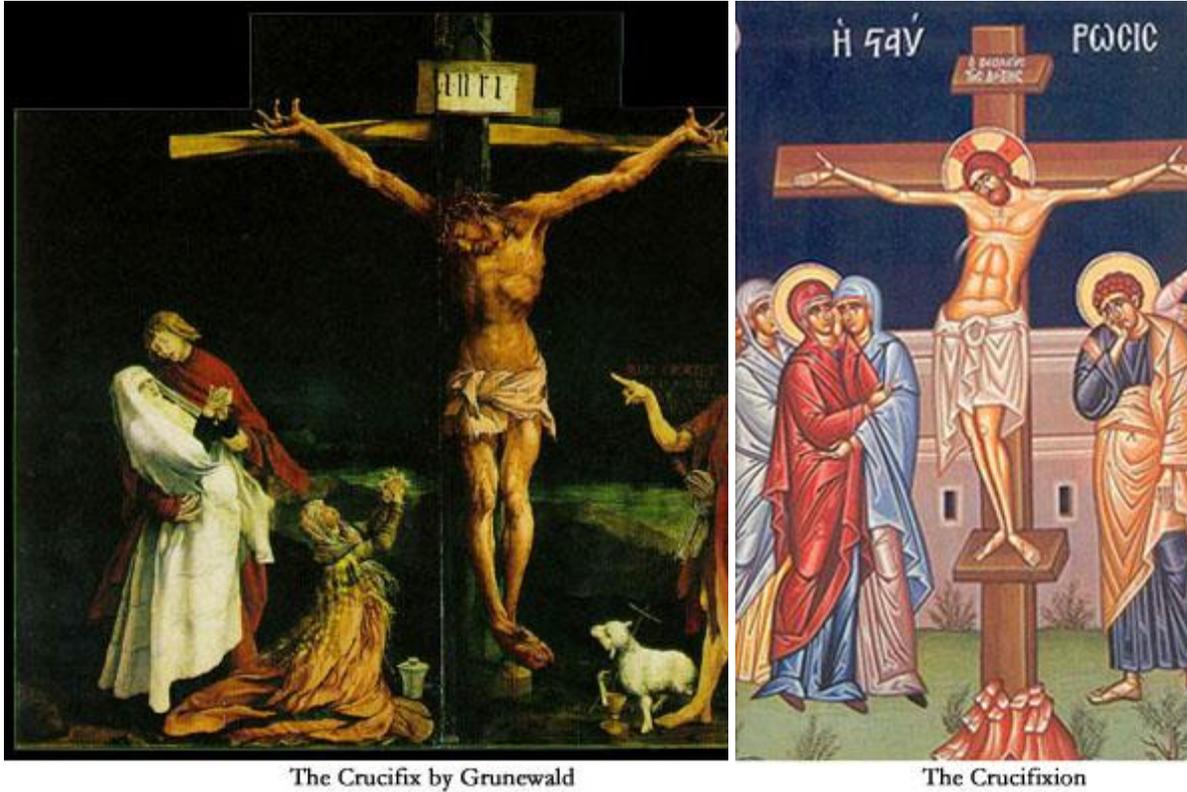


## On the Differences of Western Religious Art and Orthodox Iconography

Figure 1



### I

I would like to discuss, as an Orthodox iconographer, why the religious art that comes from Western secular societies seeks to simply portray images of Christ, Mary, the Theotokos, and His saints as naturalistic beings, bereft of any special dignity, or divinity, that is, their depiction of these holy men and women, ignorance of the true theology of what Christian art really is and how it is achieved.

These secular works of such men as the German artist, Mathias Grunewald [1475-1528], depicted images of Jesus Christ, and the Theotokos, in such a naturalistic manner that they suffer having no spirituality whatsoever, [I use "spiritual" in the Orthodox sense of the word], no sanctity, and no grace.

There bodies are not transfigured as they are in Orthodox iconography, but they are simply painted in purely human and aesthetically pleasing form, often to the point of revulsion, [figure 1], by Grunewald, for example, while, as Kontoglou says,

*"Liturgical art, on the other hand, has a spiritual, symbolic and supernatural character."*

*"The ecclesiastical art of the Orthodox Church does not strive to delight our senses, but rather to sanctify our senses by offering us the same holy nourishment which we partake of during our holy services. This nourishment comes to us through hymnology, iconography, architecture, and even through the art of the sacred utensils, vestments and every other man-made object in the temple. All these, with their reverent and elevating character work together for the purpose of lifting the souls of the faithful to praise and thanksgiving, but not in the aesthetic manner which the secular art serve. It is, rather, accomplished in an entirely different manner, a manner which is spiritual in itself."*

Yet, as in figure 1, pleasing the senses is not always what the secular artist strives for. Often they will create art that is corruptible and vulgar for the sake of shock value. Secular art arouses the emotions, it stimulates the senses, and the passions, such as anger, or envy or lust. It can also horrify. It can be repulsive. To be repulsive does not always mean that it moves one to a state of fright. It can be repulsive in the sense that it is a lie, a lie impersonates the truth, a lie that only the evil one can mask without authenticity in order to deceive and capture the ignorant in his shameful net and through his lie creates a false Christ, with false doctrine, which creates a false church, which threatens one into a state of damnation.



