“Beauty Will Save the World”
Beauty and the Beautiful in
Eastern Orthodox Christianity

The Disturbing Beauty of the Face of Christ
In the Romanov Mandylion Icon

Examining an initial encounter and the complex origins of one of
the most beloved acheiropoietos icons of Christ in St. Petersburg,
considered by many to rank among the significant wonder-working
iconographic treasures in Orthodox Russia today

A work dedicated to the Rev. Canon J. Robert Wright,
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“The indescribable glory of His face was changing through grace.” --Menaion for August

“I shall see your face; when I awake, I shall be satisfied, beholding your likeness” (Ps. 17:16)

Who among us does not desire to see the face of Our Savior Christ? This paper examines the experience of venerating the beauty of the Lord’s face in the Romanov family’s Mandylion Icon of Christ in St. Petersburg, together with the background of this type of Icon Not Made by Hands. The Mandylion icon occupies a central place among Orthodox images of Christ, although its origins are shrouded in mystery. The Seventh Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 787 gave attention to it, and to commemorate the triumph of the holy images, it is this icon of Christ which is venerated at the Feast of the Triumph of Orthodoxy the First Sunday in Lent.

As with many things Russian, the Mandylion Icon of Christ is known by several names. It originates from an intermingled tapestry of diverse threads woven over the centuries from several beloved hagiographic legends, each of which adds to its authenticity and lore, but the story begins with the longing to see the face of Christ. Beauty as a reflection of the divine and the notion of an authentic likeness of the Holy Face with its miraculous attributes are tantalizingly powerful ideas that are reflected in the history of the Mandylion. The expression “not made by hands” derives its meaning from its Gospel context, “We heard him say, I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands” (Mark 14:58). The term acheiropoietos in the Greek and spas nerokotvornyi in the Russian describe icons carrying the heritage of being created not by the mere agency of icon-painters, but by the tradition of the direct impression of Our Lord’s body; they claim to derive from the first example and thus be genuine and pleasing to God. Within Byzantium and carrying over into the early centuries of Russian iconography, icons of this type were ideologically explained by the legend of the cloth--the Mandylion--of King Abgar of Edessa.

By the mid-seventeenth century, however, the influence of other popular legends was coming into play in Russian icon workshops. In the west, the story had evolved of the true image, the “vera icona,” which was thought to have been imprinted during Christ’s Passion upon the veil of a woman well-named Veronica, who is honored in the Sixth Station of the Cross. The fabric of the Mandylion’s origin is further entangled with

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1 This work began as research under the supervision of the Rev. Can. J. Robert Wright, to whom it is dedicated.
2 Sir Wyke Bayless’s classic Victorian work, Rex Regum, which reflects on the likeness of Christ opens, “The question of whether we possess any authentic record of the Likeness of the Master, is one of profound and universal interest.” Wyke Bayless, Rex Regum: A Painter's Study of the Likeness of Christ from the Time of the Apostles to the Present Day (London: S. Low, Marston & Co. Ltd., 1902), pg. vii. While it may not be considered possible today to establish for the likeness of Christ a “continuity of the chain of evidence which reaches back to the time of the Apostles” [pg. 47], still we desire to see him.
threads of the story of imprints possibly made by Christ’s body upon the burial napkin and linens left in the tomb (John 20:5-7). Much research and intense interest have been focused on the Shroud of Turin, even after carbon testing in 1988 proved it to be of no later than medieval provenance. The Mandylion Icon of Christ Not Made by Hands is displayed in a prominent place in the church, censed during the Liturgy, and sometimes carried in procession. It is traditionally seen over doorways and gateways. It is also often present, symbolizing Christ’s invisible presence, when the penitent and priest stand together in the church for the Sacrament of Repentance.4

Even though it began for me in an unexpected moment of veneration before the Romanov family’s Icon of Christ which is presently located in the St. Petersburg Cathedral of the Transfiguration, my connection with this type of icon has continued to develop and deepen. Witnessing the icon for the first time was a jolting experience, though, at once unsettling and yet startlingly infused with love. Experiencing other icons of this type hasn’t been nearly as emotionally provocative; however, I sense a kind of resonance in the presence of many of them, a life-changing kinship. The icon was brought to my attention during a memorable Russian pilgrimage with the Teleios Foundation and its director, the Rev. James C. McReynolds. There in Russia I experienced a deep sense of spiritual interaction in an environment where faith has been put to the test by the ravages of the great world wars, and perhaps even more so by the persecutions of the Communists. Yet, there was also evidence on every side of the riches of God’s grace being poured out upon the faithful.5

On the day I encountered Christ in the Mandylion icon, travel exhaustion made it seem as if we had visited and prayed in numerous churches already, but in fact it was only our second day in St. Petersburg. We had oriented ourselves in our Alexander Nevsky Monastery surroundings by visiting the cemeteries and churches on its handsome grounds, and the next evening being the Feast of the Smolensk Mother of God, we visited several churches to share the worship of their Vespers services. Beside our fellow Anglican pilgrims, we were joined on our bus jaunts to outlying monasteries by an Orthodox nun, Galina, and her daughter, Jula, who were visiting from the Sergius Posad region. Because we three are all red-headed, a closeness built up between us which was a special gift for me on that exhilarating spiritual journey; and as it happened, facilitated my learning about icon veneration. Galina and I were grateful for her daughter’s few

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4 Timothy Ware, Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia, *The Orthodox Church* (London: Penguin Books, 1993), pg. 289. In the Office of Reception, new converts to the Orthodox faith declare, “I acknowledge the images of our Savior Christ, and of the Ever-Virgin Mother of God, and of other Saints are worthy to be possessed and honoured, and that, through contemplation thereof, we may be incited unto piety, and unto emulation of the deeds of the holy persons represented in those images.” *Service Book of the Holy Orthodox-Catholic Apostolic Church* / compiled, translated, and arranged from the Old Church Slavonic Service Books of the Russian Church and collated with the Service Books of the Greek Church, by Isabel Florence Hapgood (Brooklyn, NY: Syrian Antiochian Orthodox Archdiocese of New York and all North America, 1965), pg. 459-460.

