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ICONS



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ICONS

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## INTRODUCTION

I feel that the phenomenon of the isolation of the artist in society today is the result of the division of the arts, science, philosophy and religion into separate categories. Visual art is isolated to a large degree from the other arts and seldom are several arts combined equally for a single purpose. Visual art is put in its own select space or is massed together in a gallery. Isolated in this context it becomes a museum piece and as such is placed in an historic setting to be evaluated as the work of a particular artist or period of time. This happens to modern and old works alike. Art, in these circumstances is no longer a 'living' art and an artwork, once it is committed to a gallery or museum becomes an historical reference.

My initial interest in icons came from the images themselves. There appeared to be a great confidence and assurance in the stern figures with staring eyes and emphatic gestures. There was no doubt in such faces. I noticed that all icons seemed linked to each other - even those which were separated by time and distance. They were signs or signals which reinforced each other and led to the same ultimate destination.

Icons depict various stories from the Old and New Testaments and scenes from the lives of saints yet a certain few scenes or events are more often depicted. These are the Annunciation,



Christ with His mother, the death of Christ and the Virgin and their ascension into heaven, and St George fighting the dragon. All these 'popular' scenes depict the major events in a person's life- birth, life, death and the struggle between good and evil, (St. George and the dragon) - and as such have a universal theme. But there is another connection and that is that they are linked also to the other arts and by a common philosophy. This I discovered through research for this thesis and this factor I think accounts for their extreme assurance and, despite their age, their great spiritual power.

of the Roman Empire. When the Empire was split into an Eastern and a Western section Constantine was in control of the Eastern region which covered the area of today's Turkey and Middle East. In 330 A.D. he chose the Greek town of Byzantium as his capital. The site of the new capital was superb, set on a triangular peninsula overlooking the Bosphorus. The city was built on the ruins of the old city of Byzantium. The site of the new capital was superb, set on a triangular peninsula overlooking the Bosphorus. The city was built on the ruins of the old city of Byzantium.

The division of the Roman Empire resulted in a religious split as well. Differences in doctrine began to develop and eventually the division of Christianity into a Western or Catholic Church, and an Eastern or Orthodox Church became apparent.

The differences between the two Churches were very deep. The



CHAPTER. 1

FROM CONSTANTINE TO ICONOCLASM.

BYZANTIUM

Constantine the Great was the first Roman emperor to adopt Christianity. From a minority sect it became the official religion of the Roman Empire. When the Empire was split into an Eastern and a Western section Constantine was in control of the Eastern region which covered the area of today's Turkey and Middle East. In 323 A.D. he chose the Greek town of Byzantium as his capital, had it rebuilt and fortified and renamed it Constantinople. The site of the new capital was superb, set on a triangular peninsula at the junction of many waters both fresh and salt. Constantinople was to become the most secure and the most prosperous of cities.

The division of the Roman Empire soon led to a religious split as well. Differences in doctrine began to develop and eventually the division of Christendom into a Western or Catholic Church, and an Eastern or Orthodox Church became apparent.

The differences between the two Churches went very deep. The



Pope was the head of the Western Church. Roman Catholicism maintained its independence from imperial or state authority and became an international institution reflecting its character as the Universal Church, encompassing all peoples and subject to no earthly Government but itself. The Orthodox Church, in contrast, was ruled by the Emperor. It was thus dependant on the state, exacting a double allegiance from the faithful but sharing the benefits of political power. This development can be seen as the Christian adaptation of a very ancient heritage, the concept of ruler as God as in the divine kingship of Egypt and Mesopotamia. As Christianity proclaimed only one God, Byzantine Emperors, unlike their pagan predecessors, could no longer claim the status of Gods but they kept a similarly exalted role by placing themselves at the head of the Church as well as the state. For the Byzantine, man was united with God in the physical world through the Emperor. He formed a link between two co-existing worlds - heaven and earth - belonging to both and representing both. It was held that Christ as the word incarnate was of one single substance with the Father and hence of divine nature only. The Roman Church, in contrast, took the position that since the word was made flesh Christ possessed both divine and human natures. Conflicts such as these were major issues in the early centuries of Christianity and disputes could be of sufficient intensity to shake an empire and cause decades of war. Such differences

