An Icon of the Kingdom of God: The Integrated Expression of all the Liturgical Arts

Andrew Gould gives a unifying vision of how all the liturgical arts complement each other to create a living icon of the Kingdom of God.

The liturgical art of the Orthodox Church offers the world nothing less than a vision of the Kingdom of God. There can be no higher calling for art than this. Liturgical art is the combined effort of apostles and theologians, hymnographers and composers, architects and painters, all manner of craftsmen, and the clergy and choir at every service, to reveal through so many arts the living reality of the Kingdom of God.

The Catholikon at Vatopedi

Yet despite the high calling of this service to mankind, and the immense complexity of this artistic interplay, liturgical art as an integrated whole has been little studied. Some academics have concentrated on sacred texts, others on musical traditions or icons, but there is little attempt to understand how each depends upon the others. Further, the 'minor' arts, such as liturgical furniture and textiles, are studied hardly at all, and few consider what role these arts play in expressing the fullness of God's Kingdom.

Orthodox Christians, particularly in America, must develop a deeper understanding of the role of liturgical art. We have received the Orthodox Tradition in fragmentary form. Liturgical texts have come to us from the Old World intact, but the ancient architectural and iconographic traditions did not immigrate at all, thus requiring deliberate reconstruction through research. The music and ceremonial practices we have inherited need improvement, and the lesser arts survive today very sporadically, partially as sentimentalized traditions whose purpose is forgotten, partially as little more than ornament which is considered a dispensable luxury.

This broken history and the academic bias of the modern world have led to a certain imbalance. Sacred texts are treated with great importance in our seminaries, and churches

make every effort to present them appropriately. But the other arts are often dismissed as mere decoration for the texts. Icons are understood as just another way of showing us what we already know from texts. Music is just a way to make hymnography sound pretty and dignified. And architecture, vestments, and furniture are only there to lend appropriate decorum and symbolism to a service whose real purpose is the worship of God through scripture and prayers.

This view is false. Sacred texts are not alone in expressing divinity. Everything in the world has the capacity to reveal God to us, and every form of liturgical art reveals God in its own way. An icon is holy because it shows us something uniquely visual about God's Kingdom. It cannot be reduced to a system of symbols, a painted text. A melody bears meaning that is purely musical. Some melodies are fit for church and some are not, and the reason can only be heard, not explained with words. Sacred melodies reveal to us a truth about Heaven that cannot be found in Scripture. Even the smallest arts – a blend of incense, the embroidery on a sacred towel – directly represent an aspect of God's Kingdom. They are not there to ornament something else, but rather they themselves are icons, essential glimpses of the fullness of God's Kingdom. To deny this is to deny the incarnation. Ours is not the religion in which the Logos became text. Christ became flesh, and he revealed the Father to us not only in his words, but in his very appearance.

The church has always recognized that an incarnational faith must be manifest in a fully incarnate liturgy, where the arts work together to edify all the senses. And if liturgical art is to express the fullness of the kingdom of God, then all the arts must work together. After all, incense cannot explain our doctrines any better than scripture can tell us how Heaven smells. And so, as we examine each art one by one, it becomes apparent that each one has certain strengths and weaknesses in terms of what it can express. While sacred texts have the ability to explain facts and abstractions with great specificity and clarity, they are unable to impact our hearts with the sudden intensity of a tolling church bell or the astonishing beauty of an iconostasis.

I would like to suggest that there is a spectrum in art. At one end are arts that carry obvious and specific meaning, and these would include texts and icons. At the other end are arts whose meaning is very obscure and non-verbal, such as incense and bells. In the middle are architecture and music, which have characteristics of both types. Interestingly, it is often the case in art that the more obvious and concrete the meaning, the less captivating and persuasive the art is to our senses. Sacred texts and icons are easy to ignore. They require deliberate attention to understand, and the truth they express is easy for non-believers to dismiss. On the other hand, the awesome toll of a great bell strikes to the very depths of our hearts and affects believer and non-believer alike, though neither may know how to interpret the bell's meaning. The bell tells us something that scripture cannot.

If we examine all the liturgical arts one by one, it is possible to assess the strengths and weaknesses of each. Each art has something unique to reveal to us about God and his Kingdom. Thus even if we lack the direct spiritual experience of heaven granted to many of the saints while on earth, still, through close attentiveness to the liturgical expressions of our

Tradition, we can apprehend something of the beauties of the Age to Come. The more closely our liturgical arts conform to the traditional norms of Orthodoxy, the more capable they are of conveying truth. But our hearts and minds must be conditioned to receiving truth through these Traditions, so that we may have eyes to see. What follows is my imperfect attempt to descry heaven in the things of earth.

Part 2: Iconography

St Paul by Rublev

Much has been written about icons, yet for many their liturgical purpose remains obscure. This is because icons are usually studied in themselves and not as a component of the complete experience of liturgical art. Both iconographers and iconologists have written about this art, but from very different perspectives. Iconographers study the art of making icons, while iconologists interpret the theological and historical meanings written into the compositions. But neither approach tells us much about the liturgical experience of icons – the affect they have on us when we stand in a dim cathedral surrounded by tiers and tiers of them ascending through shadows and sunbeams. Nor do they interpret the immense experiential difference between the small icon in a shrine, the obscure fresco high on a wall, and the awesome confrontation of the great iconostasis.

Let us first consider the weaknesses of the iconographer's art. Painted images do not convey abstract concepts very well. For instance, it is often stated that in the icon of the Theotokos the red outer garment reveals her humanity, and the blue inner garment reveals her deification by grace. Christ's robes are the opposite, signifying that He is divine by nature. An elegant concept indeed, but no one would be able to discern this interpretation by looking at the icons – everyone needs to be told it. And historically there has been no agreement as to which color

symbolizes what. The colors of the robes have switched at times, and it varied whether the red robes were interpreted for blood and mortality, or were considered purple for royalty and authority. Thus we see that it is beyond the ability of a painted image to express even a simple abstract concept with any clarity. We must always fall back on words.

Paintings are better at telling stories. The icon of Christ's entry into Jerusalem is quite clear. It conveys the story just about as well as the Gospel text. And icon cycles can even tell long stories, like the entire life of a saint. But even here, it can be difficult to apprehend the story from the images alone. It is very satisfying to 'read' the life of a saint in icons when we have already read it in text, but usually quite frustrating to try to understand such an icon when we don't already know the saint's story. Even for simple narrative, iconographic expression is imprecise compared to that of text.

But what are the strengths of the iconographer's art? An icon shows us the face of a saint, the image of enlightenment. Christ Himself proclaimed that to see Him is to see the Father, and so an icon of Christ is the very image of God. The icon of a saint shows us his deified flesh, which radiates golden light, and his holy face, an awesome confluence of joy and sorrow, kindness and judgment, simplicity and wisdom. This is the image of God, and words cannot express it. We can only see God by looking into the face of a saint. There is no joy like the joy of meeting a living saint. The face of a saint glows with radiant love, even as it is lined with the creases of sorrow and pain for the sins of the world. All the books in the world cannot show us this spiritual triumph. But an icon can. With great skill and training, an icon painter can faithfully convey the countenance of holiness and present the face of godliness to us in a way that we may approach it and understand.

Compared to a photograph or a Western religious painting, an icon is a true miracle. A merely accurate recording of a saint's appearance does not make an icon. We are blessed to have many good photographs of modern saints, but we cannot engage a photograph with our hearts. The photograph shows the saint in the distance, in the past, out of reach to us, bringing us more sadness than joy. But neither does the iconographer exalt the saint with the artistic trappings of majesty. Western paintings sometimes show a saint in his apotheosis and glory, surrounded by all manner of trumpeting angels, velvet draperies, and adoring kings. These images seek to show us something of the triumph of salvation, but they too are distant and unapproachable. The saint rises to Heaven, leaving us behind. An iconographer places the saint right before us, meeting our gaze on our own terms, in our space and moment. His expression has become part of his timeless personhood, and he offers himself to us so that through him we may experience God.

Holy faces may be the greatest offering of the iconographer's art, but there are yet other wonders revealed by the brush. As artistic compositions, great icons reveal an extraordinary harmony of shapes and colors. Rublev's Trinity is so perfectly beautiful that many find in it a proof of the existence of God. This is not just because of the holy faces of the three angels, but because of the incredible balance of form and movement, the silent interplay of color and light. This icon shows us something about the inner life of the Trinity that no words can express. It shows us a harmonic brilliance that no poet can sing. Visual arts alone bear this

awesome strength – to show us many things at once, that the harmony among them may become more prominent than the things themselves – that a conciliar assembly becomes more than the sum of its parts. No idea could be more important to understanding the Kingdom of God, or even the Trinity itself. Icons have a unique ability to reveal this truth to us.

Our liturgical experience of icons is therefore one of immediacy and eternity. Sacred texts and music take time to unfold, while icons show themselves to us in their entirety at a moment. And in that moment, gazing at an icon, time and eternity meet. The presence of icons is so intense that they cannot be ignored, even by an unquiet mind. Their presence feels like a living reality, as though the saints actually stand among us. In their gaze we are both uplifted and ashamed, becoming mindful of the state of our souls.