5 The splendor of the churches in renewal and particularly the magnificence of the icons often brought to mind, “Put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing” (Mal. 3:10).
words of English, but mostly we communicated each speaking in our own language with hopeful gestures.

At first I found myself trailing along behind Fr. James, watching with wonder and shy curiosity as he venerated the icons and lit candles. We had arrived at the Church of the Smolensk Icon of the Mother of God in the middle of the liturgy, entering into the incense and candlelight of an elaborate choral service with the clergy in sumptuous vestments. The Deacon stood in front of the church’s magisterial iconostasis on the broad step with his stole raised in his hand offering up prayers for the people. The cathedral was quite full, but I followed Fr. McReynolds as he slowly circumvented the entire church through the crowd, his hand full of candles purchased at the icon-and-book stall at the back. People venerating the icons formed a constant procession around the perimeter; this continued unbroken as the service was being chanted, even across the iconostasis.

In front of most icons in the Russian churches was a large, dome-shaped brass candle-stand with holders for small candles arranged in circles, row upon row, and a larger votive lamp on top. Worshipers light their candle from one of the others and then press the base of it against nearby hot surfaces or into a flame to melt the bottom, so that it stands firm in an empty holder burning in honor of the saint. After crossing yourself three times and bowing, you kiss the holy hand or foot or veil of the saint and offer prayer. People kissing the icon sometimes press their forehead to the spot as well, then kiss it again, all in one fluid gesture of devotion. Some also bow their heads and pray leaning into it, seemingly hiding in the embracing presence of the saint. Prominent icons were displayed up a few steps, book-ended by small entrance and exit staircases, with brass rails in front of them holding a towel. Although I never saw anyone use the towel after venerating, other pious faithful ones were nearby quietly tending the shrines, fixing and re-arranging candles which had melted down or begun to tilt awry, and also wiping the glass clean with the towel. In the Cathedral of St. Nicholas, Vespers was also underway, but it was quieter and much less crowded than in Our Lady of Smolensk. In fact, the service wasn’t being offered in the central position, but on the north end of the iconostasis in front of the magnificent icon of St. Nicholas himself, with perhaps thirty people gathered around.

Galina was firmly indicating that I was to properly venerate the icon of St. Nicholas and here was an opportunity to do it with her. I followed behind as she made her prostration: she crossed herself several times, knelt down and kissed the floor in front of the staircase, then climbed the stairs to kiss the icon and pray before it. St. Nicholas standing behind the glass before me was hard to see that close to the blaze of candlelight. There were hanging shrine lamps ranging all around him in a semi-circle, but behind me now as I was pressed close to him. He was covered as well with an all-encompassing oklad which indicated several protected but unseen parts of the icon. As an Anglican, St. Nicholas

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6 This was particularly evident at the grave of St. Xenia located behind the Smolensky Church, where the faithful circumvent the little square building housing her tomb, praying to the much-beloved local saint while pressing their foreheads to the bricks, and then picnicking nearby among the other tombstones.

7 Maneuvering down unto my hands and knees reminded me of the practice of western nuns who kiss the floor immediately upon rising in the morning—or did so previously in the 1950s, anyway.
wasn’t very familiar to me; it was as though we had never met, and now we were kissing and praying together.\(^8\) Thus, *proskinesis* and *aspasmos* (reverential bowing and kissing) became intimately tied up with my own experience of the holy Russian icons encountered on pilgrimage. Women in head scarves were whispering and pointing to over our heads. We should see, it was explained, that all the hanging lamps encircling the shrine of St. Nicholas were indeed shimmering and shaking slightly as if a gentle wind was rustling the candles flames in the fragrant damp-heat stillness. It was breathlessly translated to me that this was a sign that St. Nicholas had received the veneration offered in the Vespers service and was pleased.

As we were leaving, Galina indicated another icon we simply must venerate. It was displayed to the right of the royal doors in a free-standing easel case, a *proskynetarion*, with dark brocade *encheiron* skirting arranged at length in front of it like a catafalque. The icon was leaning back at an angle, and as we approached it, I couldn’t actually see which saint was depicted, only that we didn’t have to climb up steps to approach it. After crossing myself and kissing the floor behind Galina, I leaned toward the glass opening and saw at once that I was encountering the face of Christ.

In that moment, it was as though I was leaning my head toward an open coffin and Christ was under the glass several inches, right there, very real. He looked tired and dirty. He looked mysterious and provocative. His hair was matted and sweaty. The image was so realistic, so human before me that in the radical intimacy of that moment, he seemed to smell like a homeless man begging in a rainy doorway. It embarrassed and humiliated me that this image of the Savior of the world was even repugnant to me, and at the same time utterly mesmerizing. It was difficult to keep moving forward to kiss him; it was almost paralyzing, and my stomach even pulled me away a little in the instant before I made my veneration. The eyes of Christ were open, but they seemed to be swollen with pain and love, and looking down into my heart, not up into my eyes. His whole face seemed to behold me, not just his eyes. In that captivating moment, it was astonishing that anyone in such pain could gaze so lovingly at me, and it seemed to be part of the mysterious way in which the glory of the Lord is revealed in the suffering of Jesus.

