

Iconography East and West

The Theology of Icons at the Seventh Ecumenical Council

The art historian, Robin Cormack has posed the question: What are “the allowable functions of religious art”?¹ In a sense, this was the question with which the Church struggled from the end of the seventh century until the end of the ninth century, seeking to understand the relationship of beauty to worship. Strictly speaking Orthodox iconography is not “art” as latterly understood in the west; however, the broad scope of the question is justified by the fact that during the Byzantine period, icons (from the Greek word, *eikon*, meaning image) meant not only frescos or paintings on wooden panels (as today), but also utilising many other forms, including “mosaics, carved ivory, illustrated manuscripts and even statues.”^{2,3} Certainly, Professor Cormack is correct in saying that the Quinisext Council in 692 placed iconography “firmly on the theological agenda.”⁴ However, Cormack’s aesthetic focus (supported by an insightful analysis of Byzantine politics) is misleading as well as illuminating. Icons became a pawn on the chessboard of Christological controversy—one aspect of the struggle to define the nature of Christ, how He should be worshipped, and the meaning of the Incarnation. The icon is

¹Robin Cormack, *Byzantine Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 86. Robin Cormack was formerly Professor of History of Art at the University of London, Deputy Director of the Courtauld Institute of Art and Co-curator of the 25 October 2008-22 March 2009 Royal Academy of Arts Exhibition, *Byzantium 330-1453*.

² Statues are generally absent from Orthodox temples because three dimensional media cannot articulate theology without impressionism, naturalism or sentiment - theology in canonical two dimensional media being one of the main functions of an icon. Carvings in relief are allowable but not very commonly used.

³ Andrew Louth. “Iconoclasm” and “Iconography,” pp. 318-319 in Adrian Hastings, Alistair Mason & Hugh Pyper (Eds.), *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 319.

⁴ Cormack, p. 86.

primarily “a sign of the presence of God,” a place where each believer can stand and pray and affirm, “Behold my faith.”⁵

The theological controversy continued through the Quinisext Council, the local council in the palace of Hiera at Chalcedon in 754, the Seventh Council at Nicea in 787, the local council in St Sophia in 815, and the Synod in Constantinople in 843 at which the Triumph of Orthodoxy and the affirmation of the holy icons was confirmed. Each of these five gatherings made significant and often conflicting contributions to the theology of the holy icons, but it was the Seventh Council in 787 that defined the theology of the holy icons that the Orthodox Church eventually adopted. Thus it is important to understand the decree of the Seventh Council and its underlying theology.

The Decree of the Seventh Ecumenical Council

The eight short paragraphs of the decree of this council (leaving aside the opening and closing salutations) were written after eight sessions and the promulgation of 52 canons. There was also a subsequent letter to the six-year-old Emperor Constantine VI and his mother, the Empress Irene, who was Regent and a firm supporter of icons. The council had opened in 786, but then been dissolved at the first session when the imperial guard, who supported the destruction of icons, had revolted.⁶ However, with an astute military campaign, Irene had disarmed the mutineers, and then reassembled the council in the more secure area of Nicea. Everyone present would have been well aware that “the politicisation of religious

⁵ Alfredo Tradigo, *Icons and Saints of the Eastern Orthodox Church*. Trans. by Stephen Sartarelli from the Italian, *Icone e santi d'Oriente* (Los Angeles, CA: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2004/2006),

p. 6

⁶ Egon Sendler, *The icon: Image of the invisible: Elements of Theology, Aesthetics and Technique*. Trans. By Father Steven Bigham from the French, *L'icone: Image de l'invisible* (Redondo Beach, CA: Oakwood Publications, 1981/1986), pp. 27-28.

art impinged upon every area of thought and action,”⁷ but their concerns were primarily theological and pastoral. The decree expressed the hope that the Church “may receive stability by our common decree.”⁸ Indeed, the decree and supporting canons were unanimously agreed by the more than 300 bishops, monks and legates—the last of the councils to be accepted by the universal church.⁹

