

WHAT DOES AN ICONOGRAPHER CONTINUALLY HEAR WHEN DISCUSSING A NEW ICON WITH A CLIENT: 'DO IT AS IT WAS DONE IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY.'

By Oksana Golovko, 12 February 2019

SEARCHING FOR WHAT MAKES AN ICON AN ICON

- Is the iconographer happy to copy a past icon?
- Why do Catholics and Protestants want to learn how to paint icons?
- Why do apprentice iconographers not learn to think?
- Can a reasonable livelihood be achieved as an iconographer?



Philip Davydov. Photo by Marina Khohlova

Oksana Golovko: Philip, you are the son of the priest-iconographer: Andrei Davydov. You have, therefore, been familiar with icons since childhood. What did you learn from your father?

Philip Davydov: The family's entire daily life was centred around my father's activities. As a child I carried out some small tasks such as drawing a line or selecting a colour. After school I would be with my father and studied iconography with him. It was due to my father's guidance that I gained an articulate understanding of the icon which pointed me in the right direction. My father, and his contemporaries, sought a particular understanding of the icon; how the image became an icon; how the icon was an inherent part of the liturgy; and what makes an icon special. This quest is still highly valued by me: what makes an icon an icon?

And what makes an icon an icon?

An icon painter does not illustrate the Bible or a saint's life, but provides a particular universal image for prayer and devotion.

There should be nothing in the icon to distract the person in front of it. People coming to church need an opportunity to focus their eyes on the icon, in an authentic space, so nothing interferes with their prayers. The best outcome is when an icon helps us to pray. However, this is a more elevated function.

In the creative process, the iconographer chooses the colours and the composition. However, if he or she focuses on creating first a beautiful work of art with lots of decoration etc. then the central task, that has been given to the iconographer, is not accomplished. My father always insisted on this. He taught me to understand the pivotal focus in the creative process of an icon.

Within the overall and historical tradition of icon painting, how does an individual achieve a recognisable style?

On the one hand, I do not belong to the generation that, like my father's, graduated from an academic art school or university. They achieved the traditional artistic skills and then moved into icon painting. I was

Why adapt? As the first task is that there should be nothing to distract in the icon, all decisions are arrived at based on the central premise that the icon remains an icon. There are to be no frills or excess embellishment which will distract from that central premise.

Sketches are very important in our process. My father insisted on creating thumbnail sketches of 3 x 3 cm before painting an icon. In these he worked out the composition and other aspects of the task ahead of him. Olga and I followed this example and, in doing so, learnt that even more preparatory work needed to be done on paper, prior to working on the actual wooden board. This realisation has greatly changed our process of working and, about 80% of our method for creating an icon, is this preparation work on paper.

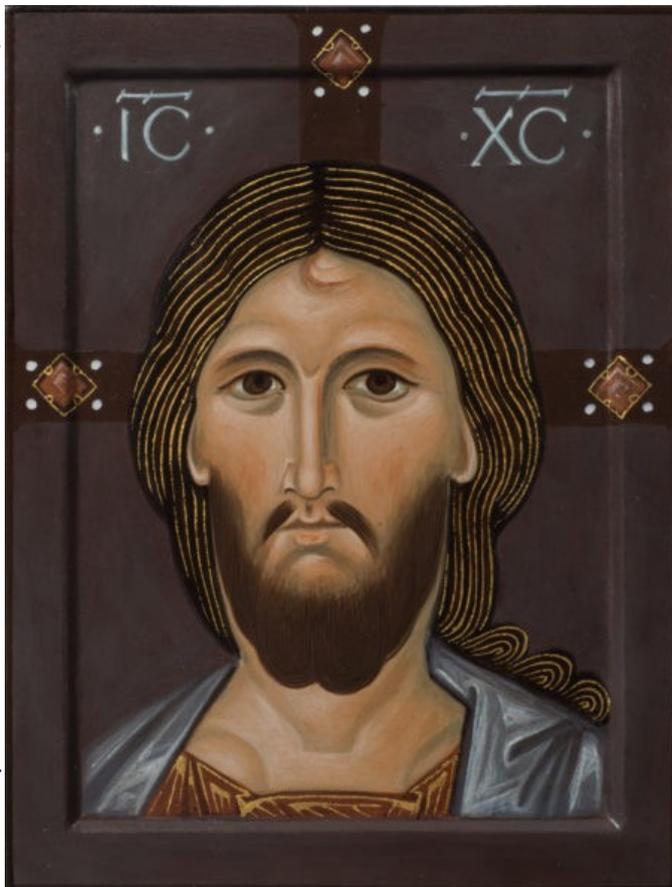
For an example: if we are to paint an icon of the Annunciation, there are various gestures or movements, and modes of composition to choose from traditional past creations. If you do most of the work on paper, then there is ample opportunity for analysing whether certain designs and colours will suit the environment that the particular icon will be situated in. We both spend a long period researching the various options in order to arrive at the final choice for the icon board.

