

AN INTERVIEW WITH GREEK ICONOGRAPHER PANAGIOTIS MARKOPOULOS

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PREFACE — MEDIEVAL AND MODERN ICONOGRAPHY

Most students of the Middle Ages will encounter, at some point in their academic journey, icons. An icon is a Christian religious image which depicts a holy figure or an event of religious significance. The quintessential medieval icon is the Eastern Orthodox style: deliberately two-dimensional, set against a gold background on a wood panel canvas. When saints are depicted, they typically have large, penetrating eyes which stare directly at the viewer. Medieval icons functioned as devotional tools; pious Christians venerated the holy figures depicted in the icons and communicated with them through the image.

Icons developed in the Late Antique period during the first centuries of Christianity. They were influenced by Roman funerary portraiture, and especially the *fayum* tradition. Fayums were hyper-realistic portraits done in wax in Roman Egypt which were applied to the sarcophagi of the dead. Like Greco–Roman commemorative busts, they immortalized the face of the deceased. When compared against icons, the similarities are remarkable—both fayums and icons place great emphasis on the eyes of the subject. In fayums, the purpose for this emphasis was to establish a link between this world and the next. Through the eyes of the portrait, the dead could see you and you could communicate with them. This philosophy shaped the philosophy of icons: in iconography, the eyes are emphasized because it is believed that the prototype of the image is able to see you through them. Via the eyes of an icon of Christ, one can establish a connection with Him. This would

eventually develop into the belief that by venerating the icon, you venerate the person depicted in it.

Icons grew in popularity into the Middle Ages, and consequently, many Byzantine churchmen grew increasingly anxious about popular use of devotional imagery. Deuteronomy 5:8 reads, “You shall not make any carved likeness, of anything in heaven above or on the earth below,” and Psalm 96:7 reads, “all who venerate carved images shall be put to shame.” In general, the Bible is unswerving in its prohibition of idolatry. How can veneration of paintings on wood panels be reconciled with Scripture? Tertullian (b. 160 AD) writes in his treatise *On Idolatry*, “As soon as the devil had brought into the world the makers of statues, portraits, and every kind of representation... then accordingly every form of art producing an idol in whatever way became a source of idolatry.”¹⁴² Conversely, John of Damascus (b. 675 AD) writes, “What the book does for those who understand letters, the image does for the illiterate...,”¹⁴³ and, “by contemplating His bodily form, we form a notion, as far as is possible for us, of the glory of His divinity.”¹⁴⁴ The Second Council of Nicaea (787 AD) asserted furthermore that veneration is not paid to the image itself, but rather to the person depicted in the image. Essentially, a long-standing tension developed between those who believed iconography to be idolatrous and those who believed that iconography functioned as an indispensable educational and devotional tool. Although Byzantine emperors banned icons twice (from 730–787, and from 814–843), their use would eventually be endorsed by the Orthodox Church.

Today, icons remain hugely popular in the Eastern Orthodox world. Orthodox churches are filled with them. They are also a popular tool of personal devotion; many Orthodox believers keep icons in their home. This widespread demand for icons in the modern period has transformed the sphere of icon production. In the Middle Ages, iconographers were specially trained, highly devout men who painted icons by hand. They did every step of the process themselves: the preparing of the wood panel, the mixing of the paint, the drafting, the painting, and the finishing. Nowadays, a vast number of icons are produced in factories. While there are still iconographers who train and work the traditional way, they are now in competition with commercial production.

The following interview was conducted with Panagiotis Markopoulos, a traditional Greek iconographer who trained in the iconographic style of Crete and currently works in Athens. He paints every icon by hand, the traditional way—he mixes the pigments, applies the gold, drafts, paints, and finishes by himself. His workshop is small, but he has many customers from all around the world who prefer his icons to the icons churned out by the commercial factories. The interview explores the philosophy of icons and the role of Orthodoxy in a modern iconographer’s life.

¹⁴² Caecilia Davis-Weyer, *Early Medieval Art: 300-1150* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986): 3.

¹⁴³ John of Damascus, *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*, trans. Andrew Louth (New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003): 31.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 72.

Panagiotis' work can be viewed at the following links. We warmly encourage readers to visit his websites:

<https://www.sites.google.com/site/agiokeri>

<https://www.facebook.com/panagiotis.markopoulosagiografos>



Panagiotis working on restoring an old icon.

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PANGRATI, ATHENS, GREECE — IN PANAGIOTIS' ICON WORKSHOP

Gwen: Please introduce yourself: how old are you, what's your occupation?

Panagiotis: My age is forty-three. My name is Panagiotis. And my job is to paint Byzantine icons.

Gwen: And how do you identify yourself, faith-wise?

Panagiotis: As an iconographer.

Gwen: Mm. Okay, how did you decide to become an iconographer, and did you always know it was what you wanted to do?

Panagiotis: No, it's something that came to my life accidentally. My family is in this work for about fifty years now, but it was not in my plans to do this work. But after some research, something sends me this way. And also, my life, it depends a lot not on living but how I see things in my life. They have to do with my work.

