



[HOME](#) /

A Wounded Presence: The Virgin of Vlainimir Icon

Elaine Elizabeth Belz

PhD student in Theological Aesthetics

Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, CA



Detail, Unknown artist, *Our Lady of Vladimir*, first third of the 12th century, tempera on wood. Hall Museum Church of St Nicholas, Moscow.

The *Virgin of Vladimir*, or *Vladimirskaya*, icon^[1] is well-known, and beloved by many who know nothing of its history. Yet the scarred and worn surface testifies to a long history, but not one of neglect. There is an evident intentionality to the abrasions that have removed all paint from the Virgin's hand and her child's hand and foot, abrasions which, by revealing the wood beneath the paint, also impose an awareness of the icon's materiality. Other chips and cracks speak of age and use. These accidental qualities of the icon are, nevertheless, generally overlooked, as the imagination fills in the gaps to supply an impression of the pristine image. My intention in this paper is to suggest that the surface damage to the icon should be considered—indeed, considered part of the icon itself. They are marks of its persistence, survival, and interaction with various communities. They demonstrate that through this icon, the holy Theotokos has been made present in a world not yet made perfect; so they give us a tangible experience of how the holy does not remain ensconced in heaven, but participates in our world. Thus, I will argue, the *Vladimirskaya* exemplifies what Alejandro García-Rivera calls “a wounded innocence.”

Orthodox theologian Gennadios Lamouris explains that because the “real content of Orthodox art is the ‘new creation’ in Christ...[t]he common world, the world of decay, was wholly unrelated to it.”^[2] Icons are meant for liturgical settings, in which they help to lift worshippers out of their ordinary

lives and into an experience of the new creation. Can this purpose be reconciled with the fact of icons' (and church buildings') inevitable decay? In seeking to answer this question, I will approach the *Vladimirskaya* through the lens of theological aesthetics. In particular, I will rely on several key concepts García-Rivera develops in his book, *A Wounded Innocence: Sketches for a Theology of Art*.^[3] Regarding method, García-Rivera writes that a "theological method proper to a theology of art tends toward *synthesis*, putting things together, rather than *analysis*, taking things apart. A theology of art ought to understand the whole rather than the parts."^[4] Thus he seeks to develop a theological aesthetics that

sees a true continuity in the beautiful. The beautiful encompasses the ugly and the pretty, the grotesque and the ordinary, the artist and the artist's community, the work of art and the work of craft, the natural and that made by human hands. Indeed, a living aesthetics is less a disinterested beholding of some alienated object than that which moves the human heart.^[5]

The list he gives is, of course, not exhaustive, but it stresses the communities to which the artist belongs and for whom the work is made. "[T]he experience of Beauty, that is, the beautiful, is a complex, intrinsically communal experience,"^[6] and since God is Beauty itself, an experience of the beautiful is "also an experience of intimacy with God."^[7] Here he is not even speaking of specifically religious art, yet he uses language that is clearly appropriate to the consideration of liturgical art.

While García-Rivera writes as a Roman Catholic theologian, much of what he has to say is shared, although perhaps in different terms, by Orthodox theology. However, I wish to note that my reflections on the *Vladimirskaya*, especially through the lens of theological aesthetics as I have studied it with Prof. García-Rivera, are a Western perspective. I do not pretend to see with Byzantine eyes. Therefore I will draw from Eastern and Western sources, as well as interdisciplinary sources, as I approach the *Virgin of Vladimir* not as an art historian, but as a theologian.

Materiality and Religious Practice

Father Michel, the prior of Chevetogne, stresses that the icon communicates the faith of the people of God. It expresses not a subjective vision but one of the community. 'The icon is a vision of faith and undergirds prayer.'

– François Sejourné, "One Stage on a Spiritual Pilgrimage." ^[8]

In her study of contemporary American material religion, Colleen McDannell makes the observation that "People need objects to help establish and maintain relationships with supernatural characters, family, and friends," adding that "Christians use goods and create religious landscapes to tell themselves and the world around them who they are." Material objects function thus to aid in the formation of community identities. They also transmit belief systems, but not merely through illustrating points of dogma. "The sensual elements of Christianity are not merely decorations that mask serious belief; it is through the visible world that the invisible world becomes known and felt."^[9] Through the giving and receiving of religious objects, as well as displaying and experiencing them in homes and in churches, Christians *practice* their faith, "as one would practice the piano in order to become a competent pianist."^[10] The material objects used in Christian worship help not only to reflect or confirm faith, but to engender it. Recalling what Limouris has said about the liturgical function of icons—to lift people from their ordinary lives into an experience of the new creation—we can appreciate the difference between the ways words and objects teach the faith. Humans learn not only through the contemplation of ideas, but even more primarily through imitation. *Seeing* the gestures in icons can trigger an urge in the viewer to "try out" the gestures her or himself, especially when the saints depicted have become familiar as family, and their iconographic depiction gives the visual cues that these are people one should imitate. In other words, icons and other religious objects engage us in embodied learning—what McDannell calls "practicing" the faith.