Part 3: The Role of Panel Icons, Frescoes, and the Iconostasis

Monastery of the Meeting of Our Lord, Moscow

Panel icons and wall frescoes play very different roles in our liturgical experience. Panel icons are personal and engaging. They convey a vibrant life and reality, and they draw our complete attention into the bounds of their space. Frescoes, on the other hand, lend to the whole of the

church a sense of the full presence of history, the completeness of the church through time. They sanctify the space by their presence, and they do not require mental engagement to have this effect. Panel icons reveal the vibrant movement and life of God's Kingdom actively approaching us, while frescoes reveal the unchanging stillness of the cloud of witnesses silently waiting for us to join them.

Everything about a panel icon is personal and vibrant. The board itself is sensual, the *kovcheg* depression carefully carved out, the battens dovetailed into the back. We want to pick it up and turn it around, feel its warmth and stability. The craftsman who made it has left his personal touch visible for all to see. Then the board is gessoed and polished to flawless finish, and covered with gold. There exists no richer surface than this, and nothing is more beautiful in a candle-lit church than the dim light playing off the soft gilded edges of the *kovchegs*. The individual brushstrokes are visible on good icons, and even the thickness of paint can be seen when light reflects off the surface just so. The human touch of the iconographer, hand-ground pigments laid on stroke by stroke, is never far from our mind when looking closely at an icon. Such materials and techniques have been developed by iconographers precisely because the living richness of the icon helps to express the living presence of the saint and to invite communion.

In contrast, frescoes bear an awesome stillness. The cold hard ethos of the masonry and plaster is in no way changed by the invisibly thin layer of pigment. The fresco itself is made of plaster, it is part of the wall, smooth and cold. It is not inviting to touch, and the hand that made it seems far removed from our experience. The frescoes in old churches seem almost like a geological phenomenon. They are so ancient and timeless, so inevitable, that to hear the name of the painter who made them is like hearing a pagan myth about the gods who made the mountains.

In addition to the isolated panel icon and the great fresco cycle, the Orthodox Church provides a third mode of iconography. The iconostasis is essentially one great panel icon, so large that it dominates our visual experience. Individual icons hanging on walls are not very effective for corporate worship. Immensely engaging to an individual standing close by, they lose their power at a distance. To a worshipper participating in the liturgy, a multitude of small panel icons hanging on the walls has limited impact. Their purpose is for individual veneration. But in our corporate worship, the Church does not limit our liturgical experience of icons to quiet frescoes. In the iconostasis, the Church developed a means of placing very large panel icons directly in front of the worshippers. The ornamented structure of the iconostasis was a key development. It unites the icons with a richly decorated framework whereby the iconostasis impacts our eyes and mind as though it were one single icon – all of Heaven engaging us at once.

In Byzantine times, great churches were sometimes decorated with mosaics. Mosaics are unsurpassed in richness and vibrancy, while also having much of the stillness and solidity of frescoes. (Note that ancient mosaics, unlike most modern examples, used marble rather than glass for the flesh tones, providing a calm matte surface to contrast with the glittering draperies and backgrounds.) In a way, mosaics share the ethos of both panel painting and

frescoes. But mosaics were never affordable for most churches, and just as their use waned historically, iconostases grew up in their place. I do not believe this is accidental. The church must have recognized that frescoes get rather lost in the dim light of churches, and she developed the iconostasis to replace the more engaging mosaics. But this is nothing to lament, because the ultimate solution is perfect. The iconostasis rightly dominates our corporate experience of worship – it is a complete and perfect statement of doctrine manifest in icons large enough for all to see. Meanwhile, the frescoes witness from all directions with a godly stillness that is the perfect example for our own life in the church. Lastly, enshrined icons are scattered about the nave, inviting personal attention and private devotion, an essential complement to corporate worship.

Dormition Cathedral, Novodevichy Monastery, Moscow

Because the iconostasis visually dominates the experience of liturgy, its proportions and style are of special significance. An excellent iconostasis can transform a bland space into a very good church, and a bad iconostasis can ruin an otherwise worthy building. Recent centuries have produced a parade of unlovely iconostases, some monstrously over-decorated, others timidly lacking in substance. In each case, the sin against beauty proceeds from a fall from Tradition and an acceptance of foreign ideas.

The historical origin of the iconostasis was the marble templon screen of the Middle Byzantine Period. These consisted of a row of columns supporting a lintel. A curtain was hung from the lintel and closed during the consecration. In the 11th century, icons began to be added in a row along the top of the lintel. Later, icons were set between the columns. Whereas the barrier was originally meant to indicate the holiness of the altar by separating it from the nave, a new artistic theology emerged. By means of icons, the screen would unite the congregation to the mystical reality of the altar by revealing the Kingdom of God. What was once a means of separation became a means of union.

The Russian church developed the iconostasis into an extraordinary artistic achievement, perhaps unmatched the world over for how firmly it grasps hold of our attention and how high it lifts our hearts. The Russians dispensed with the marble framework of the screen and placed

the icons touching side by side, tier upon tier. Their screens grew to incredible size, encompassing all the theology of Old Testament and New in one awesome vision. No one need be told that the altar in such a church is holy. The towering wall of saints and angels standing over the gates constitutes a heavenly vanguard to proclaim it. The unchurched tremble to approach such an iconostasis, and even the faithful fear to pass through it, for the sight of heaven made visible is both joyful and terrifying. The awesome power of a medieval iconostasis cannot be imagined by those who have not seen one, and for those who have, the desire to see the physical altar table itself is all but extinguished.

While the theological authority of the iconostasis lies in its icons, the screen itself and its raised solea have a certain ceremonial power. The richness, beauty, and scale of these structures lend honor and majesty to the liturgy. They hearkens back to the raised dais beneath a kingly throne, and the tapestries that hung around it. The richness of the screen heralds the importance of the altar and of the moment when the priest emerges with the gifts. The larger and more beautiful the screen, the greater its ceremonial power.

In medieval Russian screens, the theological authority of the icons and the ceremonial power of the structure were kept in balance and mutual support. The ornamentation of the structure closely harmonized with the icons and integrated them together. Later, with the rise of Baroque taste and its theatrical mindset, the ceremonial impact of the screen was seen as more important than the icons. The woodwork of the screens sprouted elaborate architectural elements around ever-smaller icons. The new forms emphasized a writhing movement in carved foliage and twisted columns. Simultaneously, the iconostasis was raised up on a high dais of several steps, so that the lower tier icons no longer met the worshippers' eyes. Such ornamentation separated the icons rather than uniting them, and the iconostasis lost its integrated theological expression.

In recent times, another fashion has attacked the majesty and dignity of the iconostasis. The overblown and ineffective iconostases of the 19th century left many doubtful as to their usefulness at all. Some suggested a return to the more open screens of ancient times, but the results have sadly missed the mark. In the modern spirit of compromise, many 20th century iconostases have been designed to attempt to strike a balance between a templon screen and an iconostasis. This compromise is usually manifest as a flimsy screen with a few icons and a lot of holes to see through. Unfortunately, such screens perform neither the role of a templon screen nor an iconostasis. Because they are still partially open during the consecration, they do not provide the veil of mystery (the curtain) that was the purpose of the templon screen. And because they leave holes between the icons, the icons do not visually integrate and work together as a theological whole. On the contrary, the partial blockage of the view is visually chaotic and only adds to the impression that the iconostasis is 'in the way'. For the iconographic vision of the Kingdom of God to be effective, it must wholly replace the physical vision of the altar, not compete with it for our attention.

A good iconostasis can be surprisingly simple. The surviving medieval Russian screens consist almost entirely of icons. Usually, only a simple horizontal board separates the tiers, and nothing separates the icons side by side. The doors themselves are icon boards, not icons

mounted in frames, and likewise the top of the screen is crowned by icons with flame-shaped tops. Any wood that is visible around the icons should be ornamented in a way that harmonizes with the surface of the icons. Simple decorative painting works well, as does carving used with restraint and sobriety. If the icons have large areas of gilding, warm golden-colored wood can blend well with them even without any decoration. If funds permit extensive carving, it should be small in scale and painted or gilded in the tradition of older Greek iconostases. Large areas of unpainted carved wood were never normative for an iconostasis until recently, and such decoration does not always harmonize well. In particular, high relief, prominent columns, complicated arch shapes, and dark-colored woods are frequently poor choices in an iconostasis design.

Contemporary iconostasis with chip-carving, Novgorod

We should not be afraid to allow the icons themselves to serve as the ornamentation for the screen. Likewise, we should not be hesitant to build a tall iconostasis. The virtue of the iconostasis is its integration of many icons as a theological whole. Its meaning is greatly enhanced by multiple tiers, and the experience of the iconostasis is strongest when the icons are quite large. If the design of the screen is restrained and sober, it will not be imposing or oppressive no matter how tall it rises. Of course, there are some church buildings that look better with a shorter iconostasis, and this requires careful architectural judgment. But in America, so many of our churches are low and uninspiring, without architectural power of

their own. Perhaps these are an opportunity to allow a tall iconostasis to redeem the beauty of God's holy temple.

