



Painting the Soul: Byzantium to El Greco

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I am an art historian whose career has been spent at the Courtauld Institute in London, but currently, I am based in California at the Getty Research Center, which is a wonderful place to work.

My title is "Painting the Soul: Byzantium to El Greco," and we will look at the production of the orthodox icon over 1,500 years, which is an enormous space. What I want to do is to show how an art historian approaches a field which is fast growing. Unknown materials are continually being found in old monasteries, so you will see new material today. The overall question I want to ask is what does a knowledge of the icon offer us today, and I will try and give an answer at the end on why I think we should study the icon. I am going to cover the period from early Christianity to the 16th Century, up to the time of El Greco. I am going to focus on materials coming from the monastery at Sinai in Egypt, which is where most of the new materials are coming from, and also London; I'm choosing examples from London and from Sinai in the main.

Sinai looks much the same today as it did in the 19th Century. El Greco was born in Candia. It is now Iraklion, but at that time it was a Western city because it was in the control of Venetians.

One of the reasons for covering a long period of time is to put in front of you the usual question that people say about icons: do they all look the same? I'm going to argue they do not all look the same. I hope you are going to agree.

The monastery in Sinai was built with money from the Emperor Justinian around 550, so it is a 6th Century building: 6th Century walls, a 6th Century church, and with quarters for the monks. It was built around what was believed to be the Burning Bush, in front of which Moses stood. The church is on that site, and it is built below the mountain up which Moses was thought to have collected the Ten Commandments. So it was a sacred site, and it has been in continuous use from the 6th Century up to the present day. In fact, in the present day, there are so many pilgrims, or tourists – the monks call them pilgrims, we might call them tourists – that there is now a guesthouse and a hotel where you can stay, just outside the monastery, which was built in the last 10 years. They even breed special small camels so that you can go quickly up to the top of the mountain to see the site!

If you go inside the church, you can see the light pouring in the East Window and the monks during the service. I have a manuscript from the 12th Century showing the monks at a service in the monastery. When you go there and you look through these materials, I think you could be forgiven for thinking that there has been a direct continuity, that nothing has changed since the 6th Century - the services are in the same Greek, and it is the same church - but I think this impression is misleading, and I want to suggest in this lecture that, over the course of time, despite superficial similarities, there are a number of changes in the way icons look and are used. One change is that you can no longer see into the apse; instead, you have chandeliers, an agnostosis, a new pulpit, even ostrich eggs hanging in the building, and these have been added over the years. That means that in the 6th Century, when you went into the nave, you looked in and you saw an apse mosaic of the Transfiguration. You saw the light of Christ in the mosaic, and the light of God coming through the window. That view you no longer see directly down the nave; it is all hidden by all the new parts. So within apparent similarity, the pilgrim today sees a different kind of environment, with slightly different attentions. There are now relics, icons and all the other aspects of a pilgrimage site.

One 12th Century icon from Sinai is really an advertisement for a bestselling medieval book, 'The Heavenly Ladder' by John Climacus. This book, which was written by a monk at the monastery in the 6th Century, is now illustrated on an icon, by the Abbott. It shows the Abbott, Antonius, climbing to the top of the ladder. It also shows the author of the book, John Climacus. And it shows heaven above, and the angels in heaven, and the souls of the monks of the monastery, and you can see they are not all going to make it to the top. Some of them are going to go into the mouth of hell, which you can see below.

This icon, I think, shows up the problem that we have in looking at icons. In fact, it shows the problem that every religion must face if it believes in the unseen God and the other world and the afterlife. It is whether these beliefs can and should be shown in pictures. If we do not know what God looks like, how can we make an image, and if we make an image, is it idolatry? Is that what the second commandment against graven images forbids? So the moment you are in the territory of the development of icons, you are also in the territory of whether you should, and whether you can, and what is going on when you do it.