The face of Christ appeared alive and detached from folds of cloth surrounding it, taking on a breathing embodied reality of its own. The experience was so compelling and evocative that it claimed for me an authentic impression on all the senses as I kissed him.\(^9\) Layers of thought and feeling were vibrating all at once, and I experienced myself as an unmistakable member of a centuries-old procession of pilgrims who in the moment of veneration glimpses the actual impression of Our Savior being made for the first time. Whether it was on the napkin of the shroud left lying at the Resurrection, or the legendary

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\(^8\) Being confirmed by the large confident hands of a Bishop I had never met or seen before that moment on my knees in the New York City Cathedral of St. John the Divine was a similar experience and memories from that earlier Sacrament seemed to envelop me.

\(^9\) Bissera Pentcheva, in “The Performative Icon,” *The Art Bulletin* 88:4 (Dec. 2006), pg. 651, describes this as a “*synesthetic*” [together+sensual apprehension] experience, one in which the whole body is engaged in a commingled sensation, with the discerning of one sense stimulated by the others. As a result, “the materially triggered synesthetic pleasure experienced by the faithful leads to something comparable to Eucharistic transformation… an excess of materiality that paradoxically reveals a vision of the immaterial.”
Abgar of Edessa cloth, or the veil of Veronica made no difference. The wondrous spectacle of Christ was the essence. I could not form words to pray, and I just stood there bowing, overwhelmed and self-conscious in the profound generosity of his presence. It was a primal recognition of the disturbing beauty of the face of Christ.

Of course, I want to discover that this is an image, copied from an image not made by hands, but by Our Lord and Savior himself. Even now, twenty years later, I still experience at every turn that somehow I am literally seeing Christ in that image with all my senses. As contemporary Christians, we discover that legends at times have built up to explain and authenticate images which have come to exist, rather than the other way around; yet even understanding that hasn’t stopped me from searching for signs of authority and tradition to explain the compelling sense of being sought out by Christ in that icon, what Rowan Williams has called “being acted upon” by the icon. Part of the appeal of the Orthodox Church is that it authenticates and honors the actual likeness of the image I witnessed of Christ. I’m convinced that my experience was not unusual; and that generations of worshippers, perhaps Peter the Great among them, have been connected to the transforming beauty of Jesus Christ through this image.

Throughout the evening and in the days that followed, I asked about the icon. Every Orthodox Russian I spoke with knew immediately which one I had encountered, in part because as it happened, we had visited the icon on its feast-day. No one was surprised in the least at the mystical intensity of my experience. The Romanov Mandylion Icon of Christ was treated with enthusiasm and admiration and was said to be one of the most revered and powerful objects of veneration in existence today in the Russian Orthodox world, ranking with such superlative iconographic treasures as the Virgin of Vladimir and Rublev icon on the Holy Trinity. Staff from the Theological Academy of the Alexander Nevsky Monastery accompanying us identified the icon as written for Tsar Alexei I in the seventeenth century by an imperial Russian artist named Ushakov from the Moscow Armory Painters School, and presented to Tsar Peter I by his mother. The Mandylion Icon of Christ was said to have been present with Peter the Great at the Battle of Poltava.

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10 Yet as I ponder that first visit, it seems as if, although I was the one bending down, the impression received was that Christ was bending over me, in the bed during my own work of dying, and imprinting the beauty of his face on my eyes, equipping me to face death.


12 Archbishop Williams has explained that an icon represents “the effect of God on and in the material world,” so that it “begins to enable a relationship…There is a connection between the state of the figure depicted in the icon and the potential state of someone praying in the presence of the icon. The person depicted is someone receptive to, saturated with divine light, divine energy. The person who stands in front of the icon is not the only one doing the looking; such a person is being seen, being acted upon.” Rowan Williams, “Icons and the Practice of Prayer,” Royal Academy of Arts Byzantium Lecture, 16 January 2009. Available at: http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/834/royal-academy-of-arts-byzantium-lecture-icons-and-the-practice-of-prayer. Accessed 1 Nov. 2011.
on his deathbed, and at his funeral. Although it was originally kept in the little cottage on the Neva favored by Tsar Peter, the icon of Christ has continued to be beloved by the Romanov imperial family and kept in their private chapels during their lifetimes. Several Russian people spoke to me about the Romanov Mandylion Icon being wonder-working and did so with an attitude of open acceptance that was as inspiring as it was mystifying. It was surprising as well to find that this icon of Our Savior was crafted as early as the 1600s. In its shadowy and almost clinically realistic style, it looks similar to a Rembrandt painting—but its heritage goes back much further.

The story of the source of the Mandylion has been handed down for generations in the texts of the Orthodox liturgical services celebrated on August 16 in its honor. Having encountered the transforming beauty of Christ, the imprint of the face of the Lord given to Hannan became a healing agent of his stricken king. The portrait of Christ at Edessa which was miraculously made for King Abgar was accepted by many in the Eastern Church as the true image, the Vera Icon, of the Savior. Therefore, its particular image of the face of Christ: bearded, long-haired, medium dark, imprinted on a veil, became one of the most familiar and revered. In this wonder-working icon, the theological texts proclaimed, the incarnate logos had left behind “a pledge on earth for mankind of his human-divine properties.” The texts described the “divine resemblance to that other resemblance that exists between Christ and God the Father.” Thus, one can behold the

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13 In Bulgakovsky’s Domik, a late nineteenth century guidebook, where the author attributed this icon to the workshop of Simon Ushakov, it was said to have been kept in the “little house on the Neva.” Lindsey Hughes, Russia in the Age of Peter the Great (New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 1998), pg. 544, note 201.

