

Writing an icon · *Caroline Hayes*

Icon master Evgeny Grachev is a warm bear of a man in his forties who lives in the small town of Yuzha, near Kholui, about 200 miles north-east of Moscow. Zhenya (as he is known) started to study icon painting at the age of 15 during the Soviet era, at a time when such studies were strictly forbidden. If Zhenya or his brave teacher had been caught the consequences would have been terrible, certainly neither man would ever have worked again. Zhenya is head of the Artists' Union of Kholui and is one of Kholui's leading painters.

Traditionally, an icon painter would live in a cell for one month before starting work, praying and living on a simple diet of bread and water before being considered ready to start. We were fortunate enough to receive a formal blessing from the priest at Kholui, Father Vladimir, who chanted verses



from the Gospels and invited us to kiss the cross so as to bless us before we started work. There was also a corner in the Grachevs' bedroom furnished with icons and set aside for prayer, which we were invited to make use of.

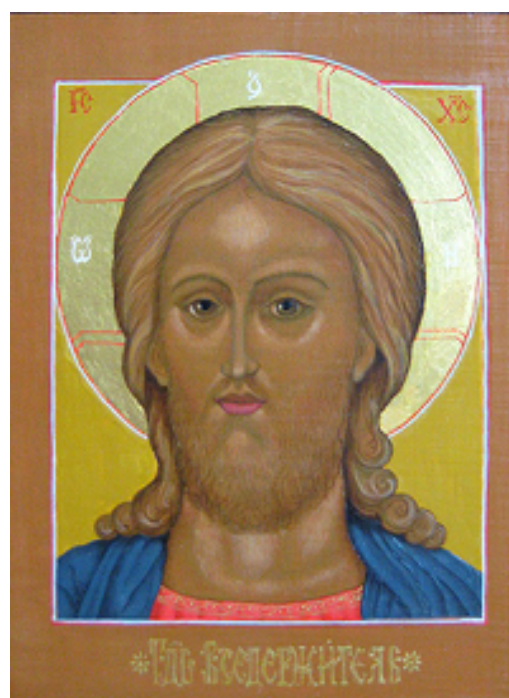
There were six of us in the group. The other five all had some experience of writing icons in the UK. Three of us chose an icon of the Angel Gabriel, and the other three, including me, chose the Pantocrator (Christ the Holder of All).

The gesso'd boards we were given were of a particularly high quality, this gesso being made out of sieved chalk, alabaster dust, sturgeon bones, and rabbit-skin glue; sometimes honey is added. This gesso-maker says a special prayer before starting work.

We were taught to work using techniques and traditions that were several hundred years old, transferring the design onto the gesso by first pricking the template and then forcing the powder through the holes onto the gesso base, applying and polishing gold leaf, and making paint using powdered pigment ground with a mixture of egg yolk, water, and white wine, known as emulsion.

Painting the face of the icon was possibly the weirdest experience for me. In icon painting it is traditional to work from the dark to the light, which is a very strange concept to a Western-trained artist. We had to apply a colour known as golden ochre to the face. Its purpose was to illuminate the highlights of the face. It had to cover the face while still leaving traces of the darker layer to provide the shadows in the eyes and down the nose etc. This was extremely difficult. The idea was to place a fair dollop of the golden ochre in a high-lit place such as the middle of the forehead and blend the paint outwards, taking more and more paint off the brush with the finger and thumb, and blending the light into the shadow. After a while the face began to emerge from the background like a photograph in developing fluid.

The icons were decorated with real gold paint, which is made from several sheets of gold leaf ground with gum arabic for



about an hour using a finger (preferably a broad Russian one!). It is then strained and washed before being allowed to dry. It is very hard work to produce, but the result is a gleaming gold paint which can be used incredibly finely to produce intricate designs and decorations.

Perhaps the most nerve-racking part was the fine red and white lines which had to be painted around the halo and outlining the frame. Zhenya was capable of painting perfectly straight fine lines and also perfect circles, but we did not have the benefit of four rigorous years at the Kholui Art School. After some practice on a piece of paper the best thing was to take a deep breath and with one's heart in one's mouth breathe out slowly while drawing the brush along in a smooth sweep.

After a detailed scrutiny by our teacher and some corrections to details (traditionally He has several shorter hairs around His parting, which I had missed) it was decided that we had finished. It is a great temptation to go on fiddling with a painting after all the meaningful work has been done. Zhenya then



applied five layers of shellac, crossing himself before applying the first layer.

Later that day we returned to Kholui Church where Father Vladimir inspected the icons and laid them out on a small table. Each icon has its own prayer for its blessing and Father Vladimir said the prayers appropriate to icons of Gabriel and the Pantocrator. He then sprinkled holy water liberally over the icons (causing one of the Gabriels to weep!). Once again we were given the cross to kiss. Then we each went to the table, crossed ourselves, picked up our icon and kissed it, before taking it away.

This completed the ceremony.

For me this was an unforgettable week in which I could immerse myself in a completely different culture. I found that the preparations we made, including the blessings, altered my whole approach to the painting, something I had never encountered before.

I am indebted to icon master Evgeny Grachev for his patient help and encouragement and for sharing his great skill, also to Ludmilla for her usual excellent care of us all the time we were there. •