

Interview with LA Press Iconographer Mary Coit Sullivan

Mary Sullivan Coit is the iconographer for Saint Mark's Orthodox Church. Reproductions are available through Lancelot Andrewes Press. She is currently working on St. Athanasius of Alexandria. She has five more panels for the Benedictine Fellowship of St. Lauraence. Saint Basil, St Gregory of Nasar and St. John Chrysostum will be three of those panels.

Question: What drew you into doing iconography?

Mary: In about 1991, my Mother and I were going to St. Mark's Church occasionally, as we had become disenchanted with the Episcopal church. We thought it had become too charismatic and were very disappointed when the language of the 1928 Prayer Book was modernized. Mother had read about St. Mark's Parish breaking away from the Episcopal Church in order to preserve the traditional mass. It quickly became apparent that it was not sufficient for St. Mark's Church to be simply ex-Episcopalian. They found their home in Orthodoxy through the Rite of Saint Tikon. I say "they" because I was not ready to become Orthodox yet. I was "on the fence"- still attending, although not regularly, but not willing to take the plunge into something that seemed so foreign to my Anglophilic upbringing. On the Sunday we went to St. Mark's and saw the newly installed Icons of Jesus, Mary and John the Forerunner behind the altar. I had an Epiphany. I don't think I heard much of the service that day-all I could think about was those Icons and I knew that I could and MUST paint (I did not know "to write") them. As I had been a scenic artist, painting backdrops and sets for the theatre, I was fairly confident when I said to Father John after the mass, "I can do that." He looked skeptical! A few days later, I contacted him and he gave me the name of Flora Baker, the iconographer who had written them and I called her. The first question she asked me was "Are you Orthodox, my dear?" I admitted no and she informed me that iconography does not take place outside the Orthodox Church. My decision was made in that moment. I was Chrismated soon thereafter. Armed with a list of books given to me by Mrs. Baker, I began my journey. Some of the books were not easy to obtain and it seemed like little was known about traditional methods of painting in the wilderness of the Western United States. I knew that Icons needed to be written as closely as possible to the way they had been written in medieval times and I was determined to discover and master these techniques. Its probably just as well that I didnt realize the extent of what I was asking. At the beginning of this enterprise, I never dared to think that I had been called but I now know that there is no other explanation for it. God had given me a Vocation in a bolt of lightning. That was about 14 years ago.

Question: How did you learn to be an iconographer?

Mary: I read many books-there are definite rules involved in iconography. After reading instructive manuals such as Thompson's The Art and Practice of Egg Tempera Painting and The Craftman's Handbook, I just started, very tentatively, to paint or write them. I started out by copying a Supplicating Mary and an Angel (Gabriel) from an iconostasis in the book, The Meaning of Icons. I knew nothing-I did not know how to make the panels or gesso them. I did not know how to gild and I did not know how to use the medium. So I basically learned the hard way-by trial and error. It took me about 5 attempts before I had an icon that was good enough to give to someone outside my immediate family!

Question: Do you foresee yourself teaching others how to write icons?

Mary: At this point, I am still developing my skills. It would be great to have an apprentice but I think it might be difficult to find someone who would or could spend the time and effort needed to get good at it. When the time is right, God will provide.

Question: What challenges are there in writing icons?

Mary: Iconography is challenging on many levels. Aside from the artistic and technical challenges, there are intellectual challenges requiring hours of research. The most challenging aspect of iconography has to be spiritual. In the conclusion of his excellent book, The Icon: Window on the Kingdom, Michael Quenot writes, "We must ...insist on the fact that icon painting demands an artistic talent plus the daily living of an intense spiritual life in the Church, itself nurtured by Tradition. An authentic iconographer is-must be-a theologian of the image, because iconography is a language which, to speak it well, implies a living Faith."

Question: What is your favorite part of iconography?

Mary: My favorite part is painting the figure, particularly the face, which is the heart of the icon. Each Icon is an opportunity to grow closer to God, to the Saints and to become better at my craft. God willing, I will have many more such opportunities!

Question: What particular icons do you want to write? Why?

Mary: There are so many- it's hard to say. I am looking forward to writing the Anastasis (Harrowing of Hell) perhaps later this year. Actually I have been waiting to write that for several years now. I would also like to write a Transfiguration Icon and a Baptism of Jesus Icon. I will do more of the Theotokos. I have wanted to do a grouping of British Women Saints, particularly the Abessess. I am going to write an Icon of St. Elizabeth the New Martyr with Scenes from Her Life very soon. Just today after Mass, Deacon Wooley told me about an idea for an Icon based on event in the Life of St. Perpetua. It is a fantastic idea and it should be realized. In short, I only hope, Deo Volente, that I will have the time and the strength to do even half of what I want to do.

Question: What guidelines are there in writing an icon?

Mary: There are many guidelines the iconographer needs to follow. Icons are part of the sacred Tradition of the Orthodox Church. They along with the Scriptures show us the incarnation of Jesus Christ. There is a language of symbols that must be adhered to-there is no part of an icon that is without meaning-so it is the job of the iconographer to stay true to the traditions of our Faith.

Question: Which icon(s) is(are) your favorite(s)? Why?

Mary: I always think my favorite is the one I am writing now. One has to "fall in love" with the subject so one can write an icon that is worthy and will, one hopes, be pleasing to God.

Question: What words of wisdom do you have for an artist who wants to get involved with writing icons?

Mary: First of all, one really must learn to draw. To the untrained eye, icons may appear simple or even primitive. They most certainly are not. In actuality icons are not stylized and are perfectly proportioned. One should subjugate oneself to the process and be patient. It is not enough however just to "ape the style" and call it iconography. It is a vocation that takes years to master. I have not mastered it. It is more than an art form **and therefore requires more than mere mastery of technique. The longer one studies and writes icons the more humble one gets.**

Question: What books or articles do you recommend for people who want to learn more about iconography?

Mary: The first book I ever read was John Baggle's Doors of Perception: Icons and Their Spiritual Significance. Daniel Thompson's The Practice of Tempera Painting and The Craftsman's Handbook are both well written and give more information on the painting process.

Question: Do you have a mentor in the world of iconography? If so who is that person and how are they assisting you?

Mary: Flora Baker helped me start and put me on the path toward iconography. Flora's spiritual maturity was both inspirational and a much needed balance to my down-to-earth painting process. I was so terribly naive-not to mention egotistical! Knowing her made me realize my shortcomings. Father John Connely has been my greatest supporter. His encouragement and help has made it possible for me to do this full-time. That is an incredible gift.