The primary means of achieving stability, as expressed in the first full paragraph of the decree, was to affirm that Christ had “bestowed upon us the light of the knowledge of Himself” and “redeemed us from the darkness of idolatrous madness.” The second paragraph of the Decree stressed the distinction between “holy and profane,” between “the images of our Lord and of his Saints [and] the statues of diabolical idols.” **[1]**¹⁰ The third paragraph reiterated the Nicene Creed; and the fourth paragraph affirmed the formulation of the Council of Ephesus of 431 of Christ’s two natures, “recognizing him as perfect God and perfect man.”¹¹ The fifth paragraph kept unchanged

all the ecclesiastical traditions handed down to us, whether in writing or verbally, one of which is the making of pictorial representations, agreeable to the history of the preaching of the Gospel, a tradition useful in many respects, but especially in this, that so the incarnation of the Word of God is shown forth as real and not merely phantastic [i.e. fantastic]....**[2]**

⁷ Cormack, p. 87.

⁸ Philip Schaff & Rev. Henry Wallace (Eds.), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*. Second series, Vol. XIV (Cosimo, NY: Cosimo Classics, 1900/2007), p. 549.

⁹ There are up to four post-Schism Councils that may as yet be formally recognised as Ecumenical.

¹⁰ The numbers in bold link with the theology of the next section of this essay.

¹¹ Schaff & Wallace, p. 549.

Thus the first five paragraphs set the scene for the detailed affirmation of iconography that was to follow.

The key sixth paragraph drew out the practical implications of icons for the Church and its members:

We . . . define with all certitude and accuracy that just as the figure of the precious and life-giving Cross, so also the venerable and holy images, as well in painting an mosaic as of other fit materials, should be set forth in the holy churches of God, and on the sacred vessels and on the vestments and on hangings and in pictures both in houses and by the wayside, to wit, the figure of our Lord God and Saviour Jesus Christ, of our spotless Lady, the Mother of God, of the honourable Angels, of all Saints and of all pious people. For by so much more frequently as they are seen in artistic representation, by so much more readily are men lifted up to the memory of their prototypes, and to a longing after them;[3] and to these should be given due salutation and honourable reverence [proskynesis schetike], not indeed that true worship of faith [latria] which pertains alone to the divine nature;[4] but to these, as to the figure of the precious life-giving Cross and to the Book of the Gospels and to the other holy objects, incense and lights may be offered according to ancient pious custom. For the honour which is paid to the image passes on to that which the image represents, and he who reveres the image reveres in it the subject represented.¹²

Finally, the seventh paragraph confirmed that the Book of Gospels, the image of the cross, the pictorial icons and the relics of martyrs were not to be rejected, while the eighth paragraph “cried out”:

So we all believe, we all are so minded, we all give our consent and have signed. This is the faith of the Apostles, this is the faith of the orthodox, [5] this is the faith which hath made firm the whole world. Believing in one God, to be celebrated in Trinity, we salute the honourable images!

¹² Schaff & Wallace p. 550.

. . . We place under anathema those . . . who presume to apply to the venerable images the things said in Holy Scriptures about idols....¹³

Although the decree's firm support for iconography is clear, the underlying theology requires further analysis.

The Underlying Theology of the Seventh Ecumenical Council

A close reading of the decree suggests five important aspects of a theology of the holy icons, linked with the bold numbers in the text above. First, **respect for the images of Christ, the Theotokos and the saints is not idolatry**. The iconoclasts who sought to destroy all icons had interpreted the second commandment literally (“You shall not make for yourself an idol or a likeness of anything in heaven above, or in the earth beneath, or in the waters under the earth.” Exodus 20.4). God himself has no form (Deuteronomy 4.12); however, certain forms such as the gold cherubims at the two ends of the mercy seat on top of the ark (Deuteronomy 25.18) and the healing serpent on the signal pole (Numbers 21.8) are clearly welcomed in the Old Testament.¹⁴ There was a danger, especially before the incarnation, that a likeness could become an idol, but there was a strong tradition of Christian representational art, especially in the context of funerals and burials.¹⁵ Furthermore, the major “intellectual architect” of the theology of this council, St John of Damascus (650/5-750), had already clearly distinguished between icons and idols, citing the Old Testament references above.¹⁶

¹³ Schaff & Wallace, p. 550-551.

