



NEWSLETTER

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Friends of Mount Athos



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Athonite Art and Iconography

By Dr Graham Speake, President of FoMA and Co-Chairman of the Madingley Conference

This will be our twelfth residential conference at Madingley! If that fact alone suggests anything, it is that we think it is a splendid place to hold a conference, and we hope you will think so too if you have not been there before. Our theme this time is 'The Art and Iconography of Athos'. Could any topic be more visually appealing? Since that ever-memorable exhibition of 'The Treasures of Mount Athos' was staged in Thessaloniki in 1997, the art of the Holy Mountain has astonished the world – women as well as men – and is no longer the exclusive preserve of the monks and the relatively few male pilgrims who are fortunate to get to see it in situ. State-of-the-art photography has enabled us all to view it on our screens and art historians have been able to study it in detail at their leisure.



Dr Graham Speake, Co-Chairman of Madingley 2026

We have decided therefore that this is the right moment to bring the best of it for you to see, and we have assembled an international team of experts whose role is to demonstrate in accessible terms why these artworks are so important and how and where the sacred tradition continues to be practised by the holy fathers on the Mountain today.

In addition to a panel of distinguished historians we are delighted to include

among our speakers a number of eminent practitioners who will share with us some of the results of their ongoing work. Internationally renowned iconographer Aidan Hart will give us a practical demonstration of painting an icon. Fr Loukas, monk of Xenophontos monastery on Athos, fresh from painting the new Greek Orthodox church of St Nicholas at Ground Zero in New York, will discuss some of the challenges facing an iconographer today. And veteran Athonite pilgrim artist Markos Kampanis will talk about how some contemporary artists (including himself) have gone about representing the architecture and landscape of the Holy Mountain.

So much for the meat of the presentations. But a Madingley conference is so much more than that. It is also about meeting up with old friends, and making new ones among like-minded



The Parish Church of Madingley



Fr Maximos Constas, Co-Chairman of Madingley 2026

delegates. It is about the chance to experience a framework of Orthodox services in the lovely little parish church which stands inside the grounds of the hall. It is about the comfortable accommodation, the meetings in the bar, and the excellent cuisine in the atmospheric great hall. It's about browsing the shelves of the book display and taking a stroll round the well-kept grounds laid out by Capability Brown. All this and more is what makes up a weekend at Madingley. No wonder we keep coming back. Do join us.

The Living Presence of the Theotokos: The *Axion Estin* of Karyes

By Dr Niki Tsironis, Institute for Historical Research – National Hellenic Research Foundation, Athens, Greece

To speak about the Virgin and Mount Athos would require volumes. Every monastery, every church, every chapel and humble cell, every path trodden by generations of monks and pilgrims, bears witness to the presence of the Mother of God. Her miraculous icons, the traditions that surround them, and the countless stories of her protection are woven into the very fabric of Athonite life. Throughout the Holy Mountain, the Theotokos is experienced as an abiding presence, the Protectress and Abbess of the Athonite community.

Among the countless icons that express this living relationship, none occupies a more cherished place than the icon known as the *Axion Estin*, preserved in the Protaton church at Karyes, the administrative and spiritual heart of the Athonite community. Its significance embraces its artistic beauty, its long history of veneration, and its central place in the spiritual life of Mount Athos. It is inseparable from one of the most treasured traditions of Orthodox Christianity, according to which the Archangel Gabriel appeared before this icon and revealed the opening words of the hymn that has since become one of the Church's most treasured Marian prayers: Ἀξιόν ἐστιν ὡς ἀληθῶς μακαρίζειν σε τὴν Θεοτόκον... ("It is truly meet to bless thee, O Theotokos...").

Closely associated with the emergence of the organised Athonite community and venerated throughout its more than one thousand years of history, the *Axion Estin* offers a privileged window onto the relationship between image, hymn, liturgy, and communal memory. On Mount Athos, an icon becomes the meeting place of beauty, prayer, and communal life. Although traditionally associated with the miracle of the late tenth century, the icon itself is generally regarded by art historians as a work of the late Byzantine period, its original painted surface having been largely concealed by a series of precious silver revetments added over the centuries as offerings of devotion. Like so many of the Holy Mountain's most treasured icons, the *Axion Estin* bears the marks of artistic craftsmanship together with a long history of veneration. Successive generations of monks, pilgrims, and benefactors have expressed their devotion through the precious revetments added to the icon over the centuries, each one becoming part of its own history. On Mount Athos, the life of an icon unfolds through the continuing prayer of the community, extending far beyond the moment when the painter laid down his brush.

The history of the *Axion Estin* icon is inseparable from the formative centuries of Athonite monasticism. The tradition surrounding it is set in the late tenth century, a period that witnessed the consolidation of the Holy Mountain as a federated monastic community under the spiritual leadership of the Protaton at Karyes. According to the Athonite tradition, a young monk was left alone in his



Axion Estin icon without riza
(photo: Mount Athos Photographic Archive)



***Axion Estin* icon in the Protaton Church, Karyes, Mount Athos**

cell one Saturday evening while his elder attended the vigil at the Protaton. A mysterious visitor, later revealed to be the Archangel Gabriel, joined him in prayer before the icon of the Virgin. When the time came to sing the familiar hymn to the Theotokos, the visitor prefaced it with previously unheard words: *Ἀξιόν ἐστιν ὡς ἀληθῶς μακαρίζειν σε τὴν Θεοτόκον...* Amazed by the beauty of the hymn and finding no parchment on which to record it, the young monk witnessed the visitor inscribe the words with his finger upon a stone tablet before disappearing. The icon and the stone were subsequently brought to the Protaton, where the hymn was received into the

liturgical life of the Athonite community and, from there, into the worship of the Orthodox Church.

