

“Spiritual Physiognomy”: Gregory Tucker talks with with Maria Pente

Where did you grow up and what were your experiences of iconography as a child?

I was born on the island of Patmos where the religious aspect of life is particularly intense, with the presence of the Cave of the Apocalypse and the Monastery of Saint John the Theologian. I was fortunate enough to belong to a family that had monks in the monastery, so from a young age I had the opportunity to come into daily contact with the works of great iconographers. I could spend hours admiring the artistic treasures in the monastery!

How did you learn to paint and when did you start painting professionally?

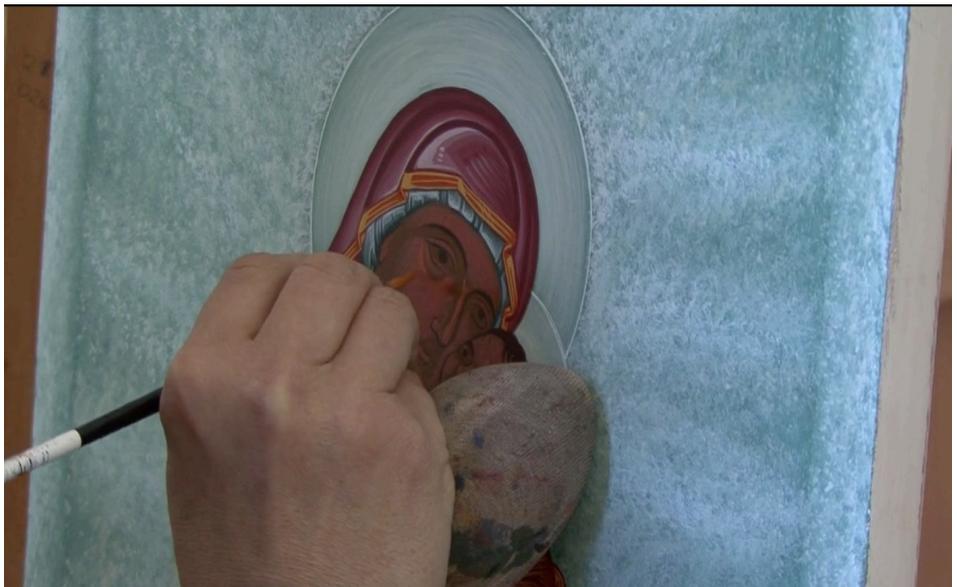
I began to paint as a child and soon my aunt urged me to study painting.

The conditions at that time on the island were not particularly favorable, however, and my parents discouraged me. Yet I never stopped painting, and as a teenager I was taught by an experienced iconographer on Patmos for more than two years. Then I decided to go to Athens, where I was fortunate to be a student of the great iconographer Vangelis Theodorakis. At that time, I took the first tentative steps of my professional career, which brings us to today—more than thirty years as an iconographer.

What are your sources of inspiration? Are there particular images or artists or places that inspire you? How do you approach painting new images?

As I mentioned before, Patmos is a unique place and is basically my source of inspiration, because here I

Maria Pente adds final touches to the face of an icon of the Theotokos that combines a neo-Byzantine figure with a contemporary background.



feel that the spiritual is much closer than anywhere else. As an iconographer you are not just a copier of images. Each time you work, you approach the spiritual physiognomy of an individual holy form and you try to represent it in the image. Then you feel that you have succeeded in your work.

Naturally I am influenced directly by John the Theologian and the divine book of the Apocalypse. I am inspired by the works of the Byzantine iconographers whose work adorns the monastery, and I have a special affection for the works of Domenikos Theotokopoulos (“El Greco”), though I don’t mean to say that I try to copy his style.



As I said earlier, an iconographer involves herself in a spiritual endeavor, and I approach the painting of every new image from this perspective. This is the spirituality that surrounds my work.

How did you come to develop your own modern style of painting alongside more traditional iconography?

After many years of work as an iconographer, I was tempted to try out original works in my own style based on religious texts. This led to an exhibition on Patmos in 2017, which had the Apocalypse of John as its central theme. I take the view that the human being is constantly searching for new ways of expression, or new forms of

Top: Conquest: The White Horse of the Apocalypse. “And behold, a white horse, and its rider had a bow; and a crown was given to him, and he went out conquering and to conquer. He who sat upon it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war” (Rev. 6:2; 19:11).

Left: Saint George. Based on an anonymous fifteenth-century icon in the style of Angelos Akotantoni, now in the Benaki Museum, Athens.

performance of the religious aspect of life, that respond better or more appropriately to modern needs and concerns.

What is your view of development in iconography? Is difference in style a matter of taste or of struggling to express different ideas in new ways?

Iconography is a craft that has to evolve and cannot be stagnant. At the same time, the mode of depiction is directly linked to the world of the soul, which has shaped every artist through the years. So, what is really happening with any style of painting is the working out of a part of the artist's spiritu-

ality. This is why, in my opinion, there are various styles. Indeed, this can be observed even in traditional iconography, because we see that the depiction of the same subject differs from artist to artist.

What do you think the role of iconography is in spreading the Orthodox faith? Do you think icons are well understood outside the Orthodox Church—or even within it?

It is very difficult to give a clear answer to such a question. The role of iconography is to offer religious people a way to come into contact with the spiritual reality expressed through

Left: The Resurrection. Neo-Byzantine icon with unique selection of (family) saints.

Right: Pantokrator. "I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness" (John 8:12).







Left: The Apocalypse. "He is clad in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. From his mouth issues a sharp sword with which to smite the nations. 'I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end'" (Rev. 19:13, 15; 22:13). Based on a seventeenth-century icon in the Holy Cave of the Apocalypse, Patmos



Right: Greeting of the Holy Princes of the Apostles Peter and Paul. Copy of an icon in the collection of the Holy Monastery of Saint John the Theologian, Patmos, dated variously between the early fifteenth and late sixteenth centuries.

the image. Therefore, the question of understanding the image outside the Church and the role of iconography in spreading the Orthodox faith are not issues for me. In my opinion, iconography is likely to work within the prayer life of the believer, and it may be the subject of artistic admiration by someone unfamiliar with the faith, but a role in spreading the Orthodox faith can hardly be expected of it. ✱



Maria Pente is a professional iconographer and painter who lives and works on the Greek island of Patmos.



Top: The Scarlet Beast and the Woman Clothed with the Sun. "But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle that she might fly from the serpent into the wilderness, to the place where she is to be nourished for a time, and times, and half a time. The serpent poured water like a river out of his mouth after the woman, to sweep her away with the flood. But the earth came to the help of the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed the river which the dragon had poured from his mouth" (Rev. 12:14–15).

Left: Maria Pente at work in her studio on a copy of the famous icon of Saint John in Adoration in the narthex of the katholikon of the Holy Monastery of Saint John the Theologian, Patmos. The icon is traditionally said to have been a gift of Emperor Alexios I Komnenos to Saint Christodoulos, who founded the monastery in the eleventh century.



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