14 Orthodox faith considers icons “to work miracles not as images but as relics...strength passes from the Imaged through the image just as healing could pass from the saint through his relic.” Gervase Mathew, Byzantine Aesthetics (New York: Harper & Row, 1963) pg. 98, 105.

15 From a Sticheron in Tone 8 from Vespers: “After making an image of Your most pure image, You sent it to the faithful Abgar, who desired to see You, who in your divinity are invisible to the cherubim.” From Matins: “You sent letters touched by Your divine hand to Abgar, who asked for salvation and health which come from the image of Your divine face.” In the Menaion for August, it describes how King Abgar, who was suffering from leprosy, had sent his archivist, Hannan, sometimes called Ananias, with a letter asking Christ to come to Edessa to heal him. The king also instructed Hannan to fashion a portrait of the Lord and bring it back to him. When Hannan found Jesus Christ, he was surrounded by followers; he climbed the rocks so that he could better see him to work on his portrait. After several attempts, he found that he could not make a satisfactory likeness because of “the indescribable glory of His face which was changing through grace.” Seeing Hannan, Jesus asked for water to wash himself. As he did so, he wiped his face on a piece of linen on which his holy face remained imprinted. He gave the cloth to Hannan to carry with the letter. Knowing that he was well on his way to Jerusalem and his last days on earth, Christ told King Abgar in his letter that he could not come to Edessa himself, but promised to send one of his disciples, once his saving mission was complete. Upon receiving the portrait, the faithful king was cured. After Pentecost, the apostle Thaddeus, who was one of the seventy mentioned in Lk. 10:1, came to Edessa, and baptized the king. Later, when the Persians threatened to attack the city in 544 CE, the icon was sought from where it had been hidden by the Bishop high above the city gate, and tradition has it that the fragile cloth icon was not only found intact and had replicated itself onto the tile supporting it. By the intervention of the icon the city was saved. The original icon imprinted on the linen cloth was preserved in Edessa and became the most precious devotional object of the town, its “palladium,” invoked as a safeguard for the city in time of
likeness, the “venerable imprint of the Beauty of the Archetype, Christ.” This explains why painted copies represent the original image as a quasi-absolute divine ideal, even an archetype of beauty (archetypia tou kallous). The liturgy for the feast-day affirms the dogmatic foundation of the image and its purpose. From the moment of the Incarnation, the Old Testament law prohibiting images (Ex. 20:4-5) had no more meaning and icons of Christ became so many irrefutable witnesses to the Incarnation of God.

Since the Image of Edessa was discovered and connected with the Abgar legend in 544 CE, in a period of history when the definition and meaning of the icon were narrowing, the Savior generating his miraculous image in response to a request for healing indicated the appropriateness of venerating the icon. The face of Christ imprinted on a cloth was first mentioned in a document called The Teaching of Addai, written around 400 CE, although it is described in the text as being painted with choice pigments, rather than miraculously created. In the Doctrina Addai, the image of Christ is “a christological argument: the image is a proof of the visibility and real humanity of Christ, God and Savior.” As late as mid-sixth century, Procopius still attributed the recovery of the town to a letter from Christ rather than the image, but by 593 CE the chronicler Evagrius gave credit to the “God-made image” (theotuexton eikona) which had not been touched by human hands. In his Ecclesiastical History, Evagrius explains that, when the defenders of the city “got into complete helplessness, they brought the God-made icon that human hands had not made, which Christ the God sent to Abgar, when he wanted him to see him.” If the Evagrius text is genuine, it is the first one referring to the image of Christ at Edessa as acheiropoietos.

In the description outlined in the Orthodox Menologian, we find the story of Abgar has been absorbed into an older legend that Eusebius of Caesarea already knew in the fourth century. At the heart of it is the actual conversion of Abgar IX (179-214), but here is an earlier Abgar, who was a contemporary of Christ. In the version recorded in the Church History of Eusebius around 325 CE, Christ sends a letter rather than an imprinted cloth. Nevertheless, the acheiropoieton icon of Christ was deployed in succeeding generations, by John of Damascus and others, to defend the use of icons during the Iconoclastic

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17 Ibid., pg. 214.
21 Historia Ecclesiastica IV.27, PG 86: 2745-2748. Note that Evagrius assumes, in the telling of the story, that his readers are already familiar with King Abgar and the image of Christ Not Made by Hands.
22 Here is the story attributed to Christ from the Eusebius version: “Happy are you who believed in me without having seen me! For it is written of me that those who have not seen me will believe and live. As to your request that I should come to you, I must complete all that I was sent to do here, and on completing it must at once be taken up to the One who sent me. When I have been taken up I will send you one of my disciples to cure your disorder and bring life to you and those with you.” Eusebius, Eccles. History, I.13.
Controversy. If an image of Christ had been divinely generated, it was argued, then the crafting of representations of the Savior must be sanctioned by God. Furthermore, the Mandylion provided tangible evidence of the historical existence of Christ and his true likeness in the icon was a sign of his continuing presence in the world.

As tradition would have it, the power of the Mandylion image was further affirmed when in 944 CE it was translated to Constantinople. The imperial court accompanied the image in procession around the capitol as if it was “the second Ark of the Covenant.” When it passed in triumph through the Golden Gate, a lame man was healed by the sight of it. Following the Liturgy in Hagia Sophia it was placed on the imperial throne, in order that it might receive the veneration of the Byzantine court, before being transferred to its permanent home in the palace chapel by the lighthouse, called the Pharos. A year later, on the anniversary of the event, Constantine praised the icon by having an encomium written in its honor, and the text passed into the standard feast-day calendar, the Metaphrastian Menalogian. The Image of Edessa was kept as an imperial palladium in the Byzantine treasury from 944 until 1203 CE; however, after the sack of Constantinople by the Crusaders in 1204 CE, subsequent provenance is unknown.