Through this embodied practice the worshipper develops a Christian *habitus*.^[11] that is, a disposition toward future action informed by Christian faith. As García-Rivera explains, *habitus* is "the development of a higher disposition toward embodying experience..." and we can in turn speak of a "liturgical *habitus* as a higher disposition toward worship. As such, the *habitus* also becomes a sensibility" oriented toward mystery.^[12] García-Rivera names Christian mystery a "sensible mystery," because it is not mystery in the sense of an unsolvable puzzle, or even a puzzle to be solved, but rather mystery to be *experienced*. The liturgical *habitus*, then is oriented toward a "sensibility to the ineffable," and because "Divine Mystery is Beauty itself," the liturgical *habitus* is also a sensibility to beauty. As we have seen above, García-Rivera describes beauty as "that which moves the human heart." A sensibility to divine beauty developed through a liturgical *habitus*, then,

reveals the human heart to itself precisely because it orients it to another heart. This movement and orientation is...a unitive revelatory experience. It reveals not only the many but also the One. More important, it reveals the very nature of Beauty itself, the many now become one. Unitive revelatory experience, in other words, is the experience of [one of] the oldest understandings of beauty, unity in diversity.^[13]

It is no wonder, then, that people are moved to touch icons.

Léonide Ouspensky describes the emotional impact of the *Umilenie* (Our Lady of Tenderness) icon type, of which the *Vladimirskaya* is but one example. This type "emphasizes the natural human feeling, the tenderness of motherly love."^[14] Noting that this type is attributed to St. Luke, he reminds us that, as with the "apostolic liturgies" and "apostolic canons," these types are attributed to St. Luke not because any of the extant copies were actually written by him, but "because they have an apostolic character and are covered by apostolic authority."^[15] That apostolic authority sanctions them for

liturgical use; the liturgical *habitus* they help to form, we might say, can be trusted as standing in the apostolic faith. In addition, that tradition assures the sacramentality of the icons. As the liturgy for the feast of *Our Lady of Vladimir* affirms:

When for the first time your icon was painted by the announcer of evangelical mysteries and was brought to you so that you could identify it and confer on it the power of saving those who venerate you, you rejoiced. You who are merciful and who have blessed us became, as it were, the mouth and voice of the icon. Just as when you conceived God, you sang the hymn: 'Now all the generations will call me blessed,' so also, looking at the icon, you say with force: 'My grace and my power are with this image.' And we truly believe that you have said this, Our Sovereign Lady, and that you are with us through this image.^[16]

This prayer also exemplifies how in the liturgy, words, gestures, and actions work together with the icons in performing their formative role. What is said about the icon reinforces what the icon itself "says"—or, as the adage goes, "What the ear hears, the eyes are contemplating."^[17] And through the icon, the saint depicted (in this case, Mary) is made present: "you are with us through this image."

"Liturgy cannot exist without art," writes Limouris. "The best example is iconography: it can be analyzed and understood theologically only if we take into consideration the 'incarnation' of art in the subject matter, colours, lines, expressions, etc."^[18] In other words, to understand icons theologically and liturgically, attention must be paid to each particular icon's subject but also its formal and material qualities—the means through which Christ, the saints, or, in our case, the Theotokos, become present to a particular gathered liturgical community.

A superficial look

In a letter published under the title, "Icon: An Expression of Prayer and Sacrament,"^[19] an unnamed Russian iconographer elucidates the composition of icons in language ripe for theological exposition. The recurring theme in his discussion is the materiality of the icon: matter matters, principally because the material, lines, color, and compositional structure of an icon make up its givenness and particularity. An icon is properly understood as revelation, not merely an artist's expression of an idea. The icon really relates to its archetype, whether Christ, Mary, or a saint, "whose action impresses its character" on the icon.^[20] According to Bissera Pentcheva, the language of "impressing" traces back to the ancient and medieval theory of extramission—the belief that rays sent from the eyes actually contact objects, returning to the eyes to impress the object onto the viewer's memory. In other words, vision was tactile. She quotes Theodore the Studite: "[the artist] takes matter, looks at the prototype, receives the imprint of that which he contemplates, and presses it like a seal into his matter."^[21] Thus, the icon attempts "to express the paradox of the tangible versus the intangible rather than the visible versus the invisible..."^[22] Or, as our anonymous iconographer puts it:

This, then, is the body of the icon, the unique plastic expression of the spiritualized human body. ... [T]his iconographic body created through the medium of panel and line, of colour and surfaces, is the only form which in its concrete simplicity, can ever be indwelt by grace.^[23]

Icons are sensual objects, and through their sensuality they present to us "the primitive beauty and purity of the material which sings the praise of God."^[24] The flat surface of the icon, Pentcheva suggests, interacts with other sensory input from the liturgy (lights, incense, and singing, for example) to overwhelm the senses and thus bring the worshipper to an embodied experience of the divine. By virtue of its materiality, an icon, "while itself an absence...enacts divine presence" through mimetic performance, that is, the performance of presence.^[25]

