

Talking with the Angels *Icons: An Ancient Art of Transfiguration*

by Eileen Read Diaz

Icons—those ancient paintings which have attracted so many of us, those solemn images of Christ, Mary, and the saints that touch us beyond our understanding, are much more than they appear to be. They are more than merely beautiful images of holy ones of the past. Iconography follows an ancient, proscribed process in which the materials used in the painting, as well as the iconographer him or herself, are transformed as the artist imprints the image on the icon board. Angela Manno, an internationally exhibited artist and Crestone resident, has been studying this ancient art form under master iconographer, Vladislav Andrejev. This article is a result of an interview with her.

For the past four years, Angela has been "writing icons" (the literal meaning of iconography). The method she uses stems from the tradition originating in the monasteries of 14th-16th century Russia. She was originally attracted to iconography for the natural, living materials used: wood for the icon board, egg tempera—one of the oldest mediums in western art, gold leaf, pigments made from

ascetics and leaders of the Church throughout the centuries." Thus it is distinct from the art that developed in the west which is attributed to the individual genius of the artist. It is not you who impress your ideas on the icon board," she says, "but the image which, if you allow it, impresses itself upon you. It is a process of transfiguration. This is what makes iconography a very practical, spiritual discipline."

Angela does a considerable amount of research prior to beginning an icon. Though the images impress themselves upon the psyche whether or not one has any knowledge about icons, the greater the understanding of the figure and its attributes, the more receptive one can be and the more nuances can be felt. An understanding of the symbolism behind each figure, the colors being used and relationship to the other personages represented in icons can have tremendous impact on both the iconography and anyone who meditates upon them.

In addition to the symbolism in the figures depicted, each step in the making of an icon has symbolic meaning. Angela describes the process: "First of all, because this process is giving glory to God, the materials used are in a state very close to how they are found in nature. The wooden board with which you start represents the Tree of Life. The routed shape of the board I use is like a chalice or container which will receive the image. The ground is gesso—12 layers of it—mixed with water. In applying the gesso, you are preparing your soul to receive this impression, this design. This step relates to the passage in the gospels where it says to go into your room and pray. You are creating a private space within which to do this. Next you apply clay, which represents our earthly nature, in certain areas and gold, which represents our divine nature, over it, where it becomes the halo. In the Christian tradition, this is the essence of humanity—we are a marriage of these two aspects. Next, you apply the first layer of color which signifies our 'cosmic nature', our physical dimension. The second layer represents the soul. The third layer, the spirit". Angela's teacher told her that when icons are painted without going through these steps, there is an emphasis on appearances only, which he believes is one of the great scourges of our time.

The colors themselves also have significance: the lower part of the spectrum—the reds and yellows—represent the earth and the higher the frequency colors—the blues—represent the heavenly kingdom. Where they meet is in the center, in the color green, which is the color of humanity. Like in the rain-



"Our Lady of Tenderness" A "Mother of God" Icon made by Crestone artist Angela Manno.



Archangel Raphael

ground up stones, clay and gesso, which is made from marble dust and chalk. The icon is sealed with linseed oil, so everything is natural. Also, each element used and each step in the process has a precise symbolic and liturgical meaning when done according to the traditional rules governing iconography.

Secondly, it was the subject matter in the icons which attracted the artist—the figures and particularly the angels. "Then the theology behind the forms began to fascinate me, and the wonderful experience of working with a mentor again."

Iconography is not just painting. It is a recapitulation of the act of our own creation. The sign in her studio explains further: It's a language that "conveys in symbolic form the teachings of the saints,

bow, there is no real separation, only a gradual change of nuances. The central color green is also associated with the heart. White represents pure consciousness. There is a certain kind of red that is used only in the robe of the Virgin that has a special name. It's earthy red mixed with a little blue which represents her as a vessel for Divine Will. When you learn how to read these symbols you start to understand more fully the whole cosmology behind the icons which is very rich and very deep."

