

The Meaning of Icons



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Includes 160 pages of text with drawings, 13 black and white and 51 full color plates. It is linen-cloth and paper bound. <P>In the last decades the art of icons has gained increased attention. Once icons were passed over by the art critics, or at most classified as popular art, although painters such as Matisse or Picasso went to Russia especially for the sake of studying this art. Most recently many books have been published on icon painting. Yet the present work is the first of its kind to give a reliable introduction into the spiritual background of this art. <P>The nature of the icon cannot be grasped by means of pure art criticism, nor by the adoption of a sentimental point of view. Its forms are based on the wisdom contained in the theological and liturgical writings of the Eastern Orthodox Church and are intimately bound up with the experience of contemplative life. <P>The introduction into the meaning and the language of the icons by Ouspensky imparts to us in an admirable way the spiritual conceptions of the Eastern Orthodox Church which are often so foreign to us, but without the knowledge of which we cannot possibly understand the world of the icon. <P>"It is not the purpose of the icon to touch its contemplator. Neither is it its purpose to recall one or the other human experience of natural life; it is meant to lead every human sentiment as well as reason and all other qualities of human nature on the way to illumination." <P>"The entire visible world as depicted in the icon is to foreshadow

the coming Unity of the whole creation, of the Kingdom of the Holy Ghost."

<P>The theological justification of the icon was derived by the Seventh Ecumenical Council from the fact of the Incarnation of God. God became human for the elation and deification of Man. This deification becomes visible in the saints. The Byzantine theologian often sets the calling of an icon painter on an equal level with that of a priest. Devoted to the service of a more sublime reality, he exercises his objective duty the same way as the liturgical priest. The "spiritual genuineness" of the icon, the cryptic, almost sacral power to convince, is not alone due to accurate observation of the iconographic canon, but also the ascetic fervor of the painter. <P>A very interesting section of the technique of icon painting is followed by the main part of the book, in which both authors describe the most important types of icons. Apart from a detailed description of the icon screen (iconostas) of the Russian Church, 58 types are explained with the aid of an equal number of illustrations, amongst which there are alone 10 various representatives of the virgin. Special mention is due to 51 icons reproduced in their complete colorful splendor. <P>The section of subjects made in order to reveal the main features of Orthodox iconography was naturally limited to the examples available outside of Russia. But this not in the least diminishes the value of the book; on the contrary, it led to the reproduction of many beautiful icons which had never been published before or had been unknown to wider public. A considerable number of museums and private collectors in Europe and America spontaneously placed their collections at the disposal of the authors.

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