



***The Icon of the Transfiguration  
Church of the Transfiguration  
Bat Cave, North Carolina  
By Veryle Lynn Cox***

A small group approached the altar on a Saturday night in August, carrying with them old boards, an old fair linen from the altar, drawings, a set of natural color pigments, and packets of rabbit skin glue, whiting and marble dust. After laying the articles at the foot of the altar, prayers were offered for the journey about to be undertaken—to write an icon of the Transfiguration. The date-- August 6, 2005, the

Feast of the Transfiguration. The church—The Church of the Transfiguration, Bat Cave, North Carolina. In exactly one year, this small mountain church would celebrate its centennial.

The poplar boards, (the traditional wood of icons), had already served a long life as a shelf in a parishioner's workshop. They were passed on to a fellow parishioner who joined the boards and inset braces on the back. An arched frame was fastened to the front. Representing the Tree of Life, the woodgrain is vertical.

Rabbit skin glue, cooked in a double boiler, was painted on the front of the board to soak into the wood and provide an adhesive surface.

In the 1980's, when the altar in this small Episcopal church was moved away from the wall, the narrow fair linens used on the altar during the Eucharist were retired. One of these linens was soaked in warm rabbit skin glue and carefully stretched and smoothed to cover the front and sides of the board forming the "shroud." When dried, it tightened to bind the board together for centuries.

To provide a smooth white surface on which to paint, rabbit skin glue, powdered whiting and marble dust were cooked together in a double boiler. After cooling in a flat container, the resulting white gelatin was scraped onto the shroud. Eighteen layers later after careful wet sanding the board resembled pure white marble. This created a traditional gesso surface which would not only absorb the paint, but it would also reflect light through the twelve layers of paint that would follow.

"The end is in the beginning", writes T. S. Eliot. The pure white surface represents the void out of which the world was created. It also represents purity and the potential for life. Pure white is the beginning of the icon, and it also is the end.

Transferred onto the white surface, the images are then incised or scratched into the gesso. Later, under layers of paint, the design will not be lost.

Many hands have prayerfully worked on the icon—in fact, prayer has been layered at every stage. The Episcopal Bishop of Western North Carolina, Porter Taylor, traced the image of Christ. Our rector, Reverend Mickey Mungan, traced the image of Moses. Our Rector Emeritus, Reverend James Hindle, was ready to trace the image of Elijah when he noted the disciple James. "He's my namesake," said Father Jim, and he chose to trace him.

North Carolina red clay dug near the artist's home and mixed with hide glue was used to paint clay on the edges of the icon. Clay is the dust from which God formed man. It also represents the Old Testament.

Many parishioners prayed the Iconographer's Prayer and painted clay on the edge of the icon. The icon was taken to shut-ins, to the hospital and to nursing homes so that many could call it their own.

It was also taken to the Convent of the Transfiguration in Glendale, Ohio, so that the Episcopal Community of the Sisters of the Transfiguration, could work on it. In 1897, the year before the Community was established, the foundress Eva Matthews along with her brother Bishop Matthews, came into Hickory Nut Gorge to purchase property for a retreat house. As a result of the presence of the Sisters in the Valley, the Church of the Transfiguration was founded as a mission in 1906.

As the red clay was applied over several months, the writing of the icon continued. An icon is said to be prayerfully "written", not painted, because the process as well as the end result is the holy made visible. It is the visual study of God, or theology.

Several layers of fine red gilder's clay, applied to the white gesso then polished, formed the foundation for the five layers of gold leaf, which was then burnished with an agate.

In ancient times, artists mixed natural earth with egg yolk to make paint. Icons written centuries ago still have fresh color, thanks to egg tempera. The yolk, preferably from a free range chicken, is removed from the yolk sack, mixed with 3 parts water and a touch of vinegar to inhibit spoilage, and is ready for natural pigments to be mixed into it. The five eggs for this icon come from a friend's chickens, all with the name of Gertrude.

Dark colors are puddled so that pigments may settle naturally from the first layer of color, known as Chaos. The iconographer's brush hovers over the dark puddle as the Holy Spirit hovered over the waters of the earth during Creation.

Cosmos is the next step in which dark lines outline the forms organizing the Chaos.

Lighter colors define shapes, and through washes which veil the colors and more layers of paint which redefine shapes, up to twelve layers of paint, veils, and lines bring the icon from darkness to light.

In Orthodox churches and family homes, icons are caressed, kissed, gently handled and processed on holy days; and the purpose of the metal frame, or “oklad” is to protect the icon. Quotations from the gospel of Matthew on the Transfiguration are raised from the surface by a technique called repousse’, where the design is pushed forward from the back side of the metal, then the design is refined on the front side.

“Jesus took with him Peter, James and John and led them up a high mountain. There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. A voice from the cloud said, ‘This is my son whom I love, listen to him!’” (Matthew 17: 1-5)

Four different prototypes of the icon of the Transfiguration were used to create this design. All have the same elements: Jesus, Elijah, Moses, Peter, John and James, the high mountain, the mandorla around Jesus to show Eternity, the Earthly realm, and the Heavenly realm. Three desert bushes were replaced by three rhododendron bushes, significant to our area of North Carolina. The cave represents Golgotha, also shown in icons of the Crucifixion.

Peter turns to Jesus and offers to build shelters for Him, Elijah and Moses. John, traditionally shown without a beard because of his youth, peeks between his fingers at the glowing sight before his eyes. James tumbles backwards down the mountain and loses his sandal: he also peers between his hands at the incredible sight. The voice of God comes over them as a cloud.

The mountains appear to have shingles on them. The symbolism is that even the mountains bow before God.

On the oklad’s upper left corner are Jesus and the three disciples going up the mountain, and on the right corner they are shown coming down the mountain. Jesus not only led them up the mountain to pray, he also led them back down again, to a life of action. The Jerusalem cross in the lower corners is the emblem of the Sisters of the Transfiguration and of our parish church. The large cross in the center represents the beginning of the church in Jerusalem, and the four smaller crosses are “the four corners of the earth,” to which the Lord sends us as his disciples.

“The end is in the beginning.” The icon began with a pure white surface. The very last stroke of paint is the pure white next to the irises in the eyes of the six figures. This is called the Ojivsky, or God Knowledge.

Over eighty souls have left their mark on the icon. It took over 200 hours to finish it, but it cannot be measured by numbers. God has used many hands to create it and it belongs to all.

### **The Iconographer’s Prayer**

*O Lord,  
bless my humble effort  
and let my labor be  
for the salvation of my soul,  
and for the glory of your most  
Holy Name.  
Amen*