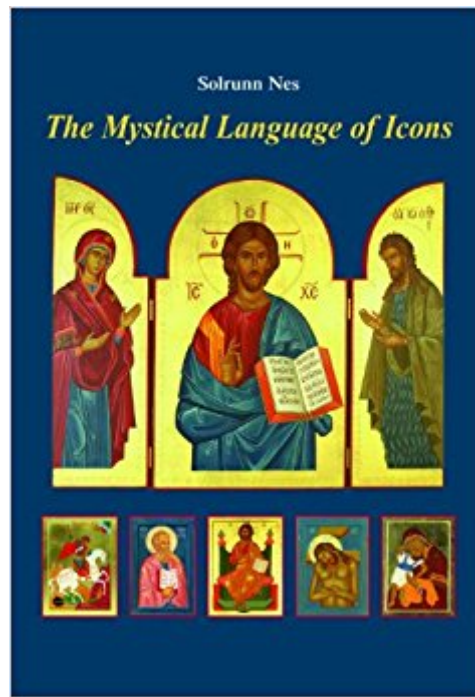


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The Mystical Language Of Icons



Synopsis

This lavishly illustrated guide to iconography explains through words and pictures the history, meaning, and purpose of Christian icons as well as the traditional methods that religious painters use to create these luminous, spiritually enlivened works of art. Solrunn Nes, one of Europe's most admired iconographers, illuminates the world of Christian icons, explaining the motifs, gestures, and colors common to these profound symbols of faith. Nes explores in depth a number of famous icons, including those of the Greater Feasts, the Mother of God, and a number of the better-known saints, enriching her discussion with references to Scripture, early Christian writings, and liturgy. She also leads readers through the process and techniques of icon painting, showing each step with photographs, and includes more than fifty of her own original works of art. Deeply inspiring and utterly unique, *The Mystical Language of Icons* will inform both those who are familiar with the rich tradition of religious art and those who are not. It also serves as a powerful devotional resource in its own right, one that Christians everywhere can turn to again and again.

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Customer Reviews

The Mystical Language of Icons is a straightforward and breathtakingly illustrated guide to Christian iconography throughout history. Full color photographs of iconographic artworks on almost every page are enhanced with an in-depth text that describes the history, meaning, and purpose of Christian icons; the techniques that religious painters used to create these works; specific nuances of individual motifs, gestures, and colors; Christian hymns, poems and prayers appropriate to individual artworks; and much more. Written by one of Europe's most well-known iconographers,

The *Mystical Language of Icons* is a serious-minded text yet highly accessible to lay readers, historians, and anyone interested in gaining a deeper understanding of iconography as a form of Christian worship, expression and communication.

Iconographer, Solrunn Nes, has put together a lavishly beautiful and engaging book about Christian icons largely in the Eastern Orthodox tradition. She discusses the painting (or writing) of icons, and one comes away with great respect for the spiritual engagement an iconographer must encounter to produce such a mystical piece of work for the faithful. She perfectly reminds the faithful, and educates the non-orthodox that an "icon is never complete in itself. It can never stand alone as an autonomous work of art, but refers to the spiritual dimensions." (p. 12) A brief history is provided. It is accurate, but not academic, which serves this book's ministry well. The book also presents some wonderful icons and their motifs. She shows mostly Greek and Russian icons, but also discusses theological ideas in relation to icons and Church teachings. This is just a wonderful book which all Christians can benefit and every Orthodox believer should have at hand.

In a time when what usually passes for religious art in the West is deplorable, it is always a sign of hope to come across the relative few who genuinely represent the tradition and (not to overstate the case in the least) the universal and authoritative canon of authentic Christian theological aesthetics. As regards the iconographic arts in particular, the essence of that canon is best expressed in the words of the Seventh Ecumenical Council (A.D. 787), which stated: The making of icons was not the creation of the painters, but an accepted institution and tradition within the universal Church. . . . The idea and tradition came from the fathers, not from the painters. Only the art belongs to the painter, whereas the form without doubt comes from the fathers, who founded the Church. (quoted in Nes, p. 13) In other words, the common classical heritage of Christian art is embedded in an objective tradition, one which is conventional, canonical, dogmatic, didactic, and liturgical. The antithesis of true Christian iconography in the Church is therefore that which presumes to abandon the objective for the subjective, tradition based on God's revelation for social propaganda, dogma for mere sentiment, the canon for self-expression. Drop into just about any Christian book or gift shop and one is likely to see prominently displayed "Precious Moments" angels, or those many ghastly "Jesus" pictures that I've come to think of (depending on which of the various scenes is depicted) as "Happy Jesus," "Malibu Jesus," and (when he is shown helping children play baseball, etc.) "Jesus the Friendly Ghost." If one continues looking around, he might describe cards or books of the skillfully rendered "icons" of either Robert Lentz ("Bridge-Building Icons") or William Hart