Whether approached as history, sacred tradition, or both, the narrative reveals something essential about the spirituality of Mount Athos. The *Axion Estin* occupies a unique place in Athonite tradition. Its anonymous painter belongs to the long lineage of Byzantine iconographers whose work has been preserved through the life of the Church, while the icon itself became the point at which image, hymn, liturgy, and communal memory converged. Through the revelation of the *Axion Estin* hymn, the icon entered the living tradition of Orthodox worship, where it has inspired generations of monks and pilgrims in a continuous act of praise before the Mother of God for more than a millennium.

The *Axion Estin* also exemplifies a broader characteristic of Byzantine religious culture. Throughout Byzantine history, the figure of the Theotokos provided a privileged language through which theological and anthropological questions were explored and expressed. Reflection on her person repeatedly became the vehicle for articulating some of the Church's most fundamental concerns: the mystery of the Incarnation, the dignity of human nature, the meaning of virginity, and, during the Iconoclastic controversy, the theological affirmation of the sacred image and of matter itself as capable of bearing divine grace. The *Axion Estin* stands within this rich tradition. It is at once an icon of the Virgin, a theological witness, and a living focus of the Church's liturgical memory.

Furthermore, the story of the *Axion Estin* illustrates a distinctive feature of Byzantine devotional culture, in which sacred images belong to a wider liturgical and performative world where image, chant, ritual, and communal memory continually shape one another. Within this living tradition, theology finds expression through the interaction of image and worship, while the liturgy continually renews the meaning of the icon. Through the hymn revealed before it, the *Axion Estin* entered the daily rhythm of Orthodox prayer, allowing a tradition born on Mount Athos to become part of the common worship of the Orthodox Church. Every celebration of the Divine Liturgy, every vigil, and every monastic office in which the hymn *Axion Estin* is sung renews that original encounter before the icon. Across the centuries, the icon has continued to inspire prayer and praise, its presence enduring through the voice of the worshipping community.

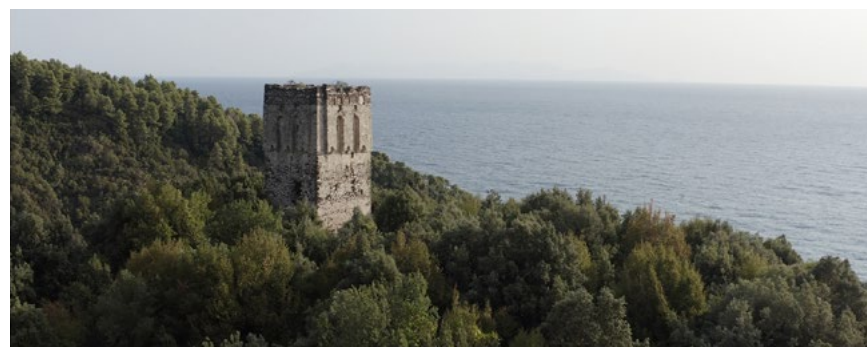
For visitors to the Protaton, the *Axion Estin* may first appear as one among the many treasured icons of the Holy Mountain. Yet its true significance lies beyond its painted surface. It has become the meeting place of heaven and earth, of angelic praise and human prayer, of history and living memory. Its beauty cannot be separated from the hymn that accompanies it, nor from the generations of monks who have stood before it in prayer. Together, these centuries of prayer, worship, and remembrance offer perhaps the clearest expression of what "holy beauty" means on Mount Athos. It is a beauty experienced in communion, continually renewed through the liturgical life of the Church and the faithful presence of those who gather before the Mother of God. In this way, the *Axion Estin* continues to bear witness to the abiding presence of the Theotokos, the Protectress and Abbess of the Holy Mountain.



***Axion Estin* icon with riza**
(photo: Mount Athos Photographic Archive)

What Mount Athos Means to Me: a place of peace and a beacon of light in an often dark and troubled world

By Prof Marcus Plested, 1643 Chair of Divinity in the School of Divinity at the University of St Andrews and author of *Orthodox Readings of Aquinas*.



The surviving Amalfi (Morfonou) Tower of the former Latin monastery of the Amalfion, founded in the tenth century by monks from Amalfi in Italy (photo: Alexeyvozniuk23101989, via Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 4.0)

Thinking about my time on Mount Athos I am tempted to paraphrase the beginning of Charles Dickens' *Tale of Two Cities*: It was the best of Orthodoxy, it was the worst of Orthodoxy. I should emphasise that in the course of my six or so pilgrimages between 1992 and 2022, my experiences have been overwhelmingly positive, but it would be remiss of me not to acknowledge that there have also been one or two more challenging moments.

But let me begin with the first image that springs to my mind: an evening in May 1993 sat on the balcony

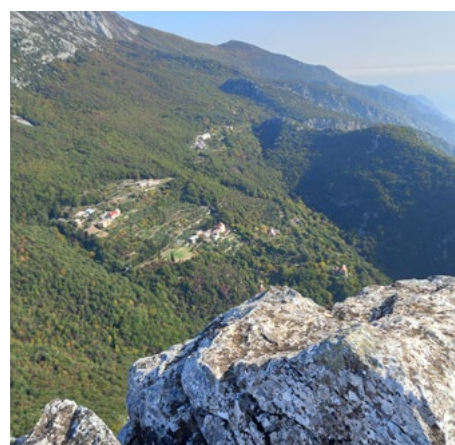
of the Cell of the Entrance of the Mother of God in Kerasia just listening to the sounds of nature: the frogs, birds, and insects, the trickling of water and the distant sound of the sea some two thousand feet below. I was sitting with Fr Parthenios, a wonderfully kind and charismatic monk who had devoted much time to mission work in Albania, then only recently freed from the most completely atheistic régime in Europe. He counselled me not to talk but simply to listen to nature's praise of its Creator. It was an extraordinary moment in which the veil between the creation and the Creator seemed very thin.

