

The Transfiguration of the Soup Can: Andy Warhol's Byzantine Orthodox Aesthetic
By Dr. James Romaine

Andy Warhol is among the most creative and consequential artists of the twentieth century. His art's provocative iconography and penetrating visual language engage some of the most important and complicated dimensions of our human condition. While the impact of Warhol's art is broadly evidenced in both the visual arts and popular culture, its significance (even the question if it has any significance at all) remains a matter of debate. In attempting to meaningfully engage works such *Campbell's Soup Cans*, *Gold Marilyn Monroe*, and *Silver Liz*, Warhol's relationship to the Orthodox icon is key to expanding and clarifying our understanding of the means and ends of his art.

In 1967, Warhol created a group of self-portraits that, for many scholars, visually manifest his enigmatic personality. In these self-portraits, the artist looks directly at the viewer; however, because Warhol's face is partly obscured by his own hand, the overall impression of the work is one of evasiveness. Warhol's ambiguous gesture, that may be read either as placing a finger over one's lips in a sign of silence or as touching one's chin in thought, suggests how Warhol's art evokes multiple, even contradictory, readings.

These coy self-portraits imply that Warhol was hiding a secret. The biggest secret to be revealed at his death, in 1987, was Warhol's religious life. In a eulogy for Warhol, John Richardson noted, "I'd like to recall a side of [Warhol's] character that he hid from all but his closest friends: his spiritual side... it is key to the artist's psyche.... Andy never lost the habit of going to Mass more often than was obligatory."¹ Richardson added, "The knowledge of this secret piety inevitably changes our perception [of him]."² In fact, over the past three decades, scholars have begun to explore the Christian dimensions of Warhol's art. Perhaps the best of these studies is Jane Dillenger's *The Religious Art of Andy Warhol*. Dillenger explored Roman Catholic themes, principally those of mortality and transubstantiation, in Warhol's art.

What has been largely overlooked, even by Dillenger, is the fact that Warhol was raised in a Byzantine-Catholic church. Andy Warhol was born Andrew Warhola, the son of Carpatho-Rusyn immigrants. Living in a Ruthenian ghetto of Pittsburgh, the Warhola family attended St. John Chrysostom Byzantine Church. While the Byzantine

Catholic church is under the authority of Rome, it adheres to the Orthodox liturgy, emphasizing the veneration of icons.

Warhol was baptized in St. John Chrysostom Byzantine Church and attended there until he left for New York City at twenty-one years of age. Warhol would attend church with his mother Julia for vesper services on Saturday night and three services, back to back from 7:00 am to 2:00pm, on Sunday. Warhol biographer, Bob Colacello, commented “He was eight hours a week looking at this iconostasis, as a little child, taking it all in.”³ If Warhol spent twenty-one years in the weekly presence of the iconostasis of St. John Chrysostom Byzantine Church, a photograph of which is archived in the Andy Warhol Museum and viewable on museum’s website, one could argue that it was one of most formative visual influences of his youth.⁴

Warhol moved to New York City in 1949. It has been assumed that he left the faith of his youth behind. There are aspects of Warhol’s life that cast doubt on the veracity and substance of his Christianity. However, there is also evidence that demonstrates that his Byzantine Catholic faith remained an important part of his entire life. In 1951, Warhol’s mother Julia came to live with him in New York and stayed for twenty years, until very close to her death in 1972. According to Dillenberger, Warhol would kneel and pray with his mother, presumably before her icons, every day before leaving their home.

After Warhol’s own death, a book was found on his bedside table entitled *Heavenly Manna: A Practical Prayer Book of Devotions for Greek Catholics*.⁵ This book contains annotations made by Warhol, evidence of his continuing active religious practice. Nevertheless, Warhol, who was painfully shy, kept those things most important to him secret. Warhol wrote in his diary that he kept his faith a secret was because he was self-conscious of his distinctiveness as a Byzantine Catholic. He wrote, “I would feel too particular in a church where they might see me praying... because I cross myself in the wrong way, I cross the Orthodox way.”⁶ However, while Warhol kept his Orthodox practices secret, he did not necessarily reject them.

If we revisit his 1967 self-portrait looking for evidence of an Orthodox aesthetic, we may recognize that Warhol’s gesture is a mirror of the gesture of the blessing Christ in many Orthodox icons, such as the famous sixth-century example of Christ Pantocrator

in Saint Catherine's Monastery in the Sinai. This visual quotation, in reverse, reinforces the proposition that one of Warhol's secrets was his connection to the Orthodox tradition.

Many scholars have observed a "Byzantine style" in Warhol's painting, in its lack of pictorial space and absence of narrative. This description may actually miss the point. Icons are not a "style." It is not enough to acknowledge a superficial similarity between Warhol's paintings of Marilyn Monroe and the icons of his Byzantine Catholic church. Proceeding from a proposition that the icon is a medium of sacred perception, this essay examines evidence of an Orthodox method of seeing in Warhol's art. Warhol's art has an immediacy and visual clarity which is confrontational. It evidences an intensity of focus on a single object or image, a focus that, in itself, lends significance to that thing looked at. Warhol's art is not the object of looking but the medium of looking.

