

# *Incarnate Beauty: Maritain and the Aesthetic Experience of Contemporary Icons\**

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Maritain defines Christian art according to “the one in whom it exists and . . . the spirit from which it issues. . . . It is the art of redeemed humanity. It is planted in the Christian soul, by the side of the running waters, under the sky of the theological virtues, amidst the breezes of the seven gifts of the Spirit.”<sup>1</sup> My approach to Christian art, specifically to the art of icon making, is influenced by Maritain’s aesthetic reflections and is an attempt to apply these to the iconographer and his work. In this paper I will briefly consider three aspects of Maritain’s aesthetics: first, the epistemological foundation of art; second, the relationship between art and beauty; and third, the role of contemplation in art.

## I

Maritain’s aesthetics is grounded in epistemology: in order to create the artist must necessarily see and know things as other than himself. “The reality with which the painter is confronted,” states Maritain, “is the universe of visible matter, of Corporeal Being, through which alone the ocean of Being in its infinity comes to show through for him. The world of the painter is the world of the eye before being and while being the world of the intellect.”<sup>2</sup> The essence of the artistic process consists in this visual

\*This article is dedicated to my mentor and friend, Michael D. Torre.

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and The Frontiers of Poetry*, trans. Joseph W. Evans (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1962), p. 65.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1953), p. 129.

knowing, and through it the artist enters into a unique transrational relationship with the object known. This intimate connection or relationship with the object gives the artist the knowledge and the capacity to create. However, this is only a part of the artistic epistemology, for in the creation of a work of art knowledge of what is other than the self and of the artist himself is obtained through the very creative process. This knowledge becomes part of the life of the art work, and is signified therein. According to Maritain,

Art is both a *direct sign* of the secrets perceived in things, of some irrecusable truth of nature or adventure caught in the great universe, and a *reversed sign* of the subjective universe of the poet, of his substantial Self obscurely revealed. Just as things grasped by poetic intuition abound in significance, just as being swarms with signs, so the work also will swarm with meanings, and will say more than it is, and will deliver to the mind, at one stroke, the universe in a human countenance.<sup>3</sup>

But how does this apply to the making of icons? Does Maritain's principle of aesthetic epistemology also hold true for this style of Christian painting? Are icons produced through the same knowledge and experience of the created world? To answer these questions, we must consider what an icon painting is.

This is not an easy question. There have been and still are many disputes on the nature of icon painting. St. John of Damascus, the great defender of icons during the iconoclastic period of the Eastern Church, said: "I make an image of the God whom I see. I do not worship matter; I worship the Creator of matter who became matter for my sake, who willed to take His abode in matter; who worked out my salvation in matter."<sup>4</sup> And more recently, Egon Sendler has said: "The icon points to a dimension which goes beyond the natural; it pushes out toward the ineffable. . . . According to St. Paul, Christ is the visible 'image of the invisible God.' (Col. 1:15); as Greek theologians say, on the other hand, the icon is . . . the reflection of God's reality."<sup>5</sup> What then is icon painting? It is making visible that which is not visible. What is the subject of the icon? Christ and Salvation History.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128.

<sup>4</sup> St. John of Damascus, *On the Divine Images*, trans. David Anderson (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980), p. 23.

<sup>5</sup> "The icon is a 'deuterotypos of the prototypos': the reflection of God's reality." Egon Sendler, S.J., *The Icon: Image of the Invisible Elements of Theology, Aesthetics and Technique*, trans. Steven Bigham (Redondo Beach, California: Oakwood Publications, 1988), p. 39.

Icons are not created to represent the world and nature; rather, they are made to represent the eternal truths revealed to us by God through Christ.

The painter of an icon, therefore, does not seek to imitate nature or produce worldly things; on the contrary, his work is meant to render an "image of the invisible and even the presence of the Invisible One."<sup>6</sup> The objects to be known by the painter are not corporeal being; rather they are the Divinity, Salvation, and Sanctified Humanity. These are not objects that may be simply known through human imagination and understanding. They are known primarily through faith. The authentic icon painter must be a believer, for only through supernatural faith will he truly know his subject matter. The reality with which he is confronted, therefore, is not visible matter, but revealed truth; it is not corporeal being, but spiritual being. The world of the icon artist is not the world of the eye before being, but the world of the soul before God.

This world of the artist is only known and experienced through faith, in faith, and with faith. It is not that the icon artist never experiences or relates to the created world; rather, he must see that world through faith in order to authentically produce his art, for without belief he cannot know nor interact with his subject matter.