The earliest surviving visual indication of the Image of Edessa is a triptych icon from the mid-tenth century which is preserved in the collection of the Holy Monastery of St. Catherine’s at Mount Sinai. Unfortunately, the central image is lost—for undoubtedly it was the Mandylion itself—but on the wings which do survive King Abgar is seen holding the Mandylion juxtaposed with other saints. Examples of the Mandylion began to appear in Russia as Orthodoxy spread to the east. The development of distinctive schools of iconography in Novgorod, Pskov, and Moscow has been seen as enkindling the “flame of the extinct Byzantine Empire.” Like Byzantine icons before them, Russian icons of Christ set out to make visible the idea of divine beauty in whose image the world was created. During the twelfth century in Novgorod, the Mandylion image began to appear and be venerated on panels which represented the textile relic in a distinctively reduced version. The towel was written on the icon and upon that was indicated the imprinted face.

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23 John of Damascus was convinced that “the beauty of the archetype is transferred with accuracy to the likeness.” (To archetypon kallos metenechthein pros to omoima). Thus, when venerating the Mandylion I seem, like John of Damascus, to “hold and venerate Christ himself” (di autou auton Christon dokow kratein kai proskunein. Three Treatises on the Divine Images II.46, III.87, Louth, trans. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003).


25 Centuries later, Alexios I Komnenos is said to have been cured of fever by wrapping himself in the veil of the Mandylion. “Its silk veil functioned as a brandeum, carrying the charisma or divine grace of the image.” Bissera V. Pentcheva, “Epigrams on Icons,” in Art and Text in Byzantine Culture, Liz James, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pg. 123.


28 Ibid. These include St. Ephriam, Deacon of Edessa. The head of Abgar is painted as the likeness the 10th century Emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitos. The icon was probably crafted with the intention of indicating that Constantine was a pious emperor concerned was the collection of famous relics.

29 Michel Quenot, The Icon: Window on the Kingdom (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1996), pg. 29.
of Christ. Thus, through devotion to its many surviving examples in Russia during the
time of late Byzantium, the celebrated relic of Christ imprinted on a cloth experienced “a
kind of posthumous resurrection despite its loss during the Latin interregnum.”
Because the Mandylion had evolved into an image of an image, it signified simultaneously a sign
and a sacred presence. Later in Russia, as previously in Byzantium, the Mandylion image
was displayed on military banners to be carried in battle and was depicted with military
saints. It was meant to represent the highest sovereign of a Christian army and to put the
enemy to flight in terror at the sight of it. Ivan the Terrible carried a flag upon which
angels held the Mandylion, and it continued to appear as late as World War I on banners
of the Russian army.

The Mandylion icon which became associated with the Romanov imperial family comes
from the last formative period of Russian icon painting, which developed throughout the
seventeenth century; a period in which, for better or worse, Russian artists absorbed the
achievements of Western painting. One example of this influence was the occasional
substitution of elements of the Veil of Veronica into the Mandylion portrait.
This obtains to the Romanov Mandylion, in which Christ can be seen with the crown of
thorns, even though the icon is consistently identified as an Image of Edessa type.
Additionally, in contrast to Western observers, Russians often use the term vernicle,
signifying “on a veil” to mean either the Edessa or Veronica icon type. In any case, the
Mandylion was the most famous image of Christ “not made by hands” from the sixth to
the thirteenth centuries and its story is far more ancient than the Veronica. Many icons
which were written in the seventeenth century express a synthesis of iconographic
tradition and the principles of later realistic painting. The center for this development was
Moscow, principally the State Armory Palace within the Kremlin, where artists appointed
by the Russian imperial court worked side by side with Western artists. Whereas in
erlier periods, late Hellenistic art had given way to the kind of refined linearity best
exemplified in the rich-hued icons of Rublev, influences from the West were now
creating a realistic, full-bodied style. Such was the artistic environment in which Ushakov
led his icon-painters.

For a painter especially known for his portraiture, we have only a sparse portrait of the
artist probably responsible for the Romanov Mandylion Icon, some of it gleaned from
remarks contained in the icons themselves. Simon Ushakov (1626-1686) was a celebrated
icon-painter who worked in the Moscow Kremlin Armory School; he was appointed by
imperial degree in 1644, at the age of twenty-two, to direct the icon-painters there. Thus,
he became a Russian court artist in the last year before Tsar Mikhail Fyodorovich died
and the accession of Tsar Alexei I, and he stands at the birth of the Romanov era. A
signature on one of his copies of the Vladimir Mother of God indicates he was the son of

(1261-1557), pg. 149.
33 Is it Christ walking the way under the weight of the cross who is being depicted in the Romanov icon? Or
is he witnessed teaching and imprinting his face on a towel? The crown of thorns notwithstanding, in the
presence of this icon, it still resonates as an Image of Edessa type only influenced by the Veronica theme.
Fedor Ushakov, and in an inscription on another icon, he is described as a nobleman. Ushakov’s skill as a portraitist found favor in the imperial court, and he brought his particular expertise in painting faces to his work with icons. The scale of his technique gained in grandeur when he supervised the mural painting in the Moscow Cathedrals of the Archangel Michael and the Assumption, and the Palace of Facets. He also supervised the creation of the notable “Icon of the Annunciation with Twelve Scenes from the Akathist Hymn,” which he and two other artists executed in 1659 for the Church of the Virgin of Georgia in Moscow, now the State Historical Museum. It was explained in the inscription that Ushakov himself fashioned all the faces in this massive icon.

