"Imprinting the Divine: Byzantine and Russian Icons from The Menil Collection" is curated by Annemarie Weyl Carr, University Distinguished Professor Emerita of Art History, Southern Methodist University.

This exhibition is generously supported by Fayez Sarofim, the John P. McGovern Foundation, The Levant Foundation, the Linbeck Family Charitable Trust, an anonymous donor, Fulbright & Jaworski L.L.P., and the City of Houston.

Public Program

Panel Discussion
"Byzantine and Russian Icons from The Menil Collection"
Friday, October 21, 7:00 p.m.
Led by Assistant Curator Clare Elliott, scholars discuss the function of icons as a conduit to the sacred, how they were intended to be "read," and the formation of the museum's collection. Participants include Annemarie Weyl Carr, University Distinguished Professor Emerita of Art History, Southern Methodist University; Bertrand Davezac, former Chief Curator, The Menil Collection; and Charles A. Stewart, Assistant Professor of Art History, University of St. Thomas.

Exhibition Catalogue

Edited by Annemarie Weyl Carr, with contributions by Annemarie Weyl Carr, Bertrand Davezac, and Clare Elliott
In this volume, the first publication to survey the Menil's diverse collection of panel-painted icons, leading scholars explore the history and meaning of these remarkable works.
Available at the Menil Bookstore; 168 pp., 85 color illustrations, $50

Cover: John the Baptist (detail), Byzantium, by a painter trained in Constantinople, late 14th century. Tempera and gold leaf on wood, 25 1/4 x 19 1/4 x 1 1/2 inches. The Menil Collection, Houston. Photo: Paul Hester

THE MENIL COLLECTION
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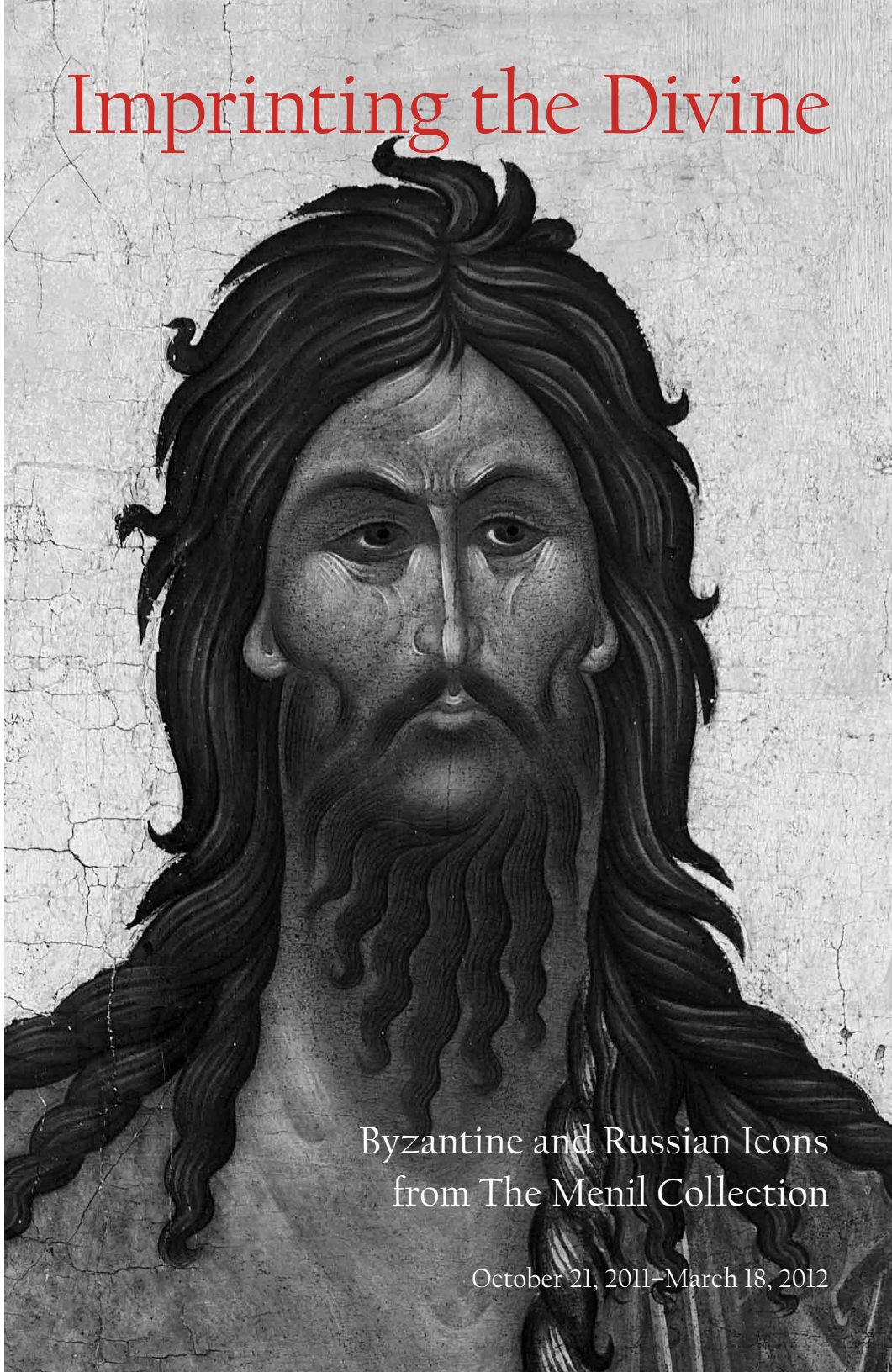