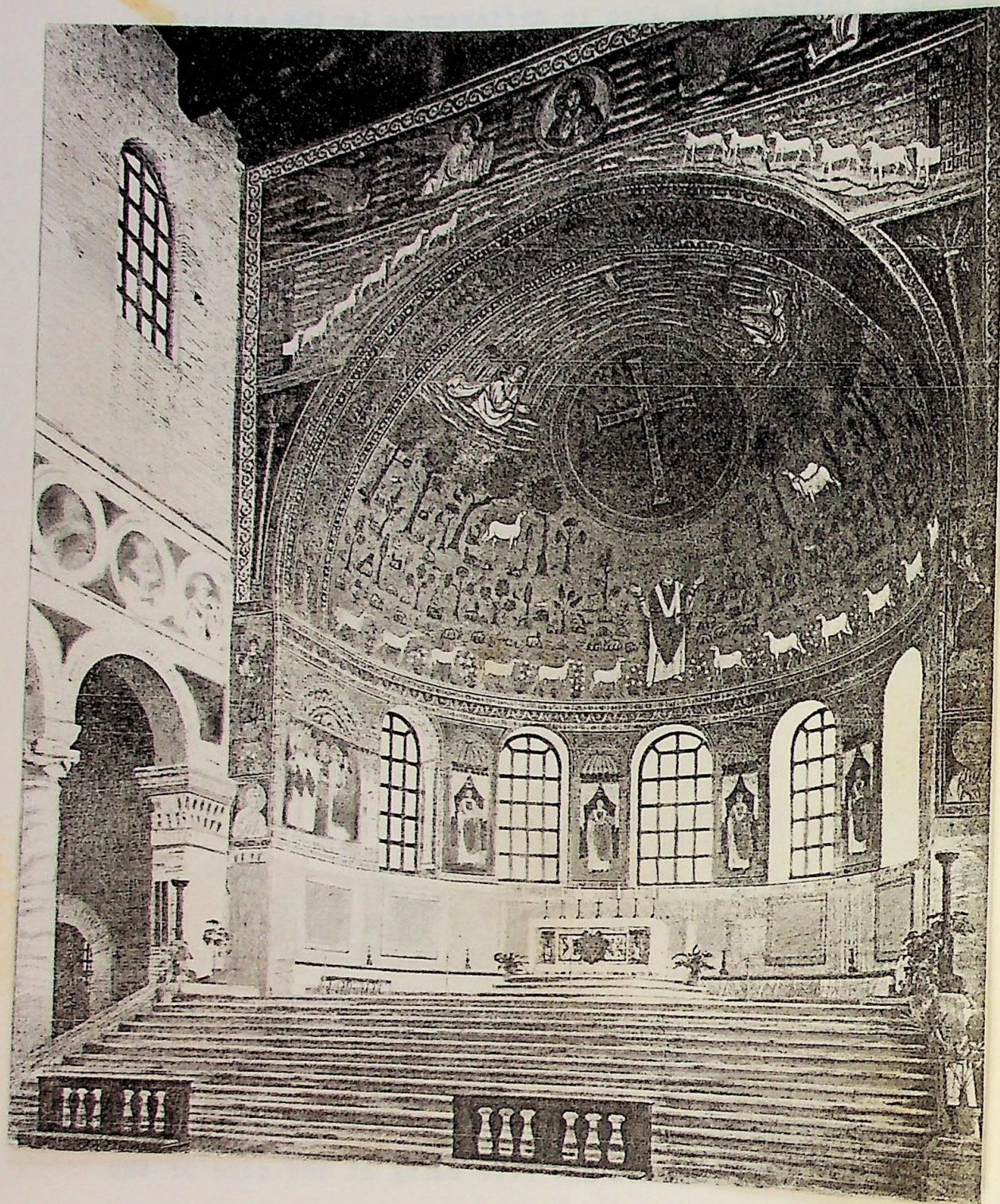


in basic doctrine led also to differences in the artistic portrayal of religious figures.

#### DEVELOPMENT OF THE IMAGE

Byzantine art developed as an integral part of the Greek Orthodox belief system, but Constantinople was a city in which two world views, the pagan and the Christian were fused. The Byzantines were familiar with the literature and philosophy of ancient Greece and the rational and intellectual thought of the pagan world was still valid. Christianity had, to a large extent, merely remoulded the old pagan forms and thus there was the danger of the people merely substituting the image of God for that of Zeus. Sculpture in the round was therefore discouraged as this was too close to a graven image which could be worshipped as a God in itself. Two-dimensional imagery was therefore the medium through which the illiterate could comprehend the message of the scriptures. As in the remark of Pope Gregory the Great 'Painting can do for the illiterate what writing does for the literate'. A painting then was meant to be read and symbolism provided a visual language which was understood by the initiated; initiation and rite being at the core of the Orthodox Liturgy. The message of the painting had to be clear,





Ill. A

the composition simple and the figures and their gestures emphatic.

Two major factors in the development of the sacred image, were the veneration of the image of the Emperor and the use of funerary portraits. The image of the Emperor signified his presence by proxy and any insult or honour paid to the image was paid to the Emperor. This concept was naturally transferred to the image in religious art. Christ was depicted in the apse of the church, over the altar, to signify his presence at the Eucharist. (see ill. A). There also developed the concept of a wonder working icon which was touched and prayed through. They derived from the Egypto-Roman funerary portraits and were reputed to work miracles. There were two types of miracle working icons. One was the image 'not made with hands' which was believed to have been made through some physical contact with the saint depicted or even Christ himself. Tradition associates the making of the first icon with Christ, when He, instead of personally visiting a king stricken with leprosy, sent an image of himself by pressing a towel to his face. The image was believed to be created by direct contact with the subject and thereby was infused with his spiritual aura. These icons then were a synthesis of matter transformed by spirit - a vehicle for the transmission of spiritual energy.

The other form of miracle-working icon was the one which

Ill. A. Sant Apollinare in Classe, Ravenna, interior and exterior views.

