

THE STRUGGLE TO SEE:  
PAINTING AFTER THE INCARNATION OF JESUS CHRIST

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“As when a great king has entered some large city and made his dwelling in one of the houses in it, such a city is certainly made worthy of high honor, and no longer does any enemy or bandit descend upon it, but it is rather reckoned worthy of all care because of the king’s having taken residence in one of its houses; so also does it happen with the King of all. Coming himself into our realm, and dwelling in a body like the others, every design of the enemy against human beings has henceforth ceased, and the corruption of death, which had prevailed formerly against them, perished. For the race of human beings would have been utterly dissolved had not the Master and Savior of all, the Son of God, come for the completion of death.”

—St. Athanasius<sup>1</sup>

Painting affirms two natural realities: the basic goodness of matter and the presence of order in all things. To paint is to use one good thing, colorful dust mixed with a binding compound, to illuminate another, the form the artist wishes to make visible, so as to create a new reality: an image cradled in resplendent, interesting matter. This encapsulated image in turn displays the ordering principles of perception by stringing out the correspondence between mind and reality along the shallow plane of the painted surface, making the order of that correspondence subject to analysis, interest, and concern. This is true whether we’re talking about a painting portraying a plate of fish, an exalted human, or a purely geometric schema. Beyond what could be called the natural good of painting, however, when painting after Christ, in the light of the sacraments, it is also possible to detect and participate in the drama of the incarnation—the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ—in ordinary visible reality.

In a similar way to how a nuclear disaster like Chernobyl can be picked up by a Geiger counter years after the flora and fauna have returned, this drama of Christ—which stands as the inflection point of human history—is still detectable in observable reality, such as in the way dust or cast shadows pool ambient light on an upward-facing surface.

It is present in the humility of objects, the poverty of forms persisting through time, dependent for their continuation on processes science has not yet fully understood. Yet, instead of a disaster, what faith detects in the observable world after the incarnation is the hope of eternal life and the promise of a future transformation of earthly matter. Painting can speak this language of an apocalyptic conflict hidden in objects resting on a table. That is the secret of its continued power to fascinate despite our easily exhausted visual sense and the multiplication of distractions in the digital age.

In the Christian tradition, it is only the incarnation that provides justification for painting anything; and it provides justification for painting everything, provided it in some way points to Christ. The reason for this is that paintings have a sensibility, they stake out an intellectual position, only in a nonverbal way (not to say that this position can't also be verbalized). The Church has long recognized this symbolic power of painting, situating the painter's art in a tradition that begins with God's creation of man in his own image and develops to include divine conceptual art, such as God's use of a burning bush to depict the Blessed Virgin, before opening up to include the work of Christian artisans<sup>2</sup>. Through the incarnation, not only can Christ be portrayed, but portrayal itself is made theological.

Throughout Christendom, painting flourished in a way that it had not even among the pagan Greeks and Romans. A painting of an idea, an ironic painting, an expressionistic painting, or a political painting today owes its existence to the fact of the incarnation. Of course, this justification is no longer recognized, but it's there in the same way that the date of the incarnation is still there when we say '2019 CE.'

More astonishingly, it is by riffing on the multiple definitions and hierarchical levels of *εἰκὼν*/*imago*—from the divine image-bearing of the Son, to the creation of man in the image of God, to the age old artistic practice of making a likeness of something three dimensional on a flat plane—that Byzantine iconography still flourishes and finds new resonances with both the inner life and with contemporary practices of art making, both liturgical and profane.



*Benedict's Rule*, 2016, oil on canvas, 9 x 12 inches.

It was during the period when I returned to practicing the Catholic faith that I began to take painting seriously and began studying the great Christian painting traditions of the past, east and west. I studied painting, drawing, and iconography during the little spare time I had and thought about the meaning and practice of painting almost hourly.

I was fortunate enough to live in New York City, where I was able to study both the French academic tradition of oil painting and the Russo-Byzantine practice of iconography in egg tempera. Both met the criteria I needed of affirming the fundamental goodness of matter and order of reality. The Russian egg-tempera tradition goes further in its insistence on the portrayal of Christ and the saints, and in locating Jesus not just at the end of the painting process, but finding him at the very beginning, in the wooden board that symbolizes his cross, our only hope.

