

What is an Icon and what makes it Holy?

“Icon” Greek for an image or picture, any image.

* Difference between an icon and portrait:

- A portrait represents an ordinary human being with artistic imagination.
- An icon, a human being united to God, a saint as free from sin. An icon cannot be contrived through artistic imagination.

* Written vs Painted:

- An icon is more a form of prayer than art
- Iconographer's hand is guided by God.
- Icons are considered sacramental, liturgical.
- Clear norms of what is deemed 'true'

What makes an Icon Holy?

- Holiness is a characteristic of the Divine: Father, Son & the Spirit are Holy by nature.
- Everything else, not divine by nature, can be 'set apart'
- An example:
 - ‘scripture’ means anything that is written, but ‘Holy Scriptures’ refers specially to the writings divinely revealed, made Holy by its content.
 - The same is true of Holy Images because of what or who is depicted, and the source of that depiction.

-An Icon is Holy if:

- 1)It depicts holy things/persons and holy revelation
- 2)The depiction is true.
- 3)Be derived from divine revelation and not human imagination.

Holy Icons must be accurate'

With the gold statue of a calf, the Israelites sinned greatly because they created an image of God from their own imagination.

Christians do not sin in creating an image of Jesus Christ and venerating it as an image of the True God, which revealed as being of the same nature as the Father and the Spirit.

The physical 'accuracy' of the image is of secondary importance. An icon isn't painted to show all physical details and earthly appearance, but rather a true image of holiness that brings life-saving belief.

Holy Icons of Jesus Christ seek to present His true nature as God-man, rather than the accurate appearance of the man.

Does an icon exist onto itself?

“The icon carries the name of the prototype. It neither carries nor contains the prototype's nature.” Nicaea II

- There is no presence being absorbed into the wood of the icon**
- it neither captures nor retains anything.**
- The icon does not have any existence in itself.**
- It is participation and a 'guiding image'. It leads to the prototype , to the person represented**
- The presence in no way incarnates itself in the icon, but the icon is nonetheless a center from which the divine energies radiate out.**

Being a material point in the world, the icon opens a breach through which the Transcendent shines, ..."

Paul Evdokimov 'The Art of the Icon: a theology of beauty'

Now for the question of Holy Icons working miracles

- Though all the Saints pray for us, and many worked miracles before and after their repose, not all Saints are called such because of miraculous powers. Many of the martyrs of the Church are called holy (Saints) despite not working any physical miracles.
- Likewise, miracle-working icons do exist, but this physical manifestation of God's grace is not needed to confidently call an image holy.
- The belief is that the student of iconography or iconographer's own piety or holiness affects the holiness of the written image, while following rules – particularly in monasteries – as to how someone must approach painting an icon, creating the icon in a prayerful attitude.

But what is its purpose specifically in iconography?

With the example of the Holy Scriptures, believed to be divinely inspired, sometimes shown in pictures of the Holy Evangelists depicted with an angel of God whispering in their ear as they write. They show us that such holy scriptures are based on divine revelation and guided in their specific choice of words.

But this is only true of the original manuscripts.

What about all transcriptions thereafter?

Those given the task of transcription do not rely on being told “from Heaven” what to write, but only painstakingly copy what is already written. They must be watchful and sober, not making any mistakes, treating every word as precious, and not to be tempted to edit anything based on proud self-Opinion.

Where the Iconographer is creating a 'new' image, prayer also has the purpose of calling upon God, or new Saint, to guide the painting and ensure it is a true representation.

* However, the preparation of an Iconographer has little to do with his or her piety being transferred to the image, merely that it is through such piety that an image of a holy person can be depicted truly, without the pollution of an artist's vainglory.

- Added note re; mass produced icons –

For example, the 19th c Russian icons can still be called Holy, because by being mass-produced, the makers only cared about reproducing accurately older types of icons that were popular, and not doing anything innovative. In doing this, they preserve the subject of the icon, and the truth of its depiction, and so the image remained 'holy'.

The Blessing of an Icon

Within the Orthodox tradition, newly painted Icon or newly bought icon are blessed. The traditions vary, but usually involve bringing the icon to a priest, who then places the icon on the altar during a Divine Liturgy. Sometimes special prayers are read over the icons, sometimes the prayers are accompanied by the sprinkling of holy water, sometimes they're not.

