

Alexandr Tsypkov's sacred graffiti

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Icon writer Alexandr Tsypkov (All images used by permission of the artist)

Once in a while, we are caught short by something so beautiful we lack words for it. That’s what happened to me when I first saw the work of Alexandr Tsypkov, an icon writer who beautifies abandoned buildings in Russia with ancient Christian images. I’ve studied and loved icons, but I’ve always seen and imagined them in churches and homes and on office walls. Tsypkov’s work, and that of his fellow artists in the After Icon project, is in more “secular” spaces—on rubble, trees, street corners, and the like, alongside fellow graffiti artists. This mix of the sacred and profane, of the iconographic and the ordinary, undoes me with its beauty. I talked to Alexandr about

his work and that of his colleagues, why and how they do what they do, and what it means for art, faith, and life in Russia today.

We often think of graffiti as an insurgent art, often profane, impenetrable to outsiders. We often think of icons as stowed away in churches, unchanging, unseen by those who don't venture inside. Why are you bringing the two together?

Christian art is always evolving. In every era, Christian art has absorbed different styles. Christian art of today can't be ignorant of cinema, for example, or animation, or tools like the Internet or street art.

I worked in a cathedral and became accustomed to images in very large sizes. It was actually this monumentalism that drew me to street art and to the idea of working on the street in an urban environment. It is important to me not to paint by commission but to paint as the old masters did, freely. The street gives me this opportunity.

How do people respond to your work?

People tend to react positively, but not everyone has understood exactly what was depicted. Even for people not familiar with Christianity, the images of angels, apostles, and saints are subconsciously associated with something bright, good, and kind. I've never encountered a bad reaction. It happens often that random people who are not associated with our project help to draw or paint or shoot video of the process. We have a lot of stories like this. I find this really motivating, and it makes me happy. Our projects have found so many like-minded friends.

"Why not create an icon on a new material without departing from the canons?" you asked the media outlet *Russia Beyond*. But why stay within the canons of traditional iconography? Why is that important to you?

Staying within the canons is essential to us! The essence of the holy image is precisely in the meaning of the church, as well as in the meanings of the culture of the image, although these meanings may vary slightly. I love the beauty of our ancient icons and frescoes. For me, this ancient culture and practice of drawing classical images is genius! Icon painting helps me to think deeply about an image, to peer into it mystically. When I look at ancient icons, I am spiritually immersed.

You've been critical of religious art being set apart in churches and made to look falsely pious. When it comes to your own art, how do you see church and world as being related?

The connection is simple. The task of an icon is to constantly remind a person of themselves. If the encounter with the image brings the person into the church, then this is a fulfillment of the mission. But I have different attitudes toward contemporary art in churches. Often I find myself annoyed by the way a contemporary icon is written or by the excessive amount of gold, by the naïveté or sentimentality of an image replete with jewelry. On the other hand, there are many interesting and worthy examples in Russia of high-quality, real church art.

How did you become an iconographer in graffiti? Did you start with graffiti or start with iconography?

I studied to become an icon painter and a monumental artist. I started painting on the street almost two years ago.

Your group has taken an interest in illustrating and beautifying abandoned places in particular. Why? What inspired you to take these images to such surfaces?

Our group is called the After Icon project. We began to paint frescoes on the ruins of abandoned churches. We did not ask anyone's permission. In our view, these frescoes were necessary. We had to do it.

What kind of dialogue about Christian art are you hoping to inspire? Would you describe your work as evangelism?

For us the dialogue between believers and nonbelievers and between artists and ordinary people is really important! We want people to see Christian discourse as an essential part of modern art on a grand scale. And we do think you could call our work a form of visual preaching.

Are you really risking arrest for vandalism? Obviously you don't see what you do as vandalism! How do you see it? As guerilla iconography?

Yes, we run the risk of being arrested for vandalism. But we do not believe that what we are doing is vandalism. Rather we are taking initiative to improve the aesthetics of the urban environment.

What is the nature of the debate over the public place of religion in Russia right now, and how does your work fit into that debate?

A return to tradition is gaining momentum in Russia right now. Russia is turning around to look at its own past as if looking in a mirror, as it seeks its place in the future. Orthodox Christianity is part of our great past. Western civilization is a civilization of the word. Russian civilization is a civilization of the image. The artists engaged in the After Icon project are contributing to this civilization by making images.

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