

STEPS & SYMBOLS OF AN ICON

The Board:

- 1) Must be painted on wood, symbol of the Tree of Knowledge (Garden of Eden) and the Tree of Life (the Cross).
- 2) The icon should have 2 parts: the outer part “container” that also works as a frame and the inner part “the contained” that holds the design (called the Ark). It also symbolizes the human being, the outer being the body and the inner being the soul.
- 3) The required size for the panel is determined once the design is prepared.

The Cloth:

- 1) The board is covered with linen (or cotton) cloth, which symbolizes the ‘Shroud’, to die to ourselves to enter the Kingdom of Spirituality.

The Gesso:

Aside from the practical preparation of the panel to receive paint, being white, it symbolizes light (the refraction of light as it enters a prism and delivers the colours. By gessoing, we create a new room for beauty. It is also a time for the iconographer to prepare for the path (the journey) of writing the icon. An icon will require up to 10 coats of gesso with sanding after every 3rd coat.

The transfer of design onto panel:

Usually transferred by using carbon paper under the prepared design which is done on a paper of choice, usually tracing or vellum paper. The design is then etched into the panel with a sharp stylus with a blunt tip. This permanently casts the image into the panel and assists the iconographer in seeing the reference lines as the gold and paints are applied.

The Clay (Bole):

The Clay (or Bole colour) represents our nature in God’s Creation. In Hebrew, Adam has three meanings: Man, Red, and Clay. It reminds us of our beginning but it is also into that clay that God breathes His Holy Spirit. The clay along the outer edge symbolizes the ‘old man’; the clay in the inner surface (under the gilding) symbolizes the ‘new man’.

The Gold:

Gold symbolizes Heaven. Gold applied on clay (bole) symbolizes Heaven’s plans for Man, for Earth. It represents the union of Heaven and Earth; if clay is Man’s basic nature, we cover it with God’s.

Once applied, the gold leaf can either be lightly burnished with a cheese cloth or given a more highly polished burnish with the use of agate stones. This process required the use of natural clay bole with natural glues in order to allow for the gold to be worked in this way. Regular commercial boles are only suited for very light burnishing.

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The Red Circle:

Being beginning to write the icon, the iconographer unites Heaven and earth with the red circle around the halo; symbolizing our new transformation, the 'new Adam'.

The Paint:

In Orthodox iconography, egg tempura paint is used but some iconographers also use acrylic paints. The commonality is that they are both water base paints. Oil cannot be used for icons as water symbolizes the rituals of purification, the waters of Baptism.

The Colours:

Colours are a gift of God. When He established His Covenant with Noah after the flood, God presented him with the colours of the rainbow. Paint symbolizes the journey of Man towards transformation. As we add more and more colours and highlights and lines, paint moves us from original chaos to shape and order, to increasing enlightenment, to vision, when lastly the face is completed, and the invisible reality is unveiled.

The White Circle:

The white circle is drawn around the original red circle as a sign, not that perfection has been achieved, but that this particular transfiguration has been completed. If perfection was not reached, the white circle also symbolizes the determination to start all over again with a new board. Thus the process of perfection is a spiral, with every step taking us higher and higher.

The Oil:

The oil (varnish) symbolizes anointing, the consecration of a chosen one.