A successful icon portrays the unseen, and it portrays it in such a way that it is easy for you to believe that the unseen exists, that heaven and hell are parts of the other world. This icon depicts 13 steps on the ladder because there are 13 chapters in this book, 13 hints on how to make it to the top. The life of Christ is 30 years, so actually the ladder is also the unseen Christ, and the ladder itself represents Christ, and the steps that you must take if you imitate Christ. What you have is a representation, a moral, a moralisation of how you should live your life, how you should imitate Christ, and it is shown in a very precise form. A Christian believer will interpret the reality of this image differently from an unbeliever, and even believers will not agree on whether to take the image of the other world literally or symbolically. That presents a real problem of how you read texts and how you read images, and whether there is literally a place above and below or whether it is symbolic.

The main point is that you can more easily believe in the existence of Christ and his life when you see images like this. They are more persuasive even than the New Testament. It is so direct an image, and that is obviously one of the functions of icons.

The idea of having icons took a long time to work out in Byzantium. We know there was a period of iconoclasm, when icons were banned. So you have to look at a span of about 800 years before the theology of having icons was sorted out. There is a manuscript of the 9th Century which refers to this period of iconoclasm for over a century in the 8th and early 9th Century, where the Church and the Emperor banned all images of Christ, but this is shown from the point of view of an iconophile. So this is propaganda against the iconoclast. What you have got are two iconoclasts whitewashing an icon of Christ. It shows the text of the psalms, referring to bad people who do things like this, and they are set against two Roman soldiers at the time of the Crucifixion. The visual moral is that to be an iconoclast is to be the same as those who crucified Christ, and the whole message is put in very violent forms. This isn't limited to the Middle Ages. We still have fundamentalist iconoclasm; for example, the Taliban.

Why did we ever have Christian images at all? Why did they start? They started in the Greco-Roman world. We tend to see Greco-Roman statues in museums, and we can see either the images themselves or pictures of them: for example Uffizi with pictures of classical gods, and the Townley Collection, which is now in the British Museum, the new Powerhouse Museum in Rome.

The early Christians grew up in a world of images. It is often said that early Christians were anti-classical. I don't think this is really true. In fact, early Christians did not have a great problem with classical statues. Like some Pagans, they thought they had demons inside them and you might avoid them, but they did not have a real problem because they knew, unlike the Pagans, that all these gods were false, and that the Christian god was true, so these were not a threat because there was no problem in seeing that they were all fictitious gods. So I do not think it is true to say that the lack of icons in the first few centuries of Christianity is because there was fear of statues. It is just rather difficult to recognise early Christian art, and I think early Christian art is writing, as indeed it was in the Reformation. Some churches in London, for example, have writing on the altarpiece.

So far as we can see, it took until the 3rd Century before images were really recognisable, but they were not banned, and there were ways of getting round the second commandment, and I ought to say a bit about that in a moment. They were not banned because, if you read the New Testament, you can find texts, like the Letter to the Colossians, which says: "Christ who is the icon of the unseen God." So Christ is an icon of the unseen. All this vocabulary of having icons, of portraying the unseen, is in text already in the New Testament. No doubt some people opposed icons and some people supported them, as has happened throughout the history of Christianity.

The argument started early, and for once, I think the advertisement from a computer company is really true – “One icon speaks a thousand words” - that is one of the arguments for having images. The theory of images as we know it took about eight centuries, and it is set out most clearly by John of Damascus, a theologian of the 8th Century. The best place to go and look for a theory of images is to read the works of John of Damascus. I would just like to give you an idea of how he rationalised the legitimacy of icons. He was writing during iconoclasm, so he had a real target. He had to try and persuade the world that the iconoclasts were wrong and that the Orthodox Church should have icons.

