

## One Icon start to finish...the process

For those who are interested how an icon is created, here are some steps in the genesis of one icon, “The Mother of God of Tenderness.”



Brief background:

The inspiration for this design is an 18th century icon in the Russian Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia. In Russian iconography this particular icon design is called “Взыграние Младенца Пресвятыя Богородицы” which in rough translation means “The playful infant of the Mother of God”. But that sounds rather wordy and awkward, so for the sake of simplicity I gave the icon the name of “Mother of God of Tenderness” from the type that it represents, from the Russian word *умиление*, which means “tender emotion”. And in Greek iconography it is known as the *Eleusa*, from the Greek word for “mercy” which is *έλεος*. This type originated somewhere in Macedonia during the Byzantine era (before the fall of Constantinople in 1453), where many ancient images of the Mother of God appeared. Several images of a playful Infant with his Mother were venerated in the region called Pelagonia, sometimes giving them the additional appellation “Пелагонитисса”, “Pelagonitissa”. The characteristic feature of this icon is the S-twist position of the Infant who throws back his head as he caresses his Mother’s cheek with his left hand, while holding his right hand down in a gesture of blessing. An icon of this type appeared in Russia no earlier than the 18th century. The Feast Day for this icon is November 20th (our Gregorian calendar, or new style; it is November 7th in the Julian or old style calendar).

The icon painting process begins with a selection of a canonically approved design in the form of a line drawing, such as this:



The icon painter makes whatever alterations he/ she feels necessary in terms of size and placement, leaving the basic attitude of the head(s), hands, feet and major details intact. There is plenty of room for the icon painter to demonstrate individual skills, technique and craftsmanship within the discipline of the traditional design. No two icons are ever the same, even if two icon painters start with the same tracing.

In the past an icon board was a well-season wooden panel that was cut, carved and processed by a carpenter. Today, an icon painter can work with quality plywood, such as birchwood plywood or hard board, aka “Masonite”. In my case I used a special reinforced hardboard called “Ampersand board” that measured 20” x 16” x 1 1/2” deep. As you can see the board is light weight because it is hollow in the back:



Not shown is the fact that thin strips of birch veneer were glued onto the front of the hardboard to raise the edges a bit, creating a hollow, called an “Ark” / “Ковчег” in the center of the panel. This is where the treasure or holy image will reside. In my experience a well-prepared gesso board may take from 4 to 6 days to prepare. If the board is not reinforced, like this Ampersand board, it will distort and the gesso will crack if one does not treat both sides of the board equally, i.e. fabric layer and the same number of gesso layers on both sides.

The board was wiped with denatured alcohol to remove any surface grease or film. Rabbit skin glue

was prepared in advance and painted over the hardboard. Then a piece of previously moistened 100% linen canvas was laid over the hardboard, smoothing out any wrinkles. Rabbit skin glue was painted on the linen and rubbed down by hand and small tools till it adhered well to the board, leaving a little extra over the edge, any excess was to be shaved off later:



Warm rabbit skin glue is brushed vigorously into the linen.

The warm rabbit skin glue is well brushed onto the linen. The front of the panel is checked to see that the surface is thoroughly moist with glue and no wrinkles are present. Then the board is allowed to dry overnight in a clean, stable environment, such as a workshop or home studio.



When the linen-covered board is thoroughly dry (usually overnight), a gesso made of rabbit skin glue and a white filler material such as Chalk or Marble Dust, is brushed over the linen. This takes a lot of practice to keep the gesso thin, free of air bubbles and fairly smooth. Once one layer looks fairly mat to the eye, the next thin layer of warm gesso is brushed on. If you paint the next layer of gesso too early, you might disturb the wet layer of gesso beneath, creating ruts and “holes” in the gesso. So, it is best to err on the side of caution and wait a bit longer for each gesso layer to look and feel fairly dry to the touch.

Here are two icon boards, a layer of linen front and back and 9 thin layers of gesso on each side. They are drying in the open air in a shaded patio, away from direct sun. Gesso production must never proceed in direct sun, because there may be rapid, uneven drying of the gesso that leads to structural problems impossible to repair.

After thorough drying for one or more days in a clean, even temperature environment, the icon board is sanded to a smooth, ivory-like finish that is wonderfully receptive to water gilding and egg tempera techniques. Here is the gessoed board with the icon design already transferred onto the polished gesso surface:



In many Russian icons the design is “scratched” into the surface lightly. This is done to help the icon painter “see the design” even after a few thin layers of egg tempera paint are already applied. In this icon, extra layers of gesso were painted where the large halo of the Mother of God was placed; the gesso was then carved to create a low relief floral design.



Once the design is inscribed, all areas intended for water gilding, are painted with very thin, multiple layers of red bole, which is a fine clay especially made for water gilding.



A light underpainting was created with sepia ink directly on the gesso to start building up the shadow areas of the features . The underpainting was then covered with a thin layer of transparent white egg tempera in technique called a “scumble” an effect caused by painting a light color over a





And the lettering on the lower portion of the icon is completed. It reads in Church Slavonic :“Image of the Most Holy Mother of God and Ever Virgin Mary of the Playful Infant”.

The Child’s gown is given some highlights in a cadmium yellow, using a Byzantine technique of expressing folds in rather flat, geometric patterns that still convey where the folds, limbs and low areas of the body are. And the labels are painted in the background in white indicating the “Mother of God” and “Christ” in stylized Greek lettering.



Detailing the Child's gown.

The borders are painted and the icon is finished.



Borders and final touches are completed.

Egg tempera paintings should not be varnished for at least 6 months, to allow the paint to “cure.”

The icon is finished. This is a rather large icon for me, being 20” x 16”. With all the preparation and interruptions, this icon took three months to complete.



Close up of finished icon: Mother of God of Tenderness

Source: <http://icontraditions.com/category/orthodox-icon-types/icons-of-the-mother-of-god>