Proposed design for Reigning Mother of God Orthodox Church (ROCOR), Charlotte, NC, designed by Andrew Gould of New World Byzantine

Part 4: Architecture

As with icons, there is a way to understand church architecture in terms of symbolic meaning. Some churches have twelve columns that represent the apostles; baptisteries are eight-sided for creation and rebirth; the cross-in-square floor plan of so many Orthodox churches signifies the meeting of Heaven (dome) and Earth (square) through the intervention of the cross, etc. This approach is akin to the iconologist's assigned meanings to the different colored robes worn by the Lord and the Theotokos. It is a form of specific symbolism that requires the mediation of words to fully apprehend. If there were 'architologists', I suppose this is what they would study. But as with icons, this level of meaning is secondary to what architecture is innately capable of expressing, and it plays a limited role in the liturgical experience of a church building. What manner of truth, then does architecture uniquely reveal to us about the structure of the Kingdom of God?

By structure I do not refer to hierarchies of saints and angels (that is the purview of frescoes), but rather the literal form and substance of the New Jerusalem. In Revelation XXI, a new heaven and a new earth are revealed to St John the Theologian, as well as the heavenly capital city, New Jerusalem. If icons reveal the people who inhabit that city, and liturgical hymns express the praise uttered therein, then church architecture, in its way, reflects the city itself – the foundations, gates, streets, and buildings.

St. John tells us a great deal about the structure of the New Jerusalem. It is proportioned like a cube, square with immensely tall walls, three gates on each side. It has twelve foundations made of gemstones. The city itself is polished gold. And there is no need of sun and moon to light it, for the glory of God illumines it.

It was providential that even before Christianity, Imperial Roman architecture already manifested several qualities consonant with St. John's vision. The Romans made their buildings massively strong, particularly at the roots, frequently standing on plinths or many-storied foundations. Their walls were tremendously thick and secure, and civic buildings always had towering height. The cube was important to Roman builders, and many of their temples, such as the Pantheon, have equal length, breadth, and height, the proportion emphasized by St. John. And though the Romans built with brick, the walls were clad in sheets of precious marble, many different colors, layered in tiers and giving the impression of a wall built of gems. Even the quality of light in late Roman architecture was mysterious and all-enveloping. By the fourth century, the Classical preference for bright clear illumination had waned, and Constantine's civic basilicas had windows made of alabaster and stone tracery, which filled the marbled interior with a diffuse golden glow.

Byzantine builders began with this architectural vocabulary, and what heavenly wonders they achieved! Not content with the simple shape of the basilica, they devised elaborate new floor plans combining the basilica and rotunda forms. Thus a temple like Hagia Sophia has a degree of complexity that, to a Roman, would look more typical for a whole city than for a single building. From the outside, Hagia Sophia resembles a mountain covered with churches. On the inside, to wander among the labyrinth of aisles and columns is an almost urban experience. The walls are clad in marbles to a great height, emphasizing the cube-like loftiness of the space. The golden ceilings and hundreds of small windows make the building glow from within.

Nothing could be more Roman in form than the New Jerusalem, foursquare with gates on all sides. Such imperial formality expresses authority and triumph. Our Lord will ultimately triumph over all the earth. In the Resurrection, Christians will no longer worship in catacombs and caves as they once did. This is the victory manifest in a new imperial capital: Constantinople. The final victory of Christ over all the powers of evil was foreshadowed by the victory of the Christians over the Roman pagans, and they knew it was right for their architecture to proclaim it.

To stand in an ancient Orthodox church, one feels immensely secure and contained. The tall thick walls, heavy doors, and small high windows create an effect of eternal refuge – a fortress that holds back all that changes and decays in the outside world. The symmetry and order of the architectural forms reflects the beautiful order of God's Kingdom, where everyone and everything is content in its place, and nothing is superfluous.

Thus the church must eschew nearly all Modernistic fashions in architecture. Lightweight frames and thin walls cannot express the eternal security of the walls of Heaven. Asymmetric and informal floor plans cannot herald divine authority over the earth. Large windows and

bright electric bulbs cannot open our eyes to the all-pervading radiance of the uncreated light. It is truly astonishing that so many modern churches wholly deny the symbolic expression of sacred architecture. Roman architecture was taken up by the Church from a culture still awaiting the coming of Christ. But Modernist architecture is emblematic of a culture that has rejected Christ. Eschewing eternal truth, such a culture turns to its own fleeting and insecure definitions of happiness. The love of theology is replaced by the enticing fashions of social theories. The awesome mysteries of God are replaced by the cold beauty of machines. This architecture has no place in the life of the Church.

The quality of secure containment bathed in warm, mysterious light is the most important contribution of architecture to the liturgical experience. Every traditional Orthodox church shares this expression, regardless of whether it is a great cathedral or a wooden chapel. Even modest village churches were built of thick logs stepping inward to create a vault or dome-like enclosure. They provide a warm and motherly embrace that is akin to the domed stone churches of great cities. The humble logs, transfigured with paintings and hanging textiles, have become worthy icons of the jasper walls of New Jerusalem. And the quality of light, from numerous candles, gilded icons, and warm brown logs, reveals the same uncreated glory as that in the great cathedral.

Part 5: The Minor Arts

The marble-clad walls of a Byzantine church are glorious and majestic when glimpsed between icon stands and chandeliers during a crowded, smoky service. But all alone, in an empty, ruinous church, the rich architectural materials can suggest the forbidding formality of a marble bank lobby. A Church, like a home, needs furniture. Without hanging lamps, the domes and vaults are too close and too plain – impressive, ponderous, but not mysterious. In the absence of organic materials like wood and silk, the eternal stillness of the architecture seems more sepulchral than sacred.

History has not been kind to our heritage, and moveable furnishings have suffered perhaps more than anything else in our tradition. In too many places, the famous ancient monuments of Orthodoxy have been stripped bare by the ravages of time. And the impoverished history of Orthodox art and architecture in America has done little to replace in the New World what has been lost in the Old. American Orthodox lack even a basic understanding of the vital role liturgical furnishings play in giving our churches their proper ethos.

Thus we must give close attention to those precious few churches that have not been sacked by thieves, burned by armies, or remodeled by subsequent wealth. The best examples are the churches on Mt. Athos, the Monastery of St. Catherine on Mt. Sinai, Visoki Decani in Kosovo, Holy Trinity Cathedral at Sergiev Posad, and St. Elijah the Prophet in Yaroslavl. These churches, though spanning a millennium in their construction dates and containing furnishings of many periods, have a furnished effect which is wholly traditional. They look the way Orthodox churches always looked. It is truly a miracle that even these few examples

survive, for as easy as it is to steal or burn these treasures, it is even easier to discard and forget them in the waves of fashion. In the time of Catherine the Great, nearly all medieval iconostases and furniture were replaced by baroque appointments. Multitudes of lamps and shrines were swept away by the austere taste of Neoclassicism. In our own age too, the modern, practical mind proves similarly reluctant to clutter the pristine space of a nave with costly shrines and treasures.

So what do we learn from these few surviving exemplars? Firstly, Orthodox churches were absolutely packed with furnishings. The walls and piers are so dense with shrines and stasidia that the lower walls can hardly be seen. The vaults are hung with so many lamps that they almost form a second ceiling not far above the floor. The nave is crowded with as much furniture as people – icon stands, lecterns, candlesticks, sometimes even tombs.

Agion Oros, Mt. Athos

Now to the modern mind it is illogical for frescoes to be obstructed with seldom-used lamps. The nave is for people, not furniture, and frescoes are meant to be seen, not hidden. And so many prominent shrines must distract one's visual attention from what should be the focus of corporate worship: the altar. Yet it is clear that in the past, Orthodox Christians saw no problem with layering lamps in front of icons, taking up floor space in small churches with furniture, and promoting personal veneration of shrines within churches. In ancient churches, many fresco compositions are so high and dimly lit that they can barely be seen, let alone identified. Yet it would not have occurred to the medieval mind to regret this. What was important was that the icon was present. It was less important that it be seen and understood. The presence of the icon signified the presence of the saint or event in the temple, and its very presence sanctified the space. The medieval Christian rejoiced in shrines and treasures. Every donated candlestick represented an act of piety for the glory of God. Every shrine was honored as though the saint himself were there. Despite the modern liturgical movement's emphasis on corporate worship, in this medieval mindset, the unity of the Body is more perceptibly real to each worshipper than his own individual experience.

