

OLD-TIME ICONOGRAPHERS – APPRENTICESHIP, CONSECRATION, AND PERSONALITY

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ABSTRACT

The church painters of the past - apprenticeship, consecration and personality. Whilst about the icon, the work and its missionary role, many specialised studies have been written based on the teaching of the Church, the apostolic sermon and the theology of the Holy Fathers, not as much has been written about the invisible face of the icon, its relationship with the church painters regarding the preparation, painting and functionality of the icon. Therefore, the present study aims to bring to light unique and practical information about the apprenticeship, personality and consecration of the church painters of the old times while emphasising the inseparable connection between the icon and the church painter. The church painters of the old times worked while having before the eyes of the soul the teachings of the Holy Gospel, harmoniously crystallised by the decisions of the ecumenical councils, fact that brought them the certainty of the work done in the Holy Spirit by together working with the grace of the divine craft. Moreover, in the past, the measure of the iconographer's worth depended not only on his professional training but, above all, on the purity of his life lived in obedience to God. Today, however, as a result of the changes in social life resulting from industrialisation, the evolution of science, economic development, and political regimes that have caused substantial social earthquakes, the training of iconographers is realised in an institutional setting through undergraduate studies, master's degrees, doctorates and degree exams, all under the obedience and involvement of the Church. What is missing from this training that is exceptional from a professional point of view? We consider that the professional formation of today's iconographers needs more spirit and that state of grace for which the iconographers once had so much zeal..

Keywords: church; iconography; apprenticeship; consecration; personality; spiritual life;

INTRODUCTION

Eastern Christian theology has professed, since the early centuries, that the icon represents a genuine confession of faith by the iconographer, being in an indissoluble connection with him and seeking to fulfil its purpose and work of preaching and interceding the evangelical truth through a pure expression of faith, in the spirit of the Holy Fathers. From the beginning, Christian icons highlighted the artistic vision of a reality that could not be directly expressed, conveying to the viewer the spiritual message that made it possible for him to discover the unseen world¹.

¹ Mihail MIHALCU, Mihaela D. LEONIDA, *Din tainele iconarilor români de altă dată*, Cluj Napoca, Eikon, 2009, p. 70.

Thus, the icon, as the theology of the image, "announces through colors and makes present what the Gospel proclaims through words. The icon is, therefore, one of the aspects of divine Revelation and of our communion with God"². Moreover, Orthodox Christians who gather in church for the liturgy establish a connection with the heavenly Church through icons and liturgical prayers. While many specialised studies have been written about the icon, its work, and its missionary role, based on the Church's teachings derived from the Gospel, apostolic preaching, and the theology of the Holy Fathers, much less has been written about the unseen aspect of the icon—its relationship with the iconographer regarding his preparation, painting, and the functionality of the icon. Therefore, this study aims to shed light on novel and practical information concerning the apprenticeship, personality, and consecration or sanctification of the iconographers of the past, highlighting the inseparable connection between the icon and the iconographer, which makes the icon a result of the "synergy between the Spirit of God and the spirit of man"³.

1. APPRENTICESHIP

The painting of icons represents a proper theology of the image as a clear expression of the truth of faith, which is the fruit of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The iconographer assumes the role of the theologian, being "illuminated and a holy member of the Church, expressing the truth not through words, but through shapes and colors"⁴. The Church and the iconographers fully recognised that the icon also serves to elevate the soul of the iconophile towards Heaven, achieving a direct union with the prototype that descends into the soul of the believer through the veneration of the image in the icon⁵.

Creating an icon is complex, considering its multiple functions and its theological message. It seeks to unite the viewer and worshiper with the archetype of the one depicted in the icon. This demonstrates the thorough preparation and training that ancient iconographers received, both in execution and from theological, moral, and spiritual perspectives.

