

## Commentary of icon of St. Kateri Tekakwitha



**St. Kateri Tekakwitha Icon 2017 ©**  
22" x 28" archival acrylic and 23K Gold  
By the hand of Andre J. Prevost  
A collaborative project with  
St. Thomas Aquinas Regional High School, North Vancouver BC

**Saint Kateri Tekakwitha** (pronounced [[gaderi dega'gwita](#)] in [Mohawk](#)), given the name **Tekakwitha**, baptized as **Catherine**<sup>[3][4]</sup> and informally known as **Lily of the Mohawks** (1656 – April 17, 1680)

The direction for the St. Kateri icon was to be as historically authentic as possible. Through research and prayer, and asking for St. Kateri's guidance, I began with the one early portraiture of her. But I found that it was too small and didn't provide enough detail, other than asserting St. Kateri as being from the Mohawk/Iroquois Nations.



After much research online, I found that most religious art images were not best suited for an icon, and a great many defaulted to the buckskin/braids and with non-indigenous features. And there was no conformity in how she was portrayed.

The initial design for the icon was based on:

- St. Kateri's face would have no scarring from the smallpox as they cleared shortly after her death. The icon was to present her glorified nature.
- The Mohawk regalia would be added (yoke and cuffs). Being a torso icon, the distinctive dress and leggings were missing.
- The delicate pattern on her garment was based on a French pattern of the era.
- The image would include a hand-made cross and a rosary.
- At this stage, the shawl was draped over her shoulders. It was going to be a dark indigo as it was commonly used.
- And of course, the initial design had the braids.

I wasn't 100% whether the shawl should be on her shoulders or covering her head, or about the braids. It had been recorded that Kateri usually covered her head, both to conceal her scarring but also because of her sensitive eyes from the smallpox. Needing to assert that the design was on the right track, and with some questions still in mind, I consulted with a contact with the Mohawk Nation. She kindly provided the following:

- 'She wore a shawl to protect her poor sensitive eyes from the sun because her eyes were severely affected by the smallpox that took the lives of her parents and brother, and her hair can loosely hang down perhaps over her shoulders.' She also agreed that the original portrait of Kateri Tekakwitha would be the closest, adding that the Iroquois and Mohawk regalia are the same. "The Iroquois Confederacy consists of 6 nations: Cayuga, Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Seneca, Tuscarora... The traditional Woman's dress is usually in 3 pieces as you have shown and elderly women wore a shawl on their head.' She reemphasized that I not portray her with braids.

So the design was changed to loosen St. Kateri's hair and the shawl was placed on the crown of her head. The replacement of the shawl was partly based on how covering her head would have been second nature to her, but also because of a) how she had wanted to start an order of nuns for Indigenous women, b) avoided visibility as she was also hiding, having escaped to avoid being forced into marriage, and c) given her religious aspirations and the norms of that era, a young woman being bare headed would have been considered improper.

**St. Kateri Tekakwitha Pray For Us**