By exposure to the master painters of Northern Europe, concern for more naturalistic forms was reaching Russian painting at this time, including heightened accuracy in the representation of the eyes. Ushakov’s excellence in the use of modeling in soft gradations of light and shade can be described in terms of Rembrandt’s technique called Chiaroscuro; yet recent scholarship has suggested that the Mandylion may have influenced the style of Rembrandt as well. Ushakov and his followers may have been influenced as well by the paintings of Memling, which were brought into their workshops by merchants. It seems plausible, for example, that the Memling painting, “St. Veronica and her Veil,” may have inspired Ushakov’s innovative technique: the eyes and particularly the eyelids look disarmingly similar to the eyes of the Romanov family icon of Christ. The glance of the eyes is practically identical and it is possible that copies of this popular painting might have been the model for the eyes of the Mandylion icon. Ushakov was perhaps also familiar with the Vernicle engraving which Albrecht Dürer crafted in 1513. In this work the cloth is held up not by the compassionate Veronica, but by two angels, a very popular theme in centuries to come which tended to mingle east and west together.

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34 Gates of Mystery: The Art of Holy Russia, Roderick Grierson, ed. (Fort Worth, TX: InterCultura, 1992), pg. 274.
36 “The Armour Chamber was transformed into an artistic centre where leading artists worked alongside foreign masters invited to the city. The most important painter was Simon Ushakov, who wanted the icon to resemble a mirror image. Faces were modeled with *chiaroscuro*.” Tatjana Vilinbachova, Symbols of Holy Russia (Milano: Leonardo International, 2003), pg. 26.
38 Gates of Mystery: The Art of Holy Russia, pg. 274.
39 There is an exemplary Mandylion icon by Ushakov in the Beltchev Collection in Pennsylvania. Here the elegant nose and disarmingly realistic eyes combine with rosy flesh to create a compassionate glimpse of Christ. Its curators contend that Ushakov actually created this specific type of Christ’s face, and they cite the icon he painted for Tsar Fyodor III which was completed between 1676 and 1677, which, if this is instead the Romanov icon, would pin down the date further. This suggestion would conflict with information available at Transfiguration Cathedral, where the icon is presented located, that the Romanov Icon was painted for Tsar Alexei I, but since his reign began four years after Ushakov died, this research suggestion makes more sense. The Teterianikovs observe that Ushakov “executed Christ’s face with great sensitivity and detailed realism which he integrates with the artistic technique of the icon. Although he uses traditional models for the depiction of the angels, the soft modeling of Christ’s face has realistically rendered features, especially the eyes.” Natalia and Vladimir Teterianikov, Russian Icons of the Golden Age 1400-1700, (Huntington, PA: Juniata College, 1988), pg. 32.
The icon-painting of Simon Ushakov and his school has been observed as parallel to the important church reforms instituted by Patriarch Nikon during the 1650s, which aimed to bring the liturgy of the Russian Church into harmony with the rest of the Orthodox Church. Although his style may have been prized by many, it is no surprise that Ushakov’s westernizing innovations were decried by Nikon for their departure from standard iconographic tradition. There is an account of a service held in the presence of the Tsar at which Nikon formally denounced the icons in the new style and dashed them to the floor; he commanded the eyes of such icons to be gouged out, and that after they had been carried in procession before the people, they should be burned.

In the European world which Peter the Great sought to emulate, it is likely that he was familiar with the likeness of Christ in the “Veronica” icon which was widely recognized among the faithful in the west. Devotion to the western icon of Christ’s holy face on a veil was said to have permeated all levels of society. Nevertheless, the most famous acheiropoitic image of Christ in the Eastern tradition, the Mandylion of Edessa, “may have influenced the development of the western types.” Although Peter the Great was responsible for cracking down on superstitious manifestations of icon veneration, “icons were part of Peter’s environment, as of every Orthodox Christian’s.” The fact that, in the time of Empress Elizabeth, the chapel in which the icon was housed became a place of pilgrimage, especially on August 16 during the festival of the icon, shows that Tsar Peter’s popular westernizing efforts did not preclude devotion to the Mandylion icon. Crowds of pilgrims lined up to visit Peter’s house and pray to the icon. “Hundreds of candles flicker before the miraculous icon; it is as if his humble dwelling were transformed into a holy church for all those grieving, embittered and seeking God’s

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40 Gates of Mystery: The Art of Holy Russia, pg. 71.
41 Archpriest Avvakum wrote: “They paint the image of Our Savior with a puffy face, and red lips...All this is done for carnal reasons, because the heretics love sensuality and do not care for higher things.” G.H. Hamilton, Art and Architecture of Russia, pg. 253.
42 Yet a friend of Ushakov, Joseph Vladimirov, came to his defense, protesting against a priest who had denounced the western influence of one of Ushakov’s icons, “Canst thou possibly say that only Russians are capable of painting icons, that only icons of Russian painting should be venerated, and that those of other lands should neither be accepted nor honored?” Ibid.
43 Alexander Sturgis, “The True Likeness,” pg. 90. Wondering at this likeness of Christ, Dante wrote, “And didst thou look even thus, O Jesus, my true Lord and God, and was this semblance Thine.” Dante, Paradiso, canto xxxi, 108, Cary, trans., Ibid., pg. 75. From his travels, Peter the Great may have even been familiar with the popular devotional prayer to the Face of Christ, “Hail, Holy Face” (Salve Sancta Facies): “No human hand depicted, carved, or polished you, as the heavenly Artist knows who made you as you are...Lead us, wonderful image, to our true homeland, that we may see the face of Christ himself.” (Non depicta minibus sculpta vel polita hoc sicst summus Artifex qui te fecit ita...Nos perduc ad patriam ofelikx figura ad videndum faciemi que est xpi pura.) Ibid., pg. 860.
45 The image of the “Savior Not Made with Hands,” in a gold case studded with precious gems, is said to have been particularly venerated and carried on Peter’s campaigns, including Poltava. He demanded it on his sick-bed, and it was carried in his funeral procession.” Lindsey Hughes, Russia in the Age of Peter the Great, pg. 377.
mercy.” Forty-six A grand church in the imperial Winter Palace designed by Rastrelli was dedicated to the “Not-Made-by-Hands” Image of Christ; in 1763 Empress Catherine II had the icon transferred there and the church became a well-known treasure trove of Christ art. Furthermore, the survival of Tsar Alexander III from a train accident was attributed to the icon, since it was accompanying him at the time.