Of course the second commandment was a problem. So if you read the first apology for images, he says that the making of images is forbidden in the Old Testament because there was a lot of idolatry around at that time, and because it was impossible, at the time of the Old Testament, to make an image of the unmeasurable, uncircumscribed invisible God. This was a fact of history. But it is a fact of history, according to John, only applied to the Jews, and the rules were changed as soon as you had the New Testament and the birth of Christ. Christians accept the New Testament, and this changes the rules: Christians are different because they can treat images properly and they can venerate God through them. Although no one can ever see the form of God, he argued, yet Christians have been able to draw a likeness of him enveloped in human form in which he was made flesh. This was the first argument, but actually he was not very persuasive, and he had to write a second apology, which was a bit tougher, before people believed him. In the second apology, he says, “We do not make images of the one who is without body or form, that would be wrong, but in Christ, we see God through a glass darkly.” That is where the famous quote comes from. So an icon is a dark glass fashioned according to the limitations of our human nature. But John of Damascus still found he could not argue the legitimacies of icons of Christ and the saints through the words of the Bible alone, and so he attacked the fundamentalist iconoclast emperors, who think Church doctrine can be defined solely through the words of the Bible and imposed by imperial decrees. According to John of Damascus, there is a binding unwritten tradition, accepted by the Orthodox Church, and it includes, among other decisions, the decision to make icons of Christ and the saints, to bow down before the cross, and to pray facing the east. So as you work through John of Damascus, he sets out the argument for icons, and the real outcome, when you read this, is you discover the fundamental problem for the early period was not whether to represent divinity but how to represent divinity. There was a consensus that you could, but there was still a problem of how to do it.

What I have tried to do so far is set out that there was a lot of thinking about the need for icons and the value of icons, but that in itself did not set the course of what icons looked like. There was still a lot of thinking to be done, and the main thinking that had to be done was about how to represent Christ, so I want to look, in the next section, at how that problem was resolved.

After writing in the 3rd Century, we know that figurative art became more widespread. This is before Constantine, in the 4th Century, made the religion legitimate in the Roman Empire, but there were a number of places where buildings were decorated. The most famous are in the Catacombs in Rome, or if you go right out to the East, almost to Iraq, you get to Dura-Europos, where there is a baptistery which was painted in the 240s. It represents a fount, and New Testament stories – Christ walking on the water, the good shepherd – so it is a whole series of representations of gospel stories. What is significant about this city is that, just down the road from the Christian church, there was a Jewish synagogue, which also has figurative paintings in it, major paintings, of the Old Testament. So you have a city which has temples with paintings in, a Christian church with paintings in it, a synagogue with paintings in it – what was going on, why did this suddenly happen there? The general theory that is put out is that these were competing religions, and they were using art as a way of putting over their case in the fastest direct way. It is, in other words, using icons, images, as part of the weaponry of being a missionary; it is all what we would now call the devices of spin, and advertising. I think this is why it was all happening. It was easier to persuade people if they saw than if they simply read and heard.

But this still sets us a problem: we have got now icons being produced, although the first that survived come from the 6th Century, from Sinai. I have is a representation of Christ in the 6th Century mosaic, and an icon of Christ, which is in the monastery, and which was probably sent out from Constantinople in the 6th Century as well. So these two images are of the same date. Our question is how to interpret exactly what’s happening in the 6th Century, and I believe the 6th Century to be the crucial moment for decisions about the representation of Christ. They are both in different styles. The icon, which is a smaller, intimate work, used for prayers and devotions, allows you to look straight into the eyes of Christ, whereas the mosaic is a vast, monumental work which was meant to overawe you after your long journey through the

desert when you came to the place of the light of God. So they have different functions, but in both cases, you will see that Christ is bearded with long hair. This is a feature in common between these. The question is why did this happen? It seems that the problem of what Christ looked like was solved in a rather ingenious manner in the 6th Century, by the discovery of a number of icons which are described as “not made by human hands.” They were miraculously produced, like an icon found in the bottom of a well on a cloth which had the imprint of the face of Christ on it, of which this is almost certainly a copy, or the mandillion of Christ, a napkin on which Christ was supposed to have wiped his face in the 1st Century. If you look at an icon of the mandillion, as it was represented in the 10th Century when it came to Constantinople, consider that this whole notion of miraculous images appears just at the time of the Sinai icon that we have just been talking about. What they agree is this type of the face of Christ. A 10th Century Russian painting of the mandillion is in London, in the Queen’s collection. Prince Albert acquired it by mistake in a different collection. That is the only icon that the Queen has, I think.