McNichols. Lentz and McNichols have adapted the Eastern iconographic style to serve their own religious sociopolitical agenda. As such, though technically impressive, their icons do not serve as vehicles of the tradition, but as propaganda and individual expression. For example, Lentz has produced such "icons" as those of "Hagios" Harvey Milk, and Christ as an AIDS victim. (Personally speaking, if pressed at gunpoint to make the choice, I would choose "Happy Jesus" for my bedroom wall over one of these slick propaganda-icons, which constitute a far graver offense.) Solrunn Nes, whom I was privileged to meet at the last Orientale Lumen Conference in June 2001, is the author of a beautiful antidote to such stuff. Highly regarded as an iconographer of considerable skill in Europe (her work can be found in many places, including Aylesford Priory in England and Takvam Chapel in Arna), and especially in her native Norway where she is a lecturer at the University of Bergen, Miss Nes has produced a fine guide to iconography in her recently published *The Mystical Language of Icons*. The book is lavishly illustrated in full color throughout with Miss Nes's own icons, each in the style of one of the various schools with which she is most conversant. All are striking and luminous, and fully in accord with the objective canonical tradition. Her work reveals how one committed prayerfully to the latter can nonetheless produce art of obvious creativity. Miss Nes provides us with an informative introduction, the fruit of her many years of research and travel to the great centers and monasteries of Orthodoxy, detailing for the reader the technique of icon painting (or "writing," as some would say), and showing the steps with photographs. She cursorily provides the historical and theological background of Orthodox iconography, the range of motifs, and important insights into the use of form, perspective, attribute, and symbol. The "meat" of the book, though, is page after page of her fine icons—those of Christ and the Theotokos, the feasts of the church year, the saints, and so forth—along with explanatory notes of the "mystical language" contained in each piece. As such, this book is both a crash course in the way the faith of the Fathers is conveyed through the art of the prayerful canonical painter, and a book for slow and absorbing devotional meditation. Above all, Solrunn Nes, herself a Western European and convert to Roman Catholicism, nonetheless possesses a profound knowledge and love of Eastern Christianity, and can be recognized as a true representative of the tradition expressed preeminently at Nicea II. Two quotations from her book's introduction serve to show why this is so, and why she is an authentic iconographer (and why, incidentally, Lentz and McNichols are not): The icon is a holy object, the form being merely a receptacle for the content. And the content is determined by the Holy Scriptures and the Traditions of the Church. That is why the work process is marked more by discipline than by [individualistic] inspiration. (p. 12). . . [T]he icon's motif is based on a historic event through which God has manifested himself. . . . However, in so far as the motif has a current interest

over and above the historic event, a style is used which underlines its universality and timelessness. As an expression of divine revelation the icon is subject to neither the laws of nature nor the reason of man. The icon is thus no illusion of the physical, visible world, but a vision of the spiritual, invisible world. (p. 21) Well, you won't get that with "Malibu Jesus" or "Saint Harvey Milk," but you will surely see it in Solrunn Nes. This book is unreservedly recommended. Addison H. Hart is a contributing editor of **Touchstone: A Journal of Mere Christianity**, in which this review first appeared.

I read "The Language of Icons" with the intention of learning more about the mode of religious art most characteristic of Eastern Christianity. The book far exceeded my expectations. I learned more about icons than I ever would have hoped. The reproductions of representative icons were beautiful and luminous. Moreover, the text was deeply spiritual and inspiring. The reader is drawn to meditate on the Christian message that the icons symbolize. There are books that are informative and books that are inspiring. This book manages to be both.

An excellent book for those interested in iconography. Set at a level for both the experienced writer, who wants to refresh their knowledge and yet also for the novice who would like to investigate this area. The explanations of the icons are wonderful, while the prayers from the eastern orthodox church illustrate the deep contemplative spirit of this media.

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