Down through the generations of Russian tsars, the Romanov Mandylion Icon is recorded receiving imperial honor and much beloved by the people. Devotion to the icon was part of the Tercentenary celebrations in 1913 marking 300 years of rule by the Romanov Tsars. Nicholas and Alexandra were reported to have venerated the Mandylion Icon of the Savior before participating in an evening service at the Peter and Paul Fortress. The next morning three principle processions, one bearing the Romanov Icon of the Savior, converged at the Kazan Cathedral. The Great Exhibition that year gave pride of place to the celebrated antiquities of Russian icon painting and acknowledged it as a divine art depicting “the transfigured divine body, which material man cannot even imagine.”

Five years after encountering the Romanov Mandylion icon of Christ on its feast-day while visiting the Cathedral of St. Nicholas, I had the good fortune to return to St. Petersburg on pilgrimage and venerate the icon again, this time where it normally resides in the Cathedral of the Transfiguration. Here, it occupies a position of honor along the right side of the iconostasis and is displayed under bright lights, with much of the icon covered by a gleaming gold frame, an oklad. It was very different from the first time meeting the Mandylion image without its jeweled frame, when it seemed that Christ was yanking me out of the sweaty details of my pilgrimage experience to draw me into the realm of sacrificial love with Him. Now, even though the icon was displayed upright, it was more difficult to distinguish the flesh of Christ’s face as the curves of his head recede into the shadows of full reddish brown hair falling over both shoulders. While I longed to see the entire icon again, everything but the face and hair was now covered ornamentally by the framing device of the oklad. Yet there at the front of the cathedral in harsh lighting, the icon flooded the eye with sensations.

Much of what is decoratively indicated in the oklad replicates the hidden remainder of the icon, but an exception is the prominently displayed nimbus or crown. Perhaps because of the presence of the crown of thorns in the icon, Christ’s nimbus is not written in the icon itself nearly as elaborately as it is shown in the jeweled frame. In the oklad it is studded with a dense array of radially arranged shards of diamonds and edged with an elaborate gold lace border of scrolled medallions, each holding yet larger diamonds. The

46 Domik, pg. 30, quoted in Lindsey Hughes, Russia in the Age of Peter the Great (New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 1998), pg. 377.
48 Lindsey Hughes, Russia in the Age of Peter the Great, pg. 544, note 201.
50 Hans Belting, Likeness and Presence, pg. 20.
51 It is what might be called a “fringed tiara,” in the parlance of crown jewels.
medallions are carved with interweaving vines and feature an outer perimeter of seraphim wings. It is a true feast for the eyes of the faithful.

The cloth, upon which the Holy Face of Christ floats regarding us without actually making eye contact, is indicated all around on the oklad in distinctly diminished perspective, though to a lesser extent than the nimbus. It appears to be a brocade veil with a rich jacquard texture embroidered in the fabric which contrasts with the smooth gold outside the Mandylion cloth. The veil in the oklad is edged with fringe made up of tear-shaped diamonds and rubies and galooned in pearls. The fabric lies in folds under Christ’s beard and along the sides of the icon, mostly hidden in the upper half behind the starburst nimbus and appearing again caught up in two knots in the upper corners. These in turn are emblazoned with medallions inscribed with the letters Alpha and Omega, which also appear in rubies within the spikes of the crown. In icons of Christ, the nimbus around the head usually contains the traditional Greek letters signifying the mystery of Existence: Ho on, meaning “Existence,” “The Being,” or “I AM THAT I AM.”

All this jeweled magnificence is a sharp contrast to the face of Christ so realistically rendered as a scruffy ungroomed man with swollen heavy-lidded features. In beholding the Romanov Icon of the Savior in all the glory of its golden oklad, it was obvious that part of its appeal for many people must be the splendor of its trappings. While scholars have examined “the role of the frame in the transformative presence” of the icon for Byzantine viewers, my initial encounter with the Mandylion icon was starkly different than seeing it floodlit and crowned in glittering diamonds. Yet it was easy to ignore all the gem-stoned finery to meet the face of Christ once more. Immediately, I sensed again the presence of Jesus modeling generosity and drawing me to action in the world. There can be no doubt that the icon “becomes a conduit of divine response.” Grace (charis) is the icon’s active element. Lossky explains that holy icons have within them a unique energy, so that they can express things in themselves invisible. The icon does not exist simply to spiritually guide our imagination during prayer. Rather, the icon “is a material center in which there reposes an energy, a divine force, which unites itself to human art.”

