

HOW YOUR ICON IS MADE: TECHNIQUE, COSTS & TIMESCALE.

This information also applies to other items of liturgical goldwork on wooden panel and gesso.

A SPIRITUAL INVESTMENT AND HEIRLOOM

An icon is a very special way of painting, inheriting an important theological and spiritual tradition of the church, both in its content and method of painting. It is made prayerfully by traditional techniques. It takes a long time to make and, kept properly, should last many lifetimes and be a focus for prayer in church or home.

TIMESCALE & COSTS

Icons usually take between two weeks and three months to complete, depending on size and complexity. The design, preparation of the gesso surface and gilding takes up most of the first week, allowing for the drying times of multiple coats of gesso and gilding preparations. Complex decorative raised and embossed/engraved gilding is the most time consuming and expensive technique, although a small gilded halo is relatively inexpensive. A complex subject involving multiple saints or scenes takes longer than a single figure. This means a small complex icon or triptych may sometimes cost as much as a large single figure.

Costs are normally the average living costs of the time spent to write the icon plus the materials, costed at an hourly rate. So count a living wage of two weeks or more, according to complexity, unless the work is small and simple enough to complete within a week (including preparation processes - see below). Generally, very little work is undertaken at £200.00 or under, and most church work is around £1-2,000 upwards.

THE ICONOGRAPHER: A WORK OF INTERCESSION & SKILL

Bear in mind commissioning an icon is much different than commissioning from a secular designer. S/he is primarily a person of prayer and the time spent on the commission is a serious responsibility of prayer for those who have commissioned the icon and those who are to view it. The iconographer is a 'contemplative theologian' working within a specific tradition which transmits the teaching of the church in visual form. Iconography has a number of rules or 'canons' which are used in expressing the spiritual character of the sacred event or saint depicted. These canons are based on the deposit of faith and tradition of the church, as given in Scripture and interpreted by the Councils of the Church, primarily the Ecumenical Councils before the schism in the eleventh century.

Much of the work of the icon, intensified in the case of western or new saints, is interpreting the sacred event or person, in context of the historical data available, the iconographic canon, and making sure it is visually appropriate for the place it will be used in. Is it in a chapel or a bedroom? What is the lighting like? Is it the patron of a church or a child's name saint? How far away will the viewer be from the icon? Is it the Lord, with a face 12/16 inches high, viewed from the back of a fifty metre church or is it a name saint for the wall of a child's bedroom? Is it for a businessman in a public office or foyer, a doctor or dentist in his/her surgery, or is it for the bedside cabinet of a woman confined to her bed for the rest of her life? Is it for a Buddhist or Islamic client with a special devotion to Our Lady: the icon can have an enormous value in such situations as a silent witness. A king will involve more gold work and possibly semi-precious stones in the crown, whereas a monastic saint will have a greater austerity of treatment.

The iconographer prays for his/her clients and prayerfully reflects, so that s/he may be open to the Holy Spirit to 'see' what will be right in any given situation.

THE TECHNICAL PROCESS OF WRITING AN ICON

Each icon has:-

1. A wooden base, usually constructed in three or more pieces to counteract wood movement on contact with hot wet materials) with a recessed centre and battens. Very small icons may be just one piece of wood/ plywood. Very large icons may be on marine plywood.
2. A 'taster' coat of glue.
3. A layer of cloth soaked in warm glue, which acts as a liner for the gesso and counteracts any splitting of the gesso)
4. Approx.12 coats of gesso (melted glue and whiting, looks like a white sauce) over two days.

5. Design (this is where time estimates become difficult because some saints of whom there are few or no icons need a lot of research: icons must be historically and theologically correct, then historical details go through a process of stylisation, in order to focus on the main spiritual characteristics of the person, so that what emerges is a 'portrait' of their spiritual character and significance for the church. Obviously the number of figures make a difference - very few figures in an icon are either symbolic or imaginary.

4. Design transfer with engraving stylus.

5. Optional semi- precious stones inserted into the gesso (infrequent, for crowns). Any raised or engraved gesso-work (using engraving tools and warm gesso on brush).

6. Gilding base (known as the gilding cushion): one coat of yellow bole (glue and assiette d'or) and approx. 8 coats of red bole.

6. Gilding - either water gilding (shiny, but looks dark under some lights) or oil gilding (matt and more durable).

7. Any optional punched gilding ornament (water gild only), such as carpet punching to add an embossed surface, or an outline punch for the halo.

8. First layers of painting with egg tempera (yolk of egg/ white vinegar or alcohol/ water/ artists quality pigment). I use melted colour as base coat usually, which involves putting on several layers which need to dry in between, but give a heightened glow to the finished colour, which should express the transfiguration of flesh, deriving from the Transfiguration of Christ and foreshadowing the risen body.

9. Shaping layers of garments - according to the commission and its placing these may be 'softer' Russian character, without hard edges, or very hard edged geometric layers in 'Greek' technique, or a combination.

10. Shaping layers of face in a green- red technique which expresses the two natures of Christ, and redemption of the Church.

11. Highlights, known as the 'lightning flash' - very hard edged lines which express the brilliant light of Mt. Tabor - the change of flesh transformed by the 'deifying light.' This is an extremely difficult technique which takes many years to handle successfully. If the underneath layers are too dark they look muddy when this light is added. If they are 'right' all the colours come alive and glow.

12. Detail decorations, including any gold decoration applied with oil size (this has to be done when the icon has dried out several days, or the gold sticks to any areas which are slightly damp).

13. The 'Naming' of the icon - the name of the icon can only be put on when the rest of the work is complete - it is compared with naming or baptising a child. The person to be named has to be fully present and recognisable.

14. Several layers of egg tempera to protect the painting

USUALLY AT THIS POINT THE ICON IS SENT TO THE COMMISSIONER

15. Varnishing. The commissioner may leave it unvarnished, or after at least six months and preferably a year, when the egg has 'petrified' the icon is returned for varnishing, or sent to another competent iconographer. If icons are varnished immediately the egg tempera combines with the varnish and peels after a few years (I have seen examples of this in the Archbishop of Canterbury's sacristy, in the case of commercially finished icons, which he had been presented with).

If for some reason it is essential that a protective layer be put over immediately all that can be offered is a diluted shellac (in the case of icons with large areas of gilding) or a dammar varnish (which forms a good base for olifa)

Varnishing is normally done with an oil based varnish mixed with a drying oil (olifa) and rubbed in by hand, making a much thinner layer, less liable to yellowing and cracking, than is used in oil painting. Icons varnished by this method have been successfully cleaned after centuries, with very little damage to the original paint.

ETHOS The icon is a 'prophecy' of the coming of the Kingdom of God, and should, ideally, last to the Second Coming, so the materials are the best and most enduring possible.

**Contact: Sister Petra Clare, Sancti Angeli Benedictine Skete,
Marydale, Cannich, nr. Beaulay, Inverness-shire, IV4 7LT.**

Telephone 01456-415218. e-mail: spc@sanctiangeli.org www.sanctiangeli.org