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## The Heritage

### BYZANTIUM

The Byzantine heritage in art, as transmitted over the centuries to Russia, quite obviously remained an essential component of the visual environment in which the Petrine revolution took place. But Byzantine art itself has been characterized by historians as conservative if not stagnant in its adherence to set forms, techniques, and subjects, and its prolonged influence on the development of art in Russia has been seen accordingly as restrictive if not deadening in its overall effects. There are plainly two questions here: the quality over the centuries of Byzantine art in Byzantium, if one may thus generalize such a vast subject; and the quality of its prolonged influence, and cumulative legacy, in pre-Petrine Russia. We'll consider these questions in turn—before coming to the perhaps surprising conclusions that Byzantine art in Byzantium is not fairly characterized as conservative, let alone stagnant, and that anyway its influence on art in Russia, particularly its dynamic and Classical aspects, was minimal. Byzantium had ceased to exist artistically before Russia came of age artistically, we should always remember, so that the artistic relation of the one to the other can really only be posed in legatory terms.

No actual examples of Byzantine guidelines or rule-books for artists have been uncovered (with a partial exception to be discussed later), and Byzantine art theory, far from restricting the work of artists, was almost exclusively concerned with justifying art for religious purposes. Secular art—portraiture, say, or decorative painting—was largely left to its own devices throughout the millennium of Byzantine history. Further, important elements of the Classical legacy in image-making were preserved by Byzantine artists to Byzantium's end, as we saw in the preceding chapter: more elements, certainly, than were preserved in the Latin West.

The early church fathers—notably Tertullian and Origen, writing in the third century—were decidedly hostile to all visual art, regarding it as pagan, a dire threat to salvation, and therefore intrinsically evil. But the popularity of representations of saints and martyrs, representations which imitated in outline such contemporary and earlier non-Christian models as funerary stat-

ues and portraits and the whole range of official imagery, nevertheless grew among Christians, and with it a gradual revival of the ancient belief that in images as in relics some special form of divine presence and help was available.<sup>1</sup> By the end of the fourth century religious imagery was no longer considered idolatrous among the leaders of Christian thought—one sign of their fusion of Christianity with Hellenism and embrace of popular attitudes. St. Basil “the Great” of Caesarea (329–379) among the Byzantine fathers best reflected in his writings the emerging view: certain passages of the Bible suggested themes to him and Greek philosophy, particularly Neoplatonism, helped the arguments. Basil wrote, for instance, departing from *Genesis*: “‘And God saw that his work was beautiful.’ This does not mean that the work pleased his sight and that its beauty affected Him as it affects us, but that that is beautiful which is completed in accordance with the principles of art and serves its purpose well.” Again: “We walk the earth as though we were visiting a workshop in which the divine sculptor exhibits his wondrous works. The Lord, the creator of these wonders and an artist, calls upon us to contemplate them.”<sup>2</sup> Yet Basil only hinted at what was to come. By the sixth century the holy image or icon was an established fact, complementing or rivaling or even superceding in authority the sacred written texts. The opportune appearance of Christ’s face in a number of images said to have been miraculously produced in Asia Minor (like the “Mandylion” of King Abgar of Edessa) made available for copying “true likenesses” of the Savior; it also transpired that the actual appearance of His Mother had been preserved, also miraculously, on several panels painted from life by St. Luke. These were potent images indeed.<sup>3</sup>

It remained for the iconoclast controversy of the eighth century, that prolonged and often violent dispute precisely over the validity of religious images, to define Christian thinking on the subject for centuries to come. The chief statements are found in a canon of the Second Council of Nicaea of 787 and in somewhat earlier writings by St. John of Damascus (John Damascene). The relevant Nicene canon reads:

We declare with all accuracy and care that the venerable and holy images shall be set forth like the figure of the venerable and life-giving Cross, inasmuch as matter consisting of colors and small stones and other material is appropriate in the holy church of God on sacred vessels and on vestments, on walls, on panels, and in houses and by roads [in the form of] images of both our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ and of our undefiled Lady the Holy Mother of God as well as those of the honorable Angels and of all holy and pious people. For the more frequently they are seen by means of artistic representation the more those who behold them [the images] are aroused to remember and long for their prototypes, and to salute and venerate them [the images], although not indeed to give them the true worship of our faith that befits the Divine Nature alone; and to offer them [the images] both incense and candles, as is done

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to the figure of the Cross and the holy books of the Gospel and other sacred objects, following ancient custom.<sup>4</sup>

This canon was confirmed in 843 at the Council of Constantinople, and thereafter its authority in the Christian Church, Eastern and Western, was unquestioned—however variously it might have been interpreted or applied in practice.<sup>5</sup>