## II

The connection between knowledge and beauty is clear for Maritain: "The beautiful is what gives delight—not just any delight, but delight in knowing; not the delight particular to the act of knowing, but a delight which superabounds and overflows from this act because of the object known."<sup>7</sup> Beauty pleases the intellect, but our senses also take delight in the beautiful.<sup>8</sup> The beauty of art is a beauty "seized *in the sensible and through the sensible*."<sup>9</sup> And this beauty which delights our intellect through the senses is connatural to us.

Moreover, Maritain notes: "[A]lthough the beautiful borders on the metaphysical true, . . . [it] is not a kind of truth, but a kind of good."<sup>10</sup> Beauty is in its essence delightful; it not only illumines as does the true, but it also arouses desire and produces love. And beauty delights because of its essential characteristics of integrity, proportion, and radiance.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>7</sup> Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and The Frontiers of Poetry*, p. 23.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

The beauty inherent in perfection, harmony, and splendor, and the beauty "seized in the sensible and through the sensible" are certainly present within the icon. Indeed, the aim of the iconographer is precisely to bring his subject matter to the viewer through the sensible, and thereby allow the viewer to delight in the beauty of the object portrayed. Yet there is more, for the icon painter is also presenting in and through matter the theological truths of the Christian faith. He is also, therefore, presenting the beauty of faith. In this sense, the icon depicts both supernatural truth and beauty.

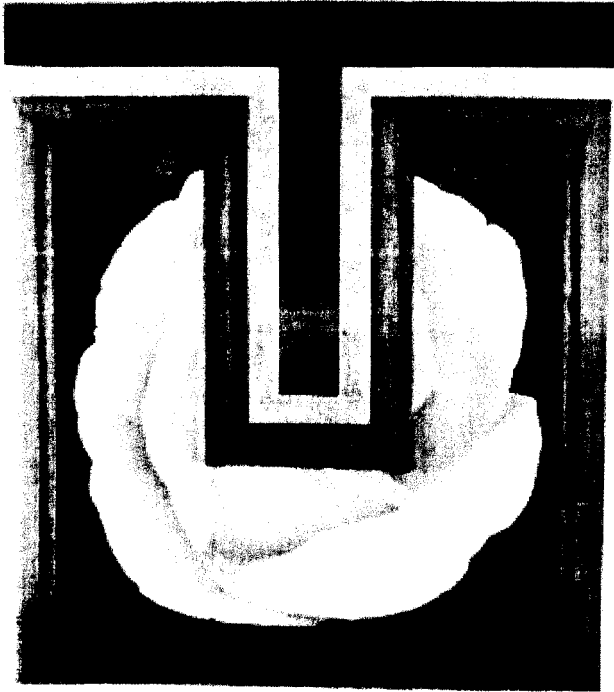
The icon is not secular art with a religious content. The artist is not interested in himself nor in self-expression, but rather in God and in Salvation. Therefore, we may even go so far as to say that the icon, because of its object, is the apex of beauty in art. Maritain says: "God is beautiful. He is the most beautiful of beings. . . . He is beautiful to the extreme (*superpulcher*), because in the perfect simple unity of His nature there pre-exists in a super-excellent manner the fountain of all beauty." And, "In the Trinity, Saint Thomas adds, the name of Beauty is attributed most fittingly to the Son."<sup>12</sup>

It is through the beautiful that art reaches into the spiritual and that true communication and connection between persons takes place. In art, there are the useful arts, which are "ordered to the service of man, and [are] therefore a simple means." There are, in addition, the fine arts which tend to make beautiful works: "The work to which the fine arts tend is ordered to beauty; as beautiful, it is an end, an absolute, it suffices of itself. . . ."<sup>13</sup> And still, within the fine arts, there is the icon, which is at the service of Christ and His Church. The end of the icon, however, is not simply usefulness, even though icons are used for prayer; nor is their end beauty, although icons certainly depict the Beautiful; rather, icons are for the use of the Beautiful One. The end of the fine art of icon painting is to glorify God and to unite persons: to establish an intimate bond between the person of Christ and the people of the Church. Icons are for the sake of prayer, which raises the human person's mind and heart to God, and more specifically, for the liturgy. They are in effect for the service of the Mystical Body of Christ.

"The Annunciation" (figure 1), an icon by Michael Schrauzer, certainly combines theological beauty with artistic beauty. Here it is undeniable that the artist comes to know his object, the Incarnation, which is beautiful,

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.



1. "The Annunciation," 1994.  
Oil on panel, maple, 12 × 11 inches.  
Courtesy of the Lazard/Harp Gallery. Michael Schrauzer.

through faith. He enters into the beauty of the truth which he portrays and also into the sensible beauty that he perceives. The icon artist knows that it is the Beauty of God Himself that makes his art transcendent. The artist desires the Beauty that is God; he enters into a relationship with Beauty, and then embodies it by transforming matter into a work of art. The viewer sees matter that has been transformed into an image of Beauty, an image which speaks of the transcendence of God and of humanity. Indeed, this work "swarm[s] with meanings, and . . . say[s] more than it is."<sup>14</sup> The icon is art wed to faith, matter wed to spirit, it is beauty and faith purposefully enfolded in matter, it is Beauty Incarnate. Yet, if the art work participates in

<sup>14</sup> Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, p. 128.

the Beautiful, so too must the artist. The artist participates in Beauty through contemplation.