Archangel Gabriel



Archangel Michael



It can even be physically beautiful, but this beauty is shallow. The physical beauty that Western art brings is not the beauty of deep inner beauty that penetrates the soul which destroys the passions, by Gods grace. One kind of beauty is one that edifies, strengthens and humbles, another beauty like a seductive woman, destroys the soul and compels sin, such as destructive lust. Another difference between worldly beauty and God's inner beauty, that is, His grace, is the difference between the

arousal of emotions which comes from secular art and ecclesiastical beauty which comes from iconography. As secular induces human emotion which is temporary and often misleading and misunderstood, the art of the church brings contrition. Mr. Kontoglou gives us these simple examples:

*"I am emotionally moved in the theater; I am contrite in church." The confusion of these two feelings {that is, of the profane and the sacred, of the worldly and the religious} is the cause of the confusion of the worldly and the spectacle with the liturgical service, a confusion of reason of which there have been introduced into many of the churches Western art which depicts the saints as ordinary men, painted in a natural style and especially four part music which is not only foreign to the character of [Greek] Orthodoxy, but is in itself worldly, theatrical, sensual, romantic, having no place in the Church especially the Orthodox Church where everything has liturgical character."*

Also from Photios Kontoglou: *"The works of Western religious art are emotional and dramatic. The dramatic element is carnal, even though it is thought to be spiritual. In the Orthodox icon there exists the liturgical element. Wherever the liturgical element is present, there the dramatic and emotional [or carnal] element is neutralized. In the works of Western religious art there is no spiritual ascent. The saints, Christ, the All-holy Mother of God are simply people painted from life, ordinary people who portray Christ, the All-holy One, or the saints. With us the iconographer is not an ordinary painter as in the West; he has a special service [liturgy] to perform through this art, a spiritual service [liturgy] and for this reason his is called "iconographer".*

## II

Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4



Madonna Della Tenda by Raphael



Madonna and Child from the school of Alessandro Botticelli



The Theotokos-Quick to Hear

The forms of religious painting, such as the Madonna Della Tenda [figure 2], by Raphael [1483-1520] or The Birth of Venus by Alessandro Botticelli [1444-1510] and also Madonna and Child [figure 4], from the school of Alessandro Botticelli; having only themes of being religious, can never be holy. [They, meaning, it portrays a religious subject, such as the saints, as they appeared naturally]. They do not show that these holy men and women became saints. They simply show them in portraiture or in statuesque form without arguing, so that their followers, the laity, will not be intimidated to achieve loftier goals, to strive for perfection, so that they may continue to live their carnal lifestyle without guilt or threat. Seeing men and women painted naturalistically, by secular artists, they see no physical change. With no inner change, no spiritual transformation, there can not be an outward conversion, and thusly, not seeing any reason to change themselves, not seeing or understanding or truly believing that men and women, although merely human, can become saints, becoming something greater than their ordinary selves, being transformed by the Holy Spirit.

What one believes about the Holy Trinity, Christ, Holy Tradition, Doctrine, His Church, the Theotokos, even the saints, and angels, is seen through Western religious art, and for that matter Orthodox iconography.

In Iconography, in order to exhibit an inner change the corporeal being manifests an outer change. Through this transfiguration, this supernatural

occurrence, we see the saintliness of these men and women in their icons as in figure 4 and all icons.

We see incorruption, immortality, piety, sanctity, grace, virtue, in place of the passions and corruptibility. This being accomplished through great struggles, such as intense prayer and fasting, through struggling and overcoming temptation, through strict adherence to God's commandments, and unwavering obedience.

Keeping in mind that Western art reflects its theology, thus, it shows in Protestant and Roman Catholic theology teaches that man is being punished for the guilt he inherited from Adam. Christ dies in our place and suffers God's wrath. The crucifixion of Christ is, therefore, depicted as the Savior in agony [figure 1].

In the Orthodox representation of Christ's crucifixion He is not punished in our place, rather, He is an emissary for the human race who conquers the devil from whom He recovers the creation which He returns to the Father as a "Sacrifice of Praise." In Orthodox iconography we never see Christ or the saints in agony, but in inner peace, security and consolation.