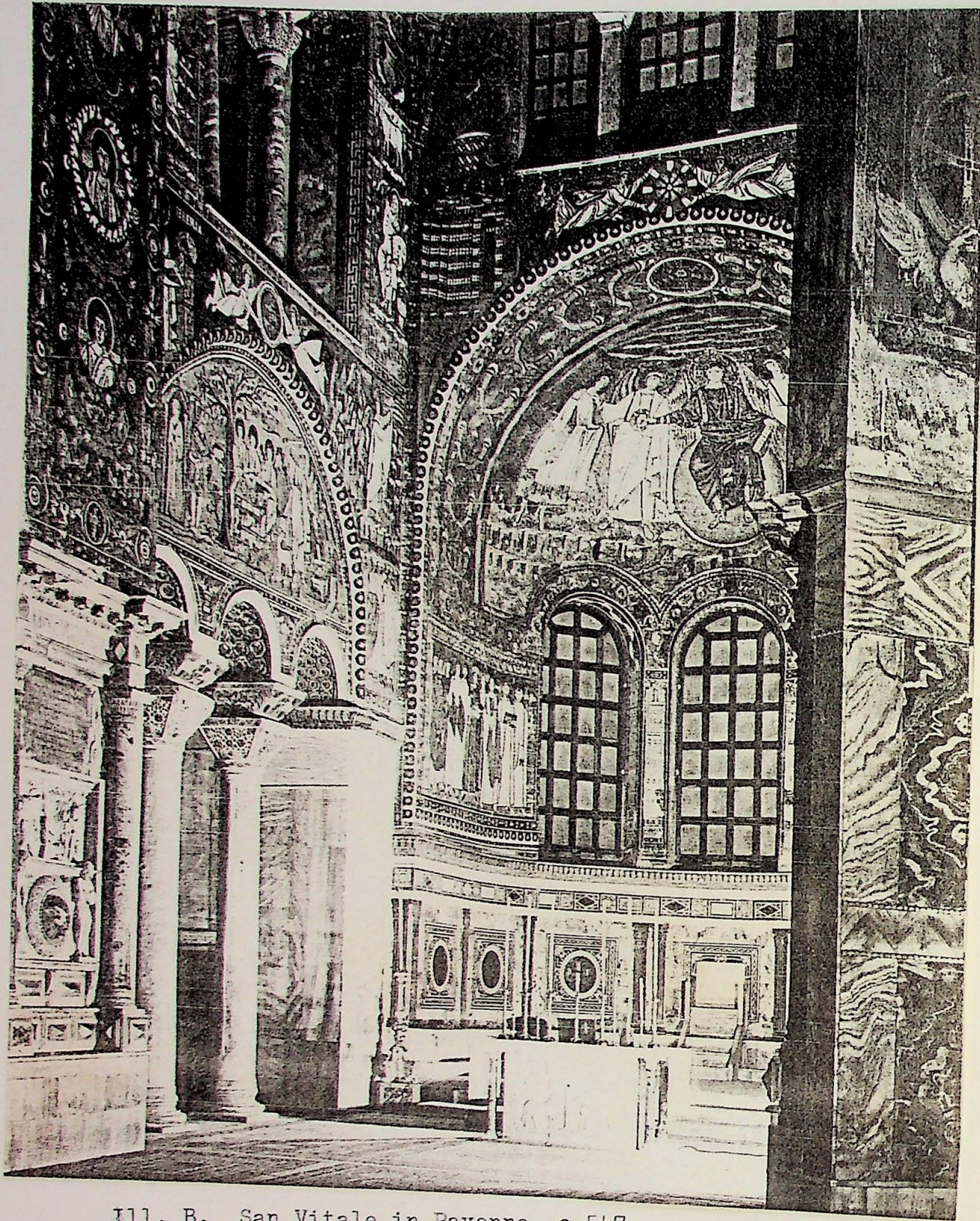


contained the 'sacred dust', which could be the ashes or maybe the sweat from the brow of a saint or martyr. They were held therefore to work not so much as images but as relics. These icons were apparently in common use by the 6th century in the form of portable paintings, kept in private houses or placed at crossroads or wayside shrines. The images were full-faced, motionless and conventionalized. The emphasis appears to have been on the isolated figure, presented frontally, the better to be invoked. Only undesirable figures such as Judas were shown in profile, or, where the pictorial space demanded a side-view, the three quarter profile was used. A number of these panels survived in the monastery of St. Catherine on Sinai (see cover ill.). For the most part though very little has survived of the icons of the first milenneum of Christianity. Icons as we know them do not come into their own until the 12th century.

#### JUSTINIAN - THE FIRST GOLDEN AGE

Coinciding with the rise of Christianity was the gradual decline of the Roman Empire, decline of cities, decline of morale, decline of art. The West was subjected to relentless waves of barbarians for some five hundred years and was harassed by Islam





Ill. B. San Vitale in Ravenna. c.547.

from the seventh to the eleventh centuries. The Eastern half of the Empire managed to survive because it possessed greater resources: it was able to raise large armies from its own subjects and could if necessary pay large sums as blackmail to stave off the barbarian onslaught. But one of the chief causes of the stability of the Eastern Empire was the siting and impregnability of its capital. By the end of the sixth century the last trace of centralized authority in the Western provinces had disappeared. The Eastern Byzantine Empire, in contrast, survived the onslaughts and under Justinian ( 527 -565 A.D. ) reached new power and stability. The reign of Justinian marks the point at which the ascendancy of the Eastern Roman Empire over the Western became complete and final. Justinian was a great art patron in the tradition of Constantine and the works he sponsored have a coherence of style which links them more with the future of Byzantine art than with the art of the preceding centuries. His era is considered a 'Golden Age' in Byzantine art.

Examples of work executed in Justinian's reign are the church of San Vitale in Ravenna ( ill. B ) and Sant Apollinare in Classe ( ill. A ) near Ravenna. Justinian not only maintained the security of his empire but recaptured Ravenna, a strategic town on the Adriatic coast of Italy, from the Ostrogoths. The





Ill. C. Hagia Sophia, Constantinople. (Istanbul) c. 537.



churches in Ravenna contain the finest early Christian mosaics

"The mosaic surfaces are areas of sparkling gold, shimmering silver, flashes of garnet, outbursts of emerald green, touches of blue and murmurs of milky white".<sup>1</sup>

The glass enamel, and even mother of pearl tesserae \* are arranged so as to reflect maximum light. The figures are arranged in rhythmic sequence and processions of saints and martyrs decorate the aisles, all leading towards the altar which depicts the most important figures - Christ, His mother and the patron saint of the church. The inner space of the church is transformed by the dazzling brilliance of light, the colour and rhythm of the figures, into a space in which the spirit is exalted. Another church built in Justinian's reign, and probably the greatest, is the church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople (ill. C ). Built between 532 and 537 A.D. its central feature is a square compartment crowned by a huge dome whose weight is carried by four enormous arches. The transition from the square formed by the arches to the circular rim of the dome is made by spherical triangles, called pendentives. This device permits the construction of taller, lighter domes than had been previously possible; henceforth it was to be a basic feature of Byzantine architecture and, later, of Western architecture as well.

1. Giuseppe Bovini, Ravenna Mosaics. p.6

\* Cube like tiles used in mosaics.



