

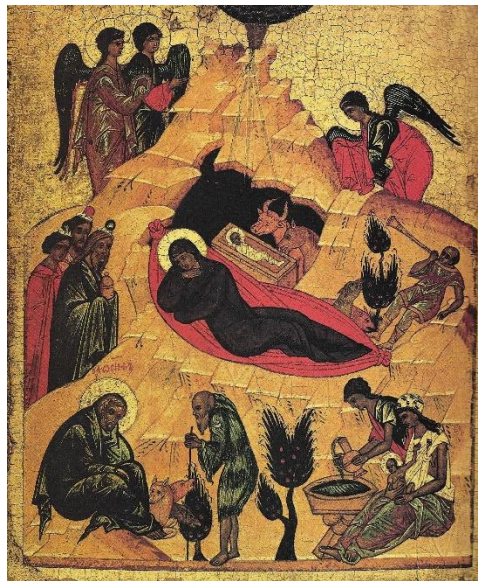
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## **An Eastern View of the Nativity**

By George R. Crisp

Contemporary Club of Redlands

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## **Summary**

The sacred art of iconography is a fascinating subject, one that is often misunderstood in the western world. Icons are unfairly judged as idols by those who are wary of violating the commandment against “graven images.” However, those who utilize icons in personal devotion or public worship, as well as the artists who create the works, view icons as a vehicle through which they worship. With Christmas quickly approaching, this paper seeks to look at the art of icons depicting the nativity of Christ. Most people are familiar with nativity scenes from the western point of view, but icons approach the subject with a different purpose. While not expecting affinity for the theology depicted, it is hoped that an appreciation for the biblical story of the nativity can be seen through the artistic form and expression found in the icons discussed. This paper is presented in conjunction with a selection of images provided via PowerPoint.

## **About the Author**

George R. Crisp was raised in a military family with parents who introduced their children to the Christian faith through the Methodist church. As a teenager, George began to explore various artistic avenues, mostly music, but he also enjoyed drawing, painting and poetry. The artwork found in various religious settings fueled his imagination, and because of the family’s travels, he was exposed to a variety of images on familiar themes. This gave him an appreciation of many art forms.

George earned a Bachelor of Arts in Music at the University of Redlands, the Master of Divinity and the Doctor of Ministry degrees from the Claremont School of Theology. He entered the ordained ministry in 1981, serving seven churches in five districts in two states before retiring and returning to Redlands in 2013. In retirement, he has served as an interim pastor in two churches. He is a member of the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers, and has produced four commercial recordings (CDs). He is a member of the Community Chorus of Redlands and has been a member of the Fortnightly Club since 2015. This is his second paper for the club.

George and his wife Sue have been married for 35 years. They have two sons and live with Dollie, their “daughter with fur.”

## An Eastern View of the Nativity

[Slide 1 is the title slide]



[Slide 2] Many people are familiar with the commonly depicted nativity scenes that appear this time of year. They may be known as manger scenes or creches, but this conventional display of biblical characters seeks to capture the birth narrative of Jesus in a tableau. At some point in childhood, many kids don a fake beard, a blue shawl or a bathrobe to act out this nativity scene for doting parents and grandparents – these days accompanied by videos or photos immediately posted on social media. At home, little tabletop figurines are a Christmas staple of many homes. There are also life-size nativity tableaus on church lawns, some of them making controversial political statements via their display. Here in Redlands, the Feast of Lights musical extravaganza, happening this weekend, will feature a vivid nativity scene portrayed by students from the drama department.

St. Francis of Assisi is often credited with staging the first nativity scene in 1223. The only historical account we have of Francis' nativity scene comes from *The Life of St. Francis of Assisi*, by St. Bonaventure, a Franciscan monk who was born five years before Francis' death. According to Bonaventure's biography, St. Francis got permission from Pope Honorius III to set up a manger with hay and two live animals – an ox and an ass – in a cave in the Italian village of Greccio. He then invited the villagers to come gaze upon the scene as he preached about “the Babe of Bethlehem.” (Francis was supposedly so overcome with emotion that he couldn't say “Jesus.”) Bonaventure also claims that the hay used by Francis miraculously acquired the power to cure local cattle of diseases and pestilences.<sup>1</sup>

The scene's popularity took off from there. Within a couple of centuries, nativity scenes had spread across Europe. We don't know if people actually played Mary and Joseph during Francis' time, or whether they just imagined those figures' presence. We do know that later scenes began incorporating live actors, and the characters expanded beyond Mary and Joseph and sweet baby Jesus.