¹⁴ Father Stephen Maxfield, “Christology: The Icon and Iconoclasm,” Lecture 8, Doctrine II, (Walsall, West Midlands, UK: Midlands Orthodox Study Centre of St Theodore of Canterbury, 2009).

¹⁵ Sister M. C. Murray, “Art and the Early Church”, *Journal of Theological Studies*, vol. 28, 1977, pp. 303-344; cited by Mariamna Fortounatto & Mary B. Cunningham “Theology of the Icon,” pp. 136-149 in Mary B. Cunningham & Elizabeth Theokritoff (Eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 137.

¹⁶ St John of Damascus, *On the Divine Images: Three Apologies Against Those Who Attack the Divine Images*. Trans. D. Anderson (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 8th century/ 1980), I.15; II.9;

Second, **an icon of Christ affirms the incarnation**; and this was the central point that the decree wished to establish. In the words of St John of Damascus:

. . . I adore the one who became a creature, who was formed as I was, who clothed himself in creation without weakening or departing from his divinity, that he might raise our nature in glory and make us partakers of his divine nature.¹⁷

Thus the Incarnation changed our understanding of God, as St John of Damascus pointed out:

In former times, God, who is without form of body, could never be depicted. But now when God is seen in the flesh conversing with men, I make an image of the God whom I see.¹⁸

Later, after the death of St John of Damascus, St Theodore the Studite (from the monastery of Studios in Constantinople) (759-826), rejected the iconoclastic argument that

Divinity cannot be portrayed. Either the divine nature is confused with the human nature, which is monophysitism; or else, if the human nature alone is portrayed, the two natures are separated, which is Nestorianism.¹⁹

On the contrary, argued St Theodore in *On the Holy Icons*:

If Christ cannot be portrayed, then either He lacks a genuine nature (which is docetism) or His nature is submerged in His divinity (which is monophysitism).²⁰

Augustine Cassidy, "Church fathers and the shaping of Orthodox theology," pp. 167-187 in M. B. Cunningham & E. Theokritoff, *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology*, p. 178; Fortounatto & Cunningham. See also P. Baker, P., "Byzantium: 330-1453. An introduction to the exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts for teachers and students" (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2008) and Robin Cormack & Maria Vassiliki, *Byzantium, 330-1453* (Royal Academy Publications, 2008).

¹⁷ St John of Damascus, *On the Divine Images*, I.4.

¹⁸ St John of Damascus, *On the Divine Images*, I.16.

¹⁹ Catharine P. Roth, "Introduction" to St Theodore the Studite, *On the Holy Icons* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1981), p. 11.

²⁰ Roth, p. 11 and *On the Holy Icons*, I.2-4.

In working out a justification for iconography, the decree of the Seventh Council clarified and deepened the human understanding of the Incarnation and the nature of Christ. Leonid Ouspensky reflected that the Church gradually created ...

an art new both in form and content, which uses images and forms drawn from the material world to transmit the revelation of the Divine world, making this world accessible to understanding and contemplation.²¹

This art, “new both in form and content” was made possible by the incarnation, because an icon of Christ does not depict “either His divine or His human nature, but His Person in which both these natures are incomprehensibly combined.”²²

Third, the confusion between prototypes and images was clarified; and Christians were urged to seek deification. The emphasis (set out in the previous paragraph) upon the person of Christ with His two natures, divine and human, firmly rejected monophysitism—the idea that Christ has a single nature in which God and manhood are somehow combined into a hybrid or ambiguous “mingled nature.”²³ The Seventh Ecumenical Council rightly recognised that iconoclasm was a form of monophysitism; and it was precisely because God became man that the image of Christ *can* be painted. Indeed, the image of Christ *should* be painted to help us to become more like God. What Dimitru Staniloae terms “the example of the deification of Jesus Christ’s humanity”²⁴ becomes a model for how each of us can seek deification, especially in painting or praying before an icon of Christ.

