

ICONS—TRUTH THAT TRANSCENDS TIME: THE ICON OF THE ENTRY OF CHRIST INTO JERUSALEM

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Both religion and art have fascinated the world since the beginning of time: thus, the blending of the two creates a most wonderful work. Religious icon paintings, such as the “Icon of the Entry of Christ into Jerusalem” on display at Houston Baptist University’s Fine Arts Museum, lent by Sharon and William Morris, hold greater significance than most paintings. The work, painted with egg tempera on wood panel, prominently displays Jesus Christ as he rides into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday – a story told in the Gospels of the Bible. Most Christians hold this painting, and other icons similar to it, in high regard due to its significance. When desiring to discover the true beauty and meaning behind an icon like “Icon of the Entry of Christ into Jerusalem,” one must investigate the history and style of the painting, the intent of the artist, and how the painting itself demonstrates Christ and His teachings.

Religious icons have survived for centuries, in various styles. The “Icon of the Entry of Christ into Jerusalem” actually comes from sixteenth century Russia, which might seem unusual. Most religious works of art seem to generate from Italy or England. However, the popularity and importance of icons caused them to spread to various parts of the world. In Russia, the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem, the scene represented in the “Icon of the Entry of Christ into Jerusalem,” holds more importance than other Christian scenes. In fact, in the sixteenth century, the Russians held a symbolic representation of the Triumphal Entry. “During this ritual representing itself a more complicated version of the Cross-Processing, a patriarch or a pontiff with a cross and a Gospel in his hands would ride astride a donkey.” (Belik). This practice, eventually abolished by Peter the Great in the seventeenth century, remains alive through the icons created in its memory. Some people believe that these icons contain a holy significance. “Although icons like this are typically didactic – intended to illustrate and explain events and characters from the Bible and church history – they are also to be considered in their context as holy objects” (Houston Baptist University). These types of icons appeared in houses and places of worship, as a reminder of Christ’s life and sacrifice. Some icons, like “Icon of the Entry of Christ into Jerusalem,” now exist in a circular form, although they originally held rectangular shapes. According to the book *Four Icons in the Menil Collection*, a simple reason for the cutting of the paintings exists “In sum, icons of circular, oval, and polygonal shape were created, either by cutting down extant rectangular paintings or by creating original icons in such shapes, to fit late seventeenth- or early eighteenth-century iconostases” (31). As defined by the Merriam Webster dictionary, an iconostasis is “a screen or partition with doors and tiers of icons that separates the bema from the nave in Eastern churches.” Therefore, as round shapes grew more popular and interesting to look at, artists began cutting down their work to fit into these new and unique iconostases.

Although the artist of “Icon of the Entry of Christ into Jerusalem” remains unknown, the thought behind the painting seems simple. The story of the Triumphal Entry, found in Matthew

21, stands as the only time when the people of the Earth treated Jesus as a King. “And the crowds that went before him and that followed him were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!” (Matthew 21:9 ESV). Although the people praised His name, their attitudes soon changed. “The people who rejoice when they see Him are not obedient subjects, but an unstable crowd who a few days later will turn against Him” (Houston Baptist University). The artist behind the beautiful icon remains unknown; however, the reasoning behind the painting seems clear – Jesus came to save the people of the world, even though they treated Him like a King mere days before His crucifixion. Some of the people in the work greet Jesus face on, but others have their heads down and seem to whisper behind the backs of others. Jesus’s head turns back to look at His disciples. He seems to worry for them most of all, because He knows the trials they remain destined to endure, beginning with His own death. Jesus follows His Father’s will, despite knowing the horrors it causes at first. He loves the world too much to jeopardize the fate of all humanity for the comfort of Himself and His friends.

Finally, the way the painting shows Christ and His teachings relates directly with the truth and beauty of the work of art. For centuries, philosophers debated the definition of Truth and Beauty. Plato believes in abstract perfect forms, Aristotle puts faith in Truth and Beauty tied to and encased in objects, while Augustine attributes all Truth and Beauty to God. It just seems impossible to argue against Jesus’s love for the world truly encompassing both Beauty and Truth. As “Icon of the Entry of Christ into Jerusalem” portrays Jesus in His arguably most popular moment while on Earth, He wept for the city. In an account parallel to Matthew’s, Luke 19 shows a more intimate side of Jesus as He drew closer to Jerusalem. “And when he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, “Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes” (Luke 19:41-44 ESV). The scene described in “Icon of the Entry of Christ into Jerusalem” holds so much meaning behind it. The eyes of Jesus might still hold tears, His heart breaking for His people as He watches His disciples behind Him, their minds happy and excited for the days to come. Jesus knew what the next few weeks had in store. He knew about the pain, the horror, the tears, the screams; but He also knew about the lives to save, the millions upon millions of humans to come whose only chance at life stood with Jesus. His sacrifice to come, although a gruesome horror at the time, remains beautiful in the eyes of those whose lives He saved. The truth in the power of His death and resurrection, freedom from sin, and hope in His second coming remains steadfast. The “Icon of the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem” perfectly stands for Truth and Beauty, as the scene represented portrays the most truthful and beautiful events in history.

The history and style of the icon, the artist’s meaning, and how the painting represents Truth and Beauty all require exploration when studying the “Icon of the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem.” Icon art helps people today travel back in time to understand what religion, beauty, and life itself appeared as in the past, and religious icons still hold great value today.

Works Cited

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