This idea of miraculous images, imprints of the face of Christ, solved the problem of what Christ looked like, and thereafter, this became the medieval image that was agreed of Christ. You may be familiar with it in the Turin Shroud. The Evening Standard says the Turin Shroud is a fake. You cannot actually see too much on the Turin Shroud, and if you go to one of the showings you still cannot really see anything at all. It is almost imagination. But the Turin Shroud, which has been Carbon tested, seems to be of the 14th Century, though you will find many people that still believe it is not a miraculous icon but the actual shroud of Christ; but it seems to be one of these kinds of productions which affirm and authenticate the face of Christ, so it has a great deal in common with the Sinai piece.

As you know, this idea of what Christ did look like was still a perennial worry in the Christian church. There is a 16th Century representation of an apocryphal letter of the governor of Judea before Pontius Pilot, in which he describes Christ. It contains a description and, supposedly, the image of what Christ looked like, as described by an eyewitness and then painted. So there is a whole category of this kind of work, and it solves the problem that the early icon painters had of how to represent Christ. So there is continuity between this image of Christ and the Turin Shroud.

It seems that the 6th and 7th Centuries were the period when there was an agreement that you could both have icons and that Christ should be represented like this. It is clear that very soon a lot of icons of Christ appeared. The most extraordinary example, in some ways, you will see on a coin, but you still might be asking why did they decide to paint Christ in this way, what was the model, assuming that you don’t believe in icons not made by human hands of course?

There were plenty of models around. They were beardless - there was Alexander, the Roman emperors, there was Zeus, there were philosophers... there was a choice you could make of beardless or bearded. It seems they chose the bearded, though there is a text which says that an icon painter of the 5th Century copied the face of Zeus. Although you might think that is an odd thing to do, it would have been quite possible because, in the 5th and 6th Centuries in Constantinople, they not only had Pagan icons – like the Egyptian triptych which is in the Getty, which is not a triptych actually, it is a mummy portrait and shows Egyptian gods. They had Egyptian gods and Pagan gods to look at, and they even had, in Constantinople, the image of Zeus from Olympia made by Phidias in the 5th Century BC, which had been transported when the Olympic Games were ended to Constantinople where it was. It was displayed in a museum and was rather large compared with the Aphrodite of Knidos and all the other famous statues which were in Constantinople. Unfortunately, this museum was burnt at the end of the 5th Century and we have lost them all, but we happen to know that just at the crucial time, when questions were being asked about what would be the correct model for Christ, that there were plenty of opportunities in Constantinople to look at artistic models. I don’t think that this figure of Christ looks too much like Zeus. They have got different hairstyles. It is much more likely that in some ways the face of Christ has built up from a composite, from thinking about putting together various charismatic models to come to this conclusion.

As I said, once they had the icon, it was reproduced. One of the oddest places to reproduce the face of Christ was on the gold coins. On the front of an icon reproduced on coins of the late 7th Century, you had the image of Christ, probably copying one of these icons not made by human hands, and below, the Emperor, with a cross. What is interesting is that these appear about the year 700, and what instantly happens after that is iconoclasm. So you might ask yourself why these coins might be implicated in re-thinking whether you should have icons of Christ. After all, this is a miraculous icon which you could hold in your hand, you could drop down a drain, you could send it abroad... perhaps this was felt to be going too far.

It certainly caused a problem with Islam, because this was the period of the rise of Islam, and initially, as the Arabs moved in to parts of the Byzantine Empire, they used the same gold coins as the Byzantines, but they could not once they had Christ on one side and a cross on the other, and so they had a problem. It is quite interesting seeing how they matched the problem. If you look at Arabic coins of exactly the same date, you will see that the first thing that was done was that the Caliph decided to put himself on one side and then the lance of Mohammed on the base below, so you moved from the cross to a relic of Mohammed. This clearly did not go down too well, and the Caliph had a brilliant idea, to put just writing on to the coins. Every Arabic coin since about 700 has had writing on it.

This was the solution, that you define Islam by writing, and Christianity by images, except it did not work out like that, because exactly when these debates were going on, the Byzantine Emperors also began to worry about this proliferation of images of Christ, and in 730, all images of Christ were banned in Byzantium. Suddenly, Christianity, in the 8th Century, becomes the religion of the cross, and Muslims have the Koran and writing, so they correspond in having non-figurative art. It is like this war of images that I suggested you had in the 3rd Century; it is missionary activity through images.