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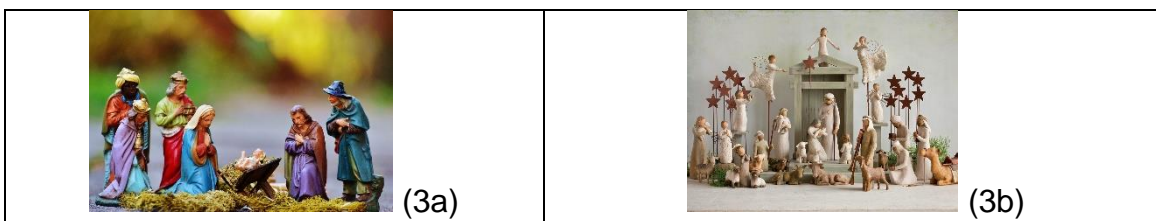
<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Rachel Nuwer, Smithsonian.com, December 14, 2012

Nativity purists (like me), know that the familiar cast of characters relied upon today is not biblically accurate. Beyond the Holy Family, angels, shepherds and three wise men have been added to our modern nativity scenes. Of the New Testament's four gospels, only Matthew and Luke describe Jesus' birth. Matthew adds the wise men (or magi), Luke comments on the shepherds, and both gospels mention angels in various parts of the story. But nowhere in the story do the shepherds and the magi appear together. Luke tells us that for Mary and Joseph there "was no room in the inn." The "inn" does not refer to some kind of first century hotel, but more like a family guest room for visitors. But if all the relatives were coming to Bethlehem for the Roman census, as Luke reports, a family's house could fill up fast. That would leave only the meagerest of accommodations for latecomers.

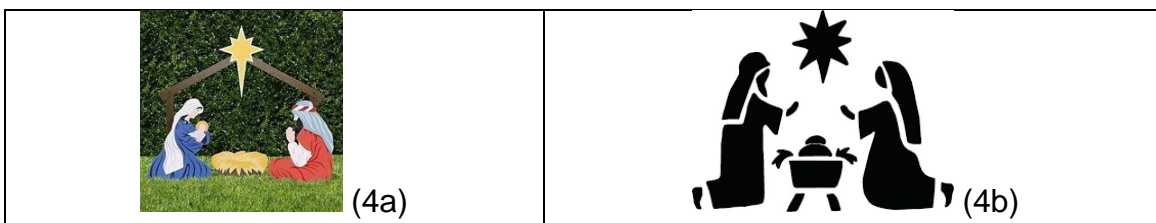
Although the popular carol "Away in a Manger" says "the cattle are lowing," no biblical record mentions cattle, donkeys, oxen, sheep, camels or other farmyard friends in conjunction with Jesus' birth. It is presumed that Mary rode in on a donkey due to her advanced pregnancy and their low economic means, but the gospels don't mention that. Many narratives presume that the shepherds brought sheep and the wise men rode in on camels, but this is conjecture.<sup>2</sup> Still, the story stirs human imagination and we have expanded the manger scene to include those staple characters. Luckily, artistic interpretation is permitted.

Full disclosure: my wife, Sue, and I have a large collection of nativities, and we annually display them in our home. Occasionally, we have been asked to display some of them in the Gathering Area (also called the Narthex) of First United Methodist Church. We have quite a variety of manger scenes – including angels, shepherds, and wise men – from various parts of the planet. I've brought just two samples with me today, a fabric nativity meant for introducing the story to children, and a stocking suitable for hanging.

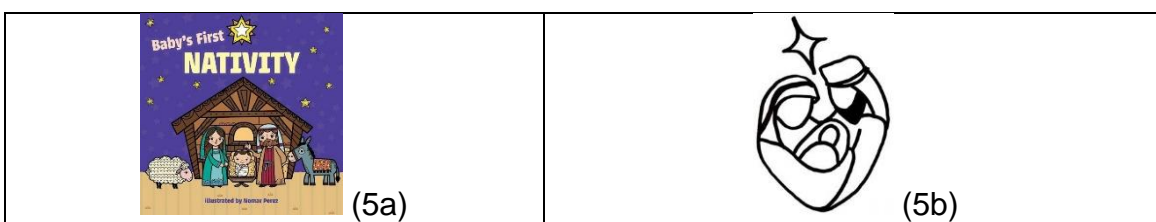
Nativities are so common that they have worked their way into various cultures. Some of the nativities are simple, others are quite elaborate [Slide 3a & 3b, below].



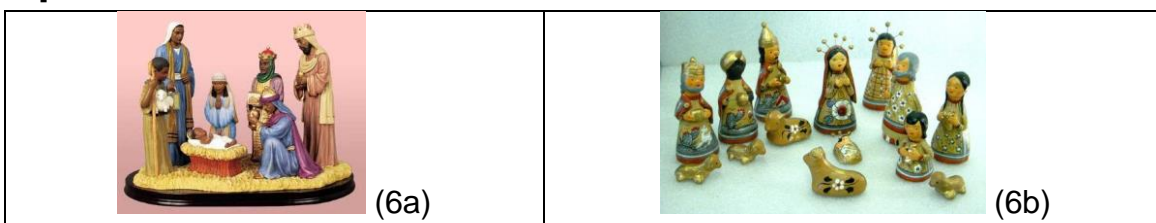
<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Merritt, "Your Christmas Nativity Scene Is a Lie, *The Atlantic*, December 13, 2015.