Russo-Byzantine icons, in a straightforward way, express the magnanimity of Jesus Christ, without which his humility cannot be properly understood. It is the overflowing generosity of Christ that caused him to take flesh. According to St. Theodore the Studite, God, through the incarnation, “deigned to be circumscribed.”<sup>3</sup> The Son of God lacked nothing, overflowed in everything, and gained nothing by becoming a man. As the quote by St. Athanasius at the beginning of this essay puts it, the city receives a high honor when the king comes to dwell within it. The care taken in making an icon, blessing it, and placing it in a home or church is an expression of the reception of this honor. Christ allows himself to be circumscribed, portrayed by the iconographer, but the artist also descends into the material world of icon making: the colorful mineral pigments, the binder made of egg yolk and wine, the board and chalk gesso. The “city” is thus prepared by man for the arrival of God.



*Virgin of the Don*, 2015–2019, egg tempera and gold leaf on panel, 11 x 9 inches.

Like the Byzantine iconographical tradition that is one of its sources, western, Renaissance-derived, painting contains traces of care for the order God manifested when creating the universe through the Son. The western style, however, also contains a more pronounced divide between technique, corresponding almost entirely to the material world (empirically observable or mathematical), and content, which can find its source anywhere and often includes a significant concern for human subjectivity. To moderns, it's a familiar space of freedom and science paired together in an often conceptually disjointed relationship; yet it also offers, through persistence in meditation, the possibility of rediscovering the congruity of observable form and human subjectivity as creations of the same Logos.



*Gowanus Bay*, Winter, 2014, oil on panel, 5 x 7 inches.

Painting outdoors is a kind of crisis in itself. Despite the proliferation of technologies designed to facilitate outdoor painting, such as oil paint in tubes, painting while exposed to the elements is tricky. The search for subject matter becomes more costly in time and effort. I remember wandering in the November chill, driven gradually to the wind-slashed Red Hook neighborhood of Brooklyn in search of a more isolated place to paint. Techniques learned in the studio are moot when your canvas has become a sail in the knifing wind and your blacks are congealing in the cold. The finished product would often be more like a scar—evidence of a struggle—than an artifact of painterly ingenuity.

My painting sites often followed the route of earlier rosary walks. Sometimes outdoor painting was so subordinate to walking and meditation that what it might look like later was not really a concern in the moment. I was not trying to reproduce the place so much as participate in the experience of being there more actively.

A key theme for me in those days, and one that would turn out to be a recurring one, was solitude. This is a zone where my art practice and faith connect on a deep level. It is still impossible for me to imagine the Christian life without a level of solitude, even if mainly interior. And on the surface, it might seem to some Christians that serious

solitude indulges postmodern alienation and isolation to the point of transgressing the Christian call to community. Yet this solitude is for the sake of communion.

As I wandered through ever more obscure corners of New York's outer boroughs I sometimes wondered if everything I saw and thought was coming to a dead end in me, never to be organized and shared with others. At times it seemed foolish and even anti-philosophical. On the other hand, it was only at the extremity of solitude that I encountered the Church as the body of Christ and could hear the voice of Jesus speaking through the seemingly all too human customs and canons of the Church. It was also where I first really encountered other people in their solitude, and so began to glimpse the deeper meaning of charity towards neighbor. The context of these developments, in addition to my wanderings, was the weekday Mass at St. Thomas Aquinas church in Brooklyn, where the priests had to deal with such humble problems as the heroin addicts who wandered up and down 9th Street using the pews as toilets.

There is a kind of communion of solitaries, without country, party, and sometimes even particular friendships that constitutes not just a part, but the heart of the Church. The capacity for inner solitude might be necessary for living the demands of the Gospel and the moral life in our day. Painting can be a participation in this solitude, and even, at times, exile: being pushed outside, misunderstood, broken, but seeing the light, the joyful solidity of things; rich in the vision of being.

