Sacred Image, Sacred Power

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The icon is the legacy of Byzantium (AD 330–1453), the Christian, East Roman Empire governed from Constantinople. In Greek the word eikon simply means “image,” and today it is usually understood to mean an abstract religious portrait painted in egg tempera on a gold-covered wooden board (Figure 9.1). But an icon could also be a mosaic, or even a coin; it could be elaborate or simple, one of a kind or mass produced (Weitzmann, 1978, 13ff.). What defined an icon in Byzantium was neither medium nor style, but rather how the image was used, and especially, what people believed it to be. An icon was, and in the Orthodox Church remains, a devotional image, one deserving special reverence and respect (*Byzantine Art*, 1964, 269). This is so because an icon is believed to be a holy image, one which literally shares in the sanctity of the figure whose likeness it bears. The accepted Orthodox view was succinctly stated nearly twelve centuries ago by St. Theodore the Studite (Mango, 1972, 173):

Every artificial image . . . exhibits in itself, by way of imitation, the form of its model . . . the model [is] in the image, the one in the other, except for the difference of substance. Hence, he who reveres an image surely reveres the person whom the image shows; not the substance of the image . . . Nor does the singleness of his veneration separate the model from the image, since, by virtue of imitation, the image and the model are one. . . .

In the eyes of Orthodoxy, Christ and his icon, the model and its image, are one. Yet, the divinity of Christ (his ousia or “substance,” as opposed to his prosopon or “person”) remains distinct from the wood and paint of the panel, which if

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covered over loses both picture and holiness. From the point of view of “devotional utility,” the panel as a palpable thing therefore necessarily disappears. For on the one hand, because of imitation (the fact that it looks like what people think the historical Jesus looked like), the icon becomes one and the same with what it portrays, whereas on the other, because of veneration (the Christian’s devotional attitude toward it), the icon becomes effectively transparent – it is transformed into a “window” or “door” through which the worshipper gains access to sanctity. In the words of St. Basil (Mango, 1972, 47), “the honor shown to the image is transmitted to its model.”

What does this reveal about the art of icon painting? First, it is remarkable that the icon as a category of object, aesthetic or otherwise, is ignored; there are no

Figure 9.1 Christ “the wisdom of God,” panel painting, c.1400. Greek Ministry of Culture, Archaeological Receipt Fund, Museum of Byzantine Culture, Thessaloniki
qualifications placed on what constitutes an icon, what a good icon is, or a bad one, or how close to the accepted portrait type a painting must come in order to qualify as an icon. Theodore the Studite goes on to note that an icon will lose its “iconness” through obliteration, and thereby revert to base substance, but he begs the more fundamental question of what it takes for substance to become icon in the first place. To him and those around him it must have been obvious: an icon was simply what they all recognized to be an icon. Term and object were, for them, affectively defined: a painting became an icon at the moment when it began to function as an icon. In this sense, it was created “in the eye of the beholder,” which suggests that natural phenomena, like clouds, could become icons too. And in fact, that seems to have been true, at least to judge from stories like that preserved in the diary of a fifteenth-century Spanish visitor to Constantinople named Clavijo, who describes Christians of that city venerating a slab of richly veined marble in Hagia Sophia that they thought looked like the Virgin and Child with St. John the Baptist (Clavijo, 1928, 75):

These figures as I have said are not drawn or painted with any pigment, nor graven in the stone artificially, but are entirely natural and of its substance; for the stone evidently was formed thus by nature with this veining. . . . These sacred figures on the stone appear as if standing on the clouds in the clear heaven, indeed it is as though a thin veil were drawn before them. . . .