This attitude began to be dismantled with the influence of baroque art. In the eighteenth century, the liturgical experience became theatrical. Liturgical art was meant to be seen by as many people as possible and only from a certain direction, like a stage set. Churches were designed to look overwhelmingly dramatic, and architectural ornamentation took precedence over iconography and furnishings in the visual experience. At the height of Russian Baroque, the iconostasis became a writhing mass of gilded architecture, and the icons became sensational vignettes of emotional drama. With this aesthetic, the real presence of the Kingdom of God is suppressed, and religion as performance takes its place. The addition of pews to our American churches completes the transformation into a theatre. The result is the unconscious adoption of a new anthropology: an artificial division between spectators (laity) and actors (clergy).

Today, even churches that have overcome the temptation of pews still succumb to the theatrical mindset in other details. Iconostases usually look good only from the front. Within the altar, and behind choir stands, clutter and ugliness is tolerated that would not be allowed to be seen in the nave. And the visibility of icons is considered so important that people sometimes hang lampadas beside the icons instead of in front of them, thereby rendering ineffective their purpose of lighting the icon. In a traditional church, liturgical furniture is distributed about the nave. Analoi, shrines, and candlestands are found in any corner, because the whole church is liturgical space, and any corner of the nave may be the site of devotions.

We must tirelessly battle against the theatrical spirit of the age that defines itself in sloth, entertainment, and artifice. The presence in our churches and homes of lovely, handmade objects is meant inspire us to be beautiful creations ourselves. Each work of art in the church must be conceived as intrinsically sacred, not a mere prop in an Orthodox stage set. The iconostasis must be beautifully built like fine furniture, not superficially ornamented on one side. Furniture needs to be solid and traditional, not plywood boxes with applied crosses. Like architecture, furnishings glorify God by the strength of their design and beauty of their craftsmanship.

The next several parts of this essay will explore furniture, lamps, vestments, linens, ceremonial implements, gardens, and incense in greater detail.

Holy Resurrection Orthodox Church, Claremont, NH

Part 6: Furniture

In Western churches, liturgical furniture has historically been conceived as an extension of the architecture. In Gothic cathedrals, the choir stalls form an immense integrated construction that is ornamented like Gothic stonework in miniature. The bishop's throne is surmounted by a vaulted and buttressed canopy, sometimes with spires reaching almost to the roof. In a baroque church, the pulpit is so large and ornate as to completely dominate the nave. A baldachino may stand over the altar like a church within a church. The built-in furniture is an indispensable part of the architecture.

Orthodox churches exhibit an entirely different tradition. Excepting only the iconostasis, eastern churches are furnished with small and moveable furniture. And the furniture does not look like part of the building. In most cases, it is stylistically completely different from the architecture, usually looking more warm and domestic than grand and ecclesial. This is so very appropriate, because the character of an Orthodox liturgy is, in a way, domestic. The faithful are comfortable at church, as though in their own homes. In Greek monasteries it is normal to see the monks resting their arms on lecterns or their foreheads on the stasidia. The furniture is for their comfort and use. It is not there for ecclesial grandeur.

From the earliest days of civilization, the seats of kings and deities have been clad in thin sheets of gold or silver. The Ark of the Covenant, Egyptian tomb furnishings, Roman high places, and Byzantine altars and thrones were made like this. It is known that the templon screen and all the furnishings of Hagia Sophia were covered in precious metals, with the altar in pure gold. Silver furniture is now rare, but there are still a few silver-clad shrines of saints in Orthodox churches, and in Italy, silver altars still exist in many cathedrals. Silver is a soft, warm material, especially when used in large sheets. It is wavy and imperfect and shows uneven patination from years of polishing. The color gradually becomes a warm brownish hue, and it is attractive to the touch. The old silver furniture that survives today is very much approachable and human-scaled, more charming than imposing.

Silver cover for an altar, 6th-century Byzantine, Dumbarton Oaks Institute

Silver covered shrine in the Chapel of St Christodoulos, Patmos

Another Imperial Byzantine craft was furniture veneered in carved ivory. Remarkably, there survives the sixth-century throne of Maximian, bishop of Ravenna. It is wholly clad in ivory panels featuring vine motifs and icons. But again, it is not an imposing design. The chair is small and simply shaped, and the softly carved ivories invite closeness and touch. As in all Byzantine art, the richness of the materials is used to invite rather than to intimidate.

As the availability of silver and ivory waned with the strength of Byzantium, bone, mother of pearl, and tortoiseshell took their place as ornamental inlay. While such furniture occasionally includes crosses or small angels in the ornamentation, it is very often indistinguishable from furniture that one would find in rich Muslim houses or mosques. Evidently, the church did not consider it necessary for liturgical furniture to 'look Byzantine,' or to be covered with icons. After all, the furniture is for the comfort and use of the faithful, and there is no need for it to differ from the finest domestic furniture. On the contrary, furniture covered with crosses and icons becomes the object of reverence, which can interfere with its practical purpose.

The inlaid wood furniture which often survives in Greek monasteries is exceptionally warm and comfortable. The flat polished surfaces invite caress far more than carved surfaces and are more practical to keep clean and waxed. The contrasting inlay is very effective ornament for dimly lit churches. Diffuse indoor light is unflattering to relief carving, but not to inlay. The warm color and rich polish of the wood glow beautifully in candle light, and the geometric inlay adds a wonderful sparkle. Byzantine churches tend to favor cool blues and grays in the stonework and frescoes, and this warm wood furniture stands out as a very satisfying contrast.

Detail of bishop's throne, Church of St. George, Phanar, Istanbul, 17th century

In Russia and Romania, particularly in village churches, liturgical woodwork grew out of folk traditions. Given the drastic remodeling imposed on Russian churches, hardly any old furniture survives, but enough fragments exist to give an impression. Old Russian furniture favored spindle shapes, which were sometimes elegantly turned on a lathe, and sometimes hewn with an axe like the square porch spindles on log churches. Very often this simple furniture was painted in the same merry colors as domestic folk crafts.

Old monastic stasidia in folk style, Romania

The medieval Russians revived the practice of cladding wood in sheets of embossed silver, and this was frequently done on iconostases and tombs. In the 16th and 17th centuries, a very elaborate style of polychromed woodcarving prevailed, with intricate vines and songbirds painted in red, green, and gold encrusting every surface. Magnificent furnishings of this type remain in place at St. Elijah, Yaroslavl. The deep carving, highlighted in strong colors and gold

leaf, is also very effective in dim light. This ‘Old Russian’ (pre-baroque) style of carving is being widely revived in Russian workshops today.

Throne canopy, St. Elijah Church, Yaroslavl, Russia, 17th-century

During the Baroque Period in Russia, the decorative arts became more prominent. Iconostases were built with thicker columns and more gilded carving as the icons became less of the focus. While this may be regrettable from a liturgical standpoint, nevertheless we must admit that ecclesiastical ornamentation remained extremely beautiful in Russia in the 18th century. It was not until the early 19th century that Russian artists and architects wholly turned their backs on their native decorative traditions. Churches built in the Neoclassical Era look little different from those built in France. They have the cold rigor of Greek Revival architecture and are devoid of frescoes. The few icons, if one can call them that, are contained in frames like Catholic altarpieces. Furniture suffered equally from this new style. Neoclassical Russian furniture is akin to “Empire Style” work in France. It alludes to the conquests of Napoleon by favoring ancient Egyptian and Greek forms, especially truncated obelisks bearing foreign symbols like the triangle and eye. They are massive, carved of solid marble, or wholly gilded. They are altogether cold and intimidating.

Russia soon repented of this style, and churches from the late 19th-century revived the 'Old Russian' forms and ornamentation. A great deal of wonderful medieval-revival furniture was produced at this time, both for secular and liturgical use. Orthodox churches in America did not inherit the benefit of this revival. Always lagging behind the fashions in Russia, American churches continued to favor a poor man's version of the Neoclassical style well into the 20th century. It is still common for our churches to use white-painted analogia decorated with Greek-Revival columns and cornices. Fortunately, on a small scale and made from wood, such furniture is not so intimidating, but it clearly lacks the warmth and beauty of traditional work.

Today, Russian liturgical workshops labor tirelessly to revive the Old Russian styles of carved and painted iconostases and furniture. Meanwhile, over the course of the 20th century, Greek artisans have developed their own style of carving and furniture design, which they call "Byzantine". This is the woodwork that can now be seen in almost all Greek Orthodox churches the world over. Unlike the modern Russian work, which is often a very precise imitation of antique examples, the "Byzantine" style of carving is largely a new invention. It is an adaptation to wood of a style of acanthus leaf carving which the ancient Byzantines executed in marble. Originally, this was architectural ornament, such as in the column capitals at Hagia Sophia. Used in wooden furniture, this carving has a rather architectural character. It can sometimes visually overwhelm the proportions of the piece, and can contribute to the imposing effect of some over-scaled Greek furniture. This carving is most effective when used sparingly and mixed with unornamented flat surfaces. In a dimly lit church, it does not read well, and ought to be highlighted with color and gilding, as all medieval carving was. Nevertheless, well done "Byzantine" carving is intrinsically very beautiful, and can serve as excellent ornamentation on well-designed woodwork.