Imprinting the Divine

Byzantine and Russian Icons from The Menil Collection

October 21, 2011–March 18, 2012

Koimesis of the Mother of God, Russia, 16th century. Tempera and gold leaf on wood, 32 1/4 x 26 1/4 x 1 1/4 inches. The Menil Collection, Houston. Photo: Paul Hester

Icons are the holy images of Orthodox Christianity. They originated in Byzantium (324–1453) and their creation continued in the Orthodox churches of Russia, the Balkans, and Greece. Today we define icons as panel paintings on golden grounds, but they exist in many media, for the icon is not the medium; it is the image. Byzantine thinkers associated these images of holy figures and events with imprinting. They likened the icon to the impression of a seal, distinct in material from its original but nonetheless bound to it by its shared image. The icon, in turn, imprints itself upon the mind of its viewers. An exhibition cannot weave the fabric of shared faith that enables the perceived image of the icon to connect viewers to its transcendent original, but it can invite us to explore how icons' makers shaped their images to that sacred purpose. "Imprinting the Divine: Byzantine and Russian Icons from The Menil Collection" invites us to explore how icons "look": how they imprint their images upon our eyes and memory.

Icons are necessarily figural. The visual focus of the figure is the face, and the exhibition begins with the iconic face. Does it indeed stare at us; is it changeless, or does it shift as we contemplate it? Does having an established type make it stereotyped? Potent as the face is, icons do not deny the body. Themselves physical objects, they affirm the centrality of incarnation: of matter as the medium through which salvation is accomplished. The saints display in their bodies the ways in which their lives were sanctified, most dramatically with the great ascetics, above all John the Baptist, who performed their conformity to Christ in their very flesh.

Icons also show holy events, especially those in Christ's life in which his divinity was revealed, which are celebrated as festivals in the church year. These "feast icons" evoke both the events themselves and their annual celebrations. Most draw upon Gospel accounts. But some of the greatest come from non-canonical sources, including the *Koimesis* or Dormition (falling asleep in death) of Mary. Here Christ materializes in a blaze of glory amid the mourning apostles to take his mother's soul, shown as a swaddled infant, directly to Heaven.

Icons were embedded in the intimate contexts of family life. As the image par excellence of a good Christian death, the *Koimesis* found a recurrent place in objects of private use, as illustrated by the bezel of a golden ring, a tiny icon of precious ivory, and a panel inscribed as a "gift to my brother George." Paired with the theme of death is birth. Like death, birth pervaded personal devotion, as seen in the small Nativities of Christ and John the Baptist, and in the image of Saint Euthymios. Like Christ in the *Koimesis*, Euthymios holds a swaddled form, here a newborn child, for the saint, who was born to aged and childless parents, was venerated for his ability to heal infertility.

Both through proximity and through coordinating multiple images on one surface, icons display interactions among holy events. The most symphonic such ensemble is the iconostasis, the cliff-like wall of images before the church sanctuary, epitomizing the history and economy of salvation. Miniature folding iconostases enabled individuals to spread the full imagery of the church before them during their prayers at home. All the icon types—faces, bodies, feasts—are drawn together in it. Holy images also interact on the *tabletki*, feather-light panels of glue-stiffened cloth painted on both sides, which were set out for veneration on the day of the saint or feast depicted on them. Often the two sides displayed the themes of closely contingent holy days, joined by the sacred time of the church calendar.

The medium that perhaps most fully exploits the interactive capacity of icons to build a space of spiritual interchange is wall painting, and the Byzantine Fresco Chapel on the Menil Campus houses the only program of Byzantine murals outside of predominantly Orthodox lands. In 1983, Dominique de Menil was presented with the opportunity to acquire two thirteenth-century frescoes from Cyprus. They had been brutally dismantled, but their exceptionally high quality was nonetheless apparent, and she was immediately struck by both their beauty and by their significance in the context of art history. During the course of the discussion, however, de Menil became suspicious of the frescoes' provenance, and eventually discovered that they had been looted from a small Greek Orthodox Chapel outside the village of Lysi in the Turkish-controlled Famagusta district. After contacting the Holy Archbishopric of Cyprus, the rightful owner, she purchased the frescoes on their behalf, and the Menil Foundation supervised their restoration. In gratitude, the Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus agreed to lend the frescoes to the Menil on a long-term basis, and in 1997 the Byzantine Fresco Chapel opened to the public. Concluding over twenty years of stewardship, the frescoes will be returned to the Archbishopric in 2012. Hundreds of thousands of visitors have taken advantage of the opportunity to experience these extraordinary works in a consecrated space that honors both their sacred origins and the tragic history of their looting. Visitors to this exhibition are encouraged to do the same.