It is odd how they intersect. If you go to Jerusalem to the Dome of the Rock, you see a building of around 700, covered inside with mosaics made by Byzantine artists working in a non-figurative style, and the texts are anti-Christian, such as "Praise be to God who never fathered a child." So the whole attack on Christ is being carried out by the Muslims, using Byzantine artists, and proclaiming this. One of the reasons why they are so close is that the Byzantines made something of a mistake in the 8th Century. They thought Islam was a heresy, not a new religion, and it took many centuries before they actually worked out that it was not just a heresy which could be brought back into the fold but it was different. So that debate is going on at this time.

This, the iconoclasts lost; the iconophiles won. The British Museum has a 14th Century icon which still celebrates the ending of iconoclasm in the year 843. Though it was made in the 14th Century, it expected you to know the names of iconophiles, who are holding icons, and the Empress and the three year old Emperor, who were supporting the change, and the patriarch. It is an icon which you bring out every year to celebrate the festival of the ending of iconoclasm. It not only shows the saints, but it uses visual techniques because, within this icon, there is another icon. There is an icon of the Virgin and child, and it is in a red surrounding – red curtains around it on a red base – and this is a very special icon. This is the icon painted by St Luke of the Virgin and child while she was alive. Curiously enough, you first hear of this during iconoclasm, when the iconophiles say "did you know there was a painting by St Luke" and this then appears, and there was a cult of it in Constantinople from the 9th Century onwards. In fact, this icon was brought out every Tuesday and people tried to touch it because it could produce miracles. But of course what it is saying is that icons are legitimate for two reasons: one, that you can represent Christ because he was made flesh, the incarnation, and so this shows the doctrine which legitimates icons; it is also legitimate because St Luke, the evangelist, painted icons, and what better authority could you have for the production of icons than St Luke?

So far I have taken you up to the end of iconoclasm and to the celebration of it. In fact, the identity of orthodoxy now really becomes with the icon, once the icon is established as part of the Orthodox Church; putting it the other way round, the orthodox is established by its use of icons. So let's just sum up. There was the 6th Century image from Sinai, an early icon, painted in pigment mixed with hot wax; an encaustic technique which was used in antiquity but stops in iconoclasm. This is actually the same icon as was found in the 1930s, and examination of it showed it was a little bit larger originally, and when it was found, it was over-painted so you could not see the architecture in the background.

I will just run through the implication of this icon's history. In the 6th Century, you could look directly at Christ, and the architecture was just used in the street, as if in the street of Constantinople, so it is a very intimate and closed icon. As time went by, this obviously seemed to be not quite right, and so the re-paint puts Christ in heaven. This is a very positive change to this icon; it is not negative. It is saying that this is a more remote figure and not located in space, but you should think of Christ being a much more distant, much more heavenly person than this figure. So there is a change in the way you would use the icon by re-painting it.

One person who understood this kind of thing quite well is Juror. His self-portrait in the year 1500 is the

most extraordinary manipulation of an icon, because this is the artist as the creator. It owes an awful lot to this kind of Byzantine icon, and shows how the devices of the icon can be transferred in art into other media if you want to make a point about the creativity and the genius of the artist like Juror in the Renaissance. I am emphasising that there are visual strategies that you can recognise in icons, and I want to look at a few more of these as we go on.

Just to show you how things change, there is another icon, which used to be in Sinai, but it was stolen by the Russians in the 19th Century. It is now in Kiev. We know it did not have a frame in the 6th Century, but at a later period, it had a frame, it was cut down and a frame was put round it, and so it was turned into a gothic type icon. That is because, during the Crusades, there was a Latin chapel, and it was presumably moved into the Latin chapel, and so this was icon being used not by the Orthodox Church but by visiting Catholics to the monastery. Again, I think if you compare this with advertising strategies, there is something to be learnt. This is put in a gothic frame.

There is an advertisement from Dolce & Gabbana in Sloan Street advertising a top, and the girl is in a gothic surrounding, so you are given the religious atmosphere. Her lips and eyes are incredibly reminiscent of a 6th Century icon, and I take it that the overall message of this is that she is going to be a good Christian mother, though I'm not quite sure that is what the ad is going to be led by...! But there are these strategies which you can see in the icon.

