

SEASONAL SHRINE

RESTORING OUR SACRED IMAGES TO THE WORLD by Caitlín Matthews



Icons of Myrddin & Arthur anon., Li Ban by Betsy Porter , and Sophia by Mary Plaster

Earlier this Spring, I logged onto Facebook, to be confronted with a plethora of images of the Goddess of Spring, in the context of people wishing each other a Happy Equinox. One image in particular made me fall back in amazement: a hyper-real glamour-puss with a décolletage down to her navel, and a lascivious expression straight from a pornographic magazine rather than any earth tradition. Is this really how people perceive and understand their divinities, I wondered? Bad religious art is bad in all denominations, of course: super-sweet Madonnas, pallid-looking Saviours, or cutesy Ganeshas can be equally alienating! And while some things are a matter of personal taste and aesthetics, the depiction of sacred beings as floozies or brainless he-men is insulting to the divinity and hardly the kind of thing we are inspired by.

Every culture and time has its own art, and nothing so dates an era as cultural imagination, but where is the sacred art of our time? We are blessed to have many fine artists like Will Worthington, and Wil Kinghan, who have opened windows into the ancient Celtic world, as well as many other painters and craftspeople whose vision does them credit. But, on the other hand, there are also many more images like those of the unfortunate equinoctial being above, as well as air-brushed images of what appear to me to be human people, not divinities at all – looking like people you could meet at the car-boot or in the supermarket: these don't inspire me or make me feel I am being powerfully upheld. Where are the images that depict the timeless acts of our sacred imagination?

Now, when we meditate, or stand in the sacred land, communing with the powers that be, we experience something very different from bad-taste art: I know this, not only from personal experience, but from the relations of students and readers who share their perceptions and understandings with me. I know it distresses devotees that they cannot find the image or statue of the beings that they venerate, or that they have to make do with pictures that are not worthy of those divinities. I began to ask myself, how can we restore the sacred images to our world?

Of course, the pre-Christian world had many beautiful images, whose destruction ensured that many ancient, ancestral visions of the sacred were lost to us. Such iconoclasm is still going on in our world, as we see from the destruction historic sites, like Palmyra, which Daesh smashed to rubble: the loss of artefacts, images and sacred sites is not just a loss of beauty, it is loss of ancestral heritage and cultural inspiration. The sacred images of pagan traditions in a present era have largely yet to emerge.

Restoring the sacred images, from the heart of our imagination seems to me a task that is laid upon us at this time. Bringing the images of our divinities, heroes, and holy ancestors back into the world for ourselves and our community enables the iconic moments of our beliefs and the sacred myths to be

manifest once again, to continually inspire us. But it is not just a matter of reproducing ancient artefacts or copying sacred images: it is about finding them in our own vision.

In the light these thoughts, over the last few years, I have begun to learn the technique of painting icons in egg-tempera, where earth and mineral pigments are mixed with egg yolk to making a painting emulsion with the addition of water and wine – a medium that preserves down the centuries. Icons are not illustrations, but rather windows into the otherworld. We don't invent icons: they arise from the genuine visions and interactions that we have already had with the divine beings of our devotion; we have already observed them with the eyes of the heart. Now, while I had a good art education, I would not regard myself to be any kind of great artist, but I am a good prayer! Bringing sacred images into being on a gessoed board, requires meditation, prayer and a deep communion with the being in question.

An icon is made up of many layers. We paint from the darkness to the light, much as we first approach a sacred being in the very beginning: at first, we do not see the likeness of our devotion clearly – their features are not known to us. We begin with a sense of presence and companionship, or awe or mystery. As we continue to meditate and the divinity or ancestor comes closer to us, our perception begins to clarify. Even so, we start over again every day, moving from the darkness of unknowing, through many different shades of colour, into the clear light of their presence.

If you are familiar with Orthodox icons, which kept alive the Eastern Mediterranean skill of egg-tempera, you will be aware that they look different from other kinds of depictions. Icons use inverse perspective: rather than the Renaissance 'vanishing point,' whereby all the lines of perspective are aligned and widen out to our view, something else seems to be happening - the perspective lines rather converge on the viewer because *the subject looks out at us*. In effect, the icon 'comes to us,' which is, of course, how our perception of the sacred being happens. The divinity, hero, spirit or ancestor, *already witnesses us*, and this is why we feel their warmth and love that drew us to the being in the first place. These images are never sappy nor sentimental, but powerful: they appear on their own terms, not ours.

In an icon, we capture the essence of timelessness, making it possible for us to experience the prototype of a being or sacred happening, so that we may witness it. This was well described by the philosopher Sallustius, the amanuensis of the Emperor Julian, who attempted to restore Pagan belief to a Christianising world, who said: 'Myth is something that has never happened, but is happening all the time.'

Often an icon will represent a sacred event that is continually happening. For example, we experience the loss and finding of Mabon, son of Modron, not as an historic event that once happened, but as a loss that lays us waste, and also as a finding that reunites our fragmentation: it affects us now, in this very moment. We experience the Goddess of the Earth not only as bountiful mother, but also we are aware of her in every devastation and loss that our physical world suffers. We are thirsty for the wisdom that never dies, and we seek the action of the Grail or Cauldron that irrigates our dryness, and heals our wounds.

Restoring the sacred images to our world assures us that we are not alone. When we go in and out, when we eat or rest, when we celebrate or mourn, those sacred images are present in our world, as well as in the otherworld, enabling the sublime to be present among us, as an embodiment that inspires us every day. I, for one, would be most interested to see the emergence of images that worthily uphold our spirituality, and inspire generations to come.

Please join myself and Felicity on 24-27 August 2018 for **ICONS OF THE HEART: PAINTING OUR SACRED IMAGES**, an icon course for the complete beginner at Hawkwood College, see **Magical Courses**.