The Western art of today is a reflection of Western religion today. Today's Western religion is a reflection of their attitude about the importance of the world in religion today. Thus, in the West, people departed from the original purpose of the Christian faith; the inner freedom from the passions by battling their Devil, to overcome sin, but in the place of welfare of the soul and acquiring the Holy Spirit, striving to be accepted by the world, the prosperity and pleasure of the body has taken precedent. Thus in the West, people hope to avoid the moral guilt of sin, if not by good works, then by faith alone. So commonly, their religious art shows the empirical man, having forgotten the piety once delivered to the saints.

### **III**

Western artists portray the saints according to their own liking or according to their minimal and mundane imaginations, sin remains, the valiant struggle for sainthood is absent, there is nothing edifying, while iconography depicts the saints struggle over sin, the victory that has achieved incorruptibility, and godhood, their winning the crown of salvation.

Only those who have adapted "faith once delivered to the saints" [Jude 3], following an uninterrupted tradition, of true doctrine, the same yesterday,

today and forever, can paint icons, because icons are not just inspirational, and educational, but they are a representation of true doctrine, an expression of one faith and one baptism. Faith means nothing if it is a false faith. If iconography is Theology, or as Trubetskoi said, "Theology in Color", then false theology begets false iconography. The reverse also being true, and therefore he or she who espouses false doctrine can not paint icons. They may attempt it, but only a pseudo reproduction will have been their greatest achievement. They may be technically accurate, and aesthetically beautiful, but it will not be grace filled, and so, consequently, not an icon, but a religious painting. Iconography must have two natures as did Christ, spiritual and physical. Those with false doctrine have only the physical. The logic is supremely simple.

Now, Grunewald's Crucifixion, represents only a corpse nailed on a cross, a vile and grotesque monstrosity. The body and its parts are swollen, and bloated, decomposing and dripping puss. The hands and feet are twisted, there is agony. The feet, twice their normal size, and misshapen. His whole body is repugnant and a terror to observe. Or as Photios Kontoglou, better puts it:

*"The whole body is one repulsive pile of flesh in final decomposition, on which appear clotted blood and puss ready to burst the dried skin and gush forth. The crown of thorns, with its long and hard spines, encircles the misshapen head, contributing to the grisly effect. But even the cross is not made, as usual, from two beams; it, too, is analogous to the gruesome specter which it holds. It is made up of the unhewn branches of some wild tree, gnarled in anguish, just like the members of the corpse it bears..."*

In the presentation of the Crucifix depicted by Grunewald he reveals to the on-looker that the death of Christ imitates ordinary human death. In this painting, there is no edification, no peace, no contrition, no hope, only despair. Representing the total opposite for that which God became man. It is painted with fear and consternation, with no sign of the presents of God. A forsaken son painted in an image of suffering and abandonment. Not only is it not a devotional painting but a satanic one, extinguishing all emphasis of hope from the Christian soul, which is precisely a contradiction of the message of the Cross. Grunewald depicts Christ in this way, because this was his faith, his hopelessness.

Mr. Kontoglou remarks about Grunewald's Crucifixion: "*Grunewald apparently used a corpse from an anatomy lecture room, or from a*

*graveyard, as a model, so that it could be portrayed in the final stage of decomposition. He did not have the consciousness that he was painting the great Mystery of the Sacrifice of the Son of God in the form of a man, as Orthodox iconographers would. For him, a corpse such as anyone's, even a criminal's is able to portray the crucified Christ. In other words, he is interested in the external appearance of the corpse, and nothing beyond this."*

The portrayal of "christ", this anti-spiritualism, is an offspring of camp santo, the skeletons, the macabre Trappist monasteries, the depiction of the Second Coming, such as that of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel in the Vatican, the gargoyles, this is to say, the grotesque statues of the Church of Notre Dame, a confusion between saints and demons.

In the devotional icon, everything is elevated from the world in its depiction. The figure itself, the grass, the rocks, buildings, trees, etc. Nothing in an icon is shown in a corruptible state, but in a supramundane manner. Christ, in His icon of the Crucifixion is shown standing on the cross. One can not tell if the cross is holding Him up or if He is holding up the Cross. Any afflictions that had befallen Him are expressed in the icon as gentleness and forgiveness towards those who inflicted harm upon His body. His face is tranquil, humble, a saddening joy, a sample of the nature we will have once we have gained our salvation.

Photios Kontoglou: "The crucified body is not just anyone, but is the very Body of the God-Man Himself; therefore it is not a corpse, but rather incorruptible unto eternity, and the source of life. It radiates the hope of resurrection. The Lord does not hang on the Cross like some miserable tatter, but it is He, rather, who appears to be supporting the Cross. His hands are not cramped, being nailed to the Wood, rather, He spreads them out serenely in supplication, according to the Troparion which says "Thou hast spread thy palms, and united what before had been divided, that is, God and man."