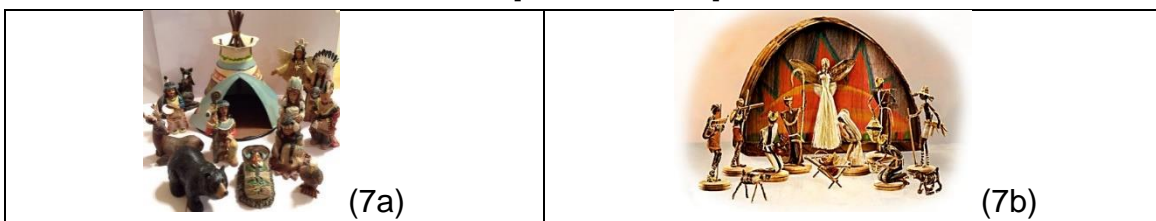
Some are fit for outdoor display; others are good as a clip art illustration for your holiday letters [Slide 4a & 4b, above]. Some depictions are geared toward children, such as the book *Baby's First Nativity*; others just focus on the Holy Family [Slide 5a & 5b, below].



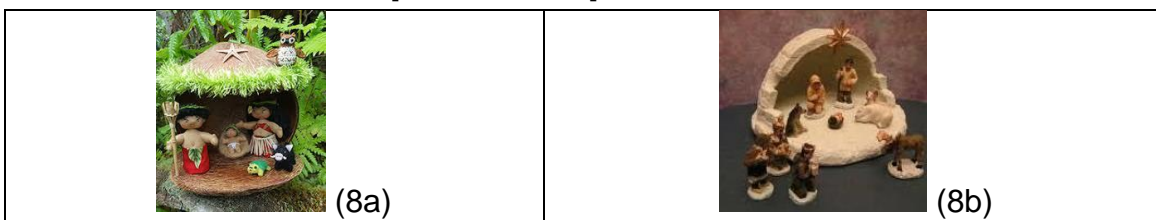
Here are a few more examples: African American / Hispanic Nativities [Slide 6a & 6b]



Native American / African Nativities [Slide 7a & 7b]



Hawaiian / Arctic Nativities [Slide 8a & 8b]





All of these nativities show the whole cast of characters – adoring Mary (usually depicted kneeling before the Christ Child), Joseph stands by stoically, but with a reverent posture; the shepherds, the Magi, sometimes an angel or two, the Bethlehem star, and a few animals – all in culturally appropriate dress and demeanor. Let's look at them again [review slides 6-8].

There's also some silliness attached to the nativity as these next few slides will show you:



[Slide 9] **Dogs Nativity** – puppy Jesus, Dalmatian Mary, Golden Retriever angel, Joseph, kinds and shepherds / **Moose Nativity** – shepherd, kings, Joseph (with staff), kneeling Mary, all gathered around the baby moose in the manger.



[Slide 10] **Star Wars Nativity** – R2D2 is Jesus, Luke and Leia are the loving parents; 3CPO is on the left as is Yoda; Chewbacca and the Wookies sit in for the shepherds and sheep; Darth Vader seems to be one of the magi, and a Jedi master appears as the angel.



[Slide 11] **Millennial Nativity** – Note these 21<sup>st</sup> century details: Joseph is taking a selfie, and there are solar panels on the manger roof along with a drone; a shepherd stands by paying more attention to his “device” than the Holy Family; the wise men have arrived on their Segways, bearing gifts from Amazon; and a cow fills the manger.<sup>3</sup>



[Slide 12] **Peanuts® Nativity** – Here Lucy is Mary; Charlie Brown is Joseph; Sally is the angel and Linus is a shepherd with Snoopy as the sheep; the magi are depicted by Franklin, Frieda and Peppermint Patty. (In other commercially available versions, Pig Pen, Violet, Schroder and Shermey also appear in the scene.)

<sup>3</sup> Image courtesy of the Zergcollective.com, accessed October 21, 2019.

