

Icons and Western art

Eastern and Western religious art. Developments in Western painting

1. Symbolic / idealistic stage

Eastern Orthodox icons and early Western painting (medieval) tries to express symbolically “what we know” about God and the world: ideas, teachings, etc.

Such art expresses a general perspective of things: a symbolic point of view (“God’s eye”) of how things are (Ortega y Gasset).

Eastern Orthodox art remained at the “symbolic” stage, and Eastern secular painting developed at a very late stage, if at all. In the West, such symbolic or general point of view was maintained until the Middle Ages (mid-13th c.). Examples are early Franciscan art, e.g., the Bardi Dossal of Francis or the San Damiano crucifix.

2. Realistic / illusionistic stage

Realistic or illusionistic art tries to represent “what we see” of things, rather than what we know about them. It seems to develop whenever art is used for entertainment (secular). However, in the West it takes over religious painting as well.

This sort of art pays particular attention to various aspects of seeing or optical science: three-dimensional space, linear perspective, natural lighting, realistic portrayal of detail, etc.

Realistic / illusionistic art represents the individual perspective or individual point of view: not what we know about things (general perspective) but what one sees of things (Ortega y Gasset).

Western art of this type stresses material, rather than spiritual beauty, and contains many naturalistic details and sensual imagery.

3. Experimental stages in Western painting

In the 1800s the tendency to paint “what we see,” or realism, begins to give way to the tendency to paint “how we see.” At first, Western painters tried to paint their “impressions” of reality (impressionism). In the late 1800s and early 1900s come various trends in post-impressionism, such as the styles of Cezanne or Van Gogh. They seem to revert to earlier iconic styles of painting with no depth (no linear perspective) and no realistic shapes, i.e., a movement away from realism. Later in the 1900s (1910s, 1920s) come various “avant-garde” movements that break down the image even more and go completely beyond realism. They seem to explore, once again, “what we know” of things. Religious painting in the West remains at the realistic stage for a while, but after World War II all restraints are taken off, and religious painting follows any style that seems appropriate to a building or a congregation.

4. The Canon. The Canonicity of Eastern art

Since the period of iconoclasm and the VIIth Ecumenical Council, the Eastern Church tried to maintain the unity of the tradition of icon painting. Since icons, just like the Scripture, are part of the Church tradition, their features (iconography) must be preserved exactly. The Canon is such tradition of preserving a particular way of painting icons.

While Western art encouraged individuality, interpretation, and invention in religious art, Eastern Orthodox iconography remained unchanged for hundreds and thousands of years. The truth value of the Orthodox tradition is in repetition, which is the way to provide the continuity of evidence.

5. Important dates

1551, Moscow, The “Council of 100 Chapters”

Discussed various questions concerning the Canon and iconography of icons:

1. What is allowed to be portrayed in icons and how (the iconography).
2. In representing Christ et al. ancient traditional models (exemplars) must be used, and nothing new should be invented. (Starting with this Council, we see the appearance of manuals of icon paintings and exemplary icons.)
3. A demand for quality: to use distinguished models. The Council prohibits the practice of icon painting by unskilled craftsmen.
4. Icon painters must have exceptional spiritual and moral qualities: pray, fast, avoid drinking and debauchery.

1666-67, The Great Moscow Council

The main question is representation of God the Father (Sabaoth) and the Holy Spirit in the iconography known as “Fatherhood” or the “New Testament Trinity.” The Council prohibits representations of any person of the Trinity except Christ, since nobody saw in the flesh anyone but Christ.