It could be said that the holiness of an icon derives from its prototype, and a blessing should not be required, but the custom makes more sense if it is seen as serving as a 'vetting', whereas the newly painted image can be observed to see if it is a true image or not.

The key reference sources for this introduction:

-“What makes an Icon Holy? A Reader’s Guide to Orthodox Icons”

<https://iconreader.wordpress.com>

-“The Art of the Icon: a theology of beauty”

By Paul Evdokimov

***Steps and
Symbolisms for
ICONS***

by

Andre Prevost

Preparation of the Icon Board

1. An icon must be prepared on wood, symbol of the Tree of Knowledge (Garden of Eden) and the Tree of Life (Christ).

2. An icon typically has 2 parts:

- * The outer part 'container' that also works as a frame
- * The inner part 'the contained' that holds the design (called the Ark).

It also symbolizes the human being, the outer being the body and the inner being the soul.

3. The dimensions of the board is determined once the design is prepared.

Note: Re construction of an icon board.

The Cloth

The board is covered with linen (or cotton) cloth, which symbolizes the 'Shroud', to die to ourselves to enter the Kingdom of Spirituality.

**Notes of types of adhesives pending which medium is being used, and practical issues.*

The Gesso

Aside from the practical preparation of the panel to receive paint, being white, it symbolizes light (the refraction of light as it enters a prism and delivers the colours. By gessoing, we create a new room for beauty. It is also a time for the iconographer to prepare for the path (the journey) of writing the icon. An icon can require up to 9-10 coats of gesso with sanding after every 3rd coat.

**Notes of types of gesso pending which medium is being used, how to apply, and sandpaper types.*

Transfer of Design onto Board

- * The design is usually transferred by using carbon paper under the prepared design (on a paper of choice, tracing or vellum paper). The design can also be drafted on the board using a grid but it is labour intensive and corrections don't erase well from the gesso.
- * The design is then etched into the panel with a sharp stylus with a blunt tip, if working in egg tempera; 'inked in' if working in acrylic. This permanently casts the image into the panel and assists the iconographer in seeing the reference lines as the gold and paints are applied.

**Note: halos are etched in with a stylus in an case.*

Example of
transferring a
design onto
the prepared
board
(placing a
carbon paper
under)



Example of
the design
'inked in'.
(and the
halos have
been etched
in).



Paint

In Orthodox iconography, egg tempura paint is used but some iconographers also use acrylic paints. The commonality is that they are both water base paints.

Oil cannot be used for icons as water symbolizes the rituals of purification, the waters of Baptism.

Colours

Colours are a gift of God. When He established His Covenant with Noah after the flood, God presented him with the colours of the rainbow. Paint symbolizes the journey of Man towards transformation. As we add more and more colours and highlights and lines, paint moves us from original chaos to shape and order, to increasing enlightenment, to vision, when lastly the face is completed, and the invisible reality is unveiled.

Egg tempera versus Acrylic Technique

A key difference between the two is how egg tempera is done in very translucent layers with a lot of egg emulsion, added and again over a darker base, building to the lighter.

In the acrylic technique, you can approach it in the same manner but the painting is harder to control because of its quick drying time. But it is not impossible.

The remainder of this presentation will be based on my technique which is more opaque.

** I use the more expensive archival quality paint.*

Acrylic

Begin blocking in
the main colours,
and adjusting
balance.

The colours are
the mid tones
from which I will
build lighter and
darker layers.



After completing the base colours, a few coats of red bole are added to all areas which will be gold leafed. A first coat of Gold Size is allowed to dry to seal the surface.

Note: Getting rid of the 'white' is helpful.



The Clay (Bole):

The Clay (or Bole colour) represents our nature in God's Creation. In Hebrew, Adam has three meanings: Man, Red, and Clay.

It reminds us of our beginning but it is also into that clay that God breathes His Holy Spirit. The clay along the outer edge symbolizes the 'old man'; the clay in the inner surface (under the gilding) symbolizes the 'new man'.

** Natural clay bole versus commercial products, dependent of gold leafing method used.*

Acrylic

Work on lighter and darker layers throughout all fabrics and larger details.

But don't do last shading or highlights.

*Note: Faces and hands must be left to the end of writing an icon.