This enduring classic was born on December 9, 1965 when “A Charlie Brown Christmas” debuted on national television. Charlie Brown, disheartened by the commercialization of Christmas learns about the true meaning of Christmas. The story is funny and sweet, and contains the words of the Bible (specifically Luke) without being threatening to non-believers.<sup>4</sup>

We don’t have time enough to show the hundreds of varieties, but I’ll mention a couple more. There’s a **rubber-duck nativity** for those want yuletide during their bath time, and even an **Irish nativity** with three wise men bearing gifts of clover, Guinness, and a pot of gold. One couple in Ohio has created a **Zombie Nativity**. The 2003 Christmas film *Love Actually* famously featured a grade-school nativity play with multiple lobsters, Spider-Man, and a large green octopus – as if pointing out the myriad strange ways the nativity can be reimagined.<sup>5</sup>



[Slide 13] By now, as we leave these novelties behind, I hope the traditional nativity depiction is clear in your minds. The cast of characters is familiar to you, and their placement in the manger scene is relatively consistent. Taking center stage is Jesus in the manger. Mary kneels before the Babe while Joseph leans on his staff as he stands beside the child’s mother. The shepherd and his sheep are flanked by the magi, gifts in hand. (Although, when you set up a nativity in your home, you are at liberty to place the characters wherever you want them.) Everyone appears at the manger under the guiding light of the Bethlehem star, and everyone’s gaze is focused on the central character – Jesus.

## A Variety of Eastern Nativities

Let’s turn our attention to a different expression of the nativity story, and the focus of this paper – looking at the Nativity of Christ through the Eastern Orthodox tradition of iconography. I have been fascinated by these sacred artistic images ever since a study on icons was part of a course I took in seminary. The word icon is derived from the Greek *eikon*, and it simply means “image.” As generally understood, icons are considered holy images to which special veneration is given. We usually associate icons with paintings on wood panels. Icons can also be frescoes, mosaics or carvings in stone, metal or ivory.

<sup>4</sup> Lee Mendelson (et al.), *The Making of A Charlie Brown Christmas* (DVD). Paramount Home Entertainment (2004).

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Merritt, *op.cit.*

Icons first appeared in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, but were met with resistance. Some people viewed icons as “graven images” in violation of the second of the Ten Commandments which states: “You shall not make for yourself any idol . . . You shall not bow down to them or worship them” (Exodus 20:4-5). The primary objection was to the representation of deity. However, as Christianity developed, leaders turned to art to help promote the religion. In 313, Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Byzantine Empire.

Iconography was developing vigorously and its basic compositional schemes were well established. They incorporated various elements from a number of sources. schools of iconography emerged. **Hellenistic** icons were noted for their clarity of composition and gracefulness. **Roman** icons were known for their hierarchical placement of figures and they symmetry of their design. In the **Syrian** school, dynamic movements and the energy of the figures was characteristic. **Egyptian** icons, borrowing from their advanced funeral traditions, featured large almond-shaped eyes, long and thin noses, and small mouths.

Still, there were fears that icons could lead to theological heresy or idol worship. The major issue was how can the dual nature of Christ, divine and human, be reconciled? The Fourth Ecumenical Council in Chalcedon (A.D. 451), settled the arguments by saying that the two natures are uniquely united in Christ without confusion and without separation. Any confusion was viewed as heresy.

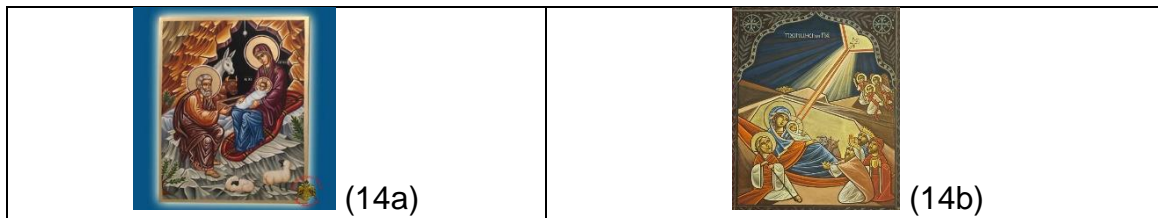
In 725, the Byzantine Emperor Leo III, and other overly zealous “puritans,” argued that misrepresentation of religious images leads to heresy. Leo banned all pictorial representations and began a systematic destruction of all holy images, particularly icons. This became a period of **iconoclasm** (725-843). The **iconoclasts** rejected the images of Christ as material images. To fight the iconoclasts, the **iconodules** – defenders or lovers of icons – argued that icons themselves were not worshiped but venerated, and that such veneration was not idolatry but led to the worship of God.

St. John of Damascus (675-749) and St. Theodore of Studios (759-826) wrote extensive treatises explaining the reasons for and the importance of icon veneration. The Empress Irene of Athens suspended the iconoclastic persecutions in 780. Seven years later, the Seventh Ecumenical Synod in Nicaea reaffirmed the veneration of icons. However, the attacks on icons were renewed by Byzantine Emperor Leo V the Armenian in 815. It was not until 843, during the reign of Empress Theodora, that the iconoclasts were defeated for good.