How do you solve any theological problems?

During the preparation and research, you are aware that you have a profound responsibility. Your decisions will affect the person praying in front of the icon. So you seek the right colour of green or blue, for example, that will best suit the icon's purpose in its future location.

Some believe that an icon can be compared to a sermon. The priest writes a draft of the sermon and then he finalises the content dependent on those particular people who will be in the congregation. This is authentic and responsible theology in my opinion.

In order to let people 'hear' the language of the icon you are about to create, you need to undertake ongoing research: to visit galleries and museums to observe the artistic language of modern artists and designers so that you are familiar with this language. You can then use this knowledge to serve the church and theology. I think Andrei Rublev, if he had modern paints and a knowledge of contemporary art, would certainly use them as brilliantly as he used those of his own time.



'There will be no copies of previous icons!'

Does the client respond negatively to this statement? Do they ask what you have done? Do they say to you that all that you have done is wrong, and that what they want is a copy of an icon from the sixteenth century?

I do not have clients with those attitudes. To each request I reply that the icon created will not be a copy of a past icon. This can be a challenge for the iconographer, because, after having done so much research, and having achieved a satisfactory image, you can be tempted just to reproduce it again and again, and some secular artists do this for their livelihood.

And it could still work, but we found out, that when you are *making a new image*, when you are in a research process, you have a specific state of brain—you are learning and moving forward. When, instead, you are doing your best to *reproduce* something—even your own image (which can be your best work)—you are wasting your main energy for a technical task to achieve similarity. It's perceivable from the image, that there is no discovery, just an execution.



Some critics disagree and say there is no breakthrough in the modern icon. They comment that the so-called search and result is purely intellectual. That the contemporary iconographer is motivated by the head not by the heart.

Recently my son gave me a book on photography². In it the author states that the human brain perceives the world through two parallel visual processes. The first stage is recognition. For example, we see an icon and immediately recognize that the image is the icon of the Mother of God 'Vladimirskaya' which we have seen many times. The second process perceives the colours, composition, rhythms, textures and so on. This one analyses the image and how it affects us. Alternative: there is a green chair in front of me, how does the green colour affect me? Does a white cupboard affect me the same way as a black coloured one would?

Unfortunately, many people are unaware of the second process of seeing. It remains unconscious, and they are ignorant of how its properties can enrich their visual, devotional and affective experience. Consequently, many iconographers pander only to the first stage, because it is the level of perception with the majority of today's clients.

So today's iconographers produce well-recognisable copies of past and well-known icons. If they produce them accurately, and even embellish them with precious stones and gilding—it's just the best (for the market)!

In our studio we are trying to include the second 'channel' of the visual process as well as the first because we understand that our past predecessors did this. There are some contemporary iconographers who also do this but there are only a few. This is because this knowledge was not included in their training. They are just taught recognition, recognition, and recognition!



2 Лапин Александр «Фотография как...» (Lapin Alexander. 'Photography as...') <https://www.livelib.ru/book/1000247907-fotografiya-kak-aleksandr-lapin>

In the end, what is more important in an icon: the semantic content, or means of the artistic expression?