These churches are, however, not only practical architectural achievements but express the belief system of Byzantium in direct symbolic terms. For example the square of the nave symbolizes the earth and the circle of the dome, the heavens. The plain, weighty exterior of the church contrasts with the rich decoration and feeling of lightness and infinite space of the interior, symbolizing the realm of man and of God and the contrast between the material and spiritual world.

With Justinian's death in 565 A.D. the Roman Empire came to an end in the West. The barbarian kings who replaced the Romans in the West however had already been Romanized to a large extent. The new states they founded, on the northern coast of Africa, and in Spain, Gaul and Northern Italy, were Mediterranean-oriented, provincial states along the borders of the Byzantine Empire, subject to the pull of its greater military, commercial, and cultural power.

With the rise of Islam in the eighth century the African and near-Eastern parts of the Empire were overrun by conquering Arab armies. The Byzantine Empire lost its bases in the western Mediterranean and, left unprotected, the church of Rome broke its last ties with the East and turned for support to the Germanic North.



### ICONOCLASM

Through the seventh and early eighth centuries the veneration of images reached its height. There was inevitably a reaction to this 'cult of the image'. In 730 A.D. Emperor Leo III issued an Edict that decreed the destruction of all images in human form of Christ, the Blessed Virgin and the saints and angels. All images were to be removed from places of worship as their presence there led to idolatry. Those who wished the destruction of the image were called Iconoclasts or 'image breakers' and their opponents were called Iconodules. The struggle between these two factions continued for over one hundred years. There are several causes attributed to the origin of Iconoclasm but it was probably the result of several factors combined. The veneration of images had quite possibly in some instances become idolatrous, icons themselves being worshipped instead of the image they represented. The influence of Islam was another factor in the rejection of images and Byzantine art of the period was reduced to the level of ornamental background. Gervase Mathew in his book 'Byzantine Aesthetics'<sup>2</sup> argues that the iconoclastic controversy was not only of a religious nature but was in fact a struggle between two political factions using a theological dispute as their point

2. Gervase Mathew, Byzantine Aesthetics.p.100.



of divergence. It was not merely the result of a 'semitic horror of the image' but had its roots in sociological and therefore economic factors. Iconoclasm was supported by church and state authorities, by those who wished the monks of each diocese to be under the control of their bishops and by those who wished the church to be under the control of the Emperor. The Iconodule opposition was led by those monks who desired the freedom of the church. So underlying the dispute on the role of the image was a struggle for power.

"The acrimony and the duration of the controversy upon the images only becomes intelligible if it was in reality also a struggle between two political factions".<sup>3</sup>

The dispute nevertheless did promote much discussion on the role of the image. The Iconodules argued that Christ came on earth in the physical form of man in order that man might know God, as in the words of Saint Athanasios "God has become man in order that man might know God". Then why should Christ not be seen and depicted as this was his function on earth? Christ was the word made carnate. Saint John of Damascus 'The Damascene' who was the chief Iconodule controversialist said that the image as an object was simply a piece of matter and the honour was paid to the prototype it represented, the same honour as is paid to consecrated things or a person worthy of respect. He said "An image is a silent sermon ... it is the book of the illiterate",

3. IBID. p.101.



reiterating Pope Gregory's previous assertion.

Many theological arguments were put forward on the nature of the image and the role of the icon in the church, and an analogy can be made to the modern question of the role of art in society. Many icons were destroyed at this time and throughout history similar purges have taken place when art and political ideology were found to be incompatible. Iconoclasm served a purpose however in that the exact nature and function of painted images was thoroughly debated and when the Iconodule party eventually returned to power it was no longer sufficient to regard the sacred image as mere 'illustration for the illiterate!.



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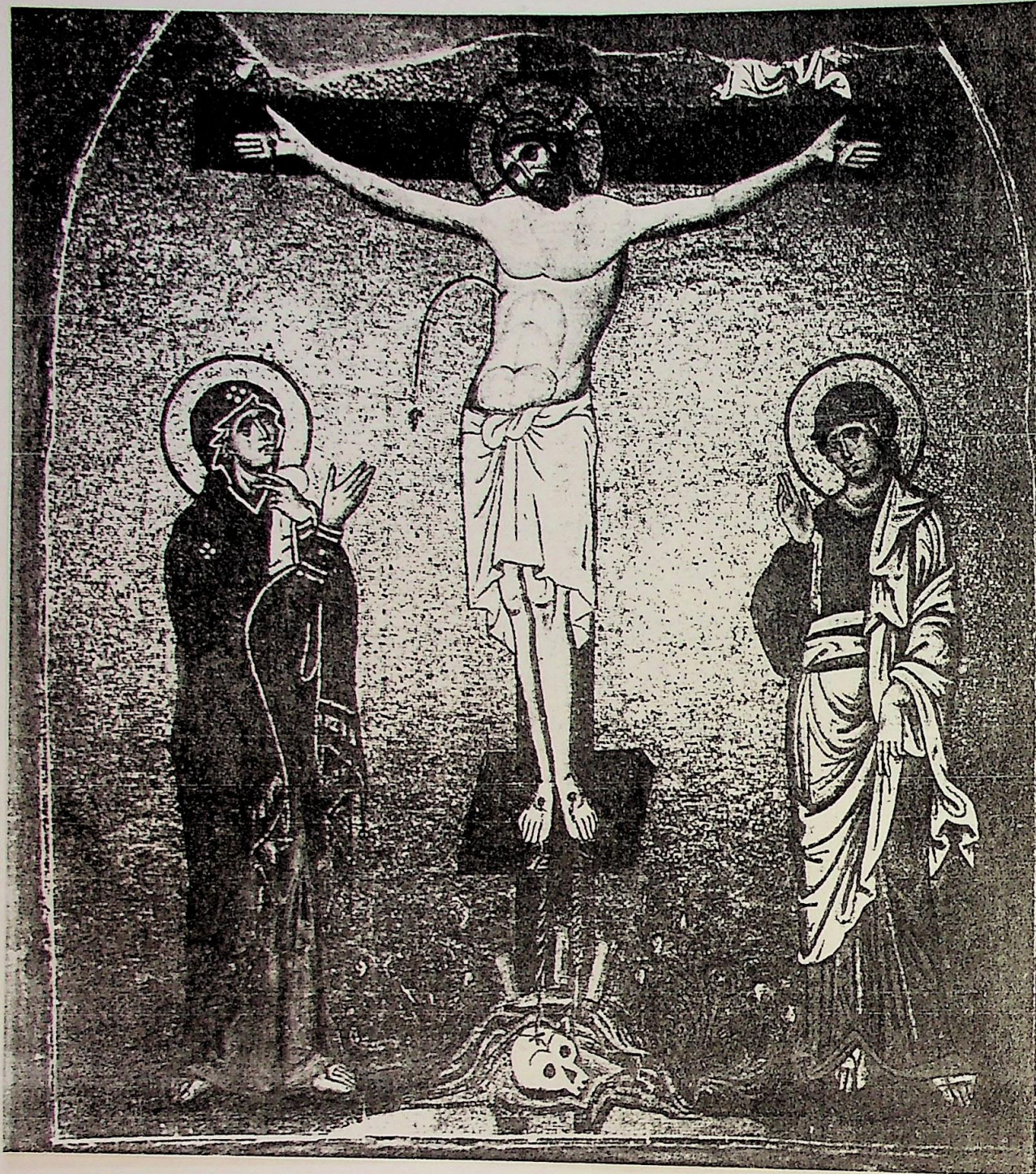
## CHAPTER. 2