### III

The mode of being of the fine arts is contemplative.<sup>15</sup> The fine arts aim, as does wisdom, at intellectual delight; they also "presuppose in the artist a kind of contemplation, from which the beauty of the work must overflow."<sup>16</sup> What is it that the fine artist contemplates? Things. The artist contemplates material things, finds in them beauty, enters into their beauty and creates from the abundance of intellectual delight that is caused by seeing and knowing the object.

The icon painter, however, is not primarily interested in the contemplation of things, but in the contemplation of God and the supernatural. Because the painter meditates on God, his primary object, he finds in God beauty and truth, he enters into a deep relationship with God and creates from the overflow of intellectual delight and love that are caused by knowing his subject matter. For the icon painter, the contemplation of things is linked to the contemplation of God. The Transcendent enters, so to speak, into the painter's work, for the artist is a mediator, a priest for beauty and truth.

This contemplation of God allows for the creation of the icon. Indeed, the work made partly expresses the interior, contemplative life of the artist. It is the contemplative life of the painter which enables his creative intuition to become embodied in matter; it is his contemplation which illumines, as it were, his activity. The act of contemplating both God and the things of God is inseparable from his creative work. The icon makes of painting a good act, and can therefore make the painter good, and become a means to his salvation. The good of the work made and the good of the artist are fundamentally united in iconography.

For Maritain, however, the realm of art and the realm of morality are autonomous. He says: "Art and poetry tend to an absolute which is the Beauty to be attained in a work, but which is not God Himself, or Beauty subsisting by itself."<sup>17</sup> And he continues: "What the artist . . . insofar as he is artist, loves over and above all is Beauty in which to engender a work, not God as supreme ruler of human life nor as diffusing His own charity in

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Jacques Maritain, *The Responsibility of the Artist* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960), p. 32.

us.”<sup>18</sup> Even though these boundaries between God, Beauty, and Art generally exist in secular art, they do not and should not exist in icon painting. The icon painter is primarily concerned with God, not with himself or his art work. He loves God as God and Beauty as an attribute of God. The icon artist serves God and paints in order to make Him loved and known. From beginning to end, grace fills the work of the painter; from the outset of the work the painter must have the gift of faith, and throughout the process he must have the gift of love of God, which spills over into the work made. The work is done through faith, with charity, and in hope. In the icon, the tension or conflict between art and morality is resolved, for when the work of art is authentically produced, it transfigures both the painter and the painting, as both are filled with the grace of the Holy Spirit and are made holy.

Furthermore, the icon is not simply a means to make the painter good, but should also make the viewer good. The work of art is the place where the fruit of the contemplation of the artist is seen, it is the place where the faith of the artist meets with the viewer. The icon is what may be called the meeting of two minds. The viewer, who sees a matter that has been transformed into an image of beauty, and intuits that it speaks of the transcendence of God and of human destiny, may be led to his own good. Here let us look at “The Madonna of the Holy See” (figure 2), a painting by the author. This painting shows the Madonna as representative of the Church, and as such she holds up the Christ Child for us to contemplate. The Christ Child in turn offers us the “pearl of great price”: faith. The pearl is the focal point of the work, for through faith we are given knowledge of God and of our salvation. The icon invites us to embrace the faith.

In summary, icons are of the supernatural. The objects of the icon are Christ and Salvation History. These objects, which are beautiful, are known through faith. Icons themselves represent Beauty, Christ Himself, and the truth found in the account of salvation. In knowing his objects, the painter desires them, enters into their beauty, and embodies them in the icon. In this act of painting, whose object is Christ and His works, the artist may find his way to God and become holy. Icons are beautiful, but they do not primarily serve beauty; they are for the good of the artist, but they are not meant to serve the artist. They are for God, and because they are for God, all the goods of painting are found in this form of Christian art: for even the power of art is within the icon, a power that can mysteriously and

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 32–33



2. "The Madonna of the Holy See," 1997.  
Oil on wood in mixed media. 23 x 31 inches.  
Collection of the artist Katherine A. Osenga.

profoundly affect the viewer and move him more passionately than any rational argument. The icon artist knows this power, and knows that art, with beauty, can wound the viewer with love and move him to fall in love as the painter has. It is precisely this power of art that the icon artist uses for the glory of God.