212

¹⁵ Sendler p 133

¹⁶ Sendler p 234

Andrei Rublev's works in Moscow c. 1360 - 1430.^{17 18} The Greek procedure for skin tone begins with a dark local color and highlighting by white hatching lines, followed by a transparent red ochre layer layer and successive scumblings which cover the whole face. For clothing, touches of colour mixed with translucent white on the folds were applied in layers. Each following layer was smaller, and whiter than the previous one. The few icons from Constantinople show how the Greek iconographers obtained the delicate modeling called *plav* in Russia.¹⁹

In Kiev, the Russian technique developed in the 10 - 13th centuries, with some differences from Constantinople as seen in the Vladimir Mother of God. The folds are simpler, with dark lines and highlighting using wide bands. The modeling of the face is softer and shows a mastery of *plav*. The careful drawing was primary. The local shade became opaque and the highlighting was done with strongly drawn white lines with little intermediate shading. For the faces, the Greek technique of *plav* and hatching was followed. The influence of the early tradition lasted up until the 18th century in Russia, but a slow mutation towards realism had begun even in the 16th century. The radiant coloring of the 15th century was gradually abandoned. Ornaments became more important and painting became dainty and miniaturized even in Russia.

Icons were varnished

Icons were varnished with oliifa. *Oliifa* is linseed oil and dryers clarified in the sunlight for up to 30 days. It was spread on with fingers, in repeated layers to equalize the mat areas caused by differing absorbency of the various pigments.

Icons were accepted and blessed by the church officials.

Icon painters were generally anonymous until 1400's, when famous painters began signing their names to icons from their studios. A new icon was not finished until it was received and blessed by the Church. There were many ceremonies and prayers for Catholic and Orthodox liturgies, involved in the ceremony, which could take up to 40 days.²⁰

¹⁷ Sendler p 234

¹⁸ Ramos-Poqui The Technique of Icon Painting, Morehous Publishing, Harrisburg, PA, 1990 p9

¹⁹ Sendler p 235

²⁰ Ramos-Poqui p 68

Icons were hung on the iconostasis, on church walls and in home Beautiful Corners. Or they could be presented as ambassadorial gifts to devout royalty and monasteries. They were believed to have miracle working properties when hung on the gates of cities being invaded, or carried in processions before armies. Veneration and kissing of icons were believed to alleviate personal problems and health troubles too.

Innovations of the Italian Renaissance

Three dimensional realism and one lense perspective of Renaissance Italy were tried in the 16th - 17th century Russia too. These works were thrown out of churches and burned as heretical and as not preserving the theological traditions. However in Greece and the Balkans, the Icon tradition was more flexible due to the culture that ensued among refugees, when the Moslems captured Byzantium in 1453. Surviving Icon painters had fled from Constantinople to Cyprus, where they continued to paint and make innovations. They took up the Renaissance techniques that revived the idealized ancient Greek models of the Renaissance.

The Catholic Church

Italy also had its own tradition of portraying holy people, especially after the Council of Trent 1545 -1563. Though inexplicit at that time these conventions, were gradually amplified to influence many art forms, and with the Renaissance innovative portraits of nobility in crowd scenes or modeling as saints brought a new style of iconography.

Summary of How and Why I painted Icons of Local SCA Saints

Foreword

For many years I painted icons using the traditional Russian, Byzantine and even Italian prototypes and presented them to the SCA Peers for blessing. I was advised to try doing more original work and include a study of the theology of the iconostasis. Over the years I have studied Russian, Byzantine and Italian styles of icon painting and iconostasis, to devise a style that would be appropriate to Creative Anachronistic commemoration of the Forefathers and Foremothers or saints of the SCA that have passed on. This concept would be both creative and anachronistic and also respectful of the living Russian Orthodox tradition of my mentors. In the 17th century, the Russian Orthodox Church was rent asunder by controversy about the Renaissance representation traditions. The Russian style is a living theological art tradition that I do not want to offend. So I decided to use the 15th century Greek-Italian model for my creatively anachronistic icons as it is more open to innovation, while still maintaining the traditional techniques of painting.

Rather than using traditional prototypes I used photographs of current, and recently deceased SCA Forefathers and Foremothers for our local saints' icons. This follows the Renaissance (and Ancient Egyptian) practice of painting from life. David Hockney discusses the use of optics (mirrors and lenses) by the old masters beginning in Flanders in 1420 with Robert Campion, Van Eyck and Van der Weyden. Their paintings travelled to Italy by 1500 influencing the work and techniques of Leonardo, Raphael (1518) and Holbein (1533 in Germany). By 1600 Caravaggio and Rembrandt's work demonstrated the new optical methods. Rembrandt may be said to have crossed the threshold from an exterior single lense reality, to portray the inner truth of the model.²¹ Stepping off from Rembrandt's realism and interior vision, I have tried to paint in a two lense perspective (eyes), using the prototype of a single lense photograph to try to recreate the inner reality of our sainted SCA Forebearers, using my astigmatic external eyes and my inner spiritual eye to transform a photographic realism back to the inner reality of the meaning of our SCA Ancestors, as they appear to me, and to the people who remember them.