In Byzantium the theory of sacred images and the artistic form they took were closely intertwined; many have called icons “theology in colors.” When a Byzantine Christian stood before an icon of Christ he believed himself to be standing face-to-face with his Savior; this, for him, was a sacred place and moment of encounter with God. Frontality and direct eye contact were therefore essential; references to earthly time or “real” space were potentially distracting, and in any case, irrelevant. Gold backgrounds, bust-length portraits, over-large eyes, gestures of blessing, “otherworldliness,” timelessness, a sense of transcendental power – these defining characteristics of icons were all dictated by the theology of sacred images and, more specifically, by the nature of the icon experience itself. And so, too, was the intense psychological “dialogue” with the beholder that the style of many icons seems to imply. Christ, through his image, dramatically confronts the worshipper; he sees into the soul to comfort or condemn. “His eyes . . . ,” so begins a Byzantine description of an image much like that illustrated in our Figure 9.2, “His eyes are joyful and welcoming to those who are not reproached by their conscience . . . but to those who are condemned by their own judgment, they are wrathful and hostile” (Maguire, 1974, 133: Mesarites, ca. 1200). The right side of Christ’s face (our left) is open, receptive, and welcoming, whereas his left side – Byzantium’s traditional side of judgment and condemnation – is harsh and threatening, the eyebrow arched, the cheekbone accentuated by shadow, and the mouth drawn down as if in a sneer. Christ’s judgment, whether comfort or condemnation, is here literally created in the eye and conscience of the beholder.
Not all Byzantine icons are portraits; many instead show Gospel scenes, especially those sacred events evocative of major church holidays, such as Easter, Christmas, and Epiphany. Because most of these icons have a specific story to tell, the figures portrayed must somehow be shown interacting, yet at the same time the image as a whole is subject to the same principles of frontality and timelessness that, much more easily, shaped the format and style of portrait icons.
On the restrictive two-dimensional surface of a panel the solution was to suppress anecdotal detail and to set the actors in three-quarter frontal poses, so that in effect they are looking out of the picture plane, and thereby engaging the beholder, at least obliquely, in a shared sacred space (Demus, 1947, 6 ff.). Mural icons, on the other hand, were subject to more flexible rules, insofar as their supporting architectural surface need not be flat. The Byzantine response, exemplified by the Annunciation mosaic at Daphni, was ingenious: the Virgin Mary is shown frontally, yet at the same time she faces the Archangel Gabriel across the void created as the squinch which supports them recedes into space – a sacred space now dramatically charged by the spiritual power they share.

What did the theology of sacred images mean for the artist? When a Byzantine painter painted an icon, the model before him and the panel in his hands had to be, in all essential characteristics, identical. Like a scribe transcribing the Gospels, an icon painter was bound by sacred tradition; he could neither add nor take away. For an icon to be an icon it must be easily recognizable; its “image” could no more be subject to change than could a saint, or Christ himself. Thus, necessarily, an icon of Christ “Almighty” from the fourteenth century (Figure 9.1) is, in all of its most salient qualities, essentially like one from the sixth century (Figure 9.2); eight hundred years separate the two, but on first view they seem virtually identical. In actuality, however, they are not identical, for Byzantine painters of talent, as these two certainly were, could distinguish themselves even within a strictly circumscribed iconographic tradition, much as scribes, through expert calligraphy, could set themselves apart even in transcribing the Gospels. But by any standard, the icon painter’s art was one of subtleties, which strove for perfection only over an extended time. Originality and self-expression as we know and value them in modern art had no counterparts in Byzantium; there were not “better” icons, or those that were judged inferior, nor was there talk of originals or copies. And from the point of view of image theory it could be no other way, since, as Theodore the Studite observed, “every artificial image . . . exhibits in itself, by way of imitation, the form of the model,” and the model is “the person whom the image shows.” By definition, then, the real model behind a Byzantine icon was not another icon (that was the proximate model only), but rather the deity or saint represented. This means that every sacred image was a copy, and that none was closer than another to the prototype (Vikan, “Ruminations”).

But to view Byzantine art simply as an art of copies is, on the one hand, to misunderstand its broader role in Byzantine culture generally, and on the other, to misrepresent and grossly undervalue its achievement. Continuity through replication was not simply a Byzantine workshop practice, nor even was it distinctive to the theology of sacred images; it was a broadly-based religious ideal governing the actions and relationships of all Christians. Jesus was himself the ultimate prototype, and the individual – by way of chains of “copies,” from biblical heroes to saints to holy men to local monks – was charged to be his imitator (Brown, 1983). St. Basil gives the following advice (Saint Basil, 1961, I, 15 ff.):
[In the scriptures] the lives of saintly men, recorded and handed down to us, lie before us like living images . . . for our imitation of their good works. And so in whatever respect each one perceives himself deficient, if he devotes himself to such imitation, he will discover there, as in the shop of a public physician, the specific remedy for his infirmity.

Basil’s two key words, image and imitation, are already familiar from icon theory, and this was no accident, for just a few lines later he draws an explicit parallel between the workshop practice of artists and the appropriate mimetic behavior of Christians generally:

. . . just as painters in working from models constantly gaze at their exemplar and thus strive to transfer the expression of the original to their artistry, so too he who is anxious to make himself perfect in all the kinds of virtue must gaze upon the lives of saints as upon statues, so to speak, that move and act, and must make their excellence his own by imitation.