Kerasia ('Cherry') is right down at the foot of Athos, in the rugged area known as the desert of Mount Athos. It remains free of roads and thus a reminder of what the Mountain was like before the roads and taxis changed it forever. The lack of roads means that the monks there rely on mules, as they did in days of old. But this of course has its risks: tragically, Fr Parthenios was thrown from his mule and killed not long after my visit. Eternal Memory!

Let me dispense now with some of the challenges I mentioned. I did encounter some hostility to the academic study of theology: 'what theology?' 'ti theologia;' I remember one monk asking with some contempt even as I told him that I would going to study theology in Oxford under Bishop Kallistos. I heard a lot of angry dismissal of non-Orthodox Christians as 'heretics and schismatics' and of Catholics as Catolics, denying them even their name. Walking past the ruins of the Latin Monastery of the Amalfitans, I was hustled along and told it was full of snakes.

But I do not want to dwell on such things. It should be news to no-one that Athos is not perfect. But the holiness I encountered there was staggering. I was especially privileged to meet Saint Paisios. Although our conversation was translated, since I had little Greek at the time, his sanctity and perspicacity shone through every word. While we were sitting around in a circle on some little log seats, a group of well-dressed Athenians came by and asked to speak to the famous elder.. Fr Paisios was dressed in a fairly filthy old cassock and didn't quite match up to their idea of a great elder. 'I'll try and find him', the elder said. 'Where are you, you wretch?', he shouted down the valley. 'He's not here', he concluded. And they left.

I remember, too, a lengthy conversation with Elder Petronius, Prior of the Romanian Skete of Prodromou. This one was a little easier because the elder spoke French. He too has now been officially canonised. Mount Athos is absolutely a place where one can meet saints. I was also fortunate enough to spend some time with Elder Ephraim at Philotheou, just as he was beginning to launch a great wave of Athonite-style monasteries in the United States. More recently I met with Fr Vasilios of Iviron, in a connection with a book I was writing on his mentor, Demetrios Koutroubis (*The Master Builder: Demetrios Koutroubis and the Renewal of Theology in Modern Greece* (Limni: Denise Harvey, 2022).



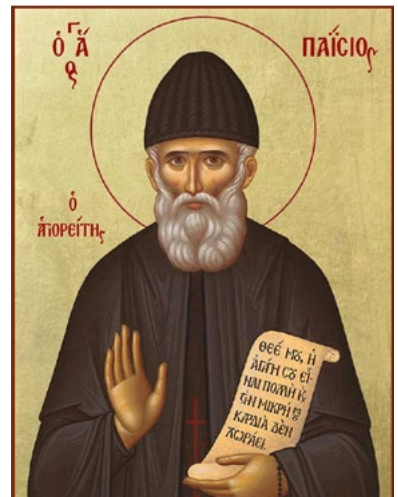
View of Kerasia, remote monastic settlement in the desert of Mount Athos (photo: Florificapis, via Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0)

On that visit I was able to bring two of my boys with me and begin the process of introducing the mountain to another generation.

And there were the beautiful services, seeing and hearing the Jesus Prayer practiced everywhere, going on endless beautiful walks, and exploring a stunning landscape rich in cells and sketes. There was the rich wine and oily octopus for breakfast (when I quite fancied some cornflakes), helping with the watermelon harvest, and drinking freshly-squeezed grape juice still warm from the vine. And all the hospitality, all the kindness. I remember one monk, seeing me flagging a little during a fourteen-hour vigil for the Exaltation of the Cross at Xeropotamou, gently directing me to a room with some refreshments and a place where one could lie down.

So what does Athos mean to me? A place in this fallen world, to be sure, but also a place where one is reminded of the highest potentialities of human nature and of the glories inherent within the creation. It is a place of peace and a beacon of light in an often dark and troubled world. Long may it prosper under the divine Providence!

Marcus Plested will deliver a talk on 'The Theology of the Athonite Icon' at the Madingley Conference.



Icon of Saint Paisios of Mount Athos, who lived as an ascetic at the Panagouda hermitage, a small, austere cell belonging to the Koutloumousiou Monastery near Karyes (icon: Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 4.0)

A New Vestment for the House of God: The Renovation of the Katholikon at Pantokratoros Monastery on Mount Athos

Based on an interview with Abbot Gabriel, his blessing on the katholikon's renovation is as much a testimony of faith as a record of marble and labour. By David Greybe, FoMA Trustee

In the early hours of 27 July 2026, a monk walked the grounds of Pantokratoros Monastery, striking the talanton – a long wooden plank sounded with a mallet. Its resonance carried across the north-eastern coast of the Athonite peninsula, calling the brotherhood and visiting pilgrims to worship in the monastery's katholikon following a year of intensive renovation. As Orthros (Matins) gave way to the first Divine Liturgy in the katholikon since the renovation, the incense rose and the chanters raised their voices, and a presence was felt that no amount of architectural work could produce – the grace of God, made manifest in a house renewed.