The Gold

Gold symbolizes Heaven. Gold applied on clay (bole) symbolizes Heaven's plans for Man, for Earth. It represents the union of Heaven and Earth; if clay is Man's basic nature, we cover it with God's.

Once applied, the gold leaf can either be lightly burnished with a cheese cloth or sable brush.

A more highly polished burnish can be done with the use of agate stones but natural clay and natural glues must be used in order for the gold to be worked in this way. Regular commercial boles are only suited for very light burnishing, using a Gold Size product.



Gold leaf is applied to the red bole with the use of an adhesive (note; re tack). I do this step once I've reached a ½ way point with the icon to minimize paint droplets on the gold when finishing the icon. The outer edge is left as red bole, representing our nature in God's Creation.

The Red Circle

The iconographer unites Heaven and Earth with the red circle around the halo; symbolizing our new transformation, the 'new Adam'.

The White Circle

The white circle is drawn around the original red circle as a sign, not that perfection has been achieved, but that this particular transfiguration has been completed. If perfection was not reached, the white circle also symbolizes the determination to start all over again with a new board. Thus the process of perfection is a spiral, with every step taking us higher and higher.

* Note: It is not always possible to add the second white circle on the smaller icons, but it is essential for the iconographer, it is essential to be connected to this truth.

- * The leaf is burnished
- * The halos and inscriptions must be added before the gold is sealed.
- * A coat of varnish (sealer) is added to the gold surface to protect the leafing.

**Note: the gold needs a few days to fully set*



The Oil

The oil (varnish) symbolizes anointing,
the consecration of a chosen one.

* Finish all final highlights and shadows as well as all decorative details.

* Now is the time to begin working on the faces and hands. The faces are of prime importance for an icon.



Once the Faces and Hands are completed, a first coat of varnish is applied over the painted image. Once dry, apply a second coat of varnish over the entire icon (including the gold).

The icon is left to dry for at least a few days, pending type of varnish used.

**Note: use a non-yellowing varnish.*



A few recommended books on Iconography

‘The Art of the Icon: a theology of beauty’

by Paul Evdokimov

‘Theology of the Icon’

by Leonid Ouspensky

**‘Transfiguration, Introduction to the
Contemplation of Icons’**

by Maria Giovanna Muzj

BREAK

**INTRODUCTION
TO SELECTION OF
ICONS
BY THE HAND OF
ANDRE J PREVOST**

Icon of St. Paul

2017

St. Paul Catholic Church
381 East Cordova St.
Vancouver, BC





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Centenary Icon of the Holy Family 2015
St. Mary's Cathedral, Winnipeg MB 64" x 43" with 24K Gold



Centenary Icon of the Presentation of the Theotokos at the Temple 2015
St. Joseph Seminary, Edmonton AB
24" x 47" with 23K Gold