²¹ Leonid Ouspensky, “The Meaning and Language of icons”, pp. 23-49 in Leonid Ouspensky & Vladimir Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons*. Trans. G. E. H. Palmer & E. Kadloubovsky (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1952/1999), p. 30.

²² Ouspensky, p. 32. See also Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon*. 2 vols. Trans A. Gythiel with E. Meyendorff (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1978/1992).

²³ Father John Anthony McGuckin, *The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology*. (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p. 228.

²⁴ Dumitru Staniloae, *Orthodox Spirituality: A Practical Guide for the Faithful and a Definitive Manual for the Scholar*. Trans. Archimandrite Jerome Neville & Otilia Kloos (South Canaan, PA: St Tikhon’s Seminary Press, 2002), p. 363.

As St Theodore expressed it, “even if there are many representations, still there is only one Christ, and not many.”²⁵ The image of Christ drew a person to Christ, the prototype—the original form, the model—but the image was not Christ Himself. Following John Meyendorff’s *Christ in Eastern Christian Thought*, the French Jesuit theologian Egon Sendler has reflected:

. . . images are not the ultimate object of veneration because the image only has a reality in relation to the object represented: the image is the reflection of the prototype. Because the veneration of the image is addressed to the prototype, Christ, [so] the veneration is transformed into worship.²⁶

In a similar vein, icons of the saints represent them in such a way that those who see the images are drawn to behave as saints themselves:

The challenge for the iconographer is to paint human beings who already in their earthly lives have passed beyond the threshold of the Kingdom. The saints’ experience of the divine must be translated so that the beholder may contemplate the Kingdom through the icon and acquire sanctification through the grace of the Holy Spirit, fulfilling what all God’s creation is called to become. Thus, gold is used in haloes but also in backgrounds as a sign of deification.²⁷

Underlying this desire to create “a longing” after the saints is an affirmation of the possibility of transformation, of remoulding ordinary human lives in the image of Christ. As Ouspensky comments:

The Church recognised that the divine action transfiguring man originates in the uncreated, imperishable light, the energy of the Divinity felt and contemplated in the body.²⁸

²⁵ St Theodore the Studite, *On the Holy Icons* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1981), I.9.

²⁶ Sendler, p. 28, summarising John Meyendorff, *Christ in Eastern Christian Thought* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1969/1975), pp. 173-192.

²⁷ Fortounatto & Cunningham, p. 142.

²⁸ Vol. II, p. 250, cited by Fortounatto & Cunningham, p. 142

The decree of the Seventh Council set up the foundations of a theology of the body.

Fourth, **reverence for images was distinguished from true worship of God.** St John of Damascus had distinguished between “adoration, which we offer to God” and “honour” or “respect” which we offer to exemplary persons of the Old Testament.²⁹ Sendler suggests that:

The central truth of the [Seventh] council can be summed up in the following distinction: images receive relative or honorific veneration, *proskynesis schetikie*, and not worship, *latria*, which we offer to God alone.³⁰

In trying to understand what St John of Damascus termed “the different degrees of worship [or proskynesis],”³¹ it is important to remember that the vast majority of Christians in the eighth century were illiterate. As St John of Damascus reminds us, “Just as words edify the ear, so also the image stimulates the eye. What the book is to the literate, the image is to the illiterate.”³² As the American historian, Robert Norrell has pointed out in a different context, we must take care to avoid “the fallacy of anachronism”—the representation of history out of its proper order.³³ The break of the Church from iconoclasm occurred when there were few books, few readers, few people aware that transformation could occur in their tightly defined social and spiritual lives. Today the icon still acts as “a window, or passageway, between human beings and God”³⁴; however, outside of church we can also be drawn to God today by reading and reflecting on the Holy Scriptures and the lives of the saints, whereas for 8th century Christians the liturgy, especially the Eucharist

²⁹ St John of Damascus, *On the Divine Images*, I.14.

³⁰ Sendler, p. 28.

³¹ St John of Damascus, *On the Divine Images*, I.14.