For an artist as for a Christian, copying was both normative and good; indeed, it was among the central ingredients in a millennium of Byzantine piety.

Stated in this way it seems as if the icon painter were little more than a craftsman, but this is correct only if icons are judged anachronistically, according to modern aesthetic notions. For while it is true that originality, self-expression, and even beauty were not the icon painter’s main goals, other still loftier aims were in their place. An icon was not simply a work of art, it was a door to heaven; but even more than that, an icon was heaven’s door to earth – literally, a channel through which Christ, the Virgin, or a saint could exercise sacred power among men. The “spiritual traffic” of sacred images thus moved in both directions, and icons frequently functioned not simply as devotional images, but as miraculous images, for converting the heathen, for preserving the Empire, and especially, for healing the sick (Kitzinger, 1954, 100ff.). A characteristic icon miracle is recounted in Chapter 118 of the Life of St. Symeon Stylites the Younger (AD 521–92), a column-dwelling holy man whose pilgrimage shrine near Antioch was renowned for its supernatural healings (van den Ven, 1962/1970): A hemorrhaging woman in Cilicia (i.e. far from the saint’s shrine) invokes Symeon’s aid with the words: “If only I see your image [icon] I will be saved.” How, one wonders, can this be? Because “the Holy Spirit which inhabits Symeon covers it with its shadow.” Thus it is through a spontaneous “spiritual infusion” not unlike that of the Incarnation that a picture painted by man is believed capable of healing. Certainly the label “craft” is inappropriate for an art form like this, which opened vistas to heaven and brought heaven’s power down to earth; and certainly the makers of this art, anonymous though they were, should not be considered mere craftsmen.

The idea that iconic verisimilitude alone was enough to gain access to sacred power was slow to develop in the Byzantine mind. Only by the sixth and seventh centuries was it well accepted (Kitzinger, 1954, 95ff.), and this was long after
the belief had taken firm root that holy objects (relics) and holy places (pilgrim-age sites) could channel and deliver miracles (Delehaye, 1933, 50 ff.; Vikan, 1982, 1 ff.). Moreover, it is remarkable that even at that relatively late period images were often believed sacred only because their substance was believed sacred. This hybrid object type might best be called a “relic-icon,” and it came in at least two distinct but closely related forms. On the one hand there were a few famous acheiropoietai, icons “not made by human hands,” foremost of which was the Mandylion of Edessa: Christ wiped his face with a towel, and the towel miraculously retained his image. It is an icon because of that image, but it is also a relic because of Christ’s contact. (And it was the source of miracles, including the defeat of the Persian army at the gates of Edessa in AD 544; Cameron, 1980.) On the other hand, there were the many types of pilgrim eulogiai (“blessings”) that were then becoming popular (Vikan, 1982, 10 ff.). Usually these were small portions of earth, wax, oil, or water which had been sanctified by contact with a relic or holy person, and then mechanically impressed by a stamp (into the solid material itself, or onto the vessel containing the liquid) with an appropriate image of whatever or whoever was the source of the sanctification. They are icons because of that image, but they are also relics because of sacred contact. The most characteristic representatives of this category of relic-icon are Symeon Tokens – hardened bits of earth from the “Miraculous Mountain” of Symeon Stylites, sanctified by direct contact with the saint (or his column), and stamped with an image of Symeon atop his column.

The surprising fact about the Edessa Mandylion and Symeon Tokens is that both are known to have existed first simply as sacred objects, without images. Averil Cameron (1980) has shown how the Edessa “towel” – which according to early texts was not a cloth at all, but a papyrus letter from Christ to Edessa’s King Abgarus – literally “acquired” its sacred image in the later sixth century, long after it had become a popular and potent non-iconic relic. And regarding Symeon Tokens, one need only read the saint’s Life to discover how frequently his miracle-working earth was dispensed without its stamped icon. For both towel and token, images were associated with sacred power, but this association came only after the fact. Apparently relics without images were good, but relics with images were even better. Why? One senses at least part of the answer in the intimate link, even from the earliest years of the cult of relics, between miraculous imagery and the quasi-mystical relic experience. St. Jerome’s account of Paula’s first encounter with the wood of the True Cross (ca. 400) is typical (Wilkinson, 1977): “she fell down and worshipped . . . as if she could see the Lord hanging on it.” Proximity to a holy object evoked in Paula a profound spiritual experience, and that experience had a strongly visual dimension; one even suspects that her vision was somehow a necessary condition for her experience of the deity’s physical presence – a presence which was certainly potential, but perhaps not fully realized, in the relic itself.

