

ICONS AND THE QUESTION OF TIME

There are many questions people ask about icons but one remains by far the most “popular”. It is so frequent that has me musing over it for years.

I keep being asked: how long does it take you to paint an icon?

Let us ponder the question and try to analyse it and respond to it, the best we can.

It is simply impossible to answer this, for multiple reasons.

We would need to know the subject of the icon, thus how involved or detailed it should be, as there is an enormous discrepancy between a depiction of a head of the saint, a half-figured rendition or a scene such as the as the Ascension or Dormition that can contain up to fifteen and more figures. Then we should know of requirements, how intricate the icon is supposed to be, from gilding to the decorative elements, such as frame (raised edge, actually, as there are no real frames in traditional icons up to 17th century). The size is essential as well, as a miniature icon is incomparable with one measuring up to 2 metres.

We must know whether the new icon is a replica of an existing one be it from centuries ago or a recent, contemporary one, or it is an altogether a new creation. In case of latter, the work could take much more than the replica, as it takes time to come up with something new but still artistically sound.

I thought it should be obvious that any icon can not be just whipped up, it is not fast food, it is a slow food, made by supposedly an experienced iconographer with years of experience. Now, HOW LONG exactly it takes to have it finished, is not only impossible to say due to the aforesaid points, but there is something even more important to bring into equation. A person asking such a misplaced question, is never taking into account years of previous experience of the iconographer. That element counts fundamentally in this issue as there are many icons that solely a

highly versed master could make. Beginners, as in any art, music for instance, are dealing at the beginning with simpler pieces when performing, waiting for the maturity to kick in and mastery of the instrument to be attained.

All this notwithstanding, I also wanted to say how amused and bemused I am with our incessant awareness and preoccupation with linear time. In this, I am not excluding myself at all, we are all slaving to Chronos to a point. Perhaps I am beginning to see things a bit differently from before as I am into icon painting on a regular basis, mostly daily and get to be fortunate enough to be close of letting go of time awareness and concerns which it brings along. What does it mean?

When we contemplate great pieces of art, masterpieces such as Mona Lisa or Guernica or The Adoration of Mystic Lamb, we are so overwhelmed and shocked with that beauty and artistic height so close to Divine as one can get that we never ask how long did it take to do this. The question is so obviously misplaced and demonstrates an inability to ask some much more relevant questions or better still, not to ask anything or utter a word, just sit there and weep. Weep for knowledge that such heights are possible by us humans, and certainly impossible for us personally. At least, that is how I felt after seeing the tryptich by Brothers Van Eyck, titled The Adoration of a Mystic Lamb in the Cathedral of St Bavon in Ghent, Belgium. At the time I was an art student in the middle of my five years studies and this event shook me through the core of my being and made me question the continuation of art studies or abandoning them, passing on to something more prosaic and safer, whatever that might be, but not remain arrogant and delusional to call myself “an artist”.

To this day I never thought of how long did it take to all these people to create their masterpieces. Was Mona Lisa a pregnant lady, was she Leonardo’s lover, was it this or that, all these speculations are colossally irrelevant, especially

the question of time. Leonardo was notorious with his slow artistic process, edging on serious procrastination, while Picasso worked fast and did not display too many self-doubts, if at all.

So, when we view an icon, be it old and new, the question of linear time is redundant. The right question would be how good it is and can it move us, can it indicate or show the existence of

another realm, is it transcendental... If we MUST talk time, then it should be Kairos, the eternal time, the realm not susceptible to our earthly laws.

As Stephen Godley aptly put it in Icons+Art: Michael Galovic: "Ultimately, let us consider how effectively each work speaks to us of eternity"

Michael Galovic

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The Ascension, 2014, an icon 90 x 120cm, Marist Centre Melbourne