³² St John of Damascus, *On the Divine Images*, I.17.

³³ Robert J. Norrell, *Up from History: The Life of Booker T. Washington* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 15.

³⁴ Fortounatto & Cunningham, p. 137.

and the readings in the midst of many icons, was the primary path for worshipping God.

Fifth, **respect and veneration for icons are an important aspect of how Orthodoxy overcomes the world.** The ringing proclamation that “honourable images” are part of “the faith of the Apostles ... the faith of the orthodox ... the faith which [makes] firm the whole world” was confirmed at the synod in Constantinople in 843 and first celebrated on the first Sunday of Lent, 11 March 843 and thereafter as the Triumph of Orthodoxy. Each of these three aspects of faith are part of the theology of the holy icons—that the faith celebrated in the Orthodox Church of the eighth and ninth centuries was the same faith exercised by the Apostles, that Orthodox faith includes the veneration of icons, and that faith confirms the reality of both the material and the Divine world. In essence, the theology of the holy icons is that icons are included among “all things that pertain to life and godliness” that God in “His divine power has granted to us” in order that we may “become partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1.4).³⁵

Toward an Integrated Orthodox Christian Life

Catherine Roth, the translator of St Theodore the Studite’s *On the Holy Icons*, ponders the danger of the modern understanding of the material world as “mere matter”—what might be termed “a creation without a creator.”³⁶ However, as St Theodore has written these

visible things are corporeal models which provide a vague understanding of intangible things.... We see images in the creation which, although they are only dim lights, still remind us of God. For instance,

³⁵ Note that St Peter is not referring to icons explicitly in 2 Peter 1.4, but his text has been applied to icons here.

³⁶ Catharine P. Roth, “Introduction” to St Theodore the Studite, *On the Holy Icons* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1981), p. 16.

when we speak of the holy and eternal Trinity, we use the images of the sun, light and burning rays....³⁷

St John of Damascus was equally explicit:

I do not worship matter; I worship the Creator of matter who became matter for my sake, who willed to take his abode in matter, who worked out my salvation through matter.³⁸

Thus a sacramental awareness that matter is linked with the intangible and the invisible is central to a theology of the holy icons. However, the holy icons and the Holy Gifts are very different expressions of this connection between the spiritual and the material or physical. Whereas in the icon we have a prototype of the original, in the Eucharist and Holy Communion we have the reality Himself, Christ given to the faithful in the Body and the Blood. As soon, therefore, as the chalice is presented from the altar, all veneration should cease. We have Christ Himself!

Sendler captures this unity of the material and spiritual worlds with his concluding definition of the theology of icons:

In the icon, we see a divine reality which goes beyond the dimensions of this earthly world but which at the same time respects this earthly world because it is created by God to become transfigured in his Spirit.... What is essential is that [in the icon] the world is transfigured.... Is not the most beautiful work that an artist can accomplish to be found in making God's light shine on his creatures?³⁹

Not surprisingly, Ouspensky suggests that “the fullest teaching on the icon” was given by this Seventh Ecumenical Council because

³⁷ *On the Holy Icons*, I.11.

³⁸ *On the Divine Images*. I,16.

³⁹ Sendler, pp. 182-183.

The icon is placed on a level with the Holy Scriptures and the Cross, as one of the forms of revelation and knowledge of God, in which Divine and human will and action become blended.⁴⁰

That is precisely the goal of Christian living to which the theology of the holy icons makes a significant contribution—to unite the Divine and human wills.

Icons in the Orthodox Church

by John Cox

Iconography is the image of in our worship as Orthodox Christians of a greater reality beyond what we see in this imperfect and broken world. The theology of the icon comes from Revelation. We see examples where St. John sees men in golden robes praying before the throne of Christ and the smoke from incense rising, representing the prayers of the faithful. Byzantine iconography is a type of worship in paint on wood, but we don't worship the paint and wood. Worship is meant for God alone. We venerate what the icon represents, be it an important part of Old Testament history or the image of Christ, the Theotokos, a saint in their glory, or an angel.

The icon when canonically presented represents a spiritual landscape rather than to strive for realistic dimensions and features.