What Pentcheva and the unnamed iconographer both claim about icons, Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart affirms more generally about the whole of creation. Hart repeatedly speaks of superficiality, a term which the Western mind tends to associate with triviality. Placing Hart in conversation with iconography elucidates his meaning, which completely reverses that thinking. He argues instead that a philosophy or spirituality that tries to get at the depth of things ultimately does away with the very things it seeks to know more profoundly. As he puts it, "beauty does not 'essentialize' (essences are supremely anaesthetic), but remains always at the surface...it is the 'eloquence' of being, which reveals being's gratuity."^[26] The following is worth quoting at length, because, although Hart does not overtly draw the connection, it relates quite thoroughly with the spirituality of icons:

Inasmuch as *creation* is not the overflow of some ungovernable perturbation of the divine substance, or a tenebrous collusion of ideal form and chaotic matter, but purely an expression of the superabundant joy and agape of the Trinity, joy and love are its only grammar and its only ground; one therefore must learn a certain orientation, a certain charity and a certain awe, and even a certain style of delectation to see in what sense creation tells of God and to grasp the nature of creation's inmost (which is to say, most superficial) truth.^[27]

Although he does not discuss icons directly, it is not hard to imagine him writing his (normally dense) tome beneath the reflected light of a candle on an icon's surface.

Even his choice of the term "ground" recalls the gold background of many icons which reflects to us mortals the heavenly light. Perhaps we might adopt Hart's language and speak of that gold ground as "an expression of the superabundant joy and agape of the Trinity." As if describing the surface of an icon, Hart speaks of "the splendor of concrete form...awakened by the aesthetic exteriority of otherness, the beauty of the other." Applying this language to icons, we see that the spirituality of praying with icons does not turn us inward or invite introspection, but rather turns us outward toward the other. Hart argues, in fact, that subjectivity "is only in being opened—formed—by the light of the other; one's 'self' is that 'matter' in which beauty impresses itself...."^[28] Pentcheva likens the "concept of the icon as surface" with Martin Heidegger's definition of truth as "the unconcealedness of being," and Hart

seems to be saying something very similar here. Like Hart, Pentcheva's analysis warns against the temptation to look for the truth in an essence beyond the given surface. Through its mimetic performance "the icon uncovers a divine vision by giving it a material being—textures that can be grasped and sensorially experienced. ... The icon as surface becomes the sensual 'givenness' of absence."[\[29\]](#)

And so we turn to the *Vladimirskaya* itself. The 12th-century icon is painted in tempera and gold leaf on wood, and measures 69 cm x 104 cm vertically oriented.[\[30\]](#) The panel is composed of five pieces of wood in differing sizes, whose joints are visible through the painted surface: three vertical boards, and horizontal boards along the top and bottom. The image appears in a carved recess approximately 43 cm x 67 cm, leaving a very wide frame. The entire frame and the background of the image itself appear to have been covered in gold leaf, which is now mostly worn through or chipped off. The traditional inscriptions indicating Mary and Christ are barely visible, but present.

Yet in this derelict condition, the Virgin and her Son command attention. Their figures merge into one organic form that nearly fills the recessed space. Dressed in highly textured and ornamented red robes, they seem to present themselves to the viewer's sense of touch as well as sight. The infant's scarlet robe shimmers with highlights of bright gold, and he wears a dark blue sash, also highlighted in gold, around his waist and over his shoulder. The Virgin's *maphorion* is decorated with the traditional eight-pointed star on her head and shoulders (the star on her right shoulder is not visible, but may be assumed), edged in crimson with fringes of gold. The red of her robe and *maphorion* is of such a deep hue as to appear almost black.

Together, the Virgin and Child make up the foreground of the image, with nothing but gold for a background. In place of an illusion of depth given by background objects, the Virgin's dark robe and eyes evoke a spiritual depth to be found in her person. At the same time, the Virgin seems to be pressing forward toward the viewer, almost with a sense of urgency, as if against a window pane. The contrast between her dark and his bright red robes, her shadowed and his bright face, creates the effect that she seems to recede even as she presents to the viewer her Son. She cradles her Child in her right hand, and with her left calls the viewer's attention to him. Although her head is bowed toward her Son, her gaze is fixed on the viewer, and her large, almond-shaped eyes bearing a deep melancholy are the defining feature of her face. The Child sits in her right hand, his bare feet dangling. He reaches upward to her with his whole body, grasping her around the neck with his left hand, clutching her veil with his right, and pressing his cheek to hers. His gaze is toward his mother's face.

Paradoxically, the Virgin and Child sit motionless and serene; and yet his whole body moves toward her in a gesture that feels timeless and eternal. His left leg apparently curls upward, as the sole of his left foot is visible, his garments draping around it and suggesting both motion and sensuality. Light plays on his face and on the Virgin's slender, long nose. These details lend an almost sculptural quality to the painting. His face expresses delight, with a slight smile on his lips.