The presence of furniture reveals the welcoming and comfortable aspect of the Kingdom of God. All is not judgment and fear in church. We are called to attend church as though we are coming home. It is so easy for a church (especially a Neoclassical one) to seem to visitors like a museum and courthouse rolled into one. (Don't touch anything, lest you break the rules, and leave quickly, before you are judged.) Furniture can do much to soften this impression. It should be warm and approachable and invite the touch. And it should be beautiful and fine. If we would not furnish our homes with furniture made from plywood and gold spray-paint, then we ought not to furnish our churches in this way. To be comfortable to touch, furniture must be solid wood with a good polish and wax. It should be light and elegantly proportioned, easy to look at and easy to use. Staining is to be avoided, because it robs light-colored wood of the opportunity to naturally achieve the warm color that comes only with time. Ornamentation, such as carving or inlay, should be integral to the structure, and not glued onto the surface as an afterthought. Above all, church furniture should be true to traditional woodworkers' standards for joinery and finish, and should have no pretense towards being finer or grander than it is. Good quality secular furniture is often very appropriate in church, and there should be no fear of using it just because it does not bear crosses and eagles. Custom-made furniture can follow any of the old styles, including traditional American styles. Old American furniture has wonderful dignity and simplicity, and is an excellent candidate for the 'baptism' of American culture into Orthodoxy.

Old book stand, Romania

Contemporary icon stand based on 16th-century design, Pskov, Russia

Part 7: Lamps

Among all the furnishings found in a church, lamps have always held a certain sacral honor. Saint John saw seven lamps standing before the throne of God. The vesperal hymn, *Phos Hilarion*, proclaims during the lighting of the lamps, "O Gladsome Light of the holy glory of the Immortal Father," thus connecting the flame of the lamps to the uncreated light of God. Lamps stand partly in our world, casting useful light for the services, and partly in the realm of Divine Mystery. A lamp before an icon is a beacon of the light of heaven that shines on the living saint.

Often made of metal, lamps have a lightness and strength that furnishings of stone and wood do not share. Byzantine lamps were often cast bronze or silver with open cutwork ornamentation. Since the late Middle Ages, chandeliers have followed the European form of a brass globe surrounded by delicate arms. Not all lamps are hung; some stand on the floor supported on ornate turned-spindle shafts – an oriental and Islamic influence of great antiquity. All of these venerable styles share an enticing complexity that invites wonder and eludes understanding. Such mystical designs are well-suited to the lamp's liminal character, for lamps seem to straddle the boundary between earth and heaven. Not wholly grounded in the earthy weightiness of wood or stone, the delicate and ornate metalwork reflects transfigured creation. In the hands of the best craftsmen, metal filigree and polished silver can have the simultaneous qualities of being prominent and sensual as a rich material, and also mysteriously vanishing and unreal.

Openwork silver lamp for holding clear glass bowl, 10th-century Byzantine

The effect of lamps hanging in an Orthodox church is uniquely eastern. In most Western churches, chandeliers are very orderly and subservient to the architecture. But in an Orthodox

church, lamps are all different shapes and styles, hanging anywhere and everywhere. The oldest and richest churches have accumulated collections of lamps so dense that it is hard to discern any pattern in how they are hung. But even in the churches that retain their original lighting design, such as Decani with its medieval choros, or St. Elijah, Yaroslavl, with its seventeenth-century chandeliers, the light fixtures have great prominence. A Byzantine choros dominates the spatial experience of the nave. All the volume of the church seems to revolve around it, a triumphant crown forever suspended just above the liturgy. And the early European chandeliers installed in old Russian churches were larger and more elaborate than those in the West, and hung right in front of the iconostasis.

Original 17th-century chandeliers of Western-European globe form, St. Elijah, Yaroslavl

Without electricity, the lighting of lamps constitutes a great drama, and this was always so. This is plain to see in the very structure of Vespers, with its 'lamp-lighting psalms' and *Gladsome Light*. In churches full of lamps, someone is continually tending them, moving

ladders, lighting them, swinging them, extinguishing them. The richest lamps are reserved for feast days, and their use betokens a great celebration and victory. In such a church, anyone with open eyes is constantly aware of the needs of the lamps, and considerable resources are expended on keeping them fueled, tended, and polished.

When hung about ten or twelve feet above the floor, lamps and chandeliers come to resemble the starry firmament, which, compared to heaven painted above, is quite close to earth. This transparent ceiling of lamps magnifies the interior of the Church because by comparison the frescoed vaults above appear farther away. This is a simple optical effect, yet there is a mystical dimension as well, for the Church is truly a microcosm. The lamps are stars, and, to those with eyes to see, standing beneath them feels like standing outside, as though all the universe were contained in the temple, an infinite chalice holding all of creation.

Hanging lamps are augmented by just as many standing lamps. In important churches many tall candlesticks reach right up to the height of the chandeliers; others are low and accessible to the faithful, and, in a crowded church, they light the people more than the icons. There are special services during which all present hold a candle, each worshipper illuminated like an icon by a lampada. How beautiful, on Pascha night, to see the bright ocean of joyful faces glowing with the same light as the icons—a beauty that shines unexpectedly from the darkness, like the phosphorescence of a tropical sea. Truly, the darkness comprehendeth it not.

In a Turkish mosque there are a thousand identical lamps, all hung in orderly rows like the kneeling worshippers. But Orthodox churches are lit with a diversity of lamps like the diversity of saints. The chandeliers are the starry light of Heaven. They give honor to the saints and angels painted on the walls, who no longer have need of sun or moon for their light. The lampadas before the icons reveal the inner light of each saint, their uncreated radiance. The gilded icons work like reflectors for the lampadas, like old-fashioned wall sconces with mirrored backs; they reflect the lamplight back into the whole church, just as the radiance of the saints shines into the whole world and illumines all. Finally, the candlestands reveal the piety of the faithful. Each candle signifies a prayer, and the light of that candle, illuminating those who stand near, shows the inner radiance that is wrought by prayer.

Lamps must be elegant and mystical in their design. Light and delicate, but intensely beautiful, they must resemble the flames they bear. Many styles and materials can work well for lamps, but there must be no hint of heaviness. In the 19th century, Russian lamp design moved away from the traditional ethos. Chandeliers became so heavy and their shape so mountainous that they elicit distraction and concern about the strength of their mountings! Standing candlesticks may have retained the traditional spindle shaft, but they grew so fat and imposing as to appear immoveable. By their appearance, such lamps speak a false doctrine, one of bourgeois ostentation, rather than mystical beauty.

In our own day, cheap lampadas and candelabra are mass-produced in stamped tin with tawdry, fake gemstones. Such disappointing details expose the physicality of the lamp – a distracting effect quite unlike that of the elegant silverwork. Worse yet, faux materials

introduce an element of untruth into the visual message of the lamps. These lamps are an imitation of the treasures of our church's imperial past, the product of a misguided nostalgia. People delight in these obvious fakes because they are unwilling to pay for things truly fine, and are afraid to confront the artistic reality of our church's limited wealth.

Good lamps need not be expensive, and they not need even be metal. Historically, they were sometimes made of wood to great effect. Candlesticks can be very gracious in turned wood, and there are some very old choros chandeliers made of carved and inlaid wood that rival the lightness of metal. Regardless of material, they should be true to their nature, and not falsely imitate a finer craft.

Part 8: Vestments

In the New Jerusalem, there is no distinction between indoors and outdoors. It is a city as well as a garden. The sun does not shine by day, nor the moon by night, for the Lamb is the light of the city of God. (Rev 21) Therefore, the church can also be compared to a natural landscape. The architecture comprises the trees and stones, the lamps the stars in the sky, or perhaps fireflies nearer the ground. The word 'choros', which now refers to the liturgical space under the dome, comes from a usage in ancient Greek poetry to refer to a forest clearing where lovers meet for trysts. The space under the dome is indeed a bright clearing, a meadow for love trysts between God and man. In a forest meadow, beauty of a special sort can be seen. There are flowers, butterflies, and songbirds. These creatures exhibit a brightness of color and iridescence unique in the landscape. God in His wisdom saw fit to bestow this beauty only upon the most delicate, fleeting, and short-lived creatures, perhaps so they do not overpower the more subtle coloration and patterns of His wider creation.

The aesthetic qualities of vestments are closely akin to these delicate creatures. The bright colors, satin luster, and energetic patterns of fine vestments can indeed rival the wings of a butterfly or the petals of a flower. How appropriate, therefore, that vestments are also the most fleeting of liturgical arts. Fine vestments are so costly to make, so easy to damage, so soon to wear out. And they are never meant as permanent elements in the design of a church, but come and go like flying birds. Vestments cannot be admired hanging still. They must be worn to reveal their beauty. As a vested priest moves about the church, through sunbeams and candlelight, he shines with a scintillating light, different from every moment to the next. What an astonishing metamorphosis! A priest in a black cassock always looks the same. The cassock reflects no light and reveals no movement. It is a garment designed for the dignity and constancy of the priestly office. But fully vested, the priest emerges from the iconostasis like the New Adam, a vision of mankind transfigured.

