

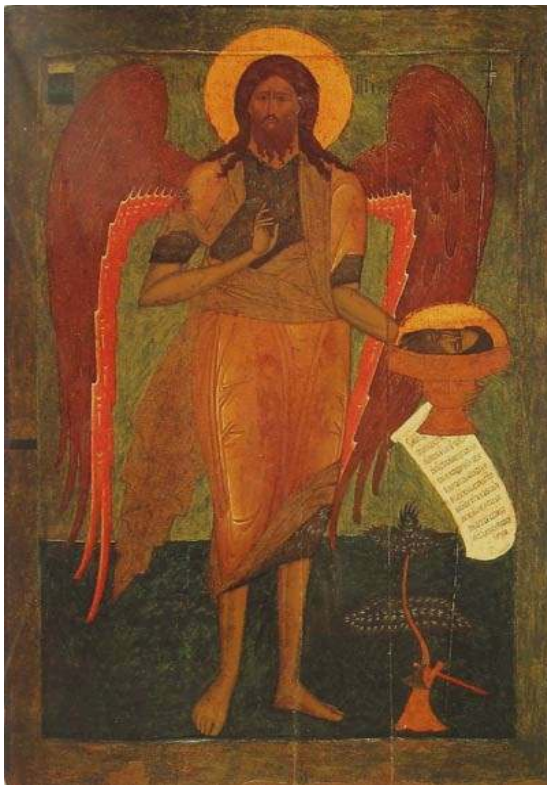
Icons

(Greek εικὼν an image) The early “iconography” or art of the Church consisted of beautiful and often symbolic representations of our Lord, Our Lady and the Saints painted on walls or on pieces of board. While the depictions in catacombs and churches are well preserved, few of the very early “Icons” on wooden boards survive before the start of the second millennium. However, by this time a sacred tradition had developed so that stylised images were reproduced of earlier depiction, now often destroyed or lost. An artist, often a monk, would prepare himself with fasting and prayer before taking on the solemn portrayal of his holy devotion. The resulting image or icon would be blessed, anointed and revered as a spiritual depiction of the Holy.

While most icons have their origin in the East, we should remember that they date from the time when the whole of Christendom was Eastern in character, before the spread of the Western, Roman, Church. Hence the writings on these images is usually in Greek or Cyrillic script.

We have four reproductions of Icons in the Sanctuary at St John’s. These represent the three angelic visitors to Abraham (the Old Testament Trinity), The Prophet Isaiah, St John the Baptist and Our Lady.

Saint John the Baptist



The representation of John the Baptist with the* wings of an angel, dressed simply as a hermit with a scroll in his hand, has its origins in the description given in the Gospel, John the precursor and prophet of the Christ.

This image from 1560 is in the Andrei Rublev museum in Moscow.

The dish held in his hand signifies the nature of his later martyrdom.

Saint John the Baptist is the patron of our parish church.

* The wings probably derive from the description of St John the Baptist in the Gospel as “Messenger”. The Greek New Testament word for messenger is ἄγγελος

pronounced Angelos. This is where we get our word “Angel”.

The Prophet Isaiah



This icon, which originally came from the cathedral of the Nativity of the Mother of God in the monastery of St Anthony in Novogorod, was part of the tier of the prophets in the *iconostasis. It is now in the Novogorod Museum.

In the iconographical tradition, Isaiah is shown holding an open scroll on which the words of his prophecy are written – I foretell that You will be born of the Virgin. He is also pointing to the text with his right finger. Whilst in his left hand he holds tongs. It was with such tongs that a seraph has touched Isaiah's lips with a burning coal taken from the altar.

* Iconostasis: This is a screen found in Eastern Rite and Orthodox Churches, decorated with images of the Saints. The action of the Eucharist takes place behind this screen which separates the standing congregation from the Priest and the Altar. A western version of this screen can be seen in the Rood (Cross) Screens of ancient churches (generally removed in this country when Catholic Churches were taken over by the Protestant National Church).

Kazan Mother and Child



According to tradition, the icon was discovered on July 8, 1579, underground in the city of Kazan by a little girl, Matrona, to whom the location of the image was revealed by the *Theotokos, the Blessed Virgin Mary, in a Marian apparition. The original icon was kept in the Theotokos Monastery of Kazan, built to commemorate the spot where it had been discovered.

Other churches were built in honour of the revelation of the Virgin of Kazan and copies of the image displayed at the Kazan Cathedral of Moscow, at Yaroslavl, and at St. Petersburg.

On the night of June 29, 1904 the icon was stolen from the church in Kazan where it had been kept for centuries (the cathedral was later blown up by the communist authorities). Although the frame of the icon was recovered years later, the icon itself it believed to have been destroyed.

* Theotokos: Greek Θεοτόκος, Mother of God, the title conferred on Mary at the Council of Ephesus AD 431 to emphasise the doctrine of the full humanity and full divinity of Christ, laying to rest many of the heresies of the early Church.



An 18th-century Russian icon depicting various types of Theotokos icons

The Holy Trinity



A mid-sixteenth Century icon of the Holy Trinity, now in the Rublev Museum in Moscow.

This icon is based on an Old Testament subject; the Hospitality of Abraham. According to traditional Orthodox interpretations these angels were for Abraham a revelation of the consubstantial and triune God.

It was given its finest and fullest expression in the icon by Andrei Rublev, painted for the Cathedral of the Trinity in the Monastery of St Sergius in 1425-27. Rublev's icon became the model for generations of iconographers. As with many other sixteenth century icons, this icon broadly follows

the iconography of Rublev's famous picture.

Please note that the Icons in St John's Church are reproductions made locally by pasting the pictures onto board.

*Paper written by Chris McDonnell, August 2011.
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