Centenary Icon
St. Joseph the Worker

2013

St. Joseph Basilica

Edmonton AB

54" x 39" 24K Gold



Icon of the Holy Family

2007

St. Andrew's Cathedral

Victoria BC

54" x 39" 24K Gold



Icon of
St. Thomas Aquinas

2016

St. Thomas Aquinas
High School

North Vancouver BC
22" x 28" 23K Gold

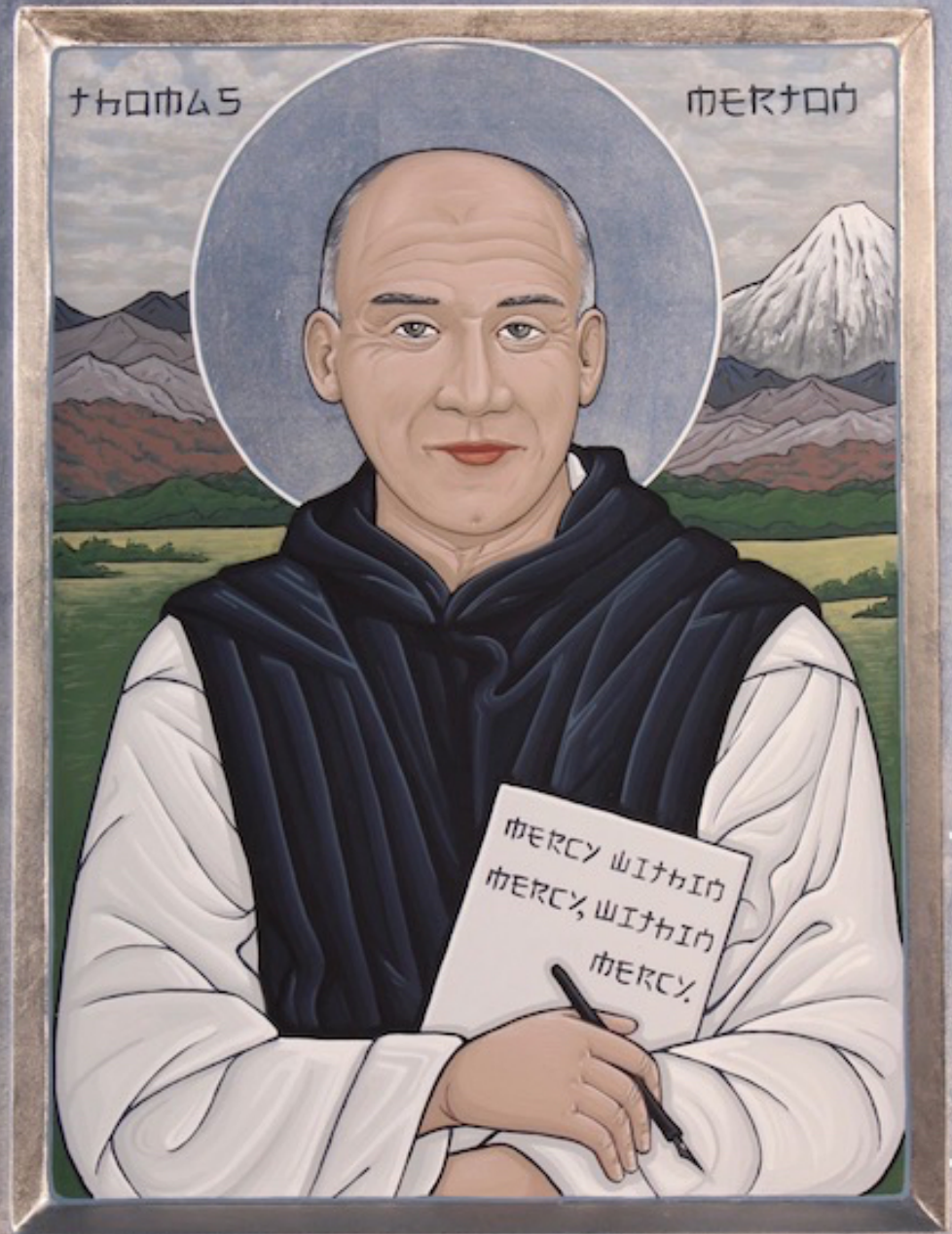


Icon of
Anne-Marie Martel
2017
St. Thomas Aquinas
High School
North Vancouver BC
22" x 28" 23K Gold

