

*Why are icons important?*

When a worshipper is offering a prayer in front of an icon they are not praying to the painting or image itself. They are using the icon as a means of directing their prayer towards God. Icons are most popular in Orthodox churches where they form part of religious worship. They are often kissed and have candles lit in front of them as a sign of respect.

*Why do icons guide us to pray with our eyes wide open?*



*Icon of the Panagia (All Holy) Lady of Jerusalem  
Holy Tomb of the Theotokos, Gethsemane*

Many of us were taught to close our eyes when we pray. Praying with icons is an ancient prayer practice that involves keeping our eyes wide open, taking into our heart what the image visually communicates.

We focus not on what is seen in the icon, but rather on what is seen through it – the love of God expressed through it. This is prayer without words, with a focus on being in God’s presence rather than performing in God’s presence. It is a right-brain experience of touching and feeling what is holy – a divine mystery. Icons are not simply art; they are a way into contemplative prayer, and are therefore one way to let God speak to us. They are doorways into stillness, into closeness with God. If we sit with them long enough, we too can enter into the stillness and if we listen to them closely enough, with our hearts, we just may discern the voice of God.

*Interview - Printed with permission, Liverpool Cathedral, UK August 2011*

## **An Interview with Ludmila Pawlowska**



*What makes this exhibition so special?*

It shows both traditional Russian icons and contemporary art inspired by traditional icon-painting techniques. My style is well known in Sweden, and I use similar techniques, with many layers of paint on wooden panels. The exhibition is very unusual since the icon tradition is very strict and prohibits any “transformation.”

It is not an exhibition about icons. It is instead an exhibition about the icon as an inspirational source for my work.

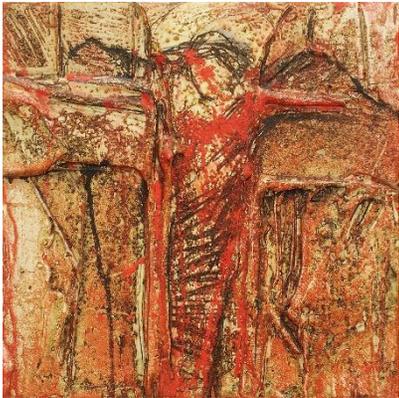
For this exhibition, I have been working with different techniques: painting, installation and sculpture using collage. Here I am already bending the rules which define a traditional icon. The icon has a spiritual power which comes from the icon itself, a kind of light.

*Why does the exhibition take place in cathedrals?*

To those whose artistic appreciation is based on western values, icons can seem strange, primitive or even ugly. With just a few notes of explanation and using the sacred space at a cathedral, however, we

may begin to see with the heart rather than mind, and discover in the icon a guide and instructor to the spiritual life. The spirit of icons can only be reached according to our experience. We have shown at a few art museums and galleries, but it is a completely different approach. Churches and cathedrals are holy spaces; in a way, this enable people to understand the contemporary approach of spirituality, thus our exhibition *Icons in Transformation*.

### *Crucifixion*

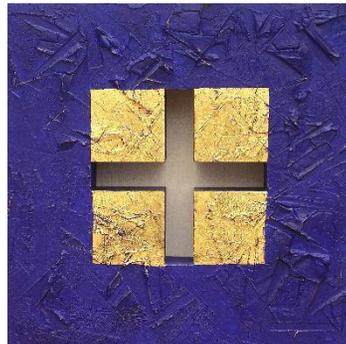


*How can the exhibit help us look at religion in a different way?*

There are many examples of events and activities that show how religion is seen in a different way today. I suppose this exhibition would not have been possible 20 or 30 years ago. Society today has changed. It is much more polarized and secular than any approaches to spirituality. The

exhibition tries to act as a guide or instructor to the spiritual life.

### *The Door to Paradise*



### *What is an icon?*

Icons are constructed in a way that contains several elements that are intended to draw the viewer away from the ordinary towards another, more spiritual, level of understanding.

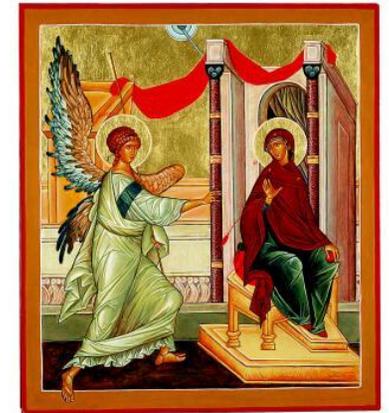
As early as the 8<sup>th</sup> century, St. John Damascenus claimed that “images speak.” He said “that they open the heart and awaken the intellect” (Didron 1965), It can be said that icons can be used as a form of prayer and meditation. To study iconography is to begin to “read” the

meanings of the images, their content and subject rather than their form.

Traditional and modern icons are sometimes described as “windows to heaven.” Instead of reaching out to an icon and trying to grasp its meaning, it is best to stand peacefully before it and let the meaning come to us. An icon is a “*showing forth of God*” and after some time spent in contemplation, we may feel that it meets us in quite a special way. Rather than stimulating the senses and the emotions, an icon is meant to exert a calming influence, allowing the viewer to step free for a moment from all the concerns of everyday life.

Icons are not photographs; they are paintings that invite you to meet God through events that happened and people who lived long ago. They are not painted as you might actually see somebody, or something, but use symbols and colors to tell you important truths about God and his relationship to us.

A traditional icon is usually painted on wood although other materials can be used. In an icon, the central figure is always the largest. Other people are smaller. In this way, the painter tells you who the most important person is in the story. *The Annunciation*



The smaller figures and things on the icon are there to tell the story. They are also there to remind us that we do not travel on our own to God but are surrounded by other people who are making the same journey, and who are our companions on the way. The figures in icons stare out at us. They throw no shadows. They stand in the eternal realm and, if they do come to meet us, it is to take us back with them into that realm. The many elements of rhythm, color, composition and harmony lead us into the stillness of contemplation.