Creating icons requires a careful understanding of the materials that constitute them and skill in handling and using them. Iconographers were required to know the materials used, the chemical processes for obtaining them, and their qualities, constantly considering their advantages and disadvantages.⁶ Mastering these secrets of sacred art made them aware that "true creation requires knowledge and spirit."⁷ Deep study and spiritual ascent are necessary for this state to become a reality. Iconography, as a divine craft, according to the documents of the Seventh Ecumenical Council, was not and is not considered to have been invented and used by painters. The origin of sacred art goes back to Saint Luke the Evangelist, in the service of the Apostles and the early Holy Fathers of the Church⁸.

No clear records allow us to determine whether a future iconographer was subject to an examination regarding their spiritual profile, artistic talent, or moral integrity before beginning their apprenticeship. In Western Christianity, it is specified that those who wish to

² Michel QUENOT, *Icoana, fereastră spre Absolut*, traducere de Vasile Răducă, Bucharest, Editura Enciclopedică, 1993, pp. 10-11.

³ Georgios KORDIS, *Ritmul în pictura bizantină*, translated by de Mihai Coman, Bucharest, Editura Bizantină, 2008, p. 13.

⁴ Georgios KORDIS, *Hierotypos. Teologia icoanei după Sfinții Părinți*, translated by de Mihai Coman, Bucharest, Editura Bizantină, 2002, p.16.

⁵ Mihail MIHALCU, Mihaela D. LEONIDA, *Din tainele iconarilor români de altă dată*, p. 72.

⁶ Leonid USPENSKI, Vladimir LOSSKY, *Călăuziri în lumea icoanei*, translated by de Anca Popescu, Bucharest, Sophia, 2003, p. 86.

⁷ Georgios KORDIS, *Ritmul în pictura bizantină*, p. 21.

⁸ Mihail MIHALCU, Mihaela D. LEONIDA, *Din tainele iconarilor români de altă dată*, p. 72.

learn the sacred art must be clothed in love, fear, obedience, and perseverance⁹. The apprenticeship of one who wished to learn the craft of icon painting began by entering the obedience and teaching of a master painter, a skilled teacher who would take care of the apprentice's formation, sharing with them the secrets of iconography.

Dionysius of Fourna, the humble hieromonk and Athonite painter who lived in the 18th century shows us the first steps of the apprentice iconographer: "Know then, O apprentice lover of learning, that if you ever wish to undertake this craft, you must carefully seek out a skilled teacher whom you will soon recognise if he teaches you as I have previously shown. And if you happen to find someone unlearned and unskilled, do as we have done: seek out some examples from the renowned Manuel Panselinos and spend enough time studying them, sketching and drawing in the manner I will show you, until you understand his forms and proportions. Then go to the churches painted by him to make copies or studies, as I will further explain"¹⁰.

Thus, the apprenticeship of the iconographer was marked by the study of the manuals compiled by the master painters of the time, which provided iconographers with the technical knowledge necessary to create copies or models of paintings, recommending these manuals to apprentices as excellent teachers¹¹. The apprentice's activity primarily involved the repeated copying, over an extended period, of numerous models created by skilled teachers or accomplished masters who were recognised for their previous work as master painters and creators of sacred art¹². The purpose of these model copies was to help the apprentice perfect their drawing skills, become accustomed to the demands of iconography, familiarise themselves with the interpretation and presentation of portraits of saints and scenes from the history of salvation, and protect them from falling into heresy¹³.

The obligation for apprentices to practice according to old models originates from the acts of the Seventh Ecumenical Council, which decreed that icons should be as close as possible to ancient models that were considered to have a divine origin and a specific functionality¹⁴. Although not mentioned as part of the apprenticeship process in any manual, there was, in practice, a secondary stage of the iconographer's apprenticeship. During their activity, the apprentice was also engaged in other tasks related to icon work, such as: "preparing pigments or additives to the appropriate granulation for painting (grinding colors), various measurements and mixing of raw materials and supplies, hydrating quicklime (slaking lime), preparing the black mortar used for filling and leveling, conditioning materials, and transporting construction materials for scaffolding"¹⁵. There are few specific details regarding the existence of tests or examinations for apprentices at the end of their novitiate. There is, however, a circular from 1781 by Bishop Filaret of Râmnicu, cited by Teodora Voinescu, which made the following recommendations: "Anyone who claims to be a painter should not be allowed to paint icons until they first present themselves to us so we can assess their skill, and grant them permission. This is to ensure that instead of beautifying

⁹ Mihail MIHALCU, Mihaela D. LEONIDA, *Din tainele iconarilor români de altă dată*, p. 74-75.

