

# The Degraded Iconicity of the Icon: The Icon's Materiality and Mechanical Reproduction

*By Hieromonk Silouan*

I do not venerate matter, I venerate the fashioner of matter, who became matter for my sake and accepted to dwell in matter and through matter worked my salvation, and I will not cease from reverencing matter, through which my salvation was worked.

St. John of Damascus, *On the Divine Images*, I: 16

There are also celestial bodies and terrestrial bodies; but the glory of the celestial is one, and the glory of the terrestrial is another. There is one glory of the sun, another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for one star differs from another star in glory.

I Cor. 15: 40-41

And I reverence... all matter participating in divine energy and serving my salvation, and I venerate [it] because of the divine energy.

St. John of Damascus, *On the Divine Images*, III:34

**M**echanically reproduced icons are inherently ambiguous. They share certain features with the original icon but are also radically different from it. The slippery, neither here-nor-there status of these mechanical reproductions makes them hard to grasp conceptually. This makes the task of trying to clarify their role in liturgical aesthetic experience problematic, if not treacherous. They are at once real and somehow *less* than real icons. In focusing on the *real* side, we minimize the problems they introduce in the life of the Church, but in pointing out the *less* than real side we run the danger of overstating the case and fueling formalist ideology. In any case, the risk must be taken. Accessible and inexpensive reproductions of icons have helped the revival of icon painting. They are here to stay. Nevertheless, they raise theological questions regarding how materials and craftsmanship affect the icon's multi-layered aesthetic and liturgical function.

During the Iconoclastic debates, it was taken for granted that an icon was a work of craftsmanship, fashioned by human hands and skill. In the midst of doctrinal controversy over the nature or validity of images of Christ and the saints, there seemed to be no need to dwell too much on the icon's manufacture. It was enough to know that an icon was, as St. Theodore the Studite says, "perhaps of wood, or paint, or gold, or silver, or some of the various materials..."<sup>1</sup> As Moshe Barasch points out:

It was only the *completed* picture, the *finished* work of art that was considered in the Iconoclastic debates. This feature stands out with particular clarity when we compare iconoclastic literature with the more or less practical art theory of the same period and culture. For the painter in the workshop, and the critic who wishes to influence the outcome of his efforts, that stage preceding the finished work, that is, the process of shaping the icon, is of course of central significance. No wonder that, in one form or another, questions pertaining to the stage emerge in regular art literature. But in the literature originating in the Iconoclastic debates, references to that stage are virtually absent. We hear close to nothing about the artist, nor is there any consideration of how the icon (that very icon that is so violently attacked or so enthusiastically defended) comes into being. All that is sometimes said is that the icon is 'made by hands,' or, rather rarely, that it has descended miraculously from heaven. So far removed is that literature from the real artist that authors do not even make demands on his behavior.<sup>2</sup>

Though related, there is a difference due to their respective historical moments in the way the Fathers took for granted and we tend to ignore how the icon comes into being, or the process of shaping the icon. Considering the icon as a *completed* picture or a *finished* work of art was only natural in a society where it was a given that most things were not the result of mass production by machines, but the fruit of long arduous effort in the workshop of a painter, mosaicist, carver, silversmith, weaver, etc.<sup>3</sup> Now, however, the advent of the age of mechanical reproduction

<sup>1</sup> St. Theodore the Studite, *On the Holy Icons, First Refutation of Iconoclasm*, translated by Catharine P. Roth, SVS Press, Crestwood, N.Y., 1981, p.32.

<sup>2</sup> M. Barasch, *Icon: Studies in the History of an Idea*, New York University, New York, 1995, p.6.

<sup>3</sup> W. Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, Schocken Books, New York, 1968, pp.217-252. "In principle a work of art has always been reproducible. Men could always imitate man made artifacts. Replicas were made by pupils in practice of their craft, by masters for diffusing their works, and, finally, by third parties in the pursuit of gain. Mechanical reproduction of a work of art, however, represents something new. Historically, it advanced intermittently and in leaps at long intervals, but with accelerated intensity. Greeks knew only two procedures of technically reproducing works of art: founding and stamping. Bronzes, terra cottas, and coins were the only art works which they could produce in quantity. All others were unique and could not be mechanically reproduced. With the woodcut graphic art became mechanically reproducible for the first time, long before script became reproducible in print. The enormous changes which printing, the mechanical reproduction of writing, has brought about in literature are a familiar story. However, within the phenomenon which we are here examining from the perspective of world history, print is merely a special, though particularly important, case. During the Middle Ages engraving and etching were added to the woodcut; at the beginning of the nineteenth century lithography made its appearance." W. Benjamin, *Ibid.*, pp.220-21.

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