After the triumph of the iconodules, iconography developed at an unprecedented speed. By the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, most iconographic formulae had been firmly established. The art was exported to other Orthodox countries – Bulgaria, Serbia, and a little later Russia. Icons were further developed by regional schools.<sup>6</sup> The next few slides will give you an idea of the artistic differences in the various Eastern Orthodox school of iconography.

[Slide 14] Byzantine / Coptic Nativities



[Slide 15] Greek Orthodox Nativities (cave detail on right)



[Slide 16] Russian / Ukrainian Nativities



For a moment, let's look at a comparison of a western nativity and the Ukrainian nativity [Slide 17a and 17b (next page)]. **What is the same?** In the western nativity we see Jesus, Mary and Joseph, a shepherd and the magi, all gathered in the manger under the star of Bethlehem. The same characters, minus the magi, all appear in the Ukrainian nativity as well. In both images, the characters are dressed in the clothes that we imagine first century people would wear. In both, the people, and you the viewer, are drawn to look at the central figure in the manger.

<sup>6</sup> Information adapted from an article by Alexander Boguslawski.



**Now, what is different?** The western scene evokes a sense of warmth and comfort, but not so much the icon. Again, the characters, and you the viewer, are drawn to look at the central figure in the manger but the Ukrainian icon depicts the scene in a cave (or grotto), not a manger, and Mary is the only character gazing at Jesus. Mary adores Jesus in a sitting, not kneeling, position. The icon has angels, one flying and a chorus of the heavenly host gathered in the upper right hand corner. Joseph is not standing beside Mary at the manger, but is sitting outside the cave looking away and talking with an unidentified character. The shepherds and their sheep are looking up at the chorus of angels, looking terrified. There are sheep in the foreground with the shepherds, and animals (likely an ox and a donkey) in the background, behind the Babe in swaddling clothes. There are no magi in this icon.

Iconography is an art that continues today, following the same forms and formulae as the ancient icons we've already seen. Modern iconographers often say they are "writing" an icon, and the word "write" is also related to the word "paint." In most Indo-European languages, the word "write" can mean carve, score, outline, scratch, cut or draw. The Latin, *scriber* (scribe), and the Greek *graphein* (graph), may more directly show the connection between the words "paint" and "write." The etymology of the word "paint" reveals such synonyms as color, stain, portray or draw.<sup>7</sup>

A few examples of the work of modern iconographers are in the following slides:

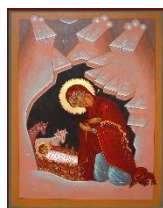
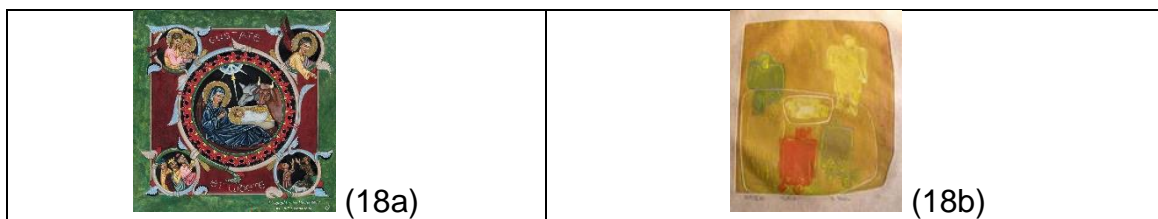
[Slide 18a] Originally a textile artist, **Juliet Venter** has been an iconographer for the past ten years. Based in England, she took up iconography in 2009 under the tutelage of an artist in Johannesburg, South Africa. Her website says she "pays homage to or is inspired by . . . manifestations of medieval art." She has taken her artistic motto from a hymn: "Pattern for our duty, showing God in beauty."

In several e-mail exchanges I've had with Ms. Venter, I've learned that this Nativity icon was partly inspired by a 13<sup>th</sup> century Italian illuminated manuscript. She has fused elements of Byzantine and western iconography in her design. She chose a **quincunx** (quin-kenks) arrangements of five equal shapes – one in the center and

<sup>7</sup> Source: *Online Etymology Dictionary*, [www.etymonline.com/word/write](http://www.etymonline.com/word/write), accessed October 31, 2019.

one in each corner. She reminded me of the “sacred geometry” that is often found in Christian art, especially icons.<sup>8</sup>

[Slide 18b] A native of Scotland, **Roland Poska** now lives and works in Rockford, Illinois. He describes his art as “deckle edged,” referring to the uneven edges, or “deckles,” which forms on hand-made paper. You can see this effect in the piece displayed here known as “Nativity 2.”



