Culture



The Gordon B. Lankton Gallery is pictured, located in the upper level of the Icon Museum and Study Center in Clinton, Massachusetts, the only museum in the United States devoted to icons and Eastern Christian art. (Michael Centore)



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"If we comprehend the spiritual through the words which we hear with our carnal ears, contemplation with our carnal eyes likewise leads us to spiritual contemplation."

So wrote the Russian iconographer and art historian Leonid Ouspensky in his landmark study, *Theology of the Icon*. It was an insight I relived time and again during my visit to the Icon Museum and Study Center in Clinton, Massachusetts, earlier in May.

Founded in 2006 to house the collection of area industrialist Gordon B. Lankton, it is the only museum in the United States devoted to icons and Eastern Christian art. Russian icons are at the heart of its collection, though it has expanded in recent years to acquire Greek, Veneto-Cretan and Ethiopian examples.

Walking slowly through the galleries spread over three levels was as much a prayerful experience as an aesthetic one. I began on the lower level, where an exhibit shows the step-by-step process for how an icon is created and introduces viewers to the sacred symbolism behind the iconographer's technique.

I was struck by how many elements from the natural world are incorporated into the icon, from the locally sourced wood that is used for the panel to the red clay mixture, called "bole," that is applied beneath areas of gold leaf. We sense the icon as an object of creation, the iconographer shaping and harmonizing earthly materials into spiritually charged compositions.

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Attuned to the "language" of the icon, I ventured upstairs to the main level. A grouping of Greek icons revealed numerous treasures. I lingered in front of a 17th-century icon of St. Alypius the Stylite poised atop a pillar, studying small details like the acanthus leaves that adorn the column and soften the ascetical quality of the image.

Such close study is the benefit of encountering these works in a museum setting. A neighboring icon, "Mother of God of the Life-Giving Spring," depicts Mary and the

child Jesus seated in a font of water. One can see how the iconographer has repeated the blue pattern of Mary's headscarf on the surface of the water, establishing a visual link between her and the salvific properties of the spring.

Two galleries on the upper level contain the bulk of the collection. Icons are spaciously arranged and artfully lit, making it a pleasure to move among them.

Themes and motifs reemerge throughout the galleries. An icon of the "Mandylion" — a Greek Byzantine term meaning "small cloth," so named because it illustrates Christ's face miraculously preserved on a piece of fabric — reappears in two 17th-century Russian icons that show groups of the faithful venerating its healing powers.



The narrative effects of iconography are brought to the fore in a large icon of the Solovetsky Monastery, a community located on an island off the northern coast of Russia. (Michael Centore)

Seeing an icon *within* an icon creates a kind of "nested narrative," a story within a story. We behold the holiness of the Mandylion both on its own and through the imagined experience of the figures in the scenes.

The narrative effects of iconography are brought to the fore in a large (57 inches by 42 inches) late 17th-century icon of the Solovetsky Monastery, a community located on an island in the White Sea off the northern coast of Russia.

It is said that iconographers do not "paint" but rather "write" icons, just as viewers must "read" them as they would a word of Scripture. I was never more aware of these literary overtones than I was standing before the Solovetsky icon, whose composition unfolds with the scope of a Russian novel.

The lower two-thirds of the image are bounded by bands of water. Boats ferrying travelers ply the waves. At the center of the space is the monastery itself. Openings in the architecture are like windows onto the monks' lives: one rings a bell in the tower as another receives pilgrims in the entranceway.

Above the monastery, scenes of workers herding livestock establish the agrarian rhythms of the island. Across the upper third stretches a retinue of angels and saints flanking Christ on both sides. Two saints unfurl a scroll that reads like a charter between heaven and earth.

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I found my eye traveling upward through these layers of life and alighting on the various figures. It was like passing in prayer between different realms — sea, earth, eschaton.

Just as moving as the grand sweep of the Solovetsky icon were the small, telling details of some of the others. I think of the two apostles with elbows propped on Mary's bier, resting their heads in their hands, in a 16th-century icon of the Dormition. With very limited means, the iconographer has managed to convey a feeling of wistfulness as they gaze upon the Theotokos.

The Mother of God features in the museum's current exhibit, "Sacred Presence: Virgin of Kazan." The exhibit brings together several versions of this famous icon, whose prototype is said to date to Byzantine times.



"The Mother of God Kazanskaya," a mid-17th century icon (Michael Centore)

The original icon is believed to have been brought from Constantinople to Kazan in the 13th century. It was subsequently lost, according to legend, and only rediscovered when a young girl had a vision of it buried in the ground in 1579. It soon became an object of Russian religious devotion, and copies proliferated.

At the center of "Sacred Presence" is a crown jewel of the museum's collection, a large icon of the Virgin of Kazan dating to about 1650. Mary wears a striking purple mantle with intricately painted fringe. She tilts toward the child Christ, whose pronounced forehead and self-possessed expression suggest wisdom and precocity.

Mary's eyes exert a gravitational pull, like two planets orbiting the sun of Christ. The longer I stayed in front of the icon, the more I felt my own eyes entering into this orbit, following hers along the path that revolves around her son.

The Vatican was given an icon of the Mother of God of Kazan in 1993. Pope John Paul II kept it in his private apartment until 2004, when he returned it to Alexis II, Patriarch of Moscow, as a way of fostering unity between the Catholic and Orthodox churches.

As I pondered the icon in the days prior to Orthodox Easter, with war raging in the Holy Land and the Russian Orthodox tradition of nonviolence tragically obscured by the invasion of Ukraine, John Paul II's message to the patriarch felt especially poignant: "Today we pray with confidence to the Most Holy Virgin, knowing that she implores for us and for all nations the gift of peace."

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