The new hand-laid marble floor in the nave (naos) of the katholikon, Pantokratoros Monastery

The katholikon of Pantokratoros, dedicated to the Holy Transfiguration of Our Lord, was erected circa 1362–1363. The monastery itself was founded in 1357, when Emperor John V Palaiologos granted an imperial chrysobull to the brothers Alexios and John, high-ranking Byzantine officials who were related to the Palaiologoi dynasty. For over six centuries, its walls have borne frescoes from successive centuries – the original Macedonian School works of the 1360s (partially revealed beneath later overpainting), the great Deesis above the main entrance, and the despotic (principal) icons of its

iconostasis by Theophanes the Cretan in the 16th century. These are not merely works of art but windows into heaven, revelations of the holy beauty that transfigures matter itself into a vessel of divine presence. It is this holy beauty – the radiance of the uncreated light made visible in pigment and stone – that no renovation must ever overshadow, but only serve.

Presiding over this sacred house is the Panagia Gerontissa, the revered miracle-working icon of the Theotokos and the monastery's most cherished treasure. This Byzantine icon has been at the centre of the monastery's devotion since its earliest days. The red lamp of the All-Holy Theotokos burns perpetually before her, an unextinguished witness to the intercession of the Mother of God in this holy place.

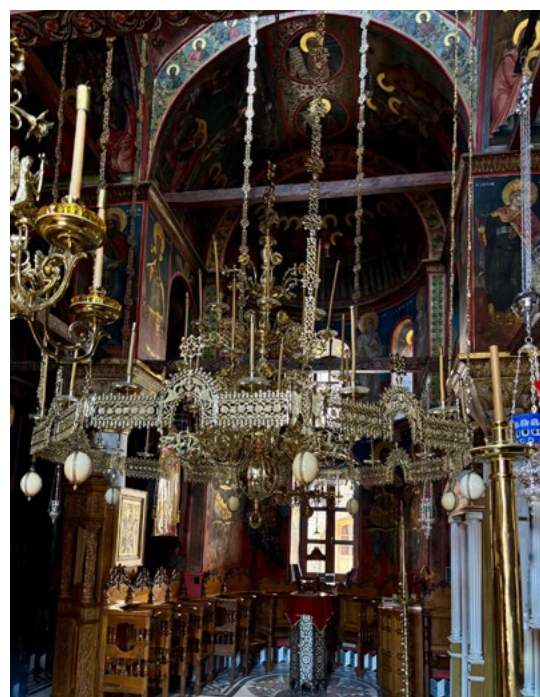
Yet the house required renewal. Abbot Gabriel – always quiet-spoken, no matter the situation, and deeply loved and respected by his brotherhood – describes the need with characteristic directness. The monks of previous generations had used dangerous chemicals to clean the marble floor. The decision was made to remove the existing marble entirely and to install a new system of heating and air conditioning – a practical necessity in a mountain monastery where winters bite and summers press hard. The project was made possible by the generosity of a single benefactor, who gave the total amount privately.

The work was planned over three years, with Father Loukas of Xenophontos Monastery, an iconographer, painter, and sculptor of international renown, leading the design alongside the fathers of the brotherhood. In all, twenty-one persons were involved, five of them fathers of Pantokratoros themselves. The marble for the new floor was sourced mostly from Greece, with the dark green stone from Pakistan and the red from Guatemala – a quiet, unspoken echo of the universal Church contributing, stone by stone, to a house on the Holy Mountain.

The most challenging aspect, Abbot Gabriel says simply, was time. One year of continuous, often non-stop labour. And yet, he notes, on those long days of exhaustion, “the consolation was felt from Jesus Christ.”

The large 16th-century icons of the iconostasis and the 14th-century frescoes were cleaned and restored *in situ* by specialist conservators who came to Mount Athos for the purpose – revealing anew the holy beauty that centuries of candle smoke, wear, and later overpainting had concealed but never extinguished.

At the heart of the new lighting in the katholikon, Abbot Gabriel explains, are two handcrafted features in the nave: a chandelier and, surrounding it, a *choros* – a large circular metal ring with candles and hand-painted icons, symbolising the heavenly assembly gathered around divine light. The chandelier was inspired by a single bronze arm dated to the mid-fourteenth century, preserved in the monastery’s museum, from which its twenty-four arms were modelled. Both the chandelier and the *choros* are suspended centrally over the nave where the faithful stand in prayer – the chandelier higher, the *choros* around and below it, its circular railing bearing hand-painted icons of the saints, encircling the faithful like the company of heaven gazing down. Both fixtures are made from bronze doré (gilt bronze) and were “hand-hammered” by skilled artisans, a phrase the Abbot speaks with evident delight. Yet it is the spiritual significance of the *choros* that he returns to most readily. *Choros*, he says, means “dance.” When the *choros* swings, the saints dance in the katholikon. And during the services of major feasts, the ecclesiarch (sacristan) sets the chandelier and *choros* moving together in a slow, circling motion – a visible and mystical sign that the saints of Paradise accompany the chanting monks and the faithful gathered below. Thus, as Abbot Gabriel explains, the new lighting is far more than an arrangement of handmade fixtures: it is a participation in the liturgy of heaven itself, “Jerusalem on high” descending to earth, and the company of the saints rejoicing with the Church in the house of God.



