

READING AN ICON

There are several aspects of icons to contemplate as one reads an icon including:

Composition—the wood panel where the image is placed

Gold background—symbolic of God's divine light

Icon figures—stylized appearance which emphasizes their spiritual nature

Colors—each one has a specific meaning

Placement of figures—the more important figures are placed in a higher position

Text—the names of saints along with liturgical phrases

Setting—the most revered icons such as the one seen below are protected in a gold or silver riza or oklad



THANKS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The icons in this collection were given to St. James Cathedral in 2024 by Michael A. Leppen, a nephew of Miriam U. and H. Earl Hoover and trustee of the Hoover Foundation. Mr. and Mrs Hoover were avid art collectors during their lifetime and active members of the Episcopal Church. Their generosity continues through the foundation, which has made a \$1 million gift toward the installation of a new organ for St. James Cathedral.

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This exhibit was developed by the St. James Cathedral Arts Council. Let us know if you are interested in more information about this group of volunteers.

Icons Windows into Heaven



Saint John the Baptist, with wings depicting his status as an "earthly angel" – Russian origin

ST. JAMES CATHEDRAL
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

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Is veneration worship?

Like the robe of Jesus that healed the woman with an issue of blood, Eastern Orthodox Christians believe icons convey the grace of God as God wills it. However, icons are not divine beings and Orthodox Christians do not worship them, nor do they worship the person(s) depicted within them.

Instead, icons are venerated.

Veneration is a reverence honor of love or recognition paid to all those portrayed in an icon. Many people misinterpret veneration as worship; however, worship in the Eastern Orthodox Church is reserved for God alone.

Icons are more than artistic creations; they are expressions of faith that bridge the material and the spiritual, the historical and the eternal. They provide believers with a tangible connection to the divine in both public worship and personal devotion.

Icons are considered “windows into heaven” for a variety of reasons:

COMMUNION WITH THE HOLY

Icons allow us to commune with the holy figures depicted within them. Through veneration of the icons, we receive divine grace, which draws us closer to God.

PICTORIAL THEOLOGY

Icons express the Gospel message in images, in the same way that Scripture does with words. It explains our theology to those who may not understand our language.

BECOMING PART OF THE BODY

Icons remind us that we are part of a community that extends beyond those we can physically see in the room with us. The saints are part of the Body of Christ just as we are.

INVERSE PERSPECTIVE

Iconographers use inverse perspective when writing icons, putting the **vanishing point** at the viewer's heart. This invites the viewer into the sacred space of the icon, creating a sense of participation with the divine.

PHYSICAL FEATURES ARE INTENTIONAL

The physical features of the person depicted in the icon are symbolic of their spirituality. The high forehead conveys their spirituality and wisdom. The elongated nose symbolizes the saint's attunement to the incense of prayers rising to heaven. The closed lips remind the viewer of the importance of silence.

ICONOGRAPHERS DO NOT SIGN THEIR ICONS

There is no signature of the iconographer on the front of the icon because the focus is on the divine image depicted rather than the individual artist. Since the icon is a window into heaven and not a personal expression like most other art, the artist's ego is secondary to the sacred subject in the icon.