The evidence from Symeon’s “Miraculous Mountain,” about two centuries later, is much more explicit. Chapter 231 of the saint’s Life describes the
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misgivings of a father who is told to return home from his pilgrimage with his still gravely ill son to await Symeon’s cure (van den Ven, 1962/1970). “The power of God . . . is efficacious everywhere,” assures the saint. “Therefore, take this eulogia [“blessing”] made of my dust, depart, and when you look at the imprint of our image, it is us that you will see.” The father is being offered – in the form of a Symeon Token – two distinct assurances that his son will eventually be saved: the blessed earth, a well-known eulogia whose powers he must already have recognized, and the saint’s image impressed on it. Somehow, when they return home and gaze on that image, father and son will in effect be confronted with a vision of the saint himself. But why should that be reassuring? The answer comes later in the same story. The man’s third son falls ill and he, too, asks to be taken to the “Miraculous Mountain.” But his father recalls the instructions of the saint and assures him that Symeon will come to visit him there, at home, and he will be healed. At this point – assumedly with Symeon Token in hand – the young man gasps and calls out, “St. Symeon, have pity on me.” He then turns to his father and cries, “Get up quickly, throw on incense, and pray, for the servant of God, St. Symeon, is before me. . . .” In that moment Symeon appears in a vision, attacks (through his eulogia) the demon that has tormented the youth, and saves him.

Other Symeon miracles suggest the same scenario – namely, that a vision of the saint was instrumental in making effective the miraculous powers of his earthen eulogia, and that the vision could be induced by a man-made image. And the same was true at other Early Byzantine loca sancta (“holy sites”). As incubation (sleeping near relics) was instrumental to miraculous healing at “Holy Doctor” shrines like those of Sts. Cosmas and Damian, Cyrus and John, and Artemios, so a dream-like vision of the saint was instrumental to successful incubation (Vikan, 1984, 73). And this vision seems most often to have been induced by images of the saint set up around the shrine. The common denominator is clear: seeing the saint through his icon ensured his presence, and his presence ensured the miraculous efficacy of his relic. In other words, the power of the relic was being “triggered” and released by the saint’s icon.

But this seems not to have been the sole, or perhaps even the main reason for adding images to relics. One need only survey the iconography of these “added pictures” to discover that most of them share something surprising in common: they repeat distinguishing architectural elements of the relic shrine from which they were issued. This is especially prevalent among the so-called Palestinian Ampullae – small pewter flasks of sixth- to seventh-century date which, having been filled with oil sanctified by contact with the True Cross, were carried home as medico-magical pilgrim eulogiai from the Shrine of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem (Vikan, 1982, 20ff.). Nearly all, as one might expect, bear some imagery evocative of the two major biblical events that had taken place at that famous locus sanctus – namely, the Crucifixion and the Resurrection. But surprisingly, most interpose between the two Marys and the Angel in the scene of the Women at the Tomb a small piece of architecture that clearly corresponds in its
most salient features (columns, pointed roof, grilles) to what we know the Holy Sepulchre itself looked like at the time. Certainly this was not simply a visual reminder of what the pilgrim had just seen, nor could it have been intended literally to illustrate the Gospel narrative, which describes a simple rock-hewn grave. The point must instead have been to capture, through iconic verisimilitude, a portion of the sacred power, the *eulogia*, which emanated on-site from the Jerusalem shrine.

For the pilgrim the *eulogia* was the spiritually-charged “blessing” received from a holy place, holy object, or holy person (Vikan, 1982, 10 ff.). Most often it came through physical contact, which could either be direct but fleeting, for example, by kissing the wood of the True Cross, or indirect but concrete, for example, through oil that had itself touched the True Cross. Both modes, of course, depended for their spiritual efficacy on the commonly held conviction that sanctity and its power were in some measure transferrable through touch (Vikan, 1982, 5). But there were other, more “iconic” ways of gaining the power of the *eulogia*. For example, an anonymous pilgrim from Piacenza, traveling south through Palestine around 570, describes the following scenes at Mount Gilboa (Wilkinson, 1977, 85):

> ... when we had travelled straight down for twenty miles [from Jerusalem] we came to Mount Gilboa, where David killed Goliath. [. . .] Goliath’s resting-place is there in the middle of the road, and there is a pile of wood at his head. There is also a heap of stones – such a mountain of them that there is not a pebble left for a distance of 20 miles, since anyone going that way makes a gesture of contempt by taking three stones and throwing them at his grave.