The new handmade *choros* and chandelier in the katholikon, Pantokratoros Monastery



The new hand-laid marble floor in the inner narthex (*lit*) of the katholikon, Pantokratoros Monastery

In the chapel of the Dormition of the Virgin, embedded within the katholikon to the left of the inner narthex, the marble floor was renewed and heating and air conditioning installed, while the holy altar was left essentially untouched. Its original floor – not marble, and never treated with chemicals – has been preserved as it has been for centuries.

When asked whether this renovation stands on a par with the great 1854 repainting of the frescoes by Matthaios Ioannou of Naousa, Abbot Gabriel’s answer is a masterclass in Athonite humility: “No. Everything has its order, and the renovation of the frescoes was more important than this renovation of the katholikon.”

And yet, asked whether the project has been a success, he does not speak of materials or measurements. He turns instead to Psalm 24: “O Lord, I have loved the beauty of your house, and the place where your glory dwells.” The purpose, he implies, is not the building itself, but the sanctification of those who gather within it – “to sanctify those who love the beauty of your house, beloved heavenly Father.”

In his closing words, the Abbot turns to Psalm 83, the psalm of the pilgrim who longs for the courts of the Lord: “How lovely are your tabernacles, O Lord of hosts.” And then, with a frankness that is itself a kind of prayer: “That is why the fathers of ancient times wanted to make the best for God’s churches. In our time we are not so holy, but we try to follow the previous fathers.”

It is a sentiment that speaks to the heart of the Athonite vocation – not perfection, but faithful imitation across the centuries. The fathers of 1363 built; Matthaios painted in 1854; and now, in 2026, a brotherhood of humble monks has laid new stone, cleaned ancient icons, and raised the dancing light of the chandelier and the choros, that the holy beauty of God’s house might shine forth once more – a fitting vessel for the Mystery, and a foretaste of that beauty which is yet to come.

Thanks be to God



Close-up details of the intricate patterning of the new hand-laid marble floor in the katholikon, Pantokratoros Monastery

The Artistic Heritage of Mount Athos and Contemporary Creation

By Anastasios Ntouro, Director of Mount Athos Center, Thessaloniki, Greece

Mount Athos constitutes one of the most important centres of the Orthodox artistic tradition, where art is directly connected with liturgical and spiritual life. Over the course of a historical trajectory spanning more than ten centuries, the monasteries and their dependencies have produced a particularly significant body of works, encompassing architecture, frescoes, portable icons, carved wooden iconostases, manuscripts, and other forms of ecclesiastical art.

Monumental painting occupies a central position in the artistic tradition of Mount Athos. Of particular significance is the iconographic programme of the Protaton in Karyes, attributed to Manuel Panselinos and regarded as a supreme example of Palaiologan painting. During the 16th century, artistic activity on Mount Athos became closely associated with the *Cretan School*,



Manuel Panselinos, Byzantine Greek painter and writer of the Palaeologan era



**Hieromonk Loukas of Xenophontos
Monastery, Mount Athos**

whose important representatives included Theophanes the Cretan, Tzortzis, and Frangos Katelanos. In the 18th century, Dionysius of Fournia contributed to the development of the post-Byzantine painting tradition, while his *Hermeneia of the Art of Painting* became an important theoretical manual for iconographic practice.

During the 19th century, Athonite painting was influenced by Western European and Nazarene art, adopting elements such as naturalistic representation, chiaroscuro, and perspective. At the same time, the Byzantine tradition continued to flourish in the icon-painting workshops of the monasteries. The coexistence of these two tendencies contributed to the formation of an artistic landscape that eventually led to the revival of Byzantine painting in the 20th century, with Fotis Kontoglou as one of its most characteristic representatives.

The practice of icon painting continues into the contemporary era in the workshops of the Athonite monasteries. A characteristic example is that of Hieromonk Loukas of Xenophontos and the workshop of the Holy Monastery of Xenophontos, which has undertaken projects both within the monastic state of Mount Athos and in Orthodox churches outside Mount Athos. At the same time, the work of Hieromonk Anastasios represents a distinctive case of contemporary Athonite painting, as it is associated with naïve painting and the tradition of the Cell in which he lived as a hermit.

Alongside its internal artistic production, Mount Athos has also been the subject of study and artistic representation by foreign secular artists. Edward Lear, during his visit in 1856, produced drawings and watercolours of the Athonite monasteries, while Paul Jouve, who visited Mount Athos in 1917, depicted the landscape, architecture, and moments from the everyday life of the monastic community.

The Mount Athos Center, founded in 2000 by the Holy Community of Mount Athos and the Municipality of Thessaloniki, plays an important role in the contemporary study, documentation, and promotion of the artistic heritage of Mount Athos. Through research, publishing, and exhibition activities, the institution has contributed to highlighting both the historical art of



**Doug Patterson, British architect
and painter**

Mount Athos and contemporary artistic creation inspired by Mount Athos.