The entire surface of the icon, including its frame, is uniformly pitted and chipped. The red ground beneath the gold leaf shows through, as does the material of the wood. Most of this damage appears accidental, as if it resulted from ordinary handling, or abuse, or poor conservation. Given the icon's age, this is hardly surprising. While we might be tempted to recreate, in the imagination, the pristine condition of this icon (in which, perhaps, the Virgin's robes were redder in hue and lighter in value), its present condition reminds us that all artworks, like all material objects, are impermanent and require human care to preserve them. The mere fact that we are able to observe this icon (if only in photographic reproduction) testifies to the care of centuries of communities even as the chips and cracks testify to the icon's use. Clearly it was not kept hidden away.

But something in this image further testifies that it was also not protected from human touch. The entire left hand of the Virgin and right hand of her Child are worn through to the wood, along with the fingertips of the Virgin's right hand, and most of the top of the infant's right foot. These abrasions suggest that over the centuries, devotees have not only handled the icon, but have touched it in meaningful gestures, connecting to the Virgin and child through their hands and his foot. These abrasions stand out from the otherwise uniform pattern of chipped paint and gold leaf. That difference from ordinary, expected wear foregrounds the icon's devotional use, confronting the viewer with evidence of a storied history that must be considered part of the icon as much as the wood, paint, and gold leaf.

There is so much in the "mere" appearance of this icon to move the viewer's heart, both in the icon's composition, which tell us about the Virgin and her Son (the God-Bearer and God); and in the icon's present condition, which tells us *something*, even if nothing specific or factual, about the audiences of faithful and unfaithful viewers who have interacted with this icon and through it, with the Theotokos, with Christ, and with other people. Any viewer of this icon enters into some kind of relationship, however fleeting, with the whole Orthodox tradition that produced and preserved it,[\[31\]](#) and thus with the many individual persons who have also approached the *Vladimirskaya*. But without knowledge of the icon's history, that connection may only be vaguely felt. The known history of this icon, however, is somewhat sparse. While the particular history is important, as it makes the *Vladimirskaya* the particular icon that it is, we may also be grateful to have some information, however elusive, about the icon's history marked into its very flesh.

History and background

Historical data may be scarce, but various Russian historical chronicles provide clues. In the literature available in English, details sometimes differ, but do not seriously conflict. The 12th century icon is the earliest extant icon we have of its particular composition; and while it certainly stands in an earlier tradition of the *Eleousa* (Our Lady of Tenderness) type, its unique characteristics—most notably, the Christ Child's arm around his mother's neck and his upturned foot—may have originated with this icon. Hans Belting assumes it copies an earlier icon, reminding us that "we can only conjecture about the original icons."[\[32\]](#) However, all other images sharing the compositional details of this 12th-century expression of the *Eleousa* (*Umilenie* in Russian) are

copies of *this icon*, the *Vladimirskaya* or *Virgin of Vladimir*. As Maria Gasper-Hulvat notes, in the case of a miracle-working icon like the *Vladimirskaya*, “its copies depict not only the image of the Mother of God, but also the tangible miracle-working icon itself.”^[33]

Written in Constantinople around 1130, it seems to have been made as a gift from the Patriarch of Constantinople to the Russian Grand Duke at Kiev. The date of the gift varies: Gasper-Hulvat places it between 1125-1131;^[34] Belting sets the date at 1136;^[35] while Skrobucha, working from the Russian Chronicles, is only willing to link the icon’s arrival at Kiev with the foundation of a church built there between 1131-1136.^[36] According to legend, the icon was seen levitating in the Kiev church, and this was taken as a sign that the icon wished to move.^[37] In any case, the icon was taken by Andrei Bogolyubsky, son of the Grand Duke of Kiev, to Vladimir. The new site was chosen by the icon, according to legend: near Kiev, the horses transporting it stopped and refused to go any further.^[38] The Uspenski (“Dormition”) Cathedral of Vladimir was built to house the icon, which was installed in the cathedral in 1161 and decorated with a revetment of gold, silver, precious gems, and pearls. There, the icon continued to perform miracles—“large-scale, public, and political, as opposed to many other Russian miracle-working icons that were credited with personal healing miracles.”^[39]

However, Skrobucha points out some intriguing ambiguity in the icon’s history. The Russian Chronicles, he notes, do not give a clear account of the icon’s fate in several disasters. For example, he cites a fire of 1185 which “ravaged Vladimir,” of which the chronicles state that “the fire took everything and nothing was left after the conflagration.”^[40] Skrobucha names at least one scholar who concluded that the *Vladimirskaya* was also destroyed (which would imply what we have is a later copy), but counters that the chronicles go on to specifically name the icon in the 13th-century Tartar invasion of Vladimir. During that invasion, according to the chronicles, the Tartars stripped the icon of its precious revetment, but apparently left the icon itself behind.^[41]