Gwen: Do you enjoy it? Are there times when it's difficult?

Panagiotis: Yes, yes of course. But even if the work is hard sometimes, if the orders are difficult, not so common, a very big challenge for me... every time I'm asking for something harder.

Gwen: To challenge yourself.

Panagiotis: Yes.

Gwen: And how long did you train for?

Panagiotis: I am working since 2000. Twenty years now.

Gwen: And you trained in Crete, right?

Panagiotis: Yes.

Gwen: What did the training involve?

Panagiotis: The training, ah, the training [laughs]. If someone is good at painting and all those things, then perhaps it will be easier, but there are some standard layers that you must learn in this work. If you have a good teacher, the training will be about 2 years, or 3. And after that, you can work on your own.



Progress on one of Panagiotis' icons of Mary and the Christ child.

Gwen: So, I've read that iconographers, at least traditionally, are supposed to be very religiously devout, and lead upright lives- do you feel like that's still the case, and do you feel like you live up to that ideal?

Panagiotis: Yes, yes. I'm not thinking like a sheep, okay, I have my own opinions about the things that the church says. I decided for myself. But always I have in the back of my mind the rules of the church.

This kind of school that I'm doing is the school from Crete—it starts sixteenth century, on the island of Crete, and the old iconographers tried to put the language of the Bible inside, in these icons so the people who cannot read can see an icon and understand a lot of things from the Bible. That was the first attempt to do with this kind of school. So that means that the iconographers who do the school from Crete, they don't do things from their mind.¹⁴⁵ We must take the old prototype and try to make it exactly how it was. Because if I change something, I would change the whole language, very big meanings. So, my work is to be a very good copy machine. Nothing else. And also, I must learn how to read the icons, not only in the first layer. So, if you don't believe in the whole thing of the church, it's very hard to try to study these things and accept them. Because they are not all natural things, they don't all have explanations. So, you must believe... or not.

Gwen: Do you go to church often?

Panagiotis: Not so often, but, for example, the days of Easter I'm going.

Gwen: Do you follow any of the various church practices, like fasting, or...?

Panagiotis: Yes, but not always so often.

[All laugh]

Panagiotis: They are part of my life of course, but we live in a modern world. We have the traditions, and we try to keep them. But I prefer the modern way, which is if you feel okay with yourself, then do it. Or not. For a priest to tell you that you must do it because it's good, or it's right...

Gwen: Mm. Do you have a lot of icons in your house?

Panagiotis: No.

¹⁴⁵ Essentially, iconographers must follow iconographic traditions, and not make any of their own artistic interventions or choices.

[All laugh]

Gwen: Really?

Panagiotis: I have made icons worldwide; I have a lot of customers worldwide. But in my home, I [only] have a very small icon of... Like this one [points], this is my icon in my house [a small icon of Mary]. The whole of my life is icons, so...

Gwen: You need a break?

Panagiotis: It has nothing to do with if I have them in my home or not.

Gwen: Ah. Are there any historical iconographers you admire, or famous icons you really like?

Panagiotis: Ah, yes! The best for me, because they are the ones who made this school, is Theophanes from Crete. Also, in the Byzantine museum they have a lot of icons from the sixteenth century... These are the best, for me. I don't accept the modern ones [joking].

[All laugh]

Gwen: So, this is a bit random, but there are the two periods of Byzantine Iconoclasm in Byzantine history. And so, I was wondering, how would you respond to the argument that venerating icons is equivalent to idolatry? I know we resolved it like 1000 years ago, but...

Panagiotis: Yes. Look, we don't love the icons. We don't pray to the piece of wood. You pray to the person who is drawn on the piece of wood. And this is the red line between *this* school and all the other icons that we have. This kind of school, the school from Crete, it has a lot of symbols. So, if someone knows how to read this kind of icon, then he can understand that these icons are not just a piece of wood with a very good drawing—or not a good drawing—but they have the symbols. The symbols give the meaning. It's like the Bible—it's just a book, but the things inside, the things that have been written, these are the center, these are the focus point. So, it's more important for someone who wants to get into this role, with the church.... First, you must know what is this focus point, how to read this thing, how to explain these things. And not just look at an icon and say 'okay, it's a very good saint, I love this saint because a miracle perhaps happened when I went to a monastery of this saint.' I don't like these things. I just said to the [previous] people who bought icons, first of all, know how to read the icon. What does the icon represent? And if you accept these things, then buy it. If you don't, it's just a good piece of art. So, it has nothing to do with the love of things that makes them idols. But okay, it also depends on the mind of the person. The oldest people [in Greece], they have their mind, their education

is perhaps low, so they don't have a very... big knowledge about what is the iconography or what is their religion.

I have a cross. I don't wear it because a friend of mine put this cross on the hand of St John the Baptist [the relic at Mt Athos], in the monastery. And this for me is a very big blessing. So, I keep this cross, because I don't want to lose it, but this makes this cross something like...

Gwen: Like an idol.