**Hieromonk Anastasios of the Kellion of
Timios Prodromos 'Dionysios of Fournia' in
Karyes, Mount Athos**

Within this context falls the work of British architect and painter Doug Patterson, who presented the exhibition *Painting in Sacred Places: Athos – Sinai* at the Mount Athos Center in 2011. His presence was also connected with the establishment of the “Doug Patterson – Royal College of Art – Mount Athos Center” scholarship, through which young artists were given the opportunity to study and artistically document the monastic state of Mount Athos. The first recipient of the scholarship was Tim Vyner, who visited Mount Athos in 2013 and documented



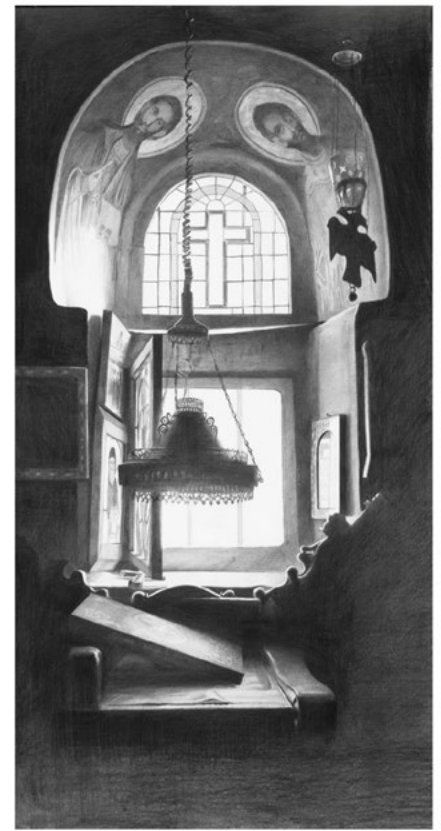
Tim Vyner, British illustrator

its landscape, architecture, and everyday life through watercolours, drawings, and digital works.

Along the same lines is the recent artistic project of the Mount Athos Center with Giorgos Taxidis. Between 2020 and 2025, the artist made more than fifteen journeys to Mount Athos and visited all twenty Holy Monasteries. This experience was expressed through painting, drawing, printmaking,

and sculpture and was presented in the exhibition *Mount Athos: Land of Silence*. Taxidis's work explores the Athonite landscape, architecture, and spaces of monastic life, highlighting the relationship between place, everyday experience, and spiritual life.

The historical continuity of Athonite art, from the Byzantine and post-Byzantine traditions to contemporary artistic approaches, demonstrates the enduring vitality of Mount Athos as a place of artistic creation and spiritual expression. At the same time, the work of institutions such as the Mount Athos Center contributes to broadening the study and reception of the Athonite heritage, connecting its historical tradition with contemporary artistic production.



Giorgos Taxidis, Greek visual artist

Icons as a Way of Seeing

By Aidan Hart, iconographer and writer

Holy icons are important not only for use as liturgical objects; they also train us to see the world more deeply, more profoundly. Individuals and cultures act as they see, and the secular world sees the world as opaque. This faulty vision is the source of its ecological crisis and its unsatiable hunger to consume.

The icon tradition, by contrast, sees this wonderful world as gift and theophany, with a face and voice. 'The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge' (Ps 19.1,2). As the writer to the Hebrews states, the Son, who is the radiance of the Father's glory and the exact expression of his being, upholds all things by his powerful spoken word (Heb 1.3). The world is full of the voice of the Word. It is a bush aflame with divine glory.

The icon tradition presumes three realities: the viewer; the image; the image's prototype. It sees no created thing as a mere thing, however beautiful. It rather reveals the world as theophany, a 'showing forth of God'. The arrangement of frescoes in churches shows the world in procession, through Christ and his Church moving towards its transfiguration in the New Jerusalem. It affirms that the world has a telos or purpose beyond mere survival.

However, from the time of René Descartes and on throughout the so-called Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries, Western Europe began to see the world no longer as an organic whole, alive and with a divine telos, but as a machine. This machine had laws that could be understood and used by man to manipulate it.



**Transfiguration of Christ icon
by Aidan Hart**



Candles lit, Protaton Church, Karyes, Mount Athos

By contrast, the Scriptures and the Church Fathers consider this world not as some blind and mechanical nature, but as a temple, an icon, a cosmos or adornment, and a paradise park. In other words, the Orthodox Tradition sees the world as a holy place set apart for the worship of God, an image of divine wisdom, a cosmos or adornment that awaits its full transfiguration as vestment for the Body of Christ, and a park in which God's people are called to walk and commune with their God and Lord.

The monastic family of Athos, set in the garden of the Mother of God, is a praying community that tries to see and live in the world in this way. For all the failings that one will inevitably find in any society of humans, the Athonite community's stated aim is to live in this paradisaical way. It offers thanks for all creation, not only in its hymnody but also in its iconography, such as in the frescoes found in Iviron and Dochiariou that depict creation

praising God. The monks try to live lightly on the earth, ascetically. Most Athonite architecture sits comfortably in the land, harmonising with it.

The catholicons and the many chapels on Athos are of course the focus and hub of the monks' liturgical life. But if we view the Athonite peninsula as a whole, then these churches and chapels taken together can be seen also as a single sanctuary and Athos as a single church. The Holy Liturgy is one. The Athonite cosmos with its forests, streams, and beaches—and of course the mountain itself—are part of this temple's architecture and part of the single liturgy of praise and thanksgiving offered within it. While at Iviron, I often heard the frogs joining with the early morning choir, their loud croaking forming a sort of *ison*, a backing to the monks' chant.

Life on Athos is a microcosm of how all mankind is called to live. The cooking, the crafts, the gardening, the hospitality given to pilgrims, the care of the forests and paths: all these things can be seen as an extension of, and return to, the Liturgy. This is why Sunday, with the Eucharist at its heart, is both the eighth day and the first day, both a culmination and a beginning.

Of course, Athos is not the only place where this vision of the world as holy place is lived out. We also find it practised in other monasteries, in the homes of the devout, in villages where Christian traditions are continued. Icons are key to this sanctification of the land. They are a stamp of Christ's ownership of earth, which is why they are found not only in churches but also in roadside shrines, by footpaths, in homes, in buses and taxis. They are processed outside on holy days. Through this iconic outreach, the church walls expand and extend the boundary of paradise further and further out into the surrounding world.