²¹ Hockney p 196

Boards

I used traditional ways of preparing the board as far as finances and availability of materials allowed. After studying many recipes, Rabbit skin glue and chalk gesso was applied in many layers to a precut poplar board. I ordered this board from Kovcheg on the internet. I wanted to avoid repetitive strain injury from chiseling and sanding in the traditional way. I also tried some innovations for cutting costs and convenience, eg plywood on wooden cradles and flat plywood boards. But I soon returned to the traditional boards as the results were far superior in weight and dignity of the finished painting despite the exorbitant cost.

Pigments

I used traditional historical earth pigments and the recognized modern equivalents for toxic and expensive alchemical colours. Working with powdered pigments is much more risky with toxic pigments than with mixed gouache or oil paints. A simple period palette²² could consist of titanium white and zinc white instead of lead white, a variety of yellow and red ochres, raw and burnt siennas, raw and burnt umbers, chromium green and other earth greens, ultramarine blue, cobalt blue, vermilion hue and ivory black.

My painting technique follows the general Byzantine method of the lesser masters. I used a flat local colour for faces, robes and backgrounds, and graduations of white mixtures for the highlights and thin, transparent dark mixtures for shades. I did not use the Russian straight white lines for highlights on the garments. I felt these were contrary to the prototypes I was using and somewhat awkward to the modern eye. I used a classical shading style similar to the Italian masters for clothing, and added some vestigial white lines on the faces to bring the icon alive. I used the mixed method of painting on the faces, which were done in alternating layers of hatching and *plav* as is traditional in both Russian and Greek icon painting schools.

BindersThe adhesives and preservatives of egg yolk, beer, vodka, vinegar, garlic and lemon juice are also claimed to be traditional monastic practices, by a living master of the art of icon painting.²³

²² Sendler p 202

²³ Vladimir Blagonadezdin, artist and architect

I used a gilding varnish rather than *olifa* gilding method, because the skill to use the longer drying method is still beyond me. Gilding varnish dries to sticky in about an hour, which fits my life style as well as my ability. Waiting 24 hours and judging just the right amount of ‘tack’ adds complexity to an already intricate process. Also, we rarely get 30 sunny days in a row to clarify the linseed oil for making *olifa*, in Vancouver.

Varnishing

The *olifa* (linseed oil and dryers) used by traditional icon painters is slow to dry and continues to attract candle smoke and insects. So I elected, on the advice of my living master, to use a Varathane varnish, as it too, is an oil based varnish, more suited to our damp climate and nomadic life style in the SCA. It also acts to make the layers of paint as translucent as the *olifa* does. A mysterious chemical reaction takes place between the layers of paint and varnish in the weeks after it is applied. After that the painting glows with brilliant color, waterproof, cat proof²⁴ and insect resistant.

These icons have been blessed with the tears of those near and dear to our departed local saints, and I am offering them to the SCA Arts & Sciences community for a blessing before passing them to the true owners. It could be said that our A&S Peers stand in the same relation in our secular society as the church officials did in past times.

I have also made miniature icons so the images of our departed heroes may be available to the populace as prints and decoupage panels. These folk art works were also common from the 1400’s onward as wood block prints and hand coloured printed images were developed for the populace. I will write more another time about these early 14th and 15th century miracle working, hand coloured printed images, pasted on boards and hung on the humble walls of the populace.

I invite my Judges, to bless my concept, efforts and intentions. I also invite suggestions for technical improvement and conceptual clarity and every effort will be made to incorporate these ideas for meeting the standards of the icon painters guild, just as the critique of the previous A&S judges has been demonstrated today.

I had previously presented my icons in Beautiful Corners such as would be found in a devout Russian or Greek Orthodox home. I also presented them in a workshop

²⁴ Yes I can testify that cats like to lick egg tempera, but don’t seem to have a preference for specific colours.

setting. But an iconostasis was requested so I have provided one. I have found a place in the Iconostasis for “Local Saints” such as St. Nicholas, St. Francis, and St. Teresa in the Orthodox tradition and have painted St. James of Compostola, and Mary Magdalene who may well occupy this position, as well as our local SCA Saints. My’ in process’ paper on iconostasis accompanies this Summary. See appendix ii

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Resources

Daniel Smith <http://www.danielsmith.com/>
4150 First Avenue South, Seattle, Washington 98134, (206) 223-9599

Iconofile, pigments, binders, gesso, gilding supplies, workshops.
<http://www.iconofile.com>

Kovcheg icon boards, links to other suppliers, <http://www.kovcheg.us/>

Opus, <http://www.opusframing.com/contact/>
1360 Johnston Street, Vancouver, BC V6H 3S1 Ph 604-736-7028 Fax 604-683-7083

Pandora Store, pigments, boards, gilding supplies, workshops.
<http://www.pandora-store.com/>