The icon painters of the past were highly accomplished artists who worked simultaneously on many levels. As my aunt, an avant-garde artist, says, that a person reacts spontaneously seeing shapes and colors. In the same way, when a person approaches an icon, which is created especially for him or her, there is an immediate response. Meaning is inseparable from aesthetics.

Sometimes it seems that your icons are almost in a conscious opposition to what Father Andrei does. He achieves expressiveness in somewhat different ways than you. D, details are important to him, but your works are extremely concise. Is that so?

Honestly, I can not work like my father. I cannot coordinate such a large number of different characters, different expressive forms, and so many details of an image as he does. Even working in the same workshop with my wife Olga, I can say that she manages to make icons of the feasts much easier than I. It is easier for me to concentrate on one thought and go realise it.



An icon is an experience belonging to everybody.

What is occurring today with modern iconography?

There are two courses of action for an iconographer to contemplate regarding his or her path.

The first one is satisfying the desires of church rectors, and it can be expressed with very concrete and simple words: 'Do as it was done in the past, I will pay you money, you will buy your bread.'

The second presumes that you have to find something new and special. However, nobody promises you will have any money for your work. So, if you dare to do it, and if you have some alternative source of income, then maybe you will be able to move forward.

In general, iconography is considered a highly valued and sacred craft, not an art.

The plumber repaired a water boiler and painted it. The icon painter wrote and put his icon next to the boiler; the relation to both is the same.

Is icon painting your only means of income?

No. Olga and I supplement our income by teaching in other countries such as Australia, Canada, Italy and the United States. During the twentieth century in these, and several other western countries, there has been an unprecedented interest in their neighbours' ways of religious life. This is an ecumenical and global movement. The time, when Protestants wanted to be totally opposite to Catholics and vice versa is over. Now all Christian denominations attend each others' conferences.



Philip Davydov in his studio

Icons, and praying before an icon, are experiences that belong to all Christians. Prior to the eleventh century there was no such a strong division within the church. The tradition of this church (universal at that time) includes interaction of all the human senses including the impact of visual images.

For over a thousand years iconographers have been seeking appropriate images for icons, and developing guidelines for their creations. This was art which was made within the framework of the church.

People from different faiths are yearning to learn more about icons as visual tools; what are the specific qualities and means, which allow an icon to 'work' so that they can incorporate it in their devotion and liturgy.

It is widely acknowledged that the Orthodox church has a profound experience and understanding of the application of the icon within the liturgy and as an adjunct to devotion and prayer. However, sometimes it is difficult for the Orthodox to explain that it is necessary to make an effort, not only to polish the gold, but to ensure that the image works for a contemporary person. In our country, people are used to treating an icon as a road sign. You 'recognise' her and go on.

How do you teach icon painting? Perhaps someone, who is an unbeliever, or who belongs to another religion, will ask you to teach them how to paint an icon. What would be your response?

Go to the Sofrino shop (officially recognised Russian retail mega-chain, producing liturgical vestments and other such things). I literally want to cry there. It's them who are real iconoclasts, treating sacred objects with such a depreciation.

Should a person come to us who is from another faith, such as a Buddhist or a yogi, he or she is moving towards God in their own way in a different culture to us. We can show them our path towards God and the traditional manner in which icons are painted in our culture and tradition.

What are the main challenges today in contemporary iconography?

That many people, even priests are still ignorant, not knowing that iconography is a sacred art. So, schools teach crafts and skills, but not art. The challenge is to educate people, and free up their rigid aesthetic attitudes.

When people are taught that there is only one acceptable expression in an icon, that originates in the past, this is very sad. This intransigent ignorance narrows the potential scope of vision, joy, and expression for the artist, and the output suffers through this narrow mediocrity of expectation and knowledge.

Is the iconographer happy when his icons are copied?

Icon and copyright seem to be incompatible concepts. After all, even the Stoglav Council ordered the Trinity to be painted like that of Andrei Rublev.

Since the time of Rublev, many icons of the Trinity based on his icon have been produced. Not all have been exact copies of the original. The particular icon painter has added something to it from his own artistry and vision.