By forgetting the divine prototype, a secular culture – if culture it can be called – condemns itself to live in a binary way instead of three-dimensionally. It demotes the gift to a mere thing. It might admire that thing's beauty but sees no face in it. A godless society de-faces creation to make it into mere nature, a nature that just is, something that came to be thanks only to a mix of chance and lots of time. The world is no longer a holy place but simply a place. The secularist does not read the note attached to the world that reads: 'From God with love'. Seeing in this way, it is only natural for modern man to treat the world as a deposit full of almost infinite goodies, to be drawn upon at will for his pleasure and ease. He takes without thanksgiving and therefore takes too much.

If pursued, this two-dimensional vision eventually contracts into a single dimension. By his departure from his father, the prodigal son broke the trinity of father, wealth and himself so that he could enjoy the dyad of just wealth and himself. But once he had exhausted



Panagia Portaitissa procession, Iviron Monastery, Mount Athos

his funds, the son found himself alone, single and isolated. In fact, the parable suggests that he contracted even further: he lost even himself and thus came to zero, for the parable tells us that his repentance began when 'he came to himself' (Lk 15.17). He had departed from his father, then riches departed from him, and then he departed from himself. This explains why the first stage in the ascetic life of a monk is to return to himself that he might return to God.

In all this, we can see the importance of rich, right, and visual liturgy such as found on Athos. The incense, the swinging of chandeliers to suggest the dancing stars, the seeing and kissing of icons, the chant, the eating and drinking: all these sensual traditions of worship are a microcosm and paradigm of how mankind is called to live with our heavenly Father and our brethren on this estate called earth.

The Scriptures begin with God, a garden, and two people, and end with the verdant city of God. We live as we see, and we see according to how we worship, either facing towards this heavenly city or facing away from it. Athos faces the spiritual east.

Aidan Hart will deliver a talk on 'The Panel Icon on Mount Athos: A Ladder between Heaven and Earth' at the Madingley Conference. Aidan will also give a practical demonstration on 'Painting an Icon'.

Face to Face by Aidan Hart

Review by Theo Andreou, who teaches at the Thyateira Midlands Ecclesiastical Seminary and specialises in Orthodox Marian devotion. He is the author of *Temple of God: An Unbroken Vision of the Virgin Mary*, and a forthcoming article in the *St Andrew's Encyclopaedia of Theology*.

Since the final defeat of Byzantine Iconoclasm in 843, the Orthodox Church has annually commemorated this event as the 'Triumph of Orthodoxy'. From this, one can discern that, for the Church, recognising the legitimacy of making and venerating icons is bound up with Orthodox identity. Indeed, even today, Orthodoxy is often distinguished from other Christian groups by its use of icons. Yet, in practice, owing to a myriad of factors, icons and their meaning had progressively lost much of the triumphal status they had enjoyed within the Orthodox world. In Russia, for example, particularly under the influence of the Westernising reforms associated with Peter the Great, naturalism came to be regarded as a superior method of artistic expression. Consequently, icons were often dismissed as primitive forms of art, devoid of a theological dimension. Sapped of their meaning, old icons in Russia were sometimes even repurposed to hold doors and windows open.

Conscious efforts to reclaim the tradition of iconography and to articulate the theology of the icon emerged, almost independently, at the beginning of the twentieth century. The two primary figures associated with this revival are Fotis Kontoglou in Greece and the Russian émigré Leonid Ouspensky in Paris. It is within this broader revival of interest in recovering the artistic techniques and theological significance of iconography that the work of Aidan Hart, himself a master iconographer and prolific writer, can be situated. Indeed, his new book *Face to Face: The Theology of the Icon* offers readers a concise yet deeply rich introduction to Orthodox thinking on icons. He begins by discussing what an icon is and is not before setting out the threefold purpose of icons: they are to be used liturgically; to testify to the inherent goodness of matter, which is not hostile to divinity; and to portray the fruit of the Incarnation, 'which is the deification of human persons within the Body of Christ' (p. 7).

Hart then turns to the use of images in the Scriptures and the prohibition against idols in Exodus 20:4, drawing on St. John Damascene's *On the Divine Images* with considerable clarity. In chapter two, after briefly discussing icons prior to Iconoclasm, he presents a distilled summary of the historical and theological factors that motivated the Iconoclasts. This lays the foundation for his third chapter, 'The Orthodox Response to Iconoclasm', one of the book's most detailed chapters. Replete with citations, Hart guides the reader through the writings of St. John Damascene and St. Theodore the Studite, as well as the documents of Nicaea II. Though not examined in detail, Hart also draws attention to Sts. Germanos and Nikephoros of Constantinople, whose significance during the Iconoclast controversy tends to be overlooked. Additionally,



this chapter elucidates the patristic distinctions between nature and person, image and prototype, and veneration and worship. The theological and practical implications of iconography, including the relationship between God and matter and the capacity of the icon to communicate spiritual truths visually, are likewise explored.

Hart provides, in chapter 4, a way of reconciling the apparent dichotomy between the practice of iconography and the ascetic notion of imageless prayer. One line of argument he takes is that icons present us with a reality saturated with divine light. He argues that being able to view the world in this way 'is the essence of the second phase of spiritual progress, natural theology' (p. 44). Icons, then, are pedagogical: they teach us to see reality as it truly is. Once someone has attained this level of spiritual perception, prayer becomes imageless and icons become redundant, precisely because the individual is now interacting with the prototypes themselves. The fullness of this is realised in the age to come.

