

Imprinting the Divine: Byzantine and Russian Icons from the Menil Collection

On View at the Menil October 21, 2011 – March 18, 2012

Rare and important pieces from the 6th to 18th centuries – from one of the most highly regarded collections in the United States

Houston, October 3, 2011 – On view beginning October 21, ***Imprinting the Divine*** showcases



the Menil's collection of icons, widely regarded by scholars as one of the most important of its kind in the United States. Featured in the exhibit are more than 60 works originating from Greek, Balkan and Russian cultures and spanning 1,200 years, from the sixth to the eighteenth centuries.

Imprinting the Divine explores how this diverse set of icons transcends historic and cultural contexts.

Orthodox Christianity developed in the Near East during the rule of the Byzantine Empire. Greek, Russian, Romanian, Serbian, and Bulgarian Orthodox churches maintained a tradition of icon painting rooted in Byzantium but each expressed it in distinctive ways. Transcending time and place through a delicate balance of tradition and innovation, these images of saintly figures and divine events were designed to imprint their holy subjects on the human mind. Though largely overlooked by Western audiences for much of their history, icons captured the imagination of early modernist painters and their distinct qualities were appreciated by contemporary audiences.

An icon, whether in an ancient or modern context, is a sign or likeness of something of greater significance. Throughout history religious icons have been used to instruct, adorn and inspire worship. To be an effective conduit to the sacred, an icon must achieve fidelity to the subject it represents, be accessible enough to be easily remembered, and blend new messages with familiar elements. The icons of ***Imprinting the Divine*** reveal a variety of visual strategies that repeat figures and scenes but that also refresh, revise and renew the various elements that go into their creation. As Carr writes in the exhibition's catalogue, "The art form evolved in both meaning and technique, yet maintained the continuity and fidelity to type so crucial to its purpose. Even now, centuries later...icons have lost none of their power to intrigue and impress." (p. 33)



The exhibit features the Menil's own outstanding icon collection, largely acquired in 1985 from collector Eric Bradley. Most notable are works from Byzantium itself, paintings on golden panels that are of extreme rarity today: vigilant warrior angels, pensive saints of haunting spirituality, and vivid scenes of exaltation. Delicate Russian holy images on feather-weight plaques of linen shimmer under the folding panels of an iconostasis, the screen of images before which congregations received communion in church; and personal images of gold and ivory from the collections of Dumbarton Oaks and the Houston Museum of Fine arts carry the holy images into the private realm of the home and individual devotion.

Organized for the Menil Collection by guest curator Annemarie Weyl Carr, Professor Emeritus at Southern Methodist University in Dallas whose books include *A Byzantine Masterpiece Recovered: The Thirteenth Century Murals of Lysi, Cyprus and Cyprus and the Devotional Arts of Byzantium In the Era of the Crusades* with Menil assistant curator Clare Elliott, ***Imprinting the Divine*** invites viewers to explore the lasting power of icons to inform faith, inspire cultures and stir artists and scholars.

Accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue, the first publication to survey this diverse collection, Annemarie Weyl Carr and other leading scholars explore the history and meaning of these remarkable works, and their continuing power to surprise and impress us.

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Images: *Saint Marina*, Lebanon, possibly Tripoli, 13th century, Tempera and metal leaf on wood, 8-1/2 x 6-3/8 x 7/8 inches. The Menil Collection, Houston. Photo: Paul Hester

The Entry into Jerusalem, ca. 1400, Gold and tempera on gesso on wood panel, 19-1/4 x 14 x 1 inches. The Menil Collection, Houston, Tenth anniversary purchase, with funds provided by The Brown Foundation, Inc.; The Wortham Foundation, Inc.; Mr. and Mrs. James Elkins, Jr.; Shell Oil Company; and Houston Endowment Inc. Photo: Paul Hester

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