If we look at past icons, we will see that nearly all of them had something original in their execution. If fifty icons, based on Rublev's Trinity, were put in a row, each would be different. This is because each painter has added something from their own imagination, talent, and artistic choice. When this approach is successful, the viewer recognises that it is an icon copied from Rublev but also distinct from it. You can see what the iconographer added from his own store of gifts and what he subtracted from the original. However the majority of iconographers, in modern times, virtually press the 'Xerox' button and you do not see any effort, vision or artistry. You just see a copy of another person's work, looking very much like a photocopy.

This attitude was explained succinctly during a discussion I had on this topic with a Romanian theologian. He said: 'My neighbour believes in God and I shall tell you what he believes in.' There is another attitude which is 'I believe in God and I shall tell you what I believe in.'



Here is a copy of one of your icons. For some individual this icon was significant and he or she decided to make a copy of your icon. Is this bad?

Why should I like it? I have put a great deal of time, energy, skill and effort into expressing God for my fellow parishioners in this particular way. The person who copied my icon did it for other people. That iconographer will speak to them more convincingly through his or her own voice and vision. They will then appreciate how he or she spoke directly to them in their own time, environment and culture. Such an icon will have more meaning and significance for them.

Each brushstroke made by the painter is individual. If we seek just to copy others then we are turning iconographers into photocopyers, not artists.

Why, in ancient times, did iconographers make their the spisok³ as accurately as possible?

Yes, that is so, but the copies were created by the master and each icon was recognised as by his hand. To use another analogy: the poet, Horace, said, 'I built a monument to myself.' Horace was translated both by Derzhavin and Pushkin and many other poets. However, when you read each of their translations, you recognise that the poem is by Horace, but that each of the translating poets added a unique quality to the original.

If someone took your icon as a basis, and then added or changed something, how would you react?

I would be happy if a person discovered a new and fresh solution based on my efforts, but I would be saddened if it was just an attempt at an exact copy.

Here is an icon of the Vladimirskaya, an icon of the Mother of God that I painted once upon a time, and in the margins of the icon have small stars on them. My stars are small, and they drown in this deep blue background there, becoming little twinkles. Another person took it as a model, made the 'same' icon, only the stars are huge in the fields. This is not cool ...

The important point is not about copyright, but whether the iconographer actually 'wrote' an icon or merely produced a photocopy. Did the artist write or simply 'xerox' someone else's work. Just knowing the patterns, you see what the main creative energy was used for. If it is to reproduce your solution, but to make it more carefully, you feel hurt. If a person develops your decision, tries to find a new interesting way out of it, you feel great.

I am very happy if someone wants to produce an icon based on my original one providing they apply a fresh approach from their own creative source.

Regarding the 'Vladimirskaya' (an icon of the Mother of God): A 15th century iconographer could view a copy of this icon and say, 'Here someone just copied my work.' However, if it was only based on the original, then the response would be 'Here this icon painter found his or her own solution?'

In the fifteenth century there were no technical means to copy images exactly. Icon painters could not upload a photo on their smart phone in order to draw or trace from it. So each painter had to work independently from their own intelligence and abilities.

How long does it take to produce an icon. When do you know that it is finished?



3
(especially of a picture or an icon)

³“Spisok”: an old Russian word **спісок** (spýsok) now has a range of meanings: list, register, roll, script, or a copy

The fact of the matter is that you are constantly analyzing how much further is there to go. You keep sorting out the visual means, checking if they work for your main goal or not.

It is very difficult, and it's a great responsibility. The hardest part is not only to control yourself, but to make yourself delete everything and start from scratch many times, if what you are doing does not work.

It is an ongoing process and the time to create the icon is unknown. You cannot say, 'Plan and research for 15 hours, pray for 40 days, and all will work out well!'

This interview was originally published in Russian, and it's original version is here:

<https://www.pravmir.ru/sdelay-kak-byilo-v-xvi-veke-cto-slyishit-ikonopisets-kogda-ishhet-novoe-reshenie/>,

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