

A closer look: Images of faith

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [September 8, 2009](#) issue

Happily, the offices of the Christian Century are located across the street from the Art Institute of Chicago, one of the world's great art museums. I walk across the street occasionally and have a look. It is perhaps a reflection of the lifestyle that many of us live that I tend to view a lot of paintings and not linger for long before any one of them.

Recently someone who knows a lot more about art than I do said that I ought to spend 15 minutes pondering a single painting. I wouldn't think of trying to hear a Beethoven symphony in a few minutes, he said. Fifteen minutes? I thought. I can see the entire Impressionist collection in 15 minutes.

I have been trying to change my behavior, but it is not easy. My eyes stray to the next picture; everything in me wants to move on. But when I succeed in lingering, I see things that I would have missed, and I sometimes sense the deeper meaning of the work and the intent of the artist.

Viewing habits like mine help explain why modern Western Christians aren't sure what to make of icons in the Eastern Orthodox tradition. *The Mystical Language of Icons*, by Solrun Nes, is about the deeply spiritual process by which icons are created, the paints and materials the iconographer employs, and the theological intent of the work. I was intrigued. I learned that I am not supposed to look at icons the way I scan a wall full of paintings. So I'm trying to slow down and concentrate.

Lately I have been reading passages from Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams's *The Dwelling of the Light: Praying with Icons of Christ*. This beautiful little book includes full-page color illustrations of four famous icons—three from the 15th century and one from the 20th.

Looking at the 15th-century work *The Transfiguration* and reading what Williams has to say about it, then turning back to the illustration, I began to understand that what I was seeing was not an attempt at photographic realism but an effort to open up the possibility that the viewer is being "looked at by God," as Williams puts it. The point is "to open our eyes to what is true about Jesus and the saints." Says Williams:

“Looking at Jesus seriously changes things. If we do not want to be changed, it is better not to look too hard or too long.”