

A painting on the ceiling of St. Gregory of Nyssa Orthodox Church on the North Side represents the baptism of Christ. Byzantine-style icons such as those at St. Gregory are distinguished by their sharp, angular figures.



Images of divinity

■ Icons used in Orthodox Christian devotions are increasingly popular among others seeking inspiration.

Story by Brian Lewis
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Photos by Grace Beahm

They are called windows into heaven. Icons, sacred art from the Orthodox Christian tradition, often look strange to Western eyes. The perspective is odd (two-dimensional instead of 3-D), and the figures can seem stiff, often with their heads at unusual angles.

But unlike other art, icons depict people and scenes "in a heavenly light that's not of this world," said the Rev. Paul O'Callaghan, dean of St. George Orthodox Christian Cathedral in Wichita, Kan.

Every brushstroke, every color, every tilt of a head has meaning, say those who make icons and those who venerate them. But these works of art — religious images typically painted on wood — aren't found only in Orthodox churches and in the homes of Orthodox Christians. They have become popular with other Christians — the result of greater exposure to this art form and of a desire for an inspiring image to focus on when praying.

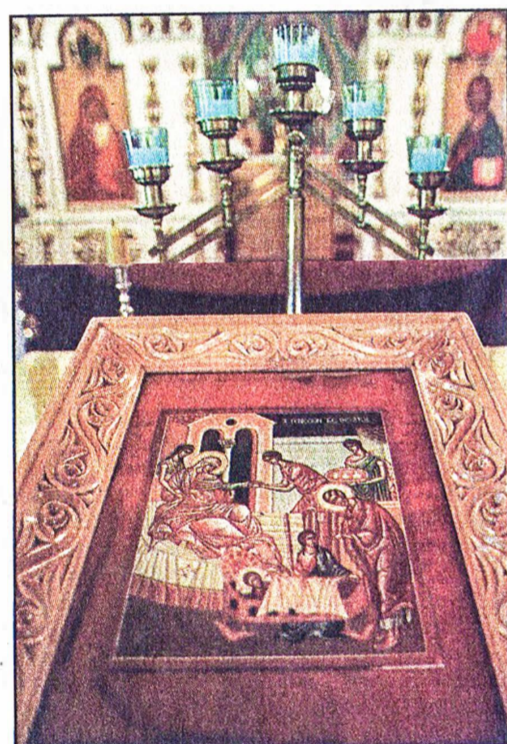


The Virgin Mary and the baby Jesus are depicted in a wood cut from Egypt at St. Mary Coptic Orthodox Church in Prairie Township.

Philip Tamoush, an Orthodox Christian in Los Angeles, has published more than a dozen books about icons and has helped create a national iconographers association. He lists the fall of communism and the introduction of tourism into Russia and Eastern Europe as two reasons for the increased interest. As people travel to those areas, Tamoush said, they are exposed to an art form they knew little about.

Also contributing to the popularity of icons has been the conversion of hundreds of evangelical Christians to Orthodoxy in recent years, Tamoush said. "They take the glory of icons and take them out to their Protestant friends."

Moreover, say Tamoush and Orthodox leaders,



ABOVE: A Greek icon that represents the most recent feast day celebrated sits on the altar at St. Gregory.

BELOW: A red velvet curtain with sewn-on artwork of Mary and the baby Jesus hangs in front of the altar at St. Mary Coptic Orthodox Church.



Faith & VALUES

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An icon of St. Gregory of Nyssa is on a doorway to the altar area of the Columbus church that bears his name.

Orthodoxy has become less ethnic in its makeup in the United States (Russian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox, for example) and more diverse in its membership. Today, there are an estimated 6 million Orthodox Christians in the United States.

While the popularity of icons has risen in recent years, the methods for making them have stayed constant.

Shelley Hatfield, an iconographer in Salina, Kan., said she uses *The Manual for Painters* for direction in creating her icons. Traditional Byzantine iconographers refer to the book — written by Dionysius of Fourni about three centuries ago — for rules on how to paint icons.

For example, Mary is always painted as the Theotokos, or "God bearer." Her outer garment is usually red, a royal color, and her undergarment is blue, representing her humanity, Hatfield said. For Jesus, she said, the colors are reversed "because he put on our humanity and humbled himself."

But iconography is more than an art — it is a spiritual endeavor, Hatfield said.

"The spiritual aspect of it is probably most important to an iconographer," she said. "Icons are not signed by the artist because you literally become an instrument of God, and you're being used to make this visual prayer."

Hatfield said she generally fasts the day before starting an icon and throughout the day when she paints. Also, before starting an icon, she will pray to the saint whom she's going to depict and will continually say the "Jesus prayer" ("Lord Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner") while she is working.

Hatfield said it takes her about eight weeks to make an icon. She usually sells icons to small churches for the cost of making them.

Warren Farha, who sells icons at his store, Eighth Day Books, in Wichita, said most people buy photographic reproductions on wood because the originals are expensive.

For example, an 8-by-10-inch reproduction on wood can cost \$25-\$30, but an original of the same size could cost hundreds of dollars, depending on how many figures are

depicted and how complex the design is, he said.

But it's not simply the artistry and beauty of icons that appeal to people — whether or not they are Orthodox Christians.

Many Roman Catholics and Protestants say icons, more than other types of religious art, help them focus their prayers.

"A lot of the other types of religious art for me are distracting as far as prayer goes," said Therese Munley, a member of St. Paul Parish Newman Center and St. Mary's Cathedral in Wichita. "The icon to me helps me pray and especially helps me pray without words."

John Traffas, who attends St. Mary's Cathedral, also said icons help him while he's praying.

"When I begin my prayers in the morning after walking the dog," he said, "I will cross myself before the image of the Trinity or the image of the Crucifixion."

The icons are more than just visual reminders, Traffas said. Through the image, the person depicted is present.

"It truly is the person, the divine person of Christ, whom one contacts in venerating the icon," he said.

Bill Swendson, a member of St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in Newton, Kan., said his priest gave him an icon of Mary Magdalene a few years ago on his birthday, also

the feast day of Mary Magdalene on the Christian calendar. He keeps it in his bedroom and looks at it every day. He said he is looking forward to learning more about icons at a workshop at his church in December.

"I think anything that helps you in your relationship with God is important," he said.

The Rev. Cheryl Bell, executive minister of United Methodist Urban Ministries, has an icon in her office called *Jesus Christ: Liberator*, a gift after she graduated from Phillips Theological Seminary in Oklahoma.

The icon depicts Jesus as an African holding a book with verses about ministering to the needy: "Whatever you did to the least of these, you did to me."

Bell said the icon helps keep her centered on her ministry, especially during hectic days.

"Sometimes when you get caught up in things," she said, "it's nice to be able to look at something to remind you, 'Yeah, this is why I'm here.'"

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SHELLEY HATFIELD
iconographer