Even with its dazzling oklad framing the Mandylion, this is not the sunlit image of Christ’s beauty experienced at the Transfiguration, but rather a compelling earthly glimpse of Jesus of Nazareth. It can be uncomfortable to contemplate the visage of Christ as unattractive; for example, as interpreted in scripture in the Servant Songs. Yet Augustine recognized that there is great fluidity in the authentic likeness of Christ: “the face of the Lord varies infinitely according to the different representations which each person makes.” Origen as well has pointed out that “Even if there is just one Jesus, he was multiple in aspect for the spirit, and those who looked at him did not see him in the

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53 Art and Text in Byzantine Culture, pg. 124.
54 Vladimir Lossky, The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church, pg. 189.
55 “He was despised and rejected by others, a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity” (Is. 53:3).
56 Augustine, De Trinitatate, VIII.4.5.
same way.” In its universality, the beauty of the face of Christ matches every age and culture; its nuance of suffering and grace can seem both appealing and off-putting. In the Mandylyon icon, the intimate link between the Spirit and the senses is made real with palpable intensity for me, yet remains a mystery. Orthodox Aesthetics theologian David B. Hart has explained that, “On the one hand, worldly beauty shows creation to be the real theater of divine glory—good, gracious, lovely, and desirable, practicing in God’s splendor—and on the other hand, it shows the world to be unnecessary, an expression of divine glory that is free, framed for God’s pleasure.”

Yet no matter where the characteristics of familiar images of Christ derive from, the icon continues to express the same character as that conveyed in the Gospels. As we gaze at the Romanov Mandylyon in veneration, are we in fact bending with Simon Peter and Mary to look into the empty tomb at the very burial linens which touched the Savior’s face? (John 20:5-7) In both the Johannine and Lukan (Luke 24:12) accounts of the Empty Tomb, plural cloths are mentioned, leaving open the provocative possibility for an image on a smaller napkin, apart from the shroud itself. Even if the Mandylyon image is not depicting shroud linens, but an earlier image on cloth from Christ’s life, it might be considered to pre-figure the empty burial linens at the Resurrection.

The icon has been called the “mediator in the communion with the divine world and a link with the heavenly prototype.” When I gaze at the icon of Christ, meditating upon it, I enter into a relationship with the one depicted there, who shares with me, as I pray and watch, something of his divine self. He is present in the icon, and perhaps in that moment, I am, too. In praying before the great icons of Christ, we have a means by which a sense of the reality of the Incarnation may be conveyed to us. Unlike classical art, which is often conveying an unattainable worldly perfection, in the icon Christ offers us a glimpse of the divine order. He shows us as we gaze at him, meeting his eyes, how things are in their true state, in the eyes of God. Henry Nouwen observed that meditating before an icon of Christ is “a sacred event in which contemplation and compassion are one, and in which we are prepared for an eternal life of seeing.” The icon guides us in preparation for eternal life in the presence of God.

In the years since both pilgrimages to Russia, I have found myself immersed in Orthodox spirituality, and inspired by the heritage and integrity of the icon tradition, as I search out what God may be revealing in the icons. Of course, I long to discern a direct connection with the historical body of Christ in the Icon Not Made by Hands, and am persistently motivated by the possibility, even in the face of contradictions inherent in that longing. Yet by definition, Mandylyon acheiropoieton icons are exquisitely fitted to the believer of any generation. Perhaps a component of navigating through this type of spirituality is

59 Basil Minchin, Praying with Icons (Norwich: Julian Shrine Publications, 1979), pg. 16.
60 Gates of Mystery, Roderick Grierson, ed. (Fort Worth, TX: InterCulture, 1992), pg. 70.
realizing that God may be revealing the living Christ, “the divine goodness that expresses itself in light, flesh and form,”62 just as much by appearances of the face of Jesus centuries later. Copies invoking the authentic tradition of the Mandylion may indeed add to the evolving integrity of the miraculous image. Nevertheless, I will continue to long for a tidy explanation to the creation of this image which has compelled people to so much prayer and transformation. As John De Gruchy as observed, “God entered the world in a particular way. The form and manifestation of the ‘beauty that saves’ is a strange and alien beauty that challenges and transforms all our assumptions.”63

I continue to marvel at the experience of encountering the Romanov Mandylion, and the sense of Christ offering me a painful flash of his suffering with a glimpse of his profound beauty, and modeling the generous grace necessary for continuing ministry. I was at once repulsed and attracted, intoxicated and seduced by the image of Jesus who seemed to be quietly breathing before me in anguished silence. Barth has said, “God’s beauty embraces death as well as life, fear as well as joy, what we might call the ugly as well as what we might call the beautiful.”64 In contemplating the Mandylion icon, I experience a transcendent dimension to the encounter and feel united with Jesus; not a sanitized postcard version of him, but union with a living being who experienced pleasure and agonized in suffering, breathing on me from the sweat of his suffering, Christ himself, the source of the Spirit. The Mandylion Icon of the Savior Not Made by Hands is surely leading us to Christ as we gaze at it, and in this it is a servant of the holy tradition of the Church, and of the Gospel. A hymn to the Orthodox feast celebrating the Icon Not Made by Hands proclaims, “We praise thee, the lover of man, by gazing upon the image of Thy physical form. Through it grant unto Thy servants, O Savior, to enter into Eden without hindrance.”65 The first encounter with the Romanov Mandylion icon, unclad in gemstones and gold, still resonates deeply through my whole being, remembering that day when I could feel the Spirit of Christ alive in me via the disturbing beauty of Jesus facing me in the Romanov icon of Christ.

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63 John W. De Gruchy, Christianity, Art and Transformation: Theological Aesthetics in the Struggle for Justice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pg. 121. “It is only when theological aesthetics is liberated from the tyranny of superficial and facile images of the beautiful that it can begin to understand both the beauty of God and its redemptive power amidst the harsh reality of the world.”
64 Barth, Church Dogmatics I/1, pg. 661.
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