In the Valley of Gethsemane this same pilgrim lies on each of the three couches upon which Christ had reclined during the night of his betrayal, “... to gain their blessing.” Similarly, at Cana he reclines at the wedding table where Christ had reclined, fills with wine one of the two surviving jugs in which Christ had transformed water into wine, then lifts it to his shoulder and offers it at the altar – again, “... to gain a blessing.” In each instance the Piacenza pilgrim performs an appropriate imitative action at the appropriate *locus sanctus*; the sacred spot provides his stage and the relics his props.

From these and many other similar stories it is clear that the ritualized reenactment of biblical events was a central ingredient in the pilgrim’s experience (Vikan, “Pilgrims”). The reenactment might be performed privately, as it was at Mount Gilboa and Cana, or it might be performed communally, as it frequently was in Jerusalem as part of public liturgical processions. On Palm Sunday, for example, a special afternoon service held on the Mount of Olives would conclude with the Gospel account of the Triumphant Entry (Wilkinson, 1971, 74, 132 f.). Then the entire congregation, with palm fronds in hand, would escort the bishop down from the Mount and into the city along the path once followed by Jesus. A similar dramatic reenactment was staged each Sunday morning in the Anastasis
Rotunda before the Holy Sepulchre; a late fourth-century Spanish pilgrim, Egeria, describes the scene (Wilkinson, 1971, 125):

. . . at [the first cock crow] the bishop enters, and goes into the cave of the Anastasis [i.e. the Holy Sepulchre]. [ . . . ] After [the recitation of] three Psalms and prayers, [the clergy] take censers into the cave of the Anastasis so that the whole . . . basilica is filled with the smell. Then the bishop, standing inside the screen, takes the Gospel book and goes to the door, where he himself reads the account of the Lord’s resurrection. At the beginning of the reading the whole assembly groans and laments at all the Lord underwent for us. . . .

Such a highly theatrical event must have left the pilgrim with a deep spiritual and visual impression. The service was celebrated on the day of the Resurrection in the shrine which was taken to be its proof, and from the very spot where the angel once announced the good news to the two Marys, a bishop now announces the same news to the assembled congregation.

Such reenactments might be taken as a natural extension of the mandate for Christian mimesis expressed by, among others, St. Basil. But more specifically, these were the ritualized actions and the empathic identification which gave shape and meaning to the pilgrim’s day-to-day existence; this was how he experienced the locus sanctus and this was how he secured for himself the transfer of its eulogia. It was as if that congregation in the Anastasis Rotunda, the bishop and clergy, and the Holy Sepulchre itself converged for a moment to become a “living icon” of the Resurrection. For like an icon, they, by virtue of iconographic verisimilitude, collectively joined the chain of imparted sanctity leading back to the archetype, to the sacred biblical event itself. And in doing so they achieved what Theodore the Studite said all icons achieved: identity of image and model. These pilgrims did not merely touch the holy site, nor were they satisfied just to take away its blessed oil; they wanted to be, at least briefly, iconically one and the same with it. And this, at least in part, is how they gained access to its sacred power.

This, too, is one way they took that sacred power home with them: in the form of eulogia images that were (as they just had been) iconically one and the same with the locus sanctus. These were not simply “triggers” to enhance the efficacy of the relic; they were potent forms of spiritual power in their own right. This is clear from the frequency with which such images began to appear alone, without relics, yet still in contexts which presuppose the presence of sacred power. Especially revealing are many Early Byzantine amulets, which bear iconography originally developed for and popularized among pilgrim eulogiai. In this case, the sanctified oil of the Palestinian Ampulla is gone, but the site’s distinctive image remains – though now it is simply impressed into a copper disc with a hole at the top to allow for its suspension around the neck as amuletic jewelry. Side by side, amulet and eulogia look much the same, but what has
happened to distinguish them is profound in its implications for the cult of sacred images. For the sanctity and miraculous power formerly thought transferrable only through physical contact is now believed transferrable simply by iconic verisimilitude. The theology of sacred images implicit in such objects is the same as that explicit in the contemporary Life of Symeon Stylites: “If only I see your image [icon] I will be saved . . . [for] the Holy Spirit which inhabits Symeon covers it with its shadow.” Relics have helped to give birth to icons, and those icons – now fully liberated from their relics – are free to function and develop on their own.

Bibliography


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