In the Theotokos, or the Mother of God, we see features like eyes that are large to receive the sight of God. In Coptic icons this feature of the large eyes is greatly accentuated. Also, the ears of the Theotokos are turned to hear the word of God.

Orthodox iconography is always trinitarian in nature. The Incarnation is the primal icon, as it were. The whole premise for iconography, therefore, is the Incarnation of Christ. Jesus came among us, He was born of a woman and lived a mortal life.

⁴⁰ Ouspensky, pp. 30-31.

People could see him in the flesh. They could hear his voice and most important, there were thousands of eyewitnesses to His time of ministry on this earth.

By using icons in our worship, we see that the human body isn't merely carnal but transfigured. There are certain dimensions to be mindful of with a canonically written icon. The nose is narrow so as not to be dependent completely on the basics of this life but to show that the person depicted in a spiritual sense.

Icons have haloes which are a depiction of the person shining forth the light of Christ. Theologically the halo is supposed to represent light surrounding the head like Moses when his face became so bright it could not be seen by earthly eyes. Incidentally, there have been recorded instances in history where more recent saints have experienced that Divine Light, one example being St. Seraphim of Sarov, who when explaining the Divine Light to his disciple, the disciple took hold of him saying, "I do not understand how I can be certain that I am in the Spirit of God. How can I discern for myself His true manifestation in me?"

Father Seraphim replied: "I have already told you, your Godliness, that it is very simple and I have related in detail how people come to be in the Spirit of God and how we can recognize His presence in us. So, what do you want, my son?"

"I want to understand it well," I said.

Then Father Seraphim took me very firmly by the shoulders and said: "We are both in the Spirit of God now, my son. Why don't you look at me?" I replied: "I cannot look, Father, because your eyes are flashing like lightning. Your face has become brighter than the sun, and my eyes ache with pain."

This Divine Light is the basis of the halo we see on icons. Only one icon will show a cross in the halo and that is on any icon of Christ. The cross is the instrument of our salvation, of course. There are usually letters IC XC or Jesus Christ and quite often Greek letters for "Omega" or "He who is".

Jesus is shown wearing a red robe covered in a green cloak (or sometimes blue). The red symbolises divinity, whilst the green/blue symbolises humanity. Thus,

Jesus Christ is by nature divine, yet is fully clothed in humanity. The green cloak is distinct from the red, as Christ's humanity and divinity are distinct and not "inter-mingled". Yet the green cloak is also girded firmly around His waist, showing the Son of God to have taken on human nature forevermore; Christ's humanity has not be casually cast off after 33 short years on earth.

To any Orthodox or Catholic Christian, Jesus' right hand is unmistakably shown as being raised to give a blessing. The arrangement of the hand, repeated by clergy when blessing others, is also rich in meaning. The fingers spell out the four-letter Christogram "IC XC", as it is by the name of Jesus that we are saved and receive blessings. "At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth;" (Phil 2:10). Not only that, but the three fingers of Christ - as well as spelling out "I" and "X" - confess the Tri-unity of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The touching finger and thumb of Jesus not only spell out "C" but attest to the Incarnation: to the joining of divine and human natures found in the body of Jesus Christ. In all depictions the icon is trinitarian in nature.

It is important to stress that icons are not art. The icon is the link between the human and the divine. Just like our churches are the place where heaven and earth meet, icons are a place for a mystical encounter between the person standing before it and God. In Orthodox countries icons are an important part of the fabric of everyday life. It is important to remember that icons are not just painted, they are written because icons are depictions of scenes from Scripture and holy people. In that sense they serve as a teaching tool even to people who are literate.

As far as art is concerned, since the beginning art has been used to glorify God. In the West, especially after the 11th century, artists started to use depictions of saints and Our Lord and the Theotokos in a more realistic sense. I would never be one to criticise artists like Michelangelo. Much of the art of the West is beautiful and spiritual. Getting away from more canonical norms, however, left more up to

the imagination of the artist to the detriment of the spirituality. In the Orthodox Church we purposely do not use three dimensional statues because of the focus on correct anatomy which can be sensual in nature. We also don't use stained glass windows (there are exceptions in some churches) because icons are supposed to give off their own light.