I became conscious of this participation-in-solitude through modern western painting while looking at a pair of snowscapes by American impressionist Everett Warner (1877-1963) at the Florence Griswold Museum in Old Lyme, Connecticut: the warmth of the light, the whole quality of vision, all the flotsam of thought put into vision; the silent wonder of standing perfectly still, barely raising your eyelids, and having light, like an angel, instantly translate all visible reality into your mind. This is the *logos* of impressionist painting: contemplating the gift of material vision, conveying the sense of drop-dead amazement at being able to step outside and trace your eyes across the brilliant white banks, fiery orange pine trunks, and drooping blue boughs.

Painting has always been in part about looking. Late in painting's long history, a certain type of painting, which might be called perceptual, unburdened of narrative duties, has come to focus almost solely on the act and drama of looking. Rather than simply circumscribing what is seen, perceptual painting enacts the process of coming to see within the medium of paint. A glance, earned. Like the blind man partially healed by mud formed of Jesus' spit, this type of painting often sees "men as it were trees, walking."<sup>1</sup> Rather than simply taming unruly paint—essentially colored mud—via technique in order to elevate it and make it a vehicle of the artist's vision, perceptual painting plants a seed of the original vision in the world of paint-mud and develops it according to the rules of that world, from within, back towards the original animating vision. Everything has to become mud before it can become vision.

There are two basic pitfalls for this type of painting. The first is that it can succumb permanently to the entropic pull of colored mud. The spiritual, rational seed is forgotten completely and the artist becomes mesmerized by the physicality of the medium. The result is either that the work remains on the level of "men as it were trees" or that it devolves entirely into the illusion of prime matter: paintings of paint. The second pitfall is to in some way lose faith in the adequacy of paint to transmit the rational, spiritual

seed. This is partly warranted: paint itself is totally inadequate, and man as a craftsman is often incapable of realizing fully what was once glimpsed in inspiration. This leads, if not to the abandonment of the project, to some form of falsification or cynical betrayal of the purity of the originating quest.

It is only really the love of the artist struggling to achieve the vision and his mercy with himself and his materials that constitute the maturation of the spiritual seed that has been planted in the mud of paint. In one sense, the painting fails to become the mature version of the seed that was intended. At least, as a material, nonverbal thing, it can't reliably transmit the spiritual idea originally envisioned. This is beyond the power of the artist. But the painting now bears the marks of a struggle to love that has persevered to its limit. Importantly, this is the best thing that the painting could have been. By incorporating the changed heart of the artist in this way, the painting is a better, truer realization of the spiritual seed than is possible to achieve otherwise. And yet, this failure cannot be willed or even permitted, because this would be another lapse into cynicism of the worse kind—counterfeit mercy. An artist who loves his medium will not allow its inadequacy to be publicly paraded in order even to demonstrate the surpassing glory of a spiritual idea. It is not even really proper to call it inadequate: the transformation of the surface of the painting into the site of a struggle to love only comes from perseverance in both the original vision and the chosen medium.

Perception is demanding and its rewards are limited, but within those limitations there is a kind freedom: the freedom to work and make progress. The highest reward of perception is the most limited: the miracle of seeing. Anyone who has ever experienced the correspondence between paint and specific visible reality, whether as a painter or a viewer of paintings, finds something unaccountable there, which is why God used miracles of sight to indicate the arrival of the God-Man, the singular Messiah who founded the Catholic Church to teach the nations.<sup>5</sup> There are multiple reasons why we see, but our enjoyment of seemingly inconsequential moments of sight is gratuitous, a flame-like expansion of focus when something is revealed to be just as it is.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>St. Athanasius the Great of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation*, trans. John Behr (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011), 58.

<sup>2</sup>St. John of Damascus, *On the Divine Images*, trans. David Anderson (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997), 64–65.

<sup>3</sup>Devin Singh, "Iconicity of the Photographic Image: Theodore of Stoudios and André Bazin," in *Byzantium/Modernism: The Byzantine as Method in Modernity*, ed. Roland Betancourt and Maria Taroutina (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2015), 244.

<sup>4</sup>Mark 8:24 (Douay-Rheims-Challoner Bible).

<sup>5</sup>Matthew 28:19 (Douay-Rheims-Challoner Bible).