Panagiotis: Yes. It's a very big mistake. But also, I know that it's a very big blessing for my cross to have touched this piece of the hand of St John the Baptist. Because in this monastery in Athos, they don't open this hand to anyone. It's not for the public. But I had the opportunity to get my cross on this hand.

Gwen: Do you think that icons have the power to work miracles?

Panagiotis: The icons are a link between this world and, if you believe, the other one. I think the miracles happen from the faith, from inside our heart. We are very powerful beings. So, it's just a tool. Of course, this tool does not work by itself. It has no batteries. It has energy, but... If you believe a lot, and you can make this connection [via the icon], these two [things, together] will become very powerful. So, perhaps... In a lot of people, icons have worked [miracles]. They have made things that the doctors could not explain.



One of Panagiotis' icons of Mary and Christ.

Gwen: This is a bit random too, but what do you like about the Orthodox Church, and is there anything you would change? Or something you dislike about it?

Panagiotis: Ah, the Orthodox Church. These days, they have very big problems. These problems have to do with the people. For example, in Greece, we have a lot of refugees, and a lot of poor people. They don't have a home; they don't have food. So, the focus point of the church is to prepare the souls of the persons [the believers], and not to feed them with food or buy them homes. But, these days, the economic problems, have taken the church away from its main focus point. But also, this is a very good job [doing charity]—we

cannot say ‘don’t do that’ or ‘try only to heal the souls.’ Ah, I don’t have anything to say about the church, because they do a good job. Perhaps for me the only stake is that they have given their energy only to protecting the living people. They leave a very low percent [of their energy] to the soul preparation. So that makes a lot of people leave the church.

Gwen: How do you feel about—I know the Patriarch has been meeting with the Pope about a reunification of the Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church. I know it’s kind of a—

Panagiotis: Yes, this is a—I don’t have a very good knowledge about the Western type of church. But....

Gwen: Do you think it’s a bad idea? Should they stay separate?

Panagiotis: Look, we have an icon that shows a ladder. At the bottom, there are the people who try to reach the ladder. At the top is heaven. At the bottom is hell.

Gwen: The Ladder of Divine Ascent?

Panagiotis: Yes. On the ladder, each one of us is not holding[/supporting] someone [else]. I’m just trying to reach the ladder as a unit [by myself]. So that means that we are alone in this way. For me, aside from the political matters and all these things, perhaps if the two churches become one, a lot of things will change in our world. But this has nothing to do with the focus point of the soul....

Gwen: Reaching heaven.

Panagiotis: Reaching heaven.

Gwen: You think it’s a personal journey?

Panagiotis: Yes, yes. Of course, we have a guide.¹⁴⁶ We’re not doing things from how we feel, or what we want. If this [reunification] is to happen, of course it would change a lot of things. I don’t know if it’s good or bad. It’s something. It’s the same thing to have one currency, worldwide. Would this be good or bad? We don’t know. Perhaps if the states have Euro, it would be a bad thing. Also, different things in different countries make different persons, make different thoughts. That makes different people worldwide. This is not bad, for me. If all people became the same, this would destroy the whole image of the planet.

¹⁴⁶ Essentially, the church guides you towards your own divine ascent. You can’t just follow whatever rules or morality you want.

I'm a very religious person, but I accept all the other religions. If someone came in here and said to me, 'I'm an atheist, I believe in Satan', I don't know, tell me anything you want—I accept it. I'm not going to say to him, 'what did you say, ah, you bad person.' I don't care about that. It's his own life, it's his own soul. If he believes in something other than Orthodoxy, other than Christ, I don't care. It's his own problem. Perhaps he says the same about me. I have friends who don't believe, and they say to me 'ah, you believe in Jesus Christ?' and all those things, and I say 'okay, at the end we'll see who is right.'

[All laugh]

Gwen: Okay, I saw a statistic that 97% of Greek people identify as Orthodox. Do you think people are becoming less religious as time goes on? Or more religious?

Panagiotis: [Thinks for a while]. Greece is an Orthodox state. A lot of people have gotten out of religion. They don't believe in anything. They go on their way. But also, when someone goes, another one comes. So, it's equal. We don't have to say they don't believe anymore, or it's less, or it's more. There are a lot of schools here in Greece that are Orthodox Christian schools, so they produce new people. But I believe that this cannot be done with force. If you feel something. There are some times in our lives where things happen to us, and these things make the mind search for something else beyond the things that we can see and feel.

Not all things have explanations. I have a customer here that has cancer. She has done everything that the doctor has told her. But her belief is so big that every time that we talk.... Perhaps I have a pain in my hand, and I say 'oh, what pain!' If I ask her how she is, she says 'okay, I am doing my therapy, I am exhausted, I have a lot of pain, but we have Easter [to look forward to]!' You see two different persons: one is suffering with very big problems, the other has a very small problem. And he's crying. But her faith is so powerful. The meds don't do anything now for the pain, but her mind can make a balance. And also, she's not afraid of death. She's very close. But she has so much power[/strength].



Finished icon of Christ.