¹⁰ DIONISIE DIN FURNA, *Erminia picturii bizantine*, translated by Smaranda Bratu Stati and Șerban Stati, revised, completed and indexed by C. Săndulescu-Verna, Bucharest, Sophia, 2000, p. 23.

¹¹ Teodora VOINESCU, *Radu Zugravu*, Bucharest, Meridiane, 1978, p. 28.

¹² Mihail MIHALCU, Mihaela D. LEONIDA, *Din tainele iconarilor români de altă dată*, p.76.

¹³ DIONISIE DIN FURNA, *Erminia picturii bizantine*, p. 23.

¹⁴ Mihail MIHALCU, Mihaela D. LEONIDA, *Din tainele iconarilor români de altă dată*, p.77.

¹⁵ Mihail MIHALCU, Mihaela D. LEONIDA, *Din tainele iconarilor români de altă dată*, p.76.

the churches, they do not produce works that are not accepted by the regulations and, instead of devotion, bring ridicule and mockery due to their inexperience"¹⁶.

Thus, the maturity of execution, experience, and skill of the iconographer, as well as the spirit of their craft, were certified by the ecclesiastical authority represented by the local bishop. Church painters, according to ecclesial consciousness, held a distinct rank in the social order of the church, occupying a special place in the Church between the altar servers and the laity¹⁷.

2. CONSECRATION

After completing the apprenticeship period, which involved the repeated drawing of models and examples according to the old manuals of master iconographers and acquiring knowledge about the materials used and the chemical processes required to obtain them, the moment of consecration or sanctification followed. This ceremony imparted to the apprentice the grace of the divine craft¹⁸ of painting icons. This consecration or ordination of the apprentice iconographer was performed by a priest or bishop in the church, with the ceremony typically taking place on the day of the bright feast of Pascha (Easter)¹⁹.

Considering the solemnity and spiritual significance of this culminating moment in the iconographer's life, as well as the period in which it took place, even though we do not have precise information, we can say that fasting, contemplation, specific prayers, confession, and communion with the Holy Mysteries of Christ preceded the ordination of the iconographer. According to Dionysius of Furna's manual, the ordination of the apprentice iconographer took place after the Vespers service in the church, before the icon of the Mother of God known as the "Guide," the first icon made by human hands (by Saint Luke the Evangelist). Master iconographers and journeymen accompanied the apprentice. The service of consecration began with the Small Blessing, followed by the opening prayers and two troparia: "Let the lips of the pagans who do not venerate the honorable icon painted by the holy apostle and evangelist Luke, known as the Guide, be silenced," and "You were transfigured on the mountain, O Christ God, showing Your glory to Your disciples as much as they could bear..."²⁰. From the beginning of this rite, we can observe that the iconographer's activity in the church was not regarded merely as a profession but as an accurate liturgical service under the protection of the Mother of God and with the work of the Holy Spirit, within a well-defined theological, canonical, and dogmatic framework. From that moment, the apprentice iconographers became fully aware of the presence and work of grace within themselves as a successor of Saint Luke the Evangelist and a Church member.

The ordination rite continued with a prayer spoken by the priest over the apprentice, preceded by the blessing of their head with the sign of the holy cross. The blessing prayer, with the priest's hands placed on the apprentice's head, invoked the mercy and help of the Savior upon them, asking for the enlightenment and wisdom of their soul, heart, and mind and requesting from God: "Guide their hands to depict without blemish and with great skill the image of Your likeness, the Pure Mother of Your Holy Church, and all the saints, for

¹⁶ Teodora VOINESCU, *Radu Zugravu*, p. 28.