Sakkos of Patriarch Nikon, 1653, Ottoman Fabric

It is hard for us today to imagine the beauty of medieval Orthodox vestments. A few Byzantine vestments survive in museums, and they are astonishingly unlike the monochrome vestments in use today. The richest Byzantine vestments were primarily peacock-blue in color, and completely embroidered with radiant icons in thread wound with silver and gold. Many more examples of 16th and 17th-century Russian vestments survive. They were made of spectacular damask imported from the Ottoman Empire or from Italy. The Russians chose these damasks because they were the richest fabrics the world had ever seen, and they were not ashamed of their foreign designs, which often bear Islamic motifs. Russian noblewomen took these fabrics and added to them collar-pieces embroidered with icons and pearls, and even sewed small metal icons to the fabric, like spots on a butterfly wing. In those days, there were no 'liturgical colors' as we understand them today. The Typikon calls for vestments to be either light or dark, and in practice the richest vestments were worn for high feasts, regardless of color. How beautiful that, following the example of butterflies and flowers, Orthodoxy allowed for this freedom and informality in her richest art.

Sakkos of Metropolitan Alexei, 1364, Byzantine fabric

Much changed when the Russians imitated the Western schedule of liturgical colors. It became expected for a Russian cathedral to have exactly matched sets of everything in every color. This was an inevitable development in a changing artistic context. A medieval church was cluttered with mismatched furnishings of every age and style, and the old vestments were a part of this organic richness. The new Neoclassical cathedrals were rigorously ordered in their design and colors. Nothing was permitted to be asymmetrical or out of place. The scale of these cathedrals was vast and the architecture displayed bright colors alien to the old palette (St. Isaac's Cathedral in St. Petersburg has columns veneered in malachite and lapis lazuli). The old polychrome vestments were out of place in this rigid aesthetic. A cathedral like St. Isaac's demanded an imperial order to liturgical ceremony, with deacons lined up in matching rows like the well-dressed soldiers in Napoleon's modern army.

Nowadays, as the older Orthodox aesthetic experiences a revival, we ought to be mindful to coordinate vestments to the visual context of our churches. The Neoclassical jewel tones found in modern vestments are not consistent with the subdued and delicate palette of medieval-style iconography. In particular, this palette has neither emerald green nor violet. An iconographer renders green as a light grayish green that one might call sage. Purple in icons is always a somber reddish purple, never the amethyst violet of modern synthetic dyes. Blue may be a deep cobalt blue, or a sea-like transparent blue-green, but it is never the harsh electric blue of some vestments. The jewel-tones of modern vestments are possible only because of synthetic dyes, and they were prized in 19th century Russia for how they complemented the bright colors of Neoclassical architecture and painting. In a church painted with good traditional iconography (meaning icons that actually follow the colors of the old examples) most modern green, blue, and violet vestments are disharmonious. Such churches would do well to use polychrome fabrics of more historical appearance.

To revive the old freedom in vestments would be a great blessing for modest parishes, which cannot afford matched sets in many colors. And to revive the use of polychrome fabrics would be such a fitting complement to the revival of traditional iconography. Thankfully, such fabrics are still made, but one must know where to find them. Interior decorators still furnish European mansions with the sort of textiles that were woven for European aristocrats in the sixteenth century. And this fabric, still made in Italy, England, and Turkey, is the very same that was used for Orthodox vestments. It is often pure silk or cotton, and infinitely more beautiful than the ecclesiastical polyester currently in widespread use. Such fabric is more expensive, but if a church needs only two or three vestments with simple servers' robes that need not match, then these materials can be affordable.

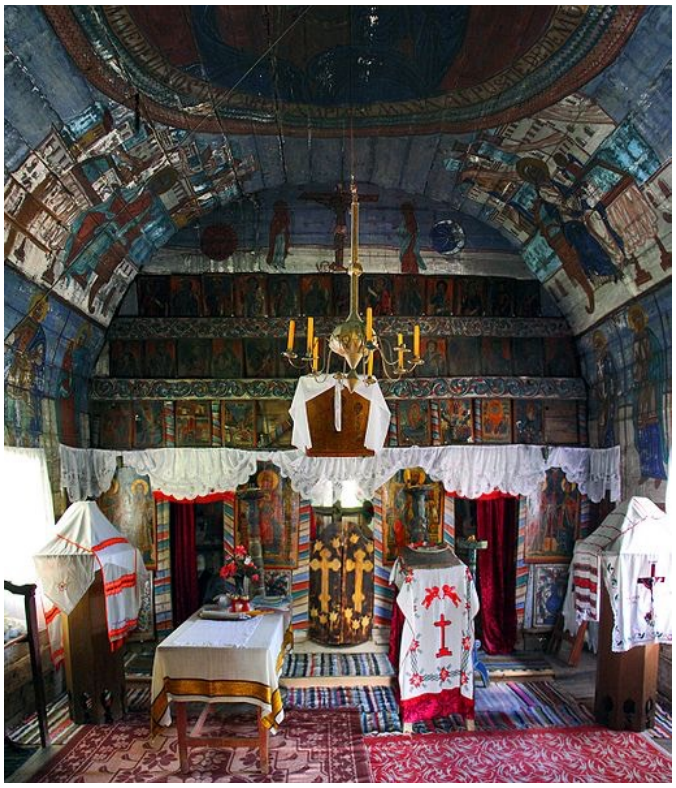
Grand Prince Nikolai Nikolaevich Enters Trnovo in 1877 (Painting by Nikolai Dmitriev-Orenburgsky, 1885) Note the mismatched colors in the priests' vestments. Each priest wears his most beautiful vestments regardless of color.

Part 9: Linens

In Orthodox churches the use of white linens provides an avenue for textile work wholly different from that of silk vestments. Many nations have the tradition of honoring icons with sacred towels. These *rushnyki* are most often white with red woven or embroidered designs. They are a folk custom predating Christianity, and the embroidered designs are so old that their interpretation is frequently unknown to those who make them. Each region or village has certain traditional designs that have persisted for centuries or more. Some elements, such as stalks of wheat, have obvious meaning in a Christian context, but other motifs that persist from pagan times have no discernible meaning to their Christian weavers. As such, embroidered linens represent almost a polar opposite to iconography; they are a form of visual art in which representation and definitive meaning are unimportant.

Despite their adoption for liturgical use, embroidered linens are still towels that can be used for cleaning and drying in non-liturgical capacities. In village life they function as a sort of currency with social rather than monetary value. They are given away in great numbers at funerals and weddings, and a large collection represents a long life of family and friendships. In church, they were first used as a towel for the priest to dry his hands on, or for the offering of bread to the bishop. But they have taken on a much larger role of showing honor to icons. In many village churches, it is considered important for every icon to be draped with a towel. It is the devotion of the village women to make these towels for the church and to keep them fresh and clean.

The tradition of *rushnyki* never assumed the pretenses of Neoclassical design. It remains a folk tradition, baptized by village women into the liturgical life of Orthodoxy with little notice or interference from men. But in a traditional Church they make a substantial visual impact. In their design and style, they are often the only work of art in a church that has the simplicity of folk art, and they are nearly the only thing present that is white in color. Through simple, anonymous devotion, they reveal the tireless work and unseen prayers of the pious women who are the backbone of every parish. Their rustic style and humble material show that it is not only wealthy patrons who adorn the house of the Lord. Indeed, the devotions of the poor and humble are worth more to God than all the riches of men, and so the *rushnyki* are placed closest to the saints of any gift to the church. A towel embraces the icon like a grandmother's hug – a marvelous counterpoint to the lampada, which honors the icon with the more abstract gift of oil and flame.



Village church, Curteana, Romania

Although *rushnyki* are a Slavic and Romanian folk tradition, the use of liturgical linens is universal. In Greek and Arab churches, comparable uses of linens appear in other forms. White lace is common in churches in all countries. It often ornaments the edges of white cloths used for all manner of decorative and functional purposes. Since Orthodox liturgy is served by male clergy, having linens, lace, and simple embroidery in the liturgical ornamentation adds a touch of feminine piety. The Orthodox in America should give more careful attention to this tradition. They are an indispensable element to the traditional furnishings of a church. They are not a mere 'liturgical color' brought out for some seasons as decoration, and put away for others. They are a tradition older and more universal than liturgical colors, and they should be always present in church like the pious women who weave them.

In America, women should learn to make their own versions of icon towels. It would be wise to adhere to the basic 'look' of Slavic *rushnyki* – mostly white with simple designs in mostly red. These colors are usually the best possible complement to traditional icons and woodwork. The geometric simplicity of the designs is important so as not to visually compete with the icon. But beyond this, the patterns in *rushnyki* vary greatly over time and place. So women today should feel free to develop their own patterns that they find pleasing and meaningful. Churches should encourage this craft as a valued expression of the love of the Saints. If we are really to show the reverence to icons that we claim, we should see to it that our icons are well-painted, displayed properly in shrines, lit with fine lampadas, and honored with beautiful towels.