### FROM THE SECOND GOLDEN AGE TO THE DECLINE OF ICON PAINTING.

#### THE ROLE OF THE ICON

Byzantine art was reborn in all its splendour from the ninth to the eleventh century with the Macedonian dynasty. The role of the icon in the life of the church had to be defined in formal terms following the iconoclastic heresy. Naturalism came increasingly under attack on the grounds that it included an element of paganism. Consequently during the ninth, tenth and eleventh centuries, painting, while never abandoning the classical conventions became increasingly hieratic and austere. The fusion between the classical technique and aesthetic standards from which Christian imagery had devolved developed into a coherent style during the eleventh century. There was then a second 'Golden Age'.

The ideal was epitomised by the ascetic body in billowing, classical drapery. There was no sentimental pathos in the bearing of the figures but rather a restrained, noble suffering or triumph, depending on the scene depicted. (see ill.D). Thus



Ill. D. The Crucifixion; mosaic, Daphnia, Greece, late 11th-cent.



the achievements of Greek art in the types used for drapery, faces and gesture, were preserved by the Byzantine insistence on certain traditions. The church controlled and dictated the formal structure and content of religious imagery but the artist still had room for personal expression. It is wrong to imagine that the artists of the period had no scope whatever writes Gombrich,

" It was they , in fact, who transformed the simple illustrations of early Christian art into great cycles of large and solemn images that dominate the interior of Byzantine churches".<sup>1</sup>

The Byzantine church had itself become an icon. Christ, His mother and the angels were present through their images in the dome and apse - the 'Sky' of the church and therefore the kingdom of heaven. On the lower half of the walls were the saints who were of the church on earth but who through their idyllic lives were immortalised in heaven. They represented an ideal towards which the common man could strive.

The Gospel narrative was depicted in the intermediate space between man and God, earth and heaven. Gervase Mathew explains the interpretation of the church as a 'threefold icon'.

" A church is not only a representation of the whole world it also represents the setting of Christ's life on earth. So that the recess in the apse is an image of the cave of Bethlehem, the altar that of the last supper..."<sup>2</sup>

1. E.H. Gombrich - The story of Art. p. 97

2. Byzantine Aesthetics. p.106.



The church is also an image of the liturgical year. The lesser scenes represent the mysteries of the church from the Annunciation to the Virgin's death. "The believer could feel himself present in turn at each (event) in chronological order".<sup>3</sup> The mysteries of the church were held to be literally re-enacted through the celebration of the Eucharist and the presentation of the image was determined by the use to which it was put. Art was used to decorate the church but never for the purpose of superficial decoration - it was conceived of as part of the architecture, which with the music, dress and gesture of the liturgy combined to raise the spirit to an exalted plane - a striving for pure spirituality. John Stuart put it this way:

"The Byzantine liturgy is, perhaps, the supreme achievement of Byzantine art. It enables the worshipper to participate actively with all his senses within a framework which encompasses form and content, painting and architecture, language, music and gestures. At an intuitive level, the worshipper is transported beyond the world of the senses to experience the ultimate reality which transcends physical reality. Every single factor used in this language of symbolism is meaningful, and every symbol adds a further dimension as it is interwoven with others... resolved through the medium of art, the nature of the interdependence between matter and spirit has been explained".<sup>4</sup>

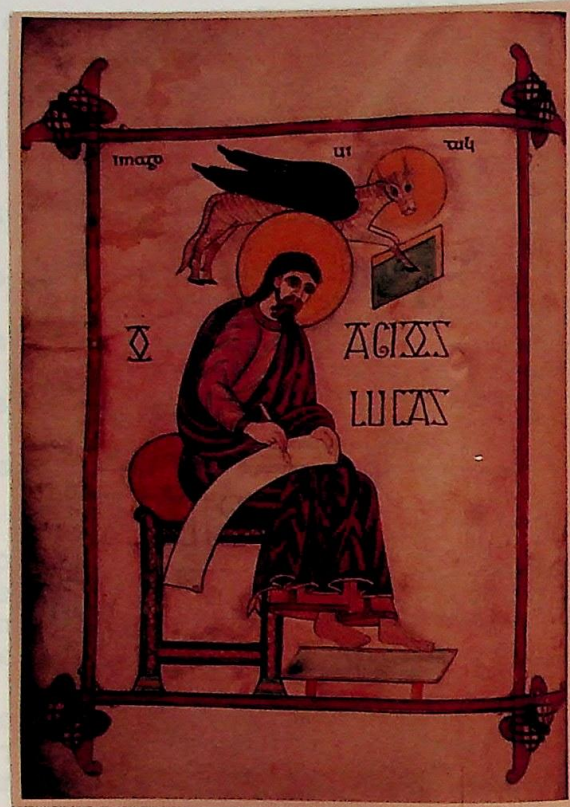
Man then is united with God through a fusion of the arts. What better use of the arts than to be united for the purpose of transporting mankind from his mundane, material existence to an exalted spiritual state.