In 1395, the icon was brought to Moscow to protect the city from invasion by Mongols led by Timur (Tamerlane), and indeed, the invaders were repelled. After a brief return to Vladimir, the icon was set up in 1480 in the Uspenski (Dormition) Cathedral in the Moscow Kremlin—a cathedral, again, which was built specifically to house it. During this time, two copies were made of it, one for each of the Uspenski Cathedrals; this fact has led scholars to conclude that the 12th-century *Vladimirskaya* traveled between the two cathedrals, and, while away from either cathedral, would be substituted with a copy which, as Gasper-Hulvat suggests, would play the role of the 12th-century icon in its absence.^[42]

In 1918-1919, the icon was examined in the State Restoration Workshops in Moscow. Skrobucha comments that the detailed notes from these examinations show that testing confirmed dates given in the chronicles, further casting doubt on the theory that the 12th-century icon was lost in a fire and replaced with a 13th-century copy. The examinations also revealed that the icon had been repainted multiple times. The only portions of the original painting that survive are the faces of both the Virgin and Child, his hand around her neck, and part of his shoulder. These portions are also the only part of the icon which retains the canvas backing that must have originally covered the entire surface of the wood. Skrobucha observes that “the faces have been preserved so well and have withstood the ravages of time better than the rest of the icon because the paint ground here is superimposed on a canvas,” whereas in the repainted portions of the icon, “the chalk background was applied straight on to the wood and so did not have such a secure base.”^[43]

That the icon was originally written with no canvas backing except what little exists today would be astonishing. However, if we recall that the icon had been clad with a revetment later stripped by Tartar invaders, it seems likely that the original painting, along with the canvas beneath it, came off with the revetment, leaving only the faces and other small sections not covered by the cladding. Without the canvas backing, then, the newly repainted icon would become subject to the “ravages of time” and require additional repainting. Presumably the first repainting was done by someone familiar enough with the icon to recall the basic composition and colors; Skrobucha does mention that the 20th century examinations revealed that over time, as the icon was repainted, the figure of the Theotokos was altered. Whether the original hues or not, Skrobucha describes the icon as a “harmonious combination of golden, cherry-red, blue and ochre yellow tones,”^[44] with the faces painted in warm olive. The Child’s face is brighter than his mother’s, but the Virgin’s face also blossoms with pink and red tones.

In the end, we are left with a fragmented sketch of the history of this icon which is itself fragmentary. From a strictly artistic perspective, the icon’s present condition seems regrettable; from an historical perspective, it leaves us wondering and conjecturing: it presents us with a puzzle, but not a mystery. From the perspective of theological aesthetics, however, it draws us into a sensible mystery, the mystery of a “wounded innocence.”

A “Wounded Innocence”

In his book, *A Wounded Innocence: Sketches Toward a Theology of Art*, Alejandro García-Rivera develops an important theological insight: the “wounded innocence” which appears in the very title of his work. We commonly think of innocence with respect to moral actions—innocence as a state of having *not* (yet) sinned, of not (yet) knowing evil. In this sense, innocence becomes “a mark of moral immaturity because it is also seen as a kind of ignorance.” But García-Rivera argues that innocence may also be conceived as a virtue that is gained, “something a person has fought to achieve.” This way of understanding innocence stems from Irenaeus, for whom the story of the “Fall” in Genesis 3 is a story of human development, “a tale of expulsion and subsequent pilgrimage... [which] begins a journey of both learning and moral advancement.” For Irenaeus, the evils and sins to which human beings are subject may be seen as growing pains on the way to a *future* state of perfection. Thus “[t]he Fall brought to self-consciousness a profound vulnerability, a radical openness to being acted upon, that, ultimately, expresses itself as the need for intercession, a call for sacred sympathy.” That sacred sympathy ultimately meets us in the incarnate Christ, the “crucial element in a theology of art.”^[45]

In the Orthodox tradition (of which Irenaeus is very much a part), the Incarnation is the justification for the production and veneration of icons.

In Christ...we encounter a visible image of God; in Mary, we find the fleshly materiality into which the logos entered in order to create the visible Christ. Thus, as a reference to the Incarnation, every icon of Mary is a justification of the orthodox ...veneration of all icons.[\[46\]](#)

García-Rivera carries this point further: the Incarnation is foundational to a theology of art, all art, not only icons or religious art. He proposes that the “eschatological dimension of the Incarnation suggests a little explored possibility for a theology of art, the dynamics of innocence emerging from human struggle within the garden of good and evil.” That struggle involves the dramatic interplay of “human compassion and divine sympathy” such as we see in the exchange between worshippers and icons or crucifixes which they touch, and where they leave votive candles, written notes, *Milagros*, and other gifts of supplication or gratitude. This struggle is a struggle not only for justification (the remission of sins) but also for sanctification, or *theosis*: the achievement of innocence, becoming fully human.[\[47\]](#) Innocence gained is a “wounded” innocence precisely because it has come through a great struggle; [\[48\]](#) like Jacob who wrestled with the angel (Gen. 32.23-32), a wounded innocence comes away with a new name—and a limp.