Consider a secular visitor to an Orthodox church. He may not react well to the treasures displayed in a church. He may ask what is their purpose; why was the money not given to the poor? If he sees an expensive icon in a carved frame, he may dismiss it as the ostentatious gift of a wealthy patron. Perhaps this patron sends his money to church so he need not go himself. But give that icon a clean embroidered towel and a vase of flowers, and all will see that the icon is an expression of living piety, a comfort for the poor. Flowers and linens are, by their nature, temporary and sacrificial. Their presence among the permanent furnishings of a church is like the breath of life in a cold body. In post-Communist countries, many churches are abandoned and semi-ruinous. But even in these empty shells, it is common to find a small icon with a towel and vase of flowers. A village woman still remembers that this is a holy place, and in her piety she maintains this tiny shrine. But what an astonishing effect it has! A great ruin, cold and damp, remains a church and not a tomb because of the devotion of that villager.

Part 10: Ceremonial Implements

Liturgical fans are the oldest of our ceremonial traditions. Like all things, their most ancient origin was practical. Fan bearers have served kings throughout history, and no doubt this service was initiated for the purpose of keeping them cool and unbothered by insects. But their purpose did not remain merely utilitarian. As early as Pharonic Egypt, the presence of fan-bearers flanking a king became a ceremonial sign of reverence and honor. Egyptian tomb-paintings show fan bearers serving both gods and pharaohs. Thus a simple luxury became an iconographic convention to show who is worthy of honor. It was no accident that fans acquired this greater symbolism. A pair of fans, tall and symmetrical, bearing the many-colored feathers of exotic birds, has an intrinsic ceremonial power. Fans have the upright boldness of battle standards, but they lean inward in deference to the authority of their master. One could contrive no better sign of reverence for a king or god.

The purely ceremonial use of fans thus predates Christian worship by many millennia. They were adopted for Christian use not for any mundane reasons related to heat or flies, but because they were a ceremonial symbol whose message was known to all. The oldest surviving liturgical fan dates from the 6th century. It is a metal plate bearing the image of a seraph surrounded by feathers. These metal feathers recall the fan's ancient prototype which used real feathers to fan the air. But its role has changed; the Christian God has no need of cooling breezes, but sits enthroned upon fiery angels. The fan itself has become an icon of the angels who gather around the Divine Throne—a new and deeper layer of meaning added to an ancient implement. As with all symbols, this secondary meaning (which has perhaps now become the primary meaning) did not arise arbitrarily. It was doubtless suggested by the resemblance of the ancient feathered fans to icons of seraphim.

The 'Riha Flabellum', a liturgical fan from 6th-century Syria.

As the symbolism of fans evolved, their liturgical use evolved also. Fans are no longer mainly used for actual fanning of the gifts. In Russian practice, this archaic function is nowadays performed only by a deacon on the day of his ordination. Fans are now appointed to symbolize the invisible presence of the angels during significant liturgical acts. They are carried in the Great Entrance while the choir sings, "We who mystically represent the Cherubim and who sing the thrice-holy hymn to the life-creating Trinity, now lay aside all cares of this life, that we may receive the King of All, who comes invisibly escorted by the angelic host." The altar servers take the place of angels, and they carry seraphic fans like soldiers who carry the heraldry of their regiment.

Liturgical fans in use at the reading of the gospel in a contemporary Russian Orthodox service.

The processional cross likewise enjoys an ancient pedigree. The cross was universally adopted as the sign of victory for Christ's church in the fourth century. Before his victory at the Milvan

Bridge in A.D. 312, Constantine saw the sign of the cross in the sky with the words, "*In hoc signo vinces* – In this sign, conquer." The emperor added the Chi-Rho cross to the top of his military standard, and the instrument of Christ's death transformed into the heraldry of his victory.

In liturgical use, the processional cross retains this ceremonial and heraldic duty. It is not meant to be an icon for veneration or contemplation, (as is, for instance, the Golgotha Cross displayed on Great and Holy Friday). Rather, it is the sign of catholicity by which every parish church displays its mystical affiliation with the church triumphant. A Roman legion would carry its *aquila* (eagle standard) to the ends of the earth to proclaim its imperial authority. Likewise every church carries the cross in procession as the standard of Christ and sign of catholic authority. Appropriate to their heraldic function, the marvelous crosses that survive from Byzantium are large and noble. They have great visual power, with flaring arms and pendant gems, a design exuding confidence and victory. They are often clad in silver with gilded icons, and would glisten in the sun like sharp swords.

6th-century Byzantine processional cross, gilded silver foil over an iron core.

Roman soldiers also carried a *vexillum*, or banner, which displayed the heraldry of their specific regiment. In Christianized Rome, these military banners frequently bore the image of Christ. The liturgical use of banners follows the historical military usage quite closely. Traditionally, a parish has a banner with her titular icon, the local flag of the regiment. Also common are banners with the Holy-Face-not-made-by-hands, the image which Christ Himself sent to King Abgar as the sign of his healing power. Banners frequently display an icon of the Theotokos, protectress of cities and churches, and chief example for all Christians. Banners displaying the archangels and the military saints proclaim the spiritual power of the church to any who might think to oppose it. Arguably, in liturgical use, these banners are a show of force against the

demons. But the very same banners were used by Orthodox armies as a show of force against their earthly enemies.

The liturgical processions of the Orthodox Church are modeled upon the procession of military standards that occurred in Imperial Rome. These processions occurred both during festivals and wartime as a demonstration of the glory and might of the Roman legions. The Orthodox Church processes her cross, fans, and banners on great feasts as a display of spiritual power and heavenly authority. It is the glorious sight of the church on earth arrayed in procession in all her strength – a sight which emboldens the hearts of the faithful and weakens the resolve of demons.

The Christian faithful have particular need of bold resolve as they approach the chalice. With fear and trembling they stand before the Body and Blood of Christ and confess to God their total unworthiness. Before the anaphora, the Great Entrance is offered to the communicants to embolden their faith. The gifts are brought out for all to see, not in a spirit of shame for our sins, but in a procession of power and glory. The victory of the church is already accomplished, and her triumph is publicly displayed. By this ceremony, the faithful are reassured that they may approach the chalice without fear of death, for the victory of life is assured.

The modern and pragmatic mind is prone to consider ceremony somewhat dubious. We tend to cling to the archaic origins of fans and banners and dismiss them as tools that once served a purpose which no longer exists. This pragmatism is shallow. Not all liturgical ceremony can be explained as the beautification of prayer and sacraments. Some ceremony is simply ceremony – a celebration of the church's strength and beauty. We should be in no way embarrassed by the pageantry of the church. Rather, let us recognize that it too glorifies God. Let the church ornament her processions with banners tall and beautiful, emblazoned with large and powerful icons like the battle standards of old. Let her hold them high and confident, for they represent not our glory, but His alone.

Part 11: Gardens, Churchyards, and Cemeteries

The vision of paradise as an idyllic walled garden is exceedingly ancient and universal. For thousands of years, palaces have been built around courtyard gardens, and the ancient kings lived out their reigns in an artificial landscape of ideal beauty – an icon of the natural world transfigured into paradise. There is a very old belief that any garden represents a restoration of Eden, and from the earliest times palace gardens have specifically imitated certain characteristics of Eden. The garden was always square. A fountain at the center poured forth water into four channels that radiated outward in the cardinal directions – an image of the four rivers of paradise referenced in Genesis 2:10-14. This archetypical design is originally of very ancient Persian origin (as is the word *paradise* itself). Almost universal, it influenced the form of gardens in Rome, Byzantium, the Arab Caliphates, the Persian empires in India, and the medieval kingdoms of Western Europe.

Given the rich symbolic history of gardens, how do they fit into the iconic expression of the kingdom of God as liturgical art? To understand the complex relationship between an Orthodox temple and its surrounding landscape, we must first consider this: We are no longer naked in the garden, like Adam and Eve. The Garden of Eden had at its center the Trees of Life and Knowledge, but the Orthodox garden has a church in its midst, the new font of life and knowledge. The whole of the grounds of a church is the territory of the Kingdom of God. To enter through the churchyard gate is to pass into a different world. To walk through the gardens to church is to begin the joyous ascent up the mountain to meet our Lord who sits enthroned in New Jerusalem.

In desert countries, the ancient church gardens have a marvelous separation from the surrounding landscape. A monastery in Egypt or Palestine is like an ark of paradise moored in the ocean of dry sand. After a long journey through a landscape of desolation, we see palms rising above the high walls. Inside are flowers and birds and fragrant smells. Even in countries with more verdant climes, the separation of the church gardens from the surroundings was considered very important. Whether by tall wall, or merely a fence with a gate, a church's grounds were always set apart from the fallen world, and all within would radiate with the beauty of life.