¹⁷ Pavel FLORENSKI, *Iconostasul*, traducere de Boris Buzilă, Bucharest, Anastasia, 1994, p. 178.

¹⁸ DIONISIE DIN FURNA, *Erminia picturii bizantine*, p. 23.

¹⁹ DIONISIE DIN FURNA, *Erminia picturii bizantine*, p.22.

²⁰ DIONISIE DIN FURNA, *Erminia picturii bizantine*, p.22.

Your glory, for the splendor and beautification of Your holy Church, and for the forgiveness of the sins of those who with reverence and piety venerate and kiss these images”²¹.

Thus, it can be observed from this beautiful text that the iconographer’s work, in obedience to the Church, was missionary, sanctifying, liturgical, and pedagogical. It helped the faithful unite through prayer and contemplation with the archetype depicted in the icon, bringing spiritual solace.

The blessing rite for the apprentice iconographer concluded with an ektenia, in which the descent of grace upon the apprentice was once again invoked, thereby granting them the status of a creator of functional icons, followed by the Small Dismissal.²² The same blessing was present in the rite through which the apprentice advanced to the rank of journeyman upon completing their apprenticeship. After these stages of formation, the iconographer could undertake and execute painting or restoration work for churches without being obligated to seek the approval or opinion of a master or expert²³.

After the rite of consecration, the apprentice iconographer gained access to the secrets of church painting²⁴, the primary sources of these secrets were the teachings received, either orally or through technical execution, and the texts of the manuals, which provided indispensable knowledge for a church painter²⁵. It should be noted that while the rite above bestowed the grace of the divine craft upon the apprentice iconographer as a gift from God, they were expected to maintain this state continually through piety, reverence, morality, obedience to the Church and their spiritual father, and prayer. They were also to perfect their technical skills with great zeal and diligence.

3. THE PERSONALITY OF THE ICONOGRAPHER

As mentioned earlier, ancient iconographers were distinguished by the Church with a special honour among the lay faithful. They most often came from the ranks of monks and priests²⁶, teachers of the church, but also, not infrequently, from among the laity²⁷. They were not mere artists working solely for material gain²⁸. They were not mere technicians who might or might not belong to the Church but bearers of a particular ecclesiastical responsibility. Church painters were recommended to lead a semi-monastic lifestyle, being subject to obedience to the local bishop and a master iconographer, who rewarded them with various honours and privileges, as well as special rewards, such as being admitted into the nobility²⁹. Regarding the spiritual life of the ancient iconographers, there is information that many of them, particularly among the priests and monks, practised the prayer of the heart³⁰, seeking that, through the inner illumination of grace, they might bring into material light the sacred images or biblical scenes they painted, as faithfully as possible to the Truth Depicting the image of a saint on a painted surface required, in addition to inventorying the ensemble of

²¹ Pavel FLORENSKI, *Iconostasul*, p. 184.

²² Mihail MIHALCU, Mihaela D. LEONIDA, *Din tainele iconarilor români de altă dată*, p. 85.

²³ Mihail MIHALCU, Mihaela D. LEONIDA, *Din tainele iconarilor români de altă dată*, p.87.

²⁴ This practice is reminiscent of *Disciplina arcana* from the early centuries of Christianity, when the uninitiated, the catechumens, did not have access to the Sacraments and the liturgy of the faithful until their baptism.

²⁵ Mihail MIHALCU, Mihaela D. LEONIDA, *Din tainele iconarilor români de altă dată*, p. 80.

²⁶ Irineu CRĂCIUNAȘ, „Pictura bisericească din Moldova (secolele XV-VII)” in Mihai HAU (ed.), Cristian ANTONESCU (coord.), *Învățătura despre Sfintele Icoane, reflectată în teologia românească*, vol. III, Bucharest, Basilica, 2017, p. 89.