This combination of community worship through the arts can be

3. IBID. p.107.

4. ICONS. p. 39.





likened to primitive tribal ceremonies which used similar means of exaltation. Konstantin Bazarov says in her essay, "Images and Icons" -

"... even though the aim of tribal or Byzantine art was never self expression of the modern craving for artistic originality, but the expression of essentially religious feelings. In all these societies the visual arts are only part of a complex which includes music, singing and dancing, and to all forms of art the reaction is much more than one of detached aesthetic appreciation, but is charged with emotion, awe, reverence and a sense of communion.<sup>5</sup>

A painting or mosaic in a Byzantine church was not merely a representation of a scene with a didactic purpose, nor was it just an object to be evaluated by intellectual or aesthetic mores. To the worshipper the images were part of the persons and scenes depicted, they established a mystical contact with the other world, the world of the spirit, of which the physical world was merely a pale reflection, a cast shadow.

#### THEORIES OF VISION

Although Byzantine art was spiritual in concept its construction was nevertheless based on a firm set of mathematical formulas and optical theories. The 'Optics' of Euclid were known to the Byzantines through the writings of

5. "Images and Icons". Art and Artists, Sept 1975. pp5-9



pappus of Alexandria, and were crucial in the formation of Byzantine theories of vision. It was believed that things were seen by rays from the eyes striking against objects, which is the reverse (though similar in concept) of what is known today - that light is reflected from the object to the eye. Some things were not susceptible to the visual rays.

"The straight rays that issue from the eye traverse dimensions. They create the field of vision by striking the object at an angle. The figure contained by the visual rays is a cone which has its vertex in the eye and its base at the extremities of the objects seen. Since the visual rays are distinct and separate from each other a man can never see the whole of an object even though he believes that he is doing so". 6

Only by moving the eyes then could all the surface be touched by the 'visual rays'. Byzantine art encourages the eye to wander across the surface, not to rest on detail. Artists used many systems of perspective, seen as devices to regulate the effects of space between the seer and the seen as well as to link the foreground and background within the picture. Depth was considered more important optically than height or width, but it was conceived as being in front of the image, not behind it.

The Byzantine picture opens onto the space before it. The 'picture space' of Byzantine art was primarily that of the church in which it was placed. Width and height were already provided