Since, as García-Rivera argues, “[a]rt is about experience: not in order to lose one’s innocence, but in order to gain it,” [\[49\]](#) the history so evident in the very material of the *Vladimirskaya* speaks to us of such experience and struggle. Indeed, we can see in the icon various facets of a wounded innocence. First, it shows us the holy Theotokos, who, Orthodox theology teaches, was the first human to achieve perfection and enter fully into the Kingdom of Heaven. The Orthodox Church never adopted the Roman Catholic dogma of the Immaculate Conception, which claims that Mary, through a special grace, was conceived and born without original sin. Rather, through God’s gift of Torah to the Jewish people, Mary became the pinnacle of humanity and indeed all creation. As Léonide Ouspensky words it, “The Virgin is the first of all humanity to have attained, through the complete transfiguration of her being, that to which every creature is summoned.”[\[50\]](#) Or as Vladimir Zelinsky explains, from the Orthodox perspective,

preservation from original sin would deprive the Mother of God of her personal freedom; it would demean her act of obedience to God, her holiness. ... If a different spiritual nature were given to her, apart from her will, then she is no longer ours and cannot constitute our glory. We cannot then say to God: ‘We have given her to thee,’ as the Church says concerning this on the feast of Christ’s Nativity.[\[51\]](#)

Icons of Mary, such as the *Vladimirskaya*, depict her in her glorified, divinized state, but at the same time, in her struggle as well. Just as icons of Christ in his crucifixion juxtapose his suffering and glorification, his death and his life, the *Vladimirskaya* shows us the Mother of God simultaneously perfected and struggling for perfection: we see in her eyes the sorrow of a Mother who knows of her Child’s future sufferings, and yet she serenely returns his affection while also inviting the viewer into that love shared between Mother and Child. In so doing, she grants us what the philosopher Josiah Royce called “religious insight:” insight into both the need for and way of salvation.[\[52\]](#) García-Rivera writes that

theology can discern the beautiful in the agonized face of a crucified man not as a sadistic exercise or as an expression of deep despair but because theology recognizes that Beauty shines through its communal dimension. Theology discerns the beautiful in the face of a crucified man through the lens of the community that gathers around the foot of his cross.[\[53\]](#)

While the *Vladimirskaya* only hints at the crucifixion through Mary’s sorrowful gaze, it is clear that the icon itself has suffered. If we take its materiality seriously—and we should, because it is through that materiality that the icon mediates the presence of Mary and her Child—we may discern the beautiful not in spite of but because of her abrasions, seen through the lens of the community that gathers before—and touches—the icon.

That community includes not only worshippers, but vandals and thieves, gift givers and gift recipients, caretakers and artists, including restorationists. Howard Caygill contends that the destruction or passing out of existence of artworks is “closer to their creation than has been fully appreciated by modern aesthetics.”[\[54\]](#) He relates the two in processes of care and conservation, as well as intentional destruction or alteration of one work of art in the production of another (for example, in the removal of a revetment from an icon). All artwork, like everything else that exists in time and space, is impermanent; any work’s continued existence is due to human care. The damage to this icon has provided opportunities (however modern art historians and preservationists may feel about it now) for multiple artists to lovingly repaint the image, which, in Orthodox tradition, makes those artists channels of God’s grace.

In addition, we see ourselves in this icon. Its damage renders the image of the divinized Theotokos more bearable and approachable to us who have not yet achieved perfection. As Gasper-Hulvat reminds us, “Orthodox theology, particularly that of icons, emphasizes the perception of the divine as light. But the light of the divine is intensely blinding: that which enables sight also prevents vision when it exceeds the viewer’s capacity to behold it.”[\[55\]](#) Veils, whether literal (in the case of veiled icons or revetments) or figurative (in the case of the iconostasis “veiling” the mysteries) may obscure, but they also make vision possible. Perhaps the chipped paint and scars on the *Vladimirskaya*’s surface serve as a veil to us who are wounded and not yet fitted for the beatific vision. We can approach Mary and Jesus in this icon, because it is like us: worn, damaged, and impermanent. And while they have attained resurrected glory, we may see that like us, they too have been wounded. The Scriptures tell us the risen Christ still bears his scars.

Anglican theologian and Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, in his reflection on the *Vladimirskaya*, notes that the Child’s “boisterous” movement toward his Mother, “seizing handfuls of her clothing and nuzzling his face against hers,” shows us that God is

not ashamed to be our God, to be identified as the one who is involved with us; here, though, it is as if he is not merely unashamed but positively *shameless* in his eagerness, longing to embrace and be embraced. It is not simply that God will deign not to mind our company; rather he is

passionate for it. The image of God's action we are presented with here is of a hungry love.^[56]

In the Incarnation, God chose to approach us by taking on human flesh and becoming subject to the conditions of our existence. Joining us in our struggle for innocence, Christ also was wounded. An incarnation-based theology of art must address not only the subject matter and formal qualities of a work of art, but also its capacity for brokenness. In the *Virgin of Vladimir*, we see that capacity both in the subject matter—in the Mother's sorrowful eyes, and in her Son's undignified emotion—but also in the very material of the icon itself. Like God's damaged creation, is not discarded but lovingly restored and maintained. And it still functions to mediate divine presence, demonstrating that God is able to work in, among, and through wounded vessels—ourselves included.