John of Damascus (ca. 675–ca. 749) in effect anticipated the Nicene canon, with much citation of Scripture and earlier fathers, in writings meant to expose the opponents of images as enemies of both church tradition and systematic thinking. His crucial argument was that in becoming man—the Incarnation—Christ forever altered the relationship between God and matter (John assumed that the centuries-long debate over the nature of Christ's person—at once human and divine—had been settled; but it actually continued, given new life by the iconoclastic controversy, into the ninth century). "We are not mistaken," John wrote, "if we make an image of God incarnate [Christ], who was seen on earth in the flesh, who associated with men and who, in His unspeakable goodness, assumed the nature, feeling, form and color of our flesh. For we yearn to see how He looked. Yet as the Apostle [St. Paul] says, 'We see through a glass darkly.' The image is also a dark glass, fashioned according to the limitations of our physical nature." John also appealed to common sense and even invoked politics; Christianity having long since become the state religion of the Byzantine empire, the question of images was inevitably politicized. "If you speak of pagan abuses, these abuses do not make our veneration of images loathsome. Blame the pagans, who made images into gods!" Further, quoting St. Basil: "The image of the [Byzantine] emperor [as on a coin] is also called the emperor, yet there are not two emperors. Power is not divided, nor is glory separated. Just as He [God] who rules us is one power, so the homage He receives from us is united, not divided, for the honor given to the image is transferred to the prototype." Or again, quite simply:

An image is a likeness, or a model, or a figure of something, showing in itself what it depicts. An image is not always like its prototype in every way. . . . An image of a man, even if it is a likeness of his bodily form, cannot contain his mental powers. . . . A son is the natural image of his father, yet he is different from him, for he is the son, not the father.

And again,

All images reveal and make perceptible those things which are hidden. For example, man does not have immediate knowledge of invisible things, since the soul is veiled by the body. Nor can man have immediate knowledge of things which are distant from each other or separated by place, because he himself is circumscribed by place and time. Therefore the image was devised that he might advance in knowledge, and that secret things might be revealed and made perceptible. Therefore, images

are a source of profit, help, and salvation for all, since they make things so obviously manifest, enabling us to perceive hidden things. Thus, we are encouraged to desire and imitate what is good and to shun and hate what is evil.

From all of this John concluded that "we use our senses to produce worthy images of Him [Christ], and we sanctify the noblest of the senses, which is that of sight. For just as words edify the ear, so also the image stimulates the eye." Indeed, "what the book is to the literate, the image is to the illiterate," this simile an echo of the concern shared by defenders and opponents alike of images concerning the needs or susceptibilities of unsophisticated Christians. Still more, John concluded, if images of Christ may be made and honored, then surely also images of both his Mother and the saints,

who are God's friends. In struggling against evil they have shed their blood; they have imitated Christ who shed His Blood for them by shedding their blood for Him. I record the prowess and suffering of those who have walked in His footsteps, that I may be sanctified and be set on fire to imitate them zealously. St. Basil says, "the honor given to the image is transferred to its prototype." If you build churches to honor the saints of God, then make images of them as well.<sup>6</sup>

John Damascene's writings have been called the "coping stone of the edifice of iconophile thought"; in other words, "no other author had such an impact on the theoretical foundation of the [Christian] belief in holy images."<sup>7</sup> Thus rationalized, and then canonized, the holy images triumphed in the Eastern empire (no comparable challenge had yet been mounted in the West), a victory known since as "the Triumph of Orthodoxy" and still commemorated in Orthodox churches on "Orthodox Sunday," the first Sunday in Lent, the season of penitence before the feast of Easter.<sup>8</sup> "For the Christian East," as another authority puts it, "not only angels and men but also their symbols and images had gradually come to be incomparably more important than mere things of nature; and the victory of the Orthodox image doctrine in the iconoclastic controversy completed this development." Pelikan goes on to say that the victory marked "the recovery of the distinctive genius of Eastern Christendom."<sup>9</sup> Even so, it was also a victory for those less intellectual, more popular tendencies in the Byzantine world which regarded the holy images themselves as sacred, or magical, or charismatic: as things which themselves partook of the aura and power of their prototypes. "The sacred icon was not identical with its prototype," in the words of still another student (we tread carefully here), "but by the middle of the ninth century it had become a part of Orthodoxy that it could be a channel to *and from it* and as a reflection *signify its presence*." In short, "the conception of the 'wonder-working icon' had thus been officially authorized."<sup>10</sup> Yet the writings of John of Damascus notwithstanding, nor those of other church fathers, nor even the conciliar canons, questions concerning the validity and truth of icons would persist in the

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