[Slide 19] **Peter Pearson** is an American iconographer who saw an icon at age 12 and fell in love. He has studied with various iconographers in Russia, Canada and the United States. Peter is also an Episcopal priest, now living at the Holy Cross Monastery in West Park, New York. I spoke with him earlier this year and he told me that the purpose of an icon is not to serve as an object of prayer, but to remind believers that they are part of worship already happening in heaven.

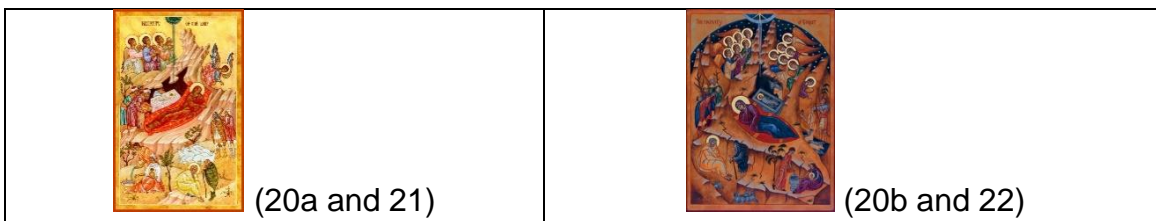
[Slide 20] **Michael Kapeluck / Randi Sider-Rose** – Michael Kapeluck and Randi Sider-Rose are Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania area iconographers that I met in October.

[Slide 21] **Michael** summed up his work this way, “I speak theology through my brush.” He explained that the symbolism and myth represented by icons can be hard for people to accept as truth in our modern scientific world because we have come to equate “myth” with “falsehood.” While science teaches the empirical, mythic symbolism draws us into spiritual mysteries beyond our senses. Michael noted that icons are more than “windows into heaven,” as they are often described. “Icons are heaven breaking into us!” he said. Michael’s work is found at [www.archangelicons.com](http://www.archangelicons.com).

[Slide 22] **Randi** noted the resistance to icons. “One criticism has been that venerating an image results in worshiping matter rather than God.” She said, “It is not matter that I worship . . . [but] an icon is matter that points away from itself

<sup>8</sup> Ms. Venter’s comments taken from personal e-mail exchanges, November 24-December 4, 2019.

toward the divine. Randi told me that each dab, each application of paint, is a prayer for the artist. Her work is found at [www.immanuelicons.com](http://www.immanuelicons.com).



## The Annunciation



[Slide 23] For many people, the story of the Nativity of Christ begins with the angel Gabriel's visit to Mary known as the Annunciation. The feast day of the Annunciation is March 25, a calculated nine months before Christmas Day. In this part of the story (as told in Luke 1:26-38), Gabriel comes to Mary and announces that God has chosen her to bear the Christ Child. In this representative icon, a Divine ray points to Mary indicating that her conception of the Child is by the Holy Spirit. Her posture reveals both her fear and her innocence. Her head is slightly bowed in reverence, her right hand on her breast symbolizes her acceptance, and her eyes are turned upward.



[Slide 24] Gabriel's wings identify him as a Divine messenger, as does the staff he is holding in his left hand. His right hand is stretched toward Mary, as she has been chosen for this event. Gabriel's legs are spread apart as if running with haste to bring the good news. Near Gabriel's ear is what I have recently learned is a "listening ribbon," indicating that the angels are always ready to hear and convey our prayers to God.



[Slide 25] This second icon of the Annunciation has similar features, following the ancient formulae developed in the various schools of iconography. But there is one major difference – the scene is not set before a blank background, but rather set in Nazareth, Mary's hometown. Gabriel has a staff, angel's wings, the suggestion of his running, and his right hand gestures toward Mary. Now, look at Mary's hands: her right hand gestures toward Gabriel, while her left hand holds a skein of yarn, showing that the angel has interrupted her quiet domestic life. Mary is also on a small platform to show she has "*found favor*" with God (Luke 1:30). According to Eastern Orthodox theology, the platform shows that she superior to other women.

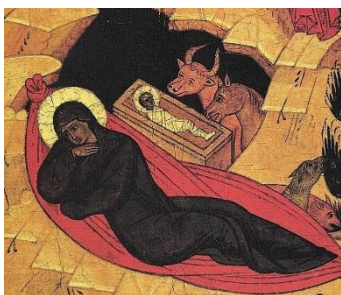
## One Eastern Nativity



[Slides 26] A closer look at one classic nativity scene reveals how different icons are from western nativities. This one, from the 15<sup>th</sup> century, is built on prototypes from the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries. It comes to us from the Novgorod School in Russia. Painted (or written) during the Mongol invasion of Europe in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, this icon preserved the Byzantine tradition. Novgorod means “new town,” and the city is south of St. Petersburg and east of Moscow. The Novgorod School is most widely known for their frescoes and murals, but also for famous icons such as the one before us. After the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the school relocated and became the Moscow School.