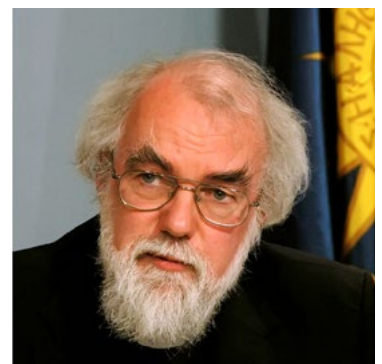
Chapter 5 surveys the uses of icons within the lives of Orthodox Christians, including their role in the liturgy, in the home, and as didactic instruments. The final two chapters (7 and 8) follow a historical thread beginning with the Franks, which ultimately brings iconography into dialogue with modernity. Here, Hart's knowledge as an artist shines as he sketches the influence of iconography on figures such as Brancusi and Kandinsky (pp. 86-87). It is, however, in chapter 6 that one of Hart's most important contributions lies. This chapter addresses the question of whether theology impacts the style of icons, and whether style affects their liturgical function. Hart demonstrates his grasp of the scholarly debate surrounding these questions, providing the reader with an account of the six main currents within the discourse, as well as their origins (pp. 53-54). These he traces to the efforts of Florensky, Kontoglou, and Ouspensky. Yet, although he acknowledges that 'they perhaps overstated the difference between the icon tradition and other art forms', which is a charge frequently levelled against them by art historians, they did so because 'they were trying to re-establish the dignity of traditional iconography against what they considered more secularized Christian art' (p. 55). Following this, Hart sets out to explore the discourse on the relationship between icon form and theology since these aforementioned foundational figures. Despite expanding on their ideas, Hart's chapter, and more broadly his book, demonstrate that he is operating with the same desire: to make the significance of the Triumph of Orthodoxy, as an affirmation of the essentiality of icons to Orthodox identity and theology, more tangible. In pursuit of this aim, Hart's new book is a wonderful addition to contemporary Orthodox literature on iconography; one that succeeds in outlining the fundamental issues whilst engaging thoughtfully with more recent perspectives.

Metropolitan Kallistos Memorial Lecture

The second lecture in memory of Metropolitan Kallistos will be delivered in St Sophia's Cathedral, Bayswater, at 6.00 pm on Thursday 21 January 2027 by Dr Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury. He will be introduced by His Eminence Archbishop Nikitas, Archbishop of Thyateira and Great Britain. His fascinating topic will be *Orthodoxy, Courage, and Freedom: The Witness of Fr Nicolae Steinhardt*.

Nicolae Steinhardt's recently translated *The Journal of Joy* is a chronicle of the spiritual journey of an unusual, controversial, gifted Romanian writer who endured a long and brutal imprisonment under the post War Communist regime. In it he describes his baptism in prison and reflects widely on faith, politics, and culture, and on what Orthodox teaching and practice have to offer in a secularised and rootless

Europe, without ever resorting to ethnic mythology and exclusivism — very much in the spirit of Metropolitan Kallistos's lifelong concern to bring Orthodoxy out of any sort of cultural ghetto. This lecture will introduce and examine Steinhardt's distinctive perspective on Orthodox faith. Following the lecture, the Friends of Mount Athos Vasilopita celebration will take place in the crypt of St Sophia's Cathedral. Full details will be shared with members and will appear on our website in the second half of October.



Dr Rowan Williams

FoMA Christmas Cards 2026, In Aid of Axion Estin Appeal

Our four Christmas cards this year unite the sacred and the scenic. Two feature Nativity of Jesus Christ icons by the renowned international iconographer Aidan Hart, bearing the joyful proclamation 'Christ is Born!'. The other two carry watercolours of Mount Athos in winter by illustrator Tim Vyner – the first recipient of the Doug Patterson/RCA bursary to draw all twenty monasteries of the Holy Mountain – each inscribed 'Season's Greetings' above small black-and-white cameo drawings of Athonite life.

Cards come in packs of 10 with white envelopes, at £7.50 per pack (excluding postage) – and **£2 from every pack sold goes directly to the Axion Estin Appeal.**

The cell of Axion Estin, adjacent to Karyes, dates from the second half of the tenth century and is therefore one of the oldest and most important cells on Mount Athos. It was here that the Archangel Gabriel appeared in 982 and first chanted the hymn 'Axion Estin', which now forms part of almost every Orthodox church service.

FoMA has proudly supported the Appeal for many years, and the Executive Committee believes we should continue to do so wholeheartedly. Work on Phase II – a new building housing a kitchen, refectory and pilgrim accommodation – is now expected to be completed by the end of 2027.

On sale from 1 October via the FoMA shop (www.athosfriends.org).

For our EU and North American customers: We hope to announce, during October, details of cheaper shipping of Christmas cards from within these two regions.



Nativity of Jesus Christ icon by Aidan Hart

Winter Service, Koutloumousiou Monastery, Mount Athos – watercolour/mixed-media by Tim Vyner



Mules at Kafsokalyvia, Mount Athos (inside 'Winter Service' card)

Season's Greetings



Mules at Kafsokalyvia, Mount Athos



Nativity of Jesus Christ icon by Aidan Hart

Winter Fuel, Docheiariou Monastery, Mount Athos – watercolour by Tim Vyner



Entrance to Philotheou Monastery, Mount Athos (inside 'Winter Fuel' card)

Season's Greetings



Entrance to Philotheou Monastery, Mount Athos