

Iconography in the Holy Land

By Ian Knowles



Passing through Palestine's churches you can't but notice icons, hundreds if not thousands of them: old ones, new ones, decayed ones, exquisite ones. The Holy Land wouldn't be the same without them.

Numerically, Greek Catholics are the single largest group of Christians in the Holy Land, followed by the Greek Orthodox, both of which follow the Byzantine liturgy. Icons are the art of that liturgy, and so are pivotal to understanding the lived experience of Christians native to the region and their ancient, now endangered culture.

Much about the role of the icon in Palestine is a matter of conjecture, but, from the evidence I have come across in my own research, I am absolutely convinced that the ancient art of the Christian liturgy began here in Palestine, probably in one of the monasteries, sometime in the middle of the sixth century. If this is so, then it makes iconography one of the most important Palestinian contributions to world culture.

What then is an icon? Is any religious picture an icon? The answer is unequivocally no. Even though, the word icon comes from the Greek word *eikon*, and simply means image or drawing, icons are not religious art except in a very specific sense. They are liturgical art, that is, art designed for an integral role in the Christian liturgy. They complement, in line and color, the words, music, ceremonies, and architecture of the liturgy. They surround the altar and bring out the meaning of what is taking place there.

The icon does this in a very unique way, which can seem baffling



Until the 1940s there were still icon workshops in Bethlehem, as there had been across the Holy Land for the best part of 1,500 years. During the nineteenth century, the workshops in Jerusalem and Bethlehem specialized in Arabic icons, which originated in Syria, and it is from these workshops that most of the icons seen today in the churches and monasteries of the area originated from.



to the non-believer. It reverses what we expect in a painting, in that it literally projects the image into the beholder's space, rather than creating a scene that disappears into the distance, framed as though being looked at through a window. Icons are *not* windows into heaven as some mistakenly say. They are doors from the sacred into the world, thin places where heaven and earth meet and sacred power enters the world, just as took place at Jesus' Transfiguration on Mount Tabor.

At the same time, the icon is *honest* art. It doesn't create the illusion of heaven or a sacred event. It is happy to be a representation: muted, flat, and symbolic. But, in so doing, it allows the reality being portrayed to be truly present, transcending the limitations of matter to bring to our eyes otherwise unseen spiritual realities. These realities are only really understood in *context*, and that context is the Christian liturgy. Icons need to be understood by cross-referencing them with the scriptures, hymns, and prayers of a particular feast or saint. The iconographer deliberately draws out these connections in creative and inspiring ways. The icon puts a world beyond our imagining within our grasp.

Iconography is thus not an art form for the uninitiated or untrained. Yet sadly,

in Palestine many of the icons are made without any significant training or understanding of their theological, liturgical, and spiritual context.

Icons are traditionally made with egg tempera – a laborious and slow process – and finely burnished gold, which again is time consuming and expensive. The commercial pressures surrounding the making and selling of icons in Palestine have minimized the quality and debased the spiritual basis upon which they are being made. The few trained iconographers that are around usually work independently, and with the lowest of incomes. This makes them vulnerable to fluctuations in the



market and the demands of the buyer. Moreover, the icons' spiritual foundation cannot be guaranteed. While there exist some very fine iconographers, they are few and far between, and often too busy (and perhaps sometimes too cynical about the motives of potential students) to pass on their skills.

For those who do work as iconographers in the West Bank, there are additional difficulties. Obtaining good quality, natural pigments is all but impossible. Likewise, there is a scarcity of quality brushes and other materials, which top-level artists need. Such supplies are mostly available in Jerusalem or Tel Aviv, but for the many

who lack permits, access to these vital supplies is unlikely. Thus, these factors conspire to make painting icons of the highest standard nearly unattainable for Palestinian artists. The only place where such supplies can be found in the West Bank is at the Icon Center in Bethlehem.

The Center and its Icon School were founded in 2012 to address this cultural crisis and to help restore iconography as a living aspect of the ancient Christian culture of the Holy Land. This is the only such institute in the region, and perhaps across the whole of the Middle East. By demanding the highest standards and encouraging collaboration, it makes it possible for Palestinians to produce works that meet the highest international standards.

At a time when so many aspects of Palestinian culture are under threat, and the Christian community is rapidly diminishing, iconography is one area which offers a glimmer of hope, as it reaches back into Palestine's deepest past and yet is still a living part of the Christian communities' spiritual life. If this initiative succeeds, then a vital part of Palestinian culture will have been preserved and, once again, after many centuries of neglect and decline, begin to flower. This is where forming a community of artists is so important, since it gives not only safety and support to individual artists who would otherwise struggle on alone, but it makes a cultural renaissance possible through creating a cross-fertilization of ideas and a context of trust and spiritual renewal.



Ian Knowles, founder and director of the Bethlehem Icon Center, is an Oxford theology graduate from the UK. He is a professional iconographer with work displayed around the world, and the author of the landmark icon "Our Lady of the Wall."

Article photos courtesy of the author.