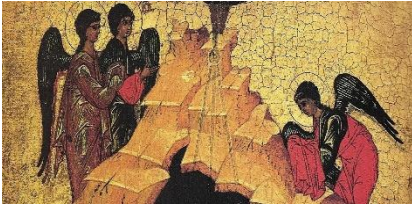
[Slide 27] The setting for this icon is a cave (or grotto), but the Babe is laid in an animal feeding trough (or manger). In Orthodox theology, this setting reveals that Jesus was born among the natural elements and is one with the created order. In fact, the Orthodox view this event as a festival of recreation and the renewal of the world. The major characters are the angels, Mary and the shepherds while Joseph and the wise men are minor characters. Jesus is seen in the manger, wrapped in swaddling clothes, with two animals (an ox and a donkey) in the background. The whole of the icon gets to the fundamental Orthodox dogma of the Incarnation.



[Slide 28] **Mary & Jesus Detail** – Breaking down the icon to its details, we first look to the center of the painting. There we find Mary and Jesus as the primary focus of the icon. Note the position she occupies – lying beside the baby but outside the cave. She is dressed in a dark blue but outlined in red which draws our attention. Her position is half-sitting, half-lying down, an indication of her postnatal exhaustion. The artist believes the Incarnation to be a real event and highlights both the divine and human elements of the story. “Around this central group – the Divine Child and His Mother – are grouped all the details [that] testify to the Incarnation itself and to its effect on the whole created world.”<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Leonid Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, New York, (1983), p. 159.

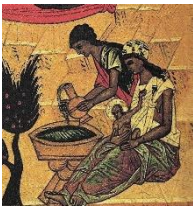




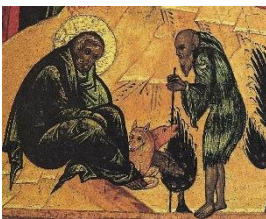
[Slides 29 & 30] **Angels Detail** – In this particular icon, there are fewer angels than you find in other icons. These heavenly messages “perform a twofold service: the glorify and they bring good tidings.”<sup>10</sup> Two of them (on the left) look up toward heaven. The third angel (on the right) leans toward and down at the people with hands symbolically full of the good news. To show the contrast, look again at the Russian nativity we saw a few minutes ago.



[Slide 31] **Shepherd Detail** – On the right of the center, an unsophisticated shepherd is listening to the angel's message. He is playing a reed pipe which further identifies him as a shepherd, but also indicates that he is adding human art (in this case, music) to the angelic choir. His clothing is dark, simple. Two animals, neither of them sheep, appear with him. He stands next to a tree which serves as a symbol of his life in the fields, but also functions to separate his rural locale from the manger scene.



[Slide 32] **Midwives Detail** – A common addition to Orthodox icons of the biblical story is the pair of midwives in the lower right corner of the icon. Tradition says that Joseph brought them to Mary to help with the birth of her child. This tradition gives Joseph a bit more to do in the story than we find in the scriptures. The midwives, dressed in their work clothes, are bathing the Holy Baby, but the child seems to be a miniature adult.



[Slide 33] **Joseph Detail** – Continuing our clockwise tour of the icon, we come to Joseph, sitting well apart from Mary and Jesus. He is sitting in the presence of a mysterious figure who is usually identified as a tempter, the devil. While not a part of the biblical nativity stories, he functions to give Joseph an expression of doubt – a virgin birth is not possible.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

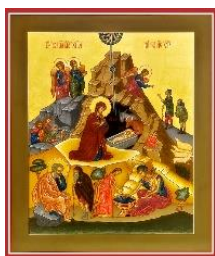




[Slide 34] **Wise Men Detail** – Lastly, we come to the wise men (magi), dressed in beautiful robes, who come with their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Their posture is reverent, as indicated by the lead man's folded hands, for they "*have come to pay him homage*" (Matthew 2:2). In contrast to the shepherd, these are learned men, and in this icon, they are depicted as being of different ages – one is young, another middle aged, and one is a man of advanced years.



[Slide 35] Look at the **whole icon** again. As with western nativities, the whole story of the nativity is captured in this one painting. Now, the point of this icon is not simply to tell you a biblical story. The icon seeks to draw you *into* the mystery of the Incarnation, to place you at the scene and invite you to become a participant in the event itself. Ultimately, the icon's purpose is to lead the viewer to worship God, the one who is the author of the story.