Just to underline the use of the monastery of Sinai by Westerners, there is an icon of St Catherine, because although Justinian dedicated the monastery to the Virgin, they found some relics in the 12th Century and changed the name and dedicated it to St Catherine in the 13th Century, which made it a very popular monastery for sponsorship from the West. The West were very interested in St Catherine, so it was a smart move by the monastery to enlarge the possible sponsorship. It was a very smart move, because in the 18th Century, Catherine the Great of Russia gave them loads of money, so they were really looking ahead for sponsorship!

This 14th Century icon is in a gothic style and the artist signed it on the back with his name, so icons are not always anonymous. They are sometimes signed, and even when they are not signed, it is often worth trying to ask who they are by, whether you can find out about the artist. I just want to give an example.

There is an icon in London, in the British Museum, from the middle of the 13th Century, showing St George rescuing a small boy. This is rather an esoteric icon. It refers to a posthumous miracle of St George in the 10th Century. A boy was captured by pirates, and had to serve them wine in a glass. They were Muslim pirates, so they should not have been drinking wine, but there you are, this kind of thing happened in the 10th Century. The artist had worked out this very esoteric, new piece of iconography, but this artist, I believe, did not only produce the icon you can see in the British Museum, but a whole set of icons in Sinai. So this artist's works are now in the monastery. What we can work out is that he was a French artist who came out with the Crusades in the 13th Century and went to Aka, and that these were either produced in Aka or, more likely, at the monastery. So you can build up profiles of artists, and you discover that, in the monastery at Sinai, there are the traditional icons made in Constantinople, or made in the monastery by orthodox artists, but there are also imports from Spain, and there are works like this, where you have a Western artist, who becomes completely native in orthodox styles.

Which of course brings us to an artist who went in the other direction... I want to say something about El Greco through an icon which was sold in Christie's a year ago, and which was bought by the Greek city of Iraclion. It is a baptism attributed to El Greco. I want to suggest that this gives us the other side. This baptism gives us an example of an artist trained in the orthodox world, in Crete in the 16th Century, who then moved west and changed his style. So you can move out of being an icon painter, but use those strategies in the Western painting of El Greco. I am going to show you a justification for saying that this small baptism is indeed an early work by El Greco.

We know quite a lot at the moment about El Greco. He is called Dominicos, and he signed a painting of a subject which you have come across before: St Luke painting the Virgin. This is a very clever piece of painting by the young El Greco – signed Dominicos – because it is in a Western style and this is a purely Byzantine icon, but it's not straight for the picture, so he is playing – he is saying, yes, I can paint a Byzantine icon, but not even straight, it is actually to one side. So this is a statement of the virtuosity of the artist. We know that these paintings like this were made before he left Crete. He left at the age of 26, in the year 1567, early in 1567. He went first to Venice, and then to Spain.

Another work of this period is in Modena, the so-called Modena Triptych. It represents Sinai on the back, traditional icon scenes, but it is not entirely orthodox in type. We are going to look at this baptism, because the new baptism looks very, very similar to it. We have found that another picture of the same size as this Christie's work, which I published together with a Greek colleague in Apollo a few months ago. We found that there is unpublished work in Canada which is the same size, the same style, and the Modena has the shepherds in the same place. So you begin to see that, in Crete, El Greco was producing icons with the same subject several times. The question is what is the exact relation between these two panels and the Modena Triptych?

If you look at the Baptism as it was when it was in London, and then the Modena version, you will see that there are slight differences. There are differences of colour. One owes a great deal to Italian prints and is rather precise in its drawings, and the other is much more fluid and has much more interest in paint. I will try and explain why this has happened.

There is another image by El Greco of St Francis, which is painted when he was in Venice. As soon as the Baptism was bought and went to Iraclion, we asked if it could go for scientific analysis. It is a bit like a patient having a CT scan. The icon was treated in various ways and being examined by high tech methods. What we had done in our publication, before this work was done, was argue that the Modena Triptych was painted in Crete just before El Greco left and went west, and that the Baptism was painted in Venice just when he arrived. So in the captions we said the date was about 1567, because we were told we had to put a date in the caption, so we rather reluctantly did so.