Works Cited

Anonymous, 'Icon: An Expression of Prayer and Sacrament', in Gennadios Limouris, ed. *Icons: Windows on Eternity: Theology and Spirituality in Colour* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990), pp. 195-201.

Belting, Hans, *Likeness and Presence: a History of the Image Before the Era of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

García-Rivera, Alex, *A Wounded Innocence: Sketches for a Theology of Art* (Collegeville Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2003).

_____, and Thomas Scirghi, *Living Beauty: the Art of Liturgy* (Lanham Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008).

Gasper-Hulvat, Marie E., 'The Icon as Performer and as Performative Utterance: The Sixteenth Century Vladimir Mother of God in the Moscow Dormition Cathedral', *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 57/58 (2010), 175-186.

Limouris, Gennadios, *Icons, Windows on Eternity: Theology and Spirituality in Colour* (Geneva: WWC Publications, 1990).

_____, 'The Microcosm and Macrocosm of the Icon: Theology, Spirituality and Worship in Colour', in *Icons, Windows on Eternity: Theology and Spirituality in Colour* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990), pp. 93-123.

McDannell, Colleen, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

Ouspensky, Léonide, *Theology of the Icon* (Crestwood NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1992).

Pentcheva, Bissera V., 'The Performative Icon', *The Art Bulletin*, 88 (2006), 631-55.

Skrobucha, Heinz, *The World of Icons* (London: J. Murray, 1971).

Wagner, David. "Peirce, Panofsky, and the Gothic." *Transactions of the Charles Peirce Society* 48:4 (Fall 2012), pp. 436-455.

Williams, Rowan, *Ponder These Things: Praying with Icons of the Virgin* (Brewster Mass.: Paraclete Press, 2006).

Zelinsky, Vladimir, 'The Mother of God in the Orthodox Church', in *Mariology: A Guide for Priests, Deacons, Seminarians, and Consecrated Persons* (Goleta, CA: Seat of Wisdom Books, 2007), pp. 767-800.

[1] The photograph included here is a public domain image, found online at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vladimirskaya.jpg> (accessed May 13, 2016). To view the full icon in greater detail, please visit the Tretyakov Gallery website: http://www.tretyakovgallery.ru/en/collection/show/image/_id/2216

[2] Gennadios Limouris, 'The Microcosm and Macrocosm of the Icon: Theology, Spirituality and Worship in Colour', in *Icons, Windows on Eternity: Theology and Spirituality in Colour* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990), pp. 93-123 (p. 96).

[3] Alex García-Rivera, *A Wounded Innocence: Sketches for a Theology of Art* (Collegeville Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2003).

[4] García-Rivera, xi.

[5] García-Rivera, ix.

[6] García-Rivera, 5.

[7] García-Rivera, 3.

[8] François Sejourné. "One Stage on a Spiritual Pilgrimage." in Limouris, *Icons, Windows on Eternity*, 191-192 (p. 192).

[9] Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 272.

[10] McDannell, 2.

[11] While I am most directly influenced by Peircean thought regarding habit, the term *habitus* is drawn from the work of sociologist Bourdieu. Bourdieu's use of the term indicates habits acquired through the internalization of social knowledge—a narrower concept than Peirce's, but Bourdieu's sense is the one that applies here. See David Wagner, "Peirce, Panofsky, and the Gothic," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, 48:4 (Fall 2012), pp. 436-435 for more on Peirce's concept of "habit" and its relation to Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*. An excellent discussion of *habitus* as I use it here can be found in Alex García-Rivera and Thomas Scirghi, *Living Beauty: the Art of Liturgy* (Lanham Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008), pp. 83–86.

[12] García-Rivera and Scirghi, 11.

[13] García-Rivera and Scirghi, 37-38.

[14] Léonide Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon* (Crestwood NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1992), p. 60.

[15] Ouspensky, 62.

[16] Quoted in Ouspensky, 62-63.

[17] Sister Olga, quoted in Sisters Minke, Albertine, and Olga. "Icons Coming to Life," in Limouris, *Icons: Windows on Eternity: Theology and Spirituality in Colour* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990), 188-190 (p. 190).

[18] Limouris, "The Microcosm and Macrocosm of the Icon," 93.

[19] Anonymous, 'Icon: An Expression of Prayer and Sacrament', in Limouris. *Icons: Windows on Eternity: Theology and Spirituality in Colour* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990), pp. 195-201.

[20] Anonymous, 195.