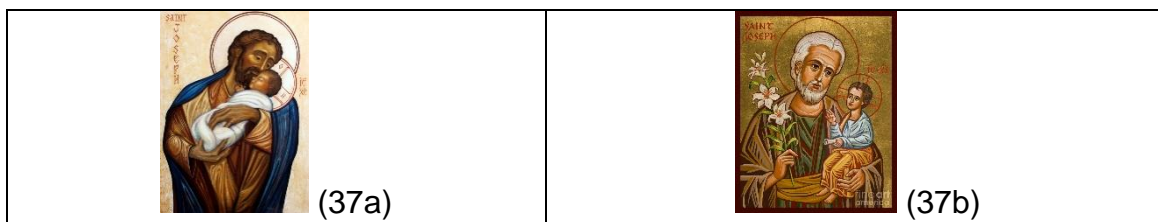
[Slide 36] **Common Features** – As you have seen, there are features common to these nativity icons. Just like their western counterparts, the icons of the nativity follow a traditional form with the standard cast of characters. Each character in the icon is in a position relative to his or her part of the story. The color palette is standardized with Mary in red (or in a blue dress on a red background).

The shepherds are dressed in drab clothes of the field, while the wise men are clad in fine robes. The midwives are also in simple work clothes, and the angels are resplendent in heavenly robes, while poor Joseph's clothes reveal his presumed dark, uncertain mood. A long ray (sometimes three) beam down from a heavenly star indicating that this is a cosmic event.

It's hard to imagine that the story of the Incarnation, as depicted in the Eastern Orthodox icon, could be trivialized the way the western nativity scenes have been. There are artists who make modern versions without using the traditional forms, mostly to make controversial commentary on the event itself. As an example, an icon by Valintin Popov, once displayed at the Long Beach Museum of Art, features Mary as Wonder Woman, Joseph as Superman, and the Baby Jesus with the Face Book logo superimposed on his face. Another of Popov's icons features Spiderman,

Mickey and Minnie Mouse, Tigger and Piglet (from the Winnie the Pooh stories), and Batman in place of the biblical figures.<sup>11</sup>

[Slide 37] Two final icons place a rare focus on Joseph and the Baby Jesus.



As a stepfather, I have a personal affinity for Joseph, who was not exactly a stepfather, but more like a foster father. He takes on the responsibility of helping Mary raise her son, names him Jesus (as directed in Matthew 1:21), and raises Jesus in his household of Nazareth. Tradition tells us that Joseph taught Jesus the carpenter's trade, and Jesus is identified as "*the carpenter's son*" in both Matthew and the gospel of Mark.<sup>12</sup>

[Slide 38] In the first icon, Joseph is tenderly holding Jesus, asleep in his arms. Jesus is still in his swaddling clothes, indicating that he is still an infant. He is kissing Jesus as an expression of his acceptance and love for this Holy Child. His gaze is fixed on Jesus, inviting the viewer of the icon to join him in praise and adoration of the Babe. Joseph's nimbus is evident, indicating his status as a holy character.

But notice, the halo is blank revealing that we do not know a lot about him to inform our adoration. In contrast, Jesus' halo has two visible and one hidden marking, identifying him as part of the Trinity. Or, if you're a purist, the two markings in his halo are proclaiming his dual divine and human nature.

[Slide 39] In the second image, an Armenian icon, Joseph's white hair shows that he is somewhat older. We don't know what his age was at the time of Jesus' birth, nor at any other time of Jesus' life. It is presumed that Joseph was older than Mary, and that he may have died after Jesus was found in the temple conversing with the temple teachers (as recorded in Luke 2:41-51).

<sup>11</sup> "Ironicon: The Art of Valentin Popov," Art and Cake: A Contemporary Art Magazine with a Focus on the Los Angeles Art Scene, accessed October 31, 2019.

<sup>12</sup> Matthew 13:53 and Mark 6:3, respectively.

Jesus, too, has the appearance of an older child (almost an adult), and Joseph is not holding him quite as closely or tenderly. Joseph and Jesus are looking at one another, once more inviting the viewer to see the love and respect they have for each other. Joseph is holding what appears (to me) to be a stalk of lilies, the flower associated with the resurrection of Jesus at Easter.

Another noticeable difference in the second icon, Jesus is holding up two fingers. This has been interpreted as a sign of blessing, or alternately an indication of his dual nature – divine and human. He is also holding, in his left hand, a scroll, a symbol of his being understood as the “Word made flesh” (John 1:14).

[Slide 40]     **Primary Image** – Whether or not you believe in the story, accept the doctrine of the Incarnation, or simply have an appreciation for the religious side of Christmas, it is clear to me that iconographers take a more theological approach to the biblical narrative. Its not that western nativities are not also fine story-telling depictions, but often they have come to sentimentalize – or, as we have seen, in some cases trivialize – the religious story of the Nativity.

I find that both art forms of the Nativity are an invitation to see and hear the story anew each year, and remember the event that brought the Christmas celebration to us. Perhaps either form can encourage us to a deeper commitment to love, joy, kindness, generosity, peace and goodwill toward all people, not only as seasonal expressions, but every day of the year. Merry Christmas!