

# Imagination, Expression, Icon Reclaiming the Internal Prototype

By Hieromonk Silouan

...Each one of us has his own peculiar way of expression...The capable artist is by no means a mechanical copier, but a creator in the true sense of the term. Unfortunately, even among iconographers there are some who have the idea that...iconography is an art of copying. Such artists, by saying this reveal quite clearly that they have understood nothing with regard to this art, and that they are incapable of probing its mystical depth, but occupy themselves only with the surface.

*Photis Kontoglou, The Orthodox Tradition of Iconography*<sup>1</sup>

Icons are a requirement of our nature. Can our nature do without an image? Can we call to mind an absent person without representing or imagining him to ourselves? Has not God Himself given us the capacity of representation and imagination? Icons are the Church's answer to a crying necessity of our nature.

*St. John of Kronstadt, My Life in Christ*<sup>2</sup>

It has become axiomatic in most texts articulating the differences between the traditional icon and secular art, to strongly stress that icon painting has nothing to do with the painter's imagination. The inordinate importance placed on the latter, as embodied in the works of post-Renaissance religious art, along with the erosive effects of secularism, are generally acknowledged as some of the main culprits behind the gradual estrangement and eventual forgetting of the

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[Editorial Note] This paper is a revised and expanded version of the talk with the same title given at the symposium, *Living Tradition: Painting Sacred Icons in the 21st Century*, organized by the Orthodox Arts Journal and which took place on May 23, 2015, at Holy Ascension Orthodox Church, Mt. Pleasant, SC.

<sup>1</sup> Photis Kontoglou, "The Orthodox Tradition of Iconography," in *Fine Arts and Tradition: A Presentation of Kontoglou's Teaching*, C. Cavaros (ed.), The Institute for Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, Belmont, 2004, pp. 63;66.

<sup>2</sup> S. John of Kronstadt, *My Life in Christ*, E. E. Goulaeff (trans.), Cassell and Comp. Ltd., London, p.430.

traditional understanding of the icon within Orthodoxy since the 17th century.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the discipline of icon painting as a sacred art is often contrasted to the modernist notion of “self-expression,” since what is to guide the hand and determine the composition is not the painter’s ego, but rather the Holy Spirit and Tradition. The painter is to supply only his skill, his craftsmanship. He must get out of the way.

Thus “style,” the individual’s manner of expression, appears to be of no ultimate consequence. What matters is *what* is being said, the revealed doctrine, rather than *who* says it. Therefore, icon painting as exemplary of the “traditional doctrine of art,” can be described, in the words of the preeminent scholar of Medieval and Oriental art, Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, as a “constant and normal” art, whereas post-Renaissance art can be seen as “variable and individualistic,” modernist painting being one of the culminating examples of this tendency.<sup>4</sup> In other words, if for the former stylistic variation hardly if at all changes, since its pictorial form has been acknowledged as best suited in embodying theological truth and manifesting the Sacred; for the latter, on the other hand, stylistic change is inevitable and encouraged, treated as an exhibitionism of solipsistic exploration and pursued in the name of “originality,” a must in keeping up with the zeitgeist. In short, our contemporary fixation on “style” is a mistaking of the accidental for the essential and betrays our culture’s preference for the contingent over immutable principles<sup>5</sup>.

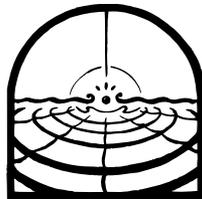
This assessment is generally undeniable and has contributed to rid us of many prejudices held against the icon and other forms of sacred art. We often find parallels in the writings of the pioneers of the of 20th

<sup>3</sup> On the imagination and its detrimental influence in icon painting see: L. Ouspensky, “Art in the Russian Church During the Symodal Period,” in: *Theology of the Icon*, Vol. II, A. Gythiel (trans.), SVS Press, Crestwood, 1992, pp. 435-436; idem, “The Icon in the Modern World,” *ibid.*, pp. 473-474; P. Kontoglou, *op. cit.*, p.30; P. Evdokimov, “The Canons and Creative Liberty,” in *The Art of the Icon: A Theology of Beauty*, Oakwood Publications, Redondo Beach, 1996, p.216; M. Quenot, *The Icon: Window on the Kingdom*, SVS Press, Crestwood, 1991, p.66-79; P. Florensky, *Iconostasis*, SVS Press, Crestwood, 1996, pp.78-82; C. Cavarnos, *Guide to Byzantine Iconography, Vol. II*, Holy Transfiguration Monastery, Boston, 2001, p. 145; A. Louth, “Tradition and the Icon,” in: *The Way*, 44/4, October, 2005, p. 149; I. Yazykova, *Hidden and Triumphant: The Underground Struggle to Save Russian Iconography*, Paraclete Press, Brewster, 2010, p. 143.

<sup>4</sup> A. K. Coomaraswamy, *On the Traditional Doctrine of Art*, Golgonooza Press, Ipswich, 1977, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> As Coomaraswamy puts it, “Styles are the accident and by no means the essence of art...” A. K. Coomaraswamy, *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd. 1972, p. 39.

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