Icons are usually written on a wooden board. The board in earlier times consisted of several parts bound together in the back by planks or strong backs to keep the wood from warping since it was typically cut directly from a tree. Even today older icons will have a convex curve because of their origin as part of a tree trunk and also their significance as a living thing.

According to custom iconographers were expected to be of high moral principle and Christian ideals. The rubrics still mention fasting and praying before working on an icon. The difference between iconography and art is the icon is not a creation of the artists imagination or whim, but it follows a prescribed pattern and the subject is according to Church tradition.

Byzantine Icons employ something called "reverse perspective". What that involves is something that makes the icon look weird to some people. In a normal scene a line will converge to a vanishing point within the painting. In Orthodox icons the lines converge outside the icon where the person is standing. This puts us in the infinite or eternal point rather than on a vanishing point in a painting. A throne or house will look inside out or wider at the rear and narrower in the front. The idea behind that is that icons are considered "Windows to Heaven". Reverse perspective draws us in as no other style of art will. It is very much like opening a window and sticking your head out. The entire world is out there for you to see and the perspective is limitless. They are doorways to another realm.

Icons are typically built up in layers starting with an underlayment of white, which lends a measure of light to all the layers that come on top of it. There is a green layer which is used to shape or enhance what will be the shadows.

A colour called sankir is used to get the skin tone. We usually mix up a mixture of yellow, red, a touch of black and a touch of blue to get this tone. It is used in many different ways which include adding more and more white to build on places opposite the shadows like cheek bones and the bridge of the nose.

An interesting note is that black is not used anywhere on an icon except for the pupil of the eye and for demons. Black is considered the colour of the underworld, so you won't see an icon with black hair. Even saints who had black skin like St. Moses the Ethiopian will be shown with highlighting and brown paint mixed with black to make it dark without being black.

Icons have an effect on the thinking of the Orthodox Church in that they lead us to think in a more symbolic manner, more paradoxical; the both-and. There is poetic synthesis to philosophical analysis. In the West, the emphasis is more linear and since the Renaissance the ideal even in Christian art is realism. The Western church will tend to show a saint or Christ Himself in the agony of martyrdom whereas the Orthodox Church will show them in a glorified state. We do show, on occasion the instruments of a particular saint's passion. For instance, St. Katherine of Alexandria is typically shown in canonical icons with a large wheel because she was tortured and killed on a large wheel. Also, often a saint shown holding a cross straight up was martyred and if the cross is at angle they reposed naturally. There are exceptions to the holding the cross image, of course.

On icons of Christ, we see Him holding his right hand up in blessing. His thumb will be touching his ring finger and the middle and index fingers will be together. This symbolises the Holy Trinity and His dual nature and also forms His monogram, IC XC (Iesus Xristos) It is the same hand of blessing we see with priests today during the Liturgy. Christ will usually be wearing a garment of royal blue for authority and His lineage as well as an undergarment of red for His precious blood. He will be holding a book or a scroll symbolising the Gospel. In images where He is shown as a child he looks like a small adult, symbolising His eternal nature.

Icons of the Theotokos will show on her garments three crosses, if possible, to symbolise the Holy Trinity. Holy Tradition has it that the first image of the Theotokos and Christ was painted by St. Luke which is the one Christians are most familiar with and is called Hodegitria. The Virgin Hodegitria and its variations are always shown with her hand pointing to Christ as he sits on her knee.

This prayer is recited before the writing of an icon:

"O Divine Lord of all that exists, You illumined the Apostle and Evangelist Luke with Your Holy Spirit, thereby enabling him to represent Your most holy Mother, the one who held You in her arms and said: "The grace of Him who has been born of me is spread throughout the world" Enlighten and direct my soul, my heart and my spirit. Guide the hands of Your unworthy servant so that I may worthily and perfectly portray Your icon, that of Your Mother and all the saints, for the glory, joy and adornment of your Holy Church".