[21] St. Theodore the Studite, quoted in Bissera V. Pentcheva, 'The Performative Icon', *The Art Bulletin*, 88 (2006), 631-55 (p. 636).

[22] Pentcheva, 636.

[23] Anonymous, 197.

[24] Anonymous, 198.

[25] Pentcheva, 631.

[26] David Bentley Hart. *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth*. (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2003), 141.

[27] Hart, 254-55.

[28] Hart, 143.

[29] Pentcheva, 651.

[30] Measurements according to the Tretyakov Gallery website. <http://www.tretykovgallery.ru/en/collection/show/image/id/2216#> Accessed 28 October 2011.

[31] The Councils, such as the Second Council of Nicea which pronounced on the veneration of icons in 787, represent a community of consensus: see Chrysostomos of Myra (Konstantinidis). "The Triumph of the Icons as Means of Dialogue and Sign of Unity." in Gennadios Limouris, *Icons, Windows on Eternity: Theology and Spirituality in Colour* (Geneva: WWC Publications, 1990), p. 3.

[32] Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: a History of the Image Before the Era of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 281.

[33] Marie E. Gasper-Hulvat, 'The Icon as Performer and as Performative Utterance: The Sixteenth Century Vladimir Mother of God in the Moscow Dormition Cathedral', *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 57/58 (2010), 175-186 (p. 177).

[34] Gasper-Hulvat, 176.

[35] Belting, 281.

[36] Heinz Skrobucha, *The World of Icons* (London: J. Murray, 1971), p. 76. Unless otherwise noted, the following history is taken from Skrobucha (a.k.a. HP Gerhard), 76-80.

[37] Gasper-Hulvat, 176.

[38] Gasper-Hulvat, 176.

[39] Gasper-Hulvat, 177.

[40] Skrobucha, 79. He is directly quoting the chronicles.

[41] Skrobucha, 79.

[42] Gasper-Hulvat, 177.

[43] Skrobucha, 79.

[44] Skrobucha, 80.

[45] García-Rivera, *A Wounded Innocence*, 15-18. Cf. Hart, quoted above, p. 9.

[46] Gasper-Hulvat, 177.

[47] García-Rivera, 19.

[48] Cf. Revelation 7.14-17: "These are the ones who have survived the time of great distress; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." (v. 14, NAB)

[49] García-Rivera, 76.

[50] Léonide Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon* (Crestwood NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1992), p. 60.

[51] Vladimir Zelinsky, 'The Mother of God in the Orthodox Church', in *Mariology: A Guide for Priests, Deacons, Seminarians, and Consecrated Persons* (Goleta, CA: Seat of Wisdom Books, 2007), pp. 767-800 (p. 799).

[52] Cf. García-Rivera, 18.

[53] García-Rivera, 5.

[54] Howard Caygill. "The Destruction of Art." In *The Life and Death of Images: Ethics and Aesthetics*, ed. Diarmuid Costello and Dominic Willsdon. (Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), 163.

[55] Gasper-Hulvat, 183.

[56] Rowan Williams, *Ponder These Things: Praying with Icons of the Virgin* (Brewster Mass.: Paraclete Press, 2006), pp. 23–24.

Table of Contents

A WOUNDED PRESENCE: THE VIRGIN OF VLADIMIR ICON

[Admin Login](#)

Powered by
OpenScholar®

Copyright © 2019 The President and Fellows of Harvard College | [Accessibility](#) | [Report Copyright Infringement](#)

This icon has linked Apostolic times to Byzantium, Kievan Rus' to Vladimir Rus', and later to Muscovy, the Third Rome; as it is said, "there will be no Fourth." The kingdom of Moscow was formed by divine providence and embraced the mystical ties of ancient empires, historical experience and traditions of other Orthodox peoples. The miracle working Vladimir icon became a symbol of unity and succession. Words cannot describe this icon; any verbal expression would be hollow compared to the gaze of the Theotokos from her image. This look contains everything – life and death; resurrection, eternity The Virgin of Vladimir, in fact, apparently dates from the 12th century. The original, I mean, which was apparently given by an Emperor of Constantinople to the Prince of Vladimir, in the region to the East of Moscow, which was a very important princely town in the 12th and 13th centuries. And, because this Virgin spent a long time in this city, it took its name. But now the original is in the Tretyakov gallery in Moscow, or more precisely in the chapel which is adjacent to the Tretyakov gallery. To the right, you can see another icon of Saint Nicholas. One of the Virgin Mary Icons most honored in Russia for centuries, the original icon of Our Lady of Vladimir was painted around the year 1130 in Constantinople and soon after brought to Russia. This image of the tender embrace of the Divine Child and the Holy Virgin quickly endeared itself to the hearts of the Russian people, who declared her the protectress of Russia. This uniquely restored version of this image was created through hundreds of hours of work by our artists. Discover the many Virgin Mary Icons finely created and offered by Monastery Icons, today. Reviews. Be the first to write