²⁷ Mihail MIHALCU, Mihaela D. LEONIDA, *Din tainele iconarilor români de altă dată*, p. 92.

²⁸ DIONISIE DIN FURNA, *Erminia picturii bizantine*, pp. 23-24.

²⁹ Pavel FLORENSKI, *Iconostasul*, p. 178.

³⁰ Mihail MIHALCU, Mihaela D. LEONIDA, *Din tainele iconarilor români de altă dată*, p. 92.

inseparable hypostatic characteristics³¹, and a spiritual closeness or touch to the archetype, with the iconographer fully aware that the icon is a symbol representing a reality that transcends him³². Therefore, the master iconographers often read passages from the Holy Scriptures, the Fathers of the Church, or the Lives of the Saints related to the specific area of the painting they were working on.

This practice aimed to create a unique spiritual environment essential for creating an icon or a scene from the history of salvation and to maintain the iconographer in a state of grace.³³ Thus, both the Athonite iconographic manual by Hieromonk Dionysius of Furna³⁴ as well as the acts of particular Russian synods³⁵ required the church iconographer to continually perfect himself through prayer, humility, and a temperate life.

According to the tradition of the Orthodox Church, the iconographer was expected to be "humble, gentle, pious, not gossipy, smiling or quarrelsome, not envious, not a drunkard, not a thief, not a murderer, but rather to maintain the purity of soul and body... to marry legally... and to come as often as possible to their spiritual father"³⁶, with a strong emphasis on their humility. As evidence of the humility of the old iconographers, many icons and murals are without signatures. The ancient iconographers believed that Christ Himself was the actual creator of the icons and that they were merely intermediaries through whom the will of God was accomplished³⁷.

Not just anyone could become an iconographer. The image of God could not be entrusted to individuals who did not possess the virtues mentioned above, as it was believed that the immoral life of the iconographer and the desire for unearned gain would desecrate this Image. The ecclesiastical authority had the responsibility to select and spiritually examine the iconographers under the Church's guidance to prevent the hardening of painting works and to continually maintain the presence of grace in the person of the iconographer.

CONCLUSIONS

In the past, iconographers worked with the teachings of the Holy Gospel preached by the Holy Apostles before their spiritual eyes, as testified by the Church Fathers through their theological works, harmoniously crystallised through the decrees of the ecumenical councils and local churches. This gave them certainty that their work was accomplished in the Holy Spirit through cooperation with the grace of the divine craft.

Today, when we look at their works, whether icons or murals, we are amazed by the quality and finesse of their execution, reflecting the exceptional preparation and zeal of the ancient iconographers, but especially the spirit and grace that flow from these icons, which illuminate our souls with the light and work of the Most Holy Trinity.

In the past, the worthiness of an iconographer depended not only on their professional training but, above all, on the purity of their life lived in obedience to God. Today, due to changes in social life resulting from industrialisation, advancements in science, economic development, and political regimes that caused enormous social upheavals, the

³¹ Georgios KORDIS, *Hierotypos. Teologia icoanei după Sfinții Părinți*, p. 83.

³² Valeriu ANANIA, *Cerurile Oltului: școlile arhimandritului Bartolomeu la o suită de imagini fotografice*, Bucharest, Editura Pro, 1998, p. 17.

³³ Mihail MIHALCU, Mihaela D. LEONIDA, *Din tainele iconarilor români de altă dată*, p. 93.

³⁴ DIONISIE DIN FURNA, *Erminia picturii bizantine*, p. 23.

³⁵ Pavel FLORENSKI, *Iconostasul*, p. 180.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. (180).

³⁷ Mihail MIHALCU, Mihaela D. LEONIDA, *Din tainele iconarilor români de altă dată*, p. 92.

training of church painters is conducted within institutional frameworks through undergraduate, master's, and doctoral studies, as well as certification and qualification exams, all under the guidance and involvement of the Church.

What is missing from this professional training? We believe that the current formation of church painters lacks the spirit and the state of grace that ancient iconographers pursued with such fervour.

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