6. Pappus, Little Astronomy.



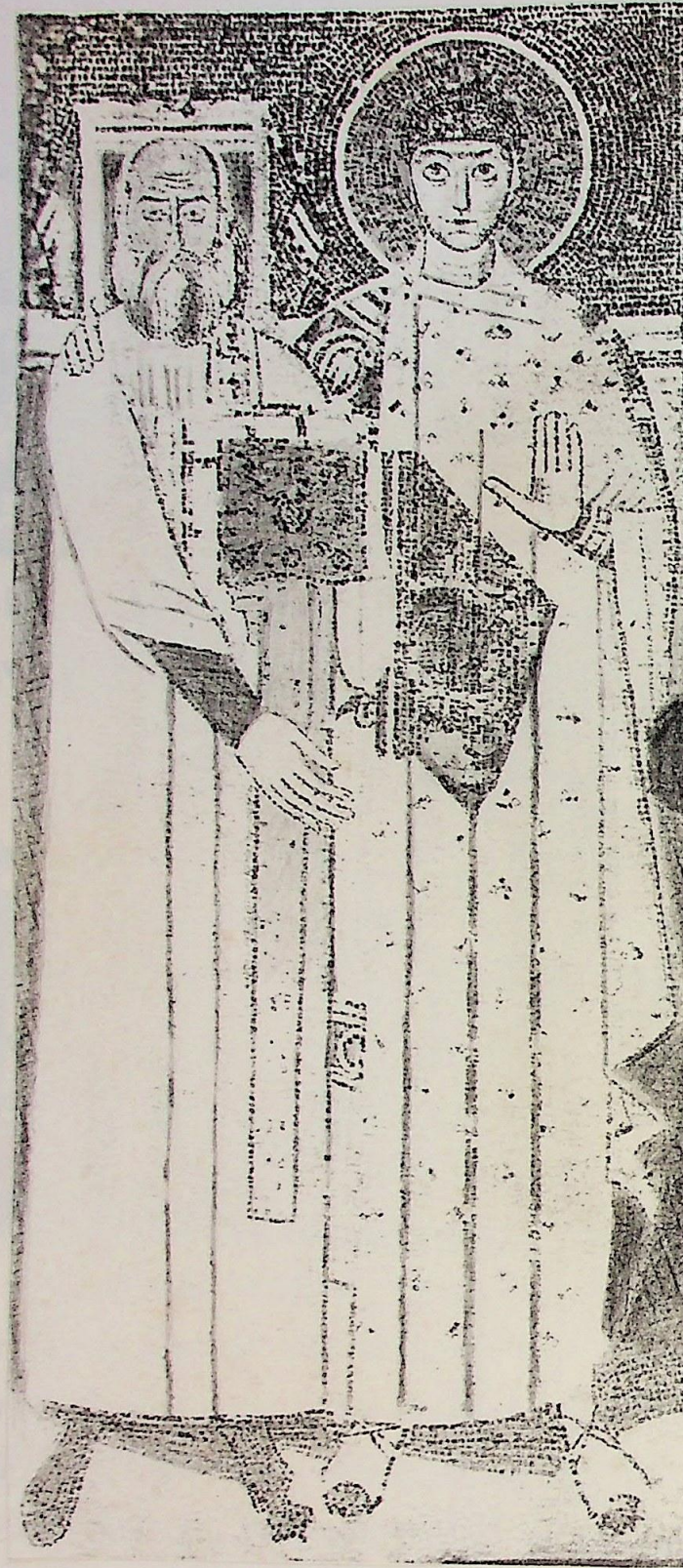


Ill. E. The protection of the Mother of God; wooden panel,  
North Russia, 16th.-century.

in the proportion of the church appointed to the mosaic or picture, depth had to be incorporated. Sometimes the picture had its own height width and depth in the form of a niche, cut into a wall. In order to accomodate a lot of figures in some scenes, certain devices were used to give some form of depth within the picture itself. There was a system of layering in which figures behind the foreground figures were progressively larger and for landscape the terrace or slope served a similar function. Sometimes the viewpoint was shown from above and in front within the same composition (ill. E).

At times the co-existence of two surfaces and even two spaces within one composition is conveyed by a counterpoint of geometrical elements, as for example in the crucifixion mosaic from Daphne (ill. D). The composition is geometrically balanced and musically harmonious. The figure of Christ forms a central perpendicular while the line of His arms form a curve in opposition to the curve of the outer arch. The two figures at the foot of the cross stand in an illusory foreground created by the angle of the bodies turned towards the figure on the cross. A shift of viewpoint is created by the reversed perspective of the footrest which is seen from above. The figures themselves are dignified and graceful and show a





Ill. F. St. Demetrius with a Bishop; mosaic, 7th.-century.

classicism which is harmoniously merged with the Byzantine spiritual ideal of human beauty. The faces and gestures convey gentleness and a restrained, noble, suffering. The feeling of this one moment is timeless, they exist in an 'eternal present'. A final note is struck by the issue from Christ's wound, forever flowing, forever still. Although space was created by various methods within the Byzantine picture, depth existed primarily between the image and the spectator. The horizon line is usually placed high and the perspective elements tend to converge downwards from top to bottom instead of receding, as became the norm in Western art where the picture plane opened out behind the image like a view from a window.

Apart from forming the compositional basis of Byzantine art, mathematics - especially geometry and arithmetic - also had a symbolic function. The square, for example, symbolises the earth and the circle the heavens. (see ill.s.C and F). Arithmetic contained not only the art of calculation but the theory of number. Numbers were held to have a mystic meaning and to be connected with musical harmonies.

"In the close study of any Byzantine work of art it is perhaps worth first looking for the proportion of three to two or of six to one. Byzantine 'surface-aesthetic' was inevitably derived from arithmetic since all harmonies in form or colour were the echoes of an incorporeal music, the harmonies of Pure Number".<sup>7</sup>

7. Gervase Mathew, Byzantine Aesthetics, p.26





Ill. G. Head of St. Peter. Detail of a fresco, Cathedral of the Dormition, Vladimir. c. 1408.

The number six had particular significance since God created the world in six days. Six was also considered a particularly harmonious number; Divided by three it becomes two, divided by two it becomes three, divided by six it becomes one, when two and three and one are added it becomes six again. Pure geometry and the theory of numbers eventually interpenetrated each other. The harmonies of number could be translated into geometric terms: a hundred as the circumference of a circle or six as an isosceles triangle.

Time and motion are expressed through the musical apportionment of line and space. The figure itself is essentially still, conveying its inner feeling through formal, symbolic gesture. It is animated only by the use of line in the folds of drapery and the overall movement of the composition. A sense of rhythmic timing, could be conveyed through a series of tapering brush strokes, both curved and straight which move across the image indicating the planes, giving a sense of volume and radiating outwards like waves of energy. (see ill. G) The actual line follows the same pattern of natural growth as, for example, a blade of grass; starting at an invisible point, swelling to fullness and tapering again to a point. The icon painter was in this sense a naturalistic painter, in the organic nature and structure of the image. He painted the





Ill. H. The Transfiguration; mosaic, 13th.-century.

fundamental mechanism of living things, based on an analysis of nature in depth. The calligraphic line echoes the growth pattern in nature. The lines which move across St. Peter (ill. G) are applied with an energy and rhythmic pace reminiscent of a musical beat. Line also serves to organise and integrate the structural mass of the composition (see ill.H). The figure of Christ is supported by a series of intersecting lines which radiate towards the surrounding figures. Implied line is carried through gesture, for example the hand gesture of St. Peter in the top left of the panel is repeated in the gesture of Christ's right hand, while His left hand is repeated by the figure in the lower right corner. These paintings of the 'linear style' are not to be confused with a more primitive use of line sometimes seen in the icons of North Russia which may be termed 'contour style'. (ill.E). Line in this instance is used in the separation of one mass of colour from another and is more akin to coloured drawing. The function of line here is merely to define the extremities of a shape and as such is lacking in any musical connotation.

Colour as well as giving 'the illusion of spatial coherence' had symbolic, unconscious associations. Byzantine colour theory is almost certainly related to alchemy which, at that time was





Ill. J. Christ in Glory by Andrei Rublyov. Central Russia,  
c. 1410 - 1415.

a living and highly respected activity. The process of extracting colour was linked with the need to understand the nature and spiritual properties of matter. Pigments which came from the earth and were close to the earth colours such as greens, browns and ochres were used to define earthly existence. Blue being the colour of the skies, the heavens, symbolised infinity and contemplation. Red was a particularly favoured colour, especially in the Russian states. It denoted vigour and vitality and is the colour of the blood of martyrs and of Christ. The exact hue of a colour varied according to the minerals and plants available locally. An orange red though would be associated with fire and therefore spiritual purification and martyrdom. White stands for purity and was often the colour of Christ's robes. White may also be used to indicate spirituality and an invisible presence. White, used over a solid colour could indicate another dimension, an aura of spirituality. (see ill. J).