When asked how iconography relates to her previous art work Angela said, "For at least the past ten years, the main focus of my art was depicting the Earth as a whole system. It was a very extroverted phase of my art in which I traveled outward in my imagination to depict the earth from a great distance and backward in time portraying humanity at this point in the evolution of the universe. The piece I did for NASA, titled "Self-Discovery" pointed toward the inner world which the iconography has allowed me to explore in depth. In fact, I used a quote by Joseph Campbell to accompany the art which is now on permanent display at the Kennedy Space Center. It reads, "Where we had thought to travel outwards, We shall come to the center of our own existence."

"All My Relations", a later series of mandalas depicting the interrelatedness of life on Earth and our descendency from stars is

another transitional work. In fact, when my teacher saw this triptych, he pointed out that though I had painted the cosmos and anthropos (humanity), I had yet to portray the Theocosmos or Kingdom of God. This is what I am exploring now. It is a great revelation, intensely personal and introspective, yet transpersonal as well.

In general, my work remains archetypal rather than psychological (Jung makes this distinction in his terms 'visionary' versus 'psychological' art). My deepest concerns in my art relate to the perennial questions of humanity: who we are, where we are going, what choices do we have in the matter . . . I believe that art and the media have an opportunity and responsibility not only to reflect what is happening in our inner and outer world, but to 'imagine' our optimal parameter—sand portray what is highest in the human spirit."

The figures generally depicted in icons are beings from the celestial hierarchy such as angels, as well as saints, "righteous warriors" and martyrs of the church. When I asked Angela what her feelings were about some of the modern day icons such as Dorothy Day and Gandhi appearing, she said she believes it is an "effort to dignify and to draw attention to people who live extraordinary lives of love and compassion and self-sacrifice."

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Though she does not compose her own icons at this point, she feels the day will come when she incorporates an image of the Earth into her practice. "The Earth deserves our reverence for its boundless beauty and fecundity. It is the mother of us all. One could say the Earth's mantra is "Be it done unto me according to Thy Word."

Among the icons Angela has completed are those of the Archangels Michael and Raphael. She is currently working on Archangel Gabriel.

"Archangels are states of consciousness that correspond to the elements," she says. "Archangel Michael is earth and has to do with our basic will. Archangel Gabriel is associated with water and has to do with the soul. Water is the most powerful but subtle of elements. It's association with the soul I believe illustrates the ideal state of the soul when it yields to God's will. The element associated with Raphael is fire which represents our spirit. His hair is drawn with pure gold to represent this. Another kind of angel is the guardian angel which conveys light to us and perfects us. They are the closest angels to us. In the Orthodox tradition, an icon of a guardian angel is given customarily to the parents of a newborn child.

"Also according to this tradition, we have a spiritual or angelic mind as well as discursive and intuitive mind. The angels are made up of this spiritual energy entirely whereas we have other components. This leads me to believe that the angels are not these separate entities we imagine out there some-

where. They comprise our highest form of intelligence."

Iconography has been a very balancing discipline for Angela. "Though the process requires a certain receptivity, you are also actively creating this image, engraving lines, laying down color. It's a balancing act, like walking a tightrope. Though my teacher says that an icon is successful to the degree that the iconographer sets aside his own ego, I would assert that one must use the ego, the personal will, in the act of creating an icon. So it is a case of cooperation with the Divine." During the process, you might experience purgation, illumination as well as union. "The image will reflect back to you, in an intuitive process, what aspects of the self are in need of transfiguration. From one minute to the next the whole feeling can change from one of lightness and ease to turmoil and despair. One attempts to bear either this upliftment or inner conflict with equanimity."

When asked what significance icons might have for the modern world she responded, "In the modern world, the soul itself seems to have gotten lost. Though St. Theresa talks about the soul, how it is receptive and feminine in nature in relation to God, and in psychology, Alice Miller talks about 'soul murder', we still talk in terms of 'body, mind and spirit'. Thomas Moore's *Care of the Soul* is start, but it remains on the aesthetic level. It doesn't go far enough. Where's the soul in our culture? We don't recognize it as a reality. I think the popularity of icons today has to do with this spiritual hunger and of the soul pressing itself in upon our

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awareness. This process has answered a lot of questions for me. It is an incredible journey."

Angela Manno's icons can be seen at her studio. She now accepts commissions and sells hand made note cards made with reproductions of the originals.

For a catalogue or brochure or to set up a studio visit, contact her at P.O. Box 316, Crestone, CO 81131 (719) 256-4611.