Monastery of Saint Anthony in the Eastern Desert of Egypt, first built in the 4th century

In contrast, the natural landscape of Russia seems innately paradisiacal. Due to the long hours of summer daylight, flowers grow to astonishing size and with incredible profusion, every meadow looking like a thriving garden. Perhaps this contributed to the idea of 'Holy Russia', a notion that the whole country is sanctified. Indeed, Russia's verdant landscape is dotted with churches as though the nation itself is a church garden. And Russian church processions routinely travel great distances, from one village to another, through fields and forests. In a way, this is the ideal image of the Kingdom of God – the beauty of the church spreading out into all the Earth.

A churchyard in Russia overflowing with flowers – Stretensky Monastery, Moscow

But an Orthodox nation takes centuries to build, and a sanctified landscape grows ever further out of reach with the ecological vandalism of modern times. Today, most Orthodox churches are like the monastery in the desert, a lonely outpost amidst desolation and banditry. For modern people, a beautiful church garden is of the greatest importance. Most people must come to church by car, traveling at unpeaceful speed through an ugly landscape. Only by leaving our cars and passing through a churchyard gate can we mentally escape the banality of the fallen world. The short stroll through the garden to the church allows us a moment to recollect the beauty of God's creation and the peace of His presence. The sight of flowers and the songs of birds re-center our attention on the beauty of Life, and away from the hectic pressure of modernity.

Ancient Byzantine courtyard garden at Kaisariani Monastery, Greece

After providing comfort in life, a churchyard provides comfort in death. A church is traditionally surrounded by graves. How beautiful to see the faithful symbolically laid to rest in

eternal paradise! How wonderful that the dead gather around God's temple along with the living! The presence of graves is always a great blessing to a church garden, but the design of the graves is not inconsequential. Modern granite headstones have a cold perfection that is machine-like and alien to a living garden. They look best in military rows amidst flawless mown grass. The graves in a church garden must harmonize with the natural plants and rocks. Traditional grave markers are simple crosses made from wood or natural-cleft slabs of stone. They are unimposing and grow more beautiful as they age and decay. They stand in a garden like hermit monks, wise and silent, greeting visitors with only the sign of the cross. In some countries, the little plot where the departed lies is built up with a stone curb and made a miniature garden of its own – a sign that the beloved has become part of paradise, and an opportunity for the living to show remembrance by tending the little garden.

Tomb of Saint Justin Popovich, Monastery of Chelije Valjevo, Serbia

How should a church nowadays go about designing the landscape around the temple? In ancient times, Byzantine churches always had forecourts, and these contained fountains where the faithful washed themselves before entering. (Mosque architecture still imitates this

Byzantine model very closely.) But I would suggest that nowadays, in our modern civilization, where showers are plentiful but peace is rare, a different type of cleansing is needed. Modern people arrive to church well bathed, but with unquiet minds. Let us today build forecourts to our churches that contain beautiful gardens. They should be well-bounded with walls or hedges to screen off the distractions of the fallen world. There our senses can refocus on the sights, sounds, and smells of real and natural life. For only having laid aside all earthly cares can we begin our long ascent into God's Kingdom.

Part 12: Incense – Heavenly Fragrance and Transfigured Light

Of all the honors a king could bestow, the Magi chose frankincense to signify the divinity of Christ. From the very beginnings of religion, man has felt that incense is close to God. Like the other liturgical arts, incense is an icon of something real and true in the Kingdom of God. It is not a mere olfactory decoration for the services, nor some archaic solution for poor hygiene, as is often alleged.

Among Christian saints who were granted a vision of Heaven, an intense fragrance is a frequent detail of their accounts. For instance, as recounted in the life of Saint Euphrosynus the Cook, he and another monk meet in a dream in an Eden-like paradise. The air is rich with the scent of flowers. When the monk wakes, he finds in his pocket apples that the Saint had given him during the vision. He examined the apples and found they had a strange glow and "filled the little cell with a fragrance sweeter than the most costly incense." Accounts like this are common; the lives of the saints are full of observations that Heaven is a sweet-smelling garden and that holy things often have a mysterious and wonderful odor. This miracle is especially noted in the case of incorrupt relics of saints and miraculous icons, where the fragrance is often witnessed by thousands and can persist for centuries. Therefore it is clear that incense is a 'window to heaven' in the most direct and literal sense – it is the 'image' of the natural fragrance of God's Kingdom.

Like the faces of saints, the fragrance of Heaven is both comforting and sobering, expressing both joy and sorrow. The church in her wisdom, as the Magi of old, has chosen frankincense as the icon of this fragrance. Frankincense is both bitter and sweet. It is attractive like a perfume, yet neither seductive nor sensual. It is a wakeful and intense smell. If too strong it causes physical pain in our eyes, like the light of Mt. Tabor. Yet, remarkably, one does not tire of it even after hours of exposure. Rather, after long hours in church, it becomes quite normal, and its absence is greatly missed. This quality is unique among smells. Even the magnificent odor of lilacs and jasmine becomes overwhelming after just a few minutes, and one needs to be removed from it for a time in order to appreciate it again. But frankincense can be experienced for hours, for a lifetime, and only grows more appealing. All true liturgical art has this quality, for anything that reveals God to us will become more pleasing to our senses every day, as we grow in our love for His Kingdom.

The making of good incense is a subtle art. There are many variations of frankincense, and some can benefit from careful adjustment. Frankincense can be blended with floral essences without losing its characteristics. A little rose scent can add a richness to frankincense that magnifies its qualities. But the craftsman must be careful not to overwork these blends, lest the sweetness become out of balance with the bitter. When incense smells like flowers rather than spices, it becomes too seductive. It suggests an emotional response, and we soon tire of its constant presence.

Of all the senses, that of smell has the most power to evoke memories. Sometimes we experience a smell that we have not encountered in years, and instantly our mind explodes with intense memories of a former time. Our noses can distinguish thousands of distinct fragrances, and our minds tie the memories of those smells very closely with the memories of emotional responses. A smell we associate with a happy childhood, or a first love, evokes a sudden and intense emotional reaction. Even scientific studies have proven this connection, and the makers of perfume have wielded its powers to influence human relationships. There is no more poignant memory than the scent of the perfume of a lost love.

Consider how this intense connection between smell and memory works also as a liturgical art. Any churchgoer has developed an immensely strong mental association between incense and liturgy. Every time we enter a church, the smell evokes for us all the time we have ever spent in church. It instantly puts our minds in a state ready for prayer and cleanses our thoughts of anything else. If ever we fall away from the church, and then find it again later in life, all those memories will come back in an instant with the scent of incense. I personally have witnessed many a 'lapsed' Catholic or Orthodox visit a church and announce with joy, "That smell! It takes me right back to my childhood!"

Incense truly sanctifies the seductive power of perfume! With it, the church forges in us a permanent emotional bond to the liturgy. Its positive influence is probably much greater than anyone suspects, as it works upon us so subconsciously – so different from liturgical texts and painted icons, whose meaning must be cognitively understood to be of much benefit. Rather incense is akin to the sound of bells – we never know what it means, but it pierces instantly to our hearts, and awakens in us an unexpected joy.

Quite aside from the scent of incense, it is also worth considering the visual implications of the smoke from the censer. This may seem a minor consideration, but, from a purely architectural standpoint, it is not minor at all. During a service, the incense completely changes the quality of light in a church. We enter a church in the early morning and see it clear and transparent, peaceful and without commotion. It seems small and finite, and we walk from one end to the other in a few paces. But as the liturgy begins, the church fills with sounds and movement, and the air fills with smoke. Gradually, the temple seems larger. As the air grows hazy, the ceiling and iconostasis look more distant and more grand – like mountains miles away. Candles and lamps appear to have haloes – light is no longer invisible as it passes through the air – it has become like a material substance, and the air in the church is saturated with its glow. Sunbeams cascade down from the dome so bright and beautiful that one

hesitates to walk through them. They fall upon individual people and icons and we see them transfigured like Christ Himself.

Sunbeam in the incense on Palm Sunday, Holy Ascension, Charleston, SC. Photo by Andrew Gould

As the liturgy wears on, the dance of smoke and sunbeams often becomes the dominant visual experience of the space – outshining the architecture and icons. This unfolding of optical effects is itself profoundly iconic. It is the space of the temple coming alive – the architectural space co-worshiping with us – singing its own song of light and shadow. I have written before that one of the most important qualities of liturgical architecture is mystery. Churches need layered space – rows of columns, side aisles, a multitude of hanging lamps. There should be shadows as well as light. But only with the haze of incense does architectural mystery achieve its full flowering. Only then does distance become hard to judge; the temple seems large enough to contain all of Heaven. Materials lose their distracting physicality, and thus icons become much easier to see 'through' – we can more easily perceive that the saint is really present in our space. And light, that most intrinsically iconic of all created things, changes completely. It is no longer mere radiation visible only by that which it falls upon. It is itself visible, at times like a warm golden blanket enveloping the church, at other times like silver spears crashing down from Heaven. Indeed as blinding sunbeams radiate out from the Pantocrator above, and the air itself glows opaque and gold, the entire temple is painted in light as icon of Christ transfigured on Mt. Tabor.