© andreprevost.com



Icon of
Thomas Merton
2016
Calgary AB
11" x 14" Palladium Leaf



Icon of
St. Mother Teresa
2015
Calgary AB
11" x 14" 23K Gold



Icon of
St. Cardinal Henry
Newman

2015

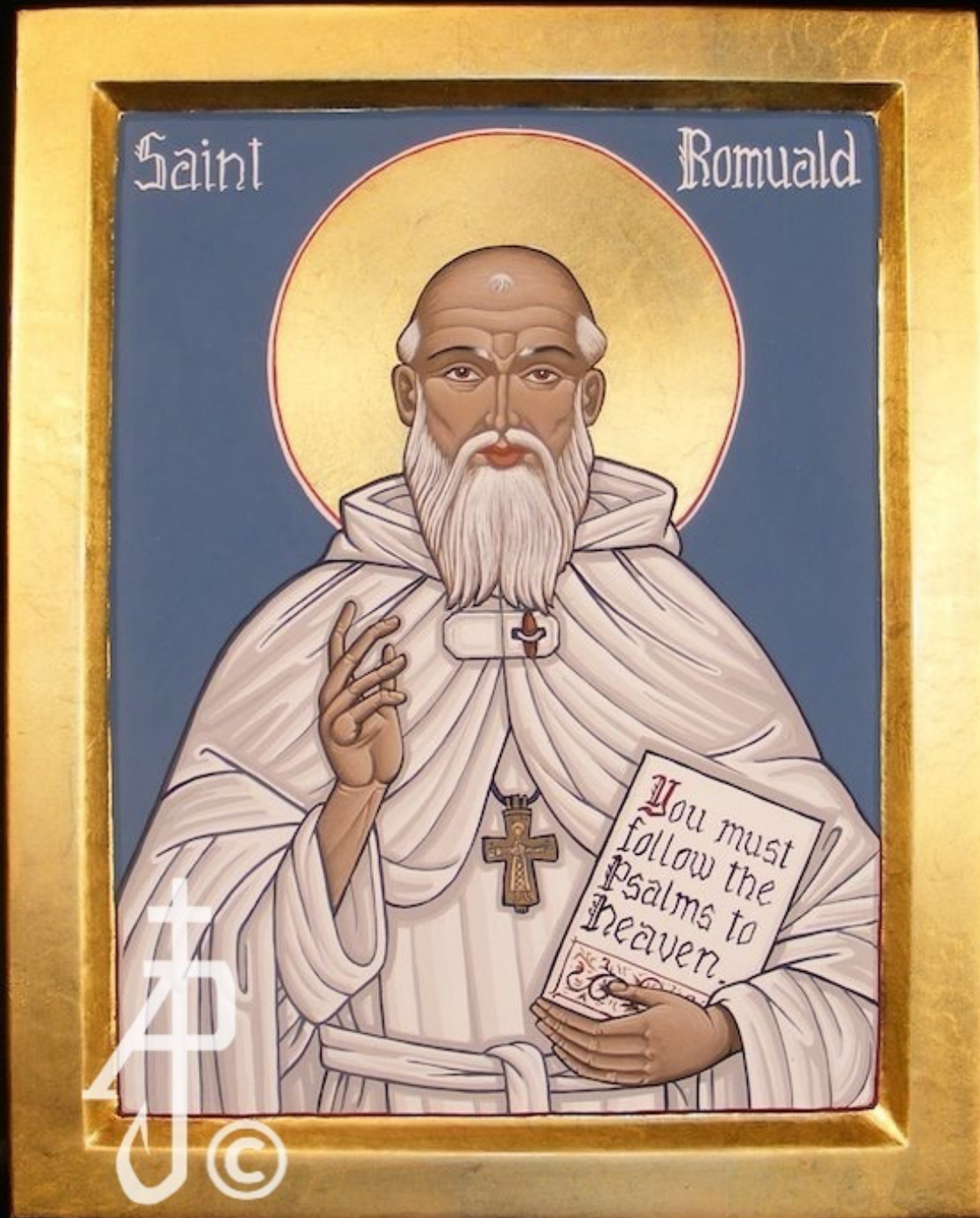
Calgary AB

11" x 14" 23K Gold



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Icon of
St. Romuald
2014
Calgary AB
11" x 14" 23K Gold



Icon of
St. Macarius
The Great
2014
Calgary AB
11" x 14" 23K Gold



Icon of
St. □ Brother Andre
2010
Calgary AB
11" x 14" 24K Gold



Icon of the
Theotokos of Canada
(Our Lady of Canada)

1995

All Saints Orthodox Cathedral
20" x 28" 22K Gold



Icon of
St. Joseph 2008
St. Joseph the Worker
Church
Victoria BC

54" x 39" 22K Gold



Sanctuary Triptych
St. Edmund's Church
North Vancouver BC
1981-1982

Refurbished in 2014
with 23K Gold

6 ft. x 15 ft.





Iconostas and Mural
St. Olga Ukrainian Catholic Church, Vermilion AB
1991-1995

Pantocrator Mural
1995
(10 ft.)
St. Olga Ukrainian Catholic
Church, Vermilion AB





Iconostas

Holy Spirit Ukrainian Catholic Church, Lloydminster AB
1993-1995

Deesis Mural
1993
Holy Spirit
Ukrainian
Catholic Church,
Lloydminster AB

10 ft. x 10 ft.
(24K Gold)



Icon of the Teacher

1997

Blessed Mary Ukrainian
Catholic Church,
Winnipeg MB

38" x 84" (22K Gold)



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