But the scientific testing gave us a bit of a surprise, because the first thing they discovered was, underneath the varnish, there is indeed a date on the Baptism. It was found, in black and white, in Latin. This makes you believe in art history – the date is 1567! So it was just as he arrived in Venice. That is confirmed by an analysis of the cross-section, showing that it is a tempera painting, not in oils but in egg tempera, and that the method of building it up is a very typical icon painter's method. So El Greco is working here as a trained icon painter, but when he got to Venice, he found new materials. Lapis lazuli is very cheap in Venice. It is a very expensive pigment usually, but cheap in Venice because that is where it was imported and there were lots of bits dropped around so you could pick it up cheap. Also, they ground in glass. This is what he had learnt: he learnt to use lapis lazuli and ground in glass and arsenic, good painterly techniques in Venice. Now we have got the cleaned painting, so it looks a bit different now, and you can see the blue is much more obvious, and it does fit quite closely with his Venetian period.

I would like to put this together to say that we have a personality trained in traditional icon painting, but these personalities can use the same strategies but change their style. So if you look at the Modena Triptych, and a 12th Century Baptism icon from Sinai, you can see, in all sorts of ways, how Greco was in the tradition of icon painting, down to the highlights in the hills, the composition. He changed this by looking at Italian prints, and so having three angels instead of two in the tradition, so he was adding to the tradition by looking at prints. But, when he gets to Venice, the tradition of painting changes again: more like Titian. He learnt very fast in Titian's workshop to change. The Baptist now turns and has a much more open and strong chest, and the angels are also slightly moved around. So you can see an icon painter changing his style, using old strategies but in a new mannerist Italian style. Very soon after this Baptism, he moved to oils; he moved from tempera painting to oils, so changed again.

So, to sum up: I have used 'icon' in all sorts of ways. Icon is probably the most over-used word in the English language right now. There is a cartoon for a recent exhibition of Warhol, where it was claimed that this was an icon, and what's this, is this an icon or not, so it is the ambivalence that we now have. I am using the term to you to refer to the products of the Orthodox Church and the various styles and techniques that they used. I think that there is a firm use of the icon and it is worth looking at the icon. If you want to justify why we should look at the icon, I will do it with just a final example.

Compare a 12th Century icon, from Sinai, of the Enunciation, with a mosaic of the Enunciation, which is in London, in the Victoria & Albert Museum, a micro-mosaic of the 14th Century. These are probably both produced in Constantinople, but a couple of centuries apart, and they show that within the representation of festival subjects, representing scenes from the New Testament, there can be a lot of variation. In one the Virgin Mary is standing and it is a rather formal set-up, with not much detail, whereas in Sinai, it is reminding you that the Enunciation scene takes place on the 21st of March, on the first day of Spring, so there is fertility everywhere – there are animals, birds nesting, a rather frightened and timid Virgin, and an angel rushing down, and also a dove from heaven is coming down. So it is a much more dramatic narrative rendering within the same tradition.

In detail, you can see this even more, inside the Virgin, there is the imprint of Christ inside the Virgin, just very, very lightly done, not as heavily done as the advertisement from Sloan Street that I mentioned earlier on, which has some similarities.

What you have is a 12th Century example of the complexity of Byzantine icons. It has got a lot of theology in it, but it has also got a lot of artistic delight in it. It is art; it is not purely religious art that doesn't have its attractions. So it gives pleasure to the viewer, but at the same time, I have been trying to suggest that the icon is a highly effective way of putting over the ideas of the Christian faith. I may have given the impression that the visual strategies of the icon painter have something in common with advertising techniques. Well, it is not just an impression: I do believe there is a connection between these strategies, and I intended to say that. I think one reason for looking at icons is it does help us to see and how to read the advertisements which are around us, but of course there is a big difference. I think icons are going to have a longer life than advertisements that you read, and I also think that the advertising message they have got is rather more worthwhile than many of the advertisements we look at.

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