Iconography is not "special" as if it is one among many other "special" talents. It is not a brick in a wall of many other bricks which can not be singled out, being assimilated into some obscurity. Talents such as, ordinary art, or the ability to compose music, or poetry, beautiful as they may be, or even a genius for science come from an inner natural aptitude, but iconography is a noetic gift, a calling, if you will, from God to a select few of His people. One can not simply decide that he or she "feels" moved emotionally, to paint icons, they can not just choose it because they have artistic ability or aspirations to paint them, and therefore, merely pick up

a brush, practice for a few years and then call themselves, iconographer. It is not an academic subject. The iconographer works in direct contact with the Holy Spirit, the saints, and the angels. What an awesome task, a fearful and humbling task! The unity between God and the iconographer is rare, and extra-ordinary. The idea that one may open up a "workshop" to show people how to paint icons for themselves is presumptuous.

Figure 5



The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb by Hans Holbein the Younger.

In the paintings of Hans Holbein the Younger The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb [figure 5], and Grunewald's Crucifixion they bear nothing but fear and annihilation. The death of a body without a soul. In Orthodoxy, we prefer to use the term "falling asleep", because death is eternal, a sleep from which we would never awaken, but Christ concord death on the cross, which means that our "falling asleep" is temporary. Just as it is temporary when we go to bed at night and fall asleep. We awaken again not only to a new day, but to a new life, where there is no more corruption or death, as iconography exhibits.



In the Orthodox icon of the Crucifixion and His bringing down from the

cross, all the figures, Christ Himself, the Theotokos, and all those portrayed, show minimal expression. One of the icon's primary function is not to display the passions but dispassion. It is not suppose to be theatrical and worldly, but humble and dignified. Dispassion is the route to salvation.

In both icons of the Crucifixion and the bringing down from the cross, Christ looks as if He could rise up at any moment. Seeing Him on the cross is a sorrow to the faithful, of course, but not the sorrow of despair, which comes from death, but as Photios Kontoglou puts it:

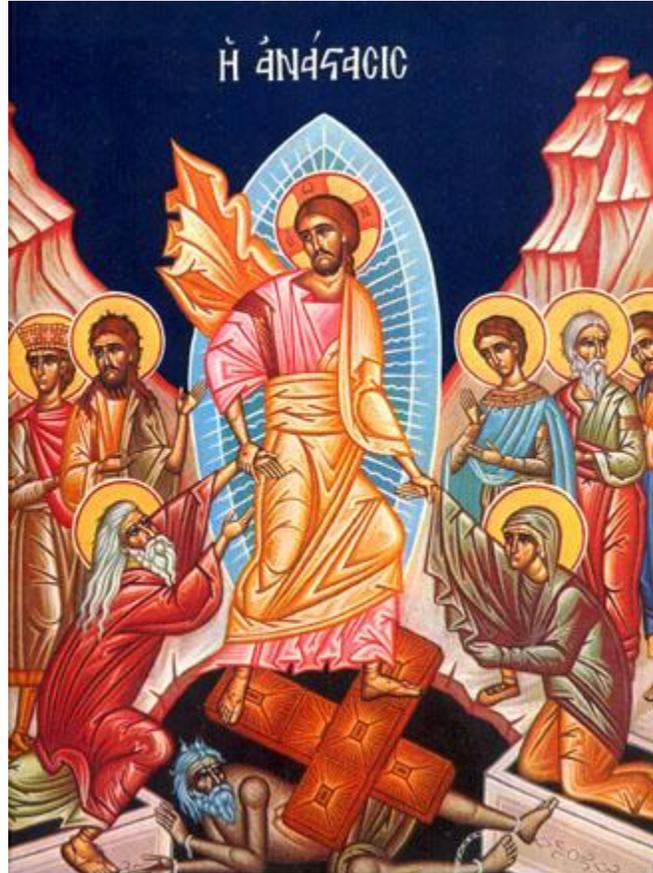
"...a sorrow in Christ, which is tribulation mixed with hope and which the Fathers call "gladdening sorrow" or "joyous grief" a spiritual joy that springs from mourning."

Also as Saint Paul tells us, saying "For sorrow according to God worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of; but the sorrow of the world worketh death." [11 Cor. 7:10]

The representation in an Orthodox icon of the Crucifixion, is hope bearing, it imparts redemption to the Christian soul, compunction, forgiveness from God towards us and our sins.



The Resurrection



The Resurrection

There are those who have taken traditional iconography and mixed it with portraiture. This corruption comes from Western influence. This, a perversion of iconography, is called, "New style iconography". There is also the marriage between traditional iconography and the art of the renaissance, also an occidental influence, a vulgarism known as, "soft style". Both these styles of "iconography" is done to make them more pleasing to the Western eye, which does not want a judgmental Christ, nor saints that show that we must actually struggle to gain the heavens.

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