The icon painter was not obliged to use naturalistic colour schemes but could use his colour to create music - like harmonies. Gold is symbolic of 'uncreated energy'. It is the colour of the sun, the stars and lightning but it is not found in the spectrum. God created light and light is synonymous with the sun, which is the life-force of the universe. The light in



religious icons is invariably shown from behind. Figures exist within the timelessness of light. Gold, used in the background reflects its light back to the spectator. Gold was also painted in fine lines on the faces and garments of heavenly figures, indicating the divine energies which radiated from them. Sometimes surrounding objects were also given these gold lines to illustrate how a spiritual being can also invest his surroundings with divine energies.

#### THE SPREAD OF BYZANTINE ART - RUSSIA.

During its second 'Golden Age' Byzantine art developed a coherence and power which carried its influence to neighbouring, and some more distant, countries. It was an imperial art which was centered at the court in Constantinople, but its energy came from the surrounding provincial states which provided a constant flow of fresh inspiration that could be incorporated into official art and in turn be redistributed throughout the provinces. Byzantium reached into the West, towards Venice (S. Mark's, Venice; churches on Torcello) and to Sicily (mosaics at Palermo Cefalu, Monreale); and into the East as far as Russia (S. Sophia Kiev). When Constantinople finally fell to the Turks in 1453 Byzantine art lost its traditional centre and Russia became the foster - mother of Byzantine art.





Ill. K. St. Makarios and the Patriarch Abel; Frescos by  
Theophanes the Greek, Novgorod, 14th.-century.

The conversion of Prince Vladimir to the Greek Orthodox faith in 989 had directed the artistic activities of the Russian Slavs towards Byzantium, and fresco painting flourished in Novgorod, Moscow and Yaroslav. From the fourteenth century onwards it gradually became the practice to cut off the altar-space from the rest of the church by putting up iconostases, screens to which icons were attached in vertical and horizontal rows. By their faithful adherence to earlier models iconographers were to preserve the traditions of Byzantine art for a long time to come. In the fifteenth century Russian icon-painting broke away from its Byzantine influence and developed its own style and form. This progression can be seen in the painting of Theophanes the Greek (ill. K) who left Constantinople probably because of its decline, and found in the intellectual freedom of Novgorod a new style which was of fundamental importance for Russian painting of the fifteenth century. Theophanes belonged to the Heychast tradition which held that man's highest faculty - that of the spiritual intellect - was not created but was the mirror image of God within man and was therefore deiform and uncreated. Divinity was expressed by light and light was distinguished from any created thing. Theophanes had a very individual style,



with highlight exaggeratedly prominent. His paintings have great elegance and delicacy with elongated figures which became a characteristic of Russian icons. In Russia Theophanes was but the forerunner, however, and the manner was developed by numerous followers and pupils so that today the name of the most famous of them Andrei Rublyov, (see ill. J), has to a great extent overshadowed that of his master. The features which distinguish Russian icons are notably elongated proportions, great delicacy of detail, bright tones and a markedly rhythmical composition. The icons of Russia are considered among the most important of all medieval works of art and their artistic merit lies above all in their colours which were for a long time obscured by dirt and overpainting.

#### DECLINE

From the sixteenth century there was a gradual decline in the quality and integrity of icon painting. Artistic influence derived from the Western Renaissance such as Mannerism and Western Realism led to the debasement of icon painting. A development which indicates a change of conception can be seen in the growing importance attached to the names of



individual painters. In the Byzantine and early Russian worlds, as in the Gothic West, painters had almost always remained anonymous. They worked to the greater Glory of God and were willing to pass unrecorded. With the Renaissance, the new humanism to a great extent supplanted this old faith in the Divine. Artists, working for the Church, began to seek to establish themselves as individuals. The name of the painter began to have as much importance, if not more than, the work itself. Art patrons, also, came to be known for themselves and numerous icons were, in fact, executed to the orders of such patrons. Frequently such icons depict the patron saint or name saint of the individual concerned, and as a result of this numerous obscure or purely local saints are depicted. Textiles, vestments and architectural details on icons began to be decorated with jewels and precious stones. The object of this seems to have been to intensify and enrich the heavenly character of the painting by drawing attention to its value. In other words spiritual value was symbolised by material riches. At a later date mounts or frames in precious metal were often added, sometimes even obscuring all but the faces of the saints.

These features, however religious the underlying aim may have been, actually only serve to accentuate the decline of the old



spiritual faith. Outward symbols were resorted to as a substitute for true spirituality which was inherent in the earlier icons. Some icons of the later period could almost be classed as precious jewels rather than painting, as the rich decoration dominates everything else in the picture. Icon painting had ceased to be an art and had become a craft or luxury trade. Those who recognised these developments as a debasement of the art of icon painting - for the most part monks who rejected earthly riches - took a reactionary stance and did not allow any change whatever. This in time stifled artistic progress and icon painting in this context became a matter of reproduction.



## CONCLUSION

For the Byzantine artist the making of an icon was a religious experience. The individual artist was usually anonymous. He was not the innovator of a new concept such as naturalistic perspective, he was not a 'star' or personality as the Western artist was to become. His art was a form of prayer and he worked as part of a team of artist craftsmen whose combined efforts created a whole. The finished art had its place and its purpose and became part of another 'whole' in the church or home. It was part of the celebration of the Eucharist, the celebration of life and death and the spirit.



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