In exploring Warhol's art as the application of an Orthodox aesthetic to contemporary art, this essay is not proposing that Warhol was consciously developing an Orthodox aesthetic. (He was certainly not attempting to create icons.) Contrary to the persona that he often presented in public, Warhol was a highly self-aware person, who was developing his own aesthetic. Since an Orthodox aesthetic was a significant part of his background, it would be natural for that to be a part of any Warhol aesthetic. The icon functioned in Warhol's art as a point of departure. In his book *Iconostasis*, the Russian scholar and priest, Pavel Florensky argued that artists need tradition as a person walking needs the ground. The ground both supports the walker and provides the resistance necessary for movement.⁷ The icon both functioned as a foundation underlying Warhol's art and a conception of the image against which he was able to push.

In discussing Warhol's art, such as *Gold Marilyn Monroe*, this essay will reference several sources on the theology of the icon, including the writings of Florensky. It should be noted, at the start, that there is no evidence that Warhol himself read or knew of Florensky. In fact, since Florensky's writings did not become known in English until the 1990s, it is almost certain that Warhol did not read Florensky. However, Warhol did not need Florensky to explain the Orthodox aesthetic as a solution to modern issues of beauty, philosophy, and spirituality. Warhol learned all that he needed to know about icons first hand. Given Warhol's visual attention and creative intelligence, what he absorbed about icons as a method of transfigured vision should not be underestimated.

The value of Florensky's writings to a study of Warhol's aesthetic is that the Russian scholar articulated a theological understanding of the icon as a medium of sacred perception. Schooled in the history of the icon, Florensky recognized the icon as a model for the sacred work of art. The consequence of this, for Florensky, was not a diminished conception of the icon but rather an expanded recognition of the sacred being and purpose of the work of art. This conception of art as "a living entity" is articulated in Florensky's essay "The Church Ritual as a Synthesis of the Arts."⁸ The essay, an argument against the relocation of images and object from the context of the church to the isolation of the museum, describes art as an aesthetic object, as intimately attached to spiritual wellness and wholeness of the person (the artist and the viewer) and humanity. Therefore, for Florensky, this distortion of the work of art from sacred medium of liturgy to an autonomous museum object was not only an attack on art but also a diminishment of humanity.

What Florensky and Warhol shared was a conception of art (the entity, structure, and purpose of art) formed in the presence of the iconostasis. Florensky described the icon as an instrument that develops and measures aesthetic perception. Warhol's aesthetic perception was formatively shaped, in large part, by an Orthodox aesthetic.

In addressing an Orthodox aesthetic, perhaps the best place to start is with the theology of the transfiguration and the method of seeing that is prompted by this theology. Transfiguration is not transformation. Transformation is the changing of something. Transfiguration is the revelation of something's most exalted and complete state.

The icon is not pictorial; it is transfigurational, it changes our perception. In *Metamorphosis: The Transfiguration in Byzantine Theology and Iconography*, Andreas Andreopoulos writes,

One of the other major themes of Transfiguration theology is the passing from the material senses to the spiritual senses—therefore, to the transfiguration of vision itself. According to the Fathers, special grace was given to the apostles on Thabor, by the operation of the Holy Spirit, so that they were able to see Christ in his glory. The real transfiguration on Thabor was not the change of Christ into something he was not before, *but the change of the perceptive capabilities of the apostles*. They passed from the world of flesh to the spiritual world, and their material vision was transformed accordingly. The icon of the Transfiguration, in a certain

sense, reproduces the experience of the apostles for us... but we, the viewers, are put in the place of the apostles.⁹

A transfiguration of perception is evidenced in Warhol's paintings of the Campbell's soup can. These works were hand painted in 1962, before Warhol developed the silkscreen method for which he is known. Warhol's first paintings of soup cans present the object more or less straight on.¹⁰ The soup can fills the full parameters of the canvas and exists in an indeterminate spatial environment that suggests the influence of an Orthodox aesthetic. Warhol saw the simple soup can with a monumentality that demands our full attention.

In Warhol's development of his paintings of soup cans, a metamorphosis in his perception is evidenced. In a second series of soup can paintings, also produced in 1962, Warhol tilted the can toward the viewer.¹¹ Because there is no definitive pictorial space in these paintings, this shift is hardly noticeable. But it is consequential. From this angle, the top of the can creates a halo-like form. The monumental appearance of the earlier soup can has become a sacred presence.¹²

One of Warhol's soup can paintings employed gold as part of the background. Warhol's use of gold finds fulfillment in *Gold Marilyn Monroe*. The fame and familiarity of *Gold Marilyn Monroe* disguises its radical break with art history. In the history of Western European and American art from Giotto to Jackson Pollock, outside the Orthodox tradition, there is no precedent for *Gold Marilyn Monroe*. As Florensky pointed out, gold is visually and inherently alien to pictorial naturalism, the mode of representation that controlled Western painting for 700 years.

Rather than being a pictorial depiction of space, gold is a revelation of uncreated and transfiguring light. In the icon, gold is metaphysical splendor made visible. In *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth*, Florensky wrote, "[the light of Tabor] that is full of grace... is beautiful in itself, and it makes all that is visible beautiful." Florensky goes further, even provocatively, to state, "There is no object so repulsive that intense light would not make beautiful."¹³

In *Gold Marilyn Monroe*, Warhol explored what we find beautiful and why we find it beautiful. Warhol recognized that our culture's emphasis on external beauty in fact

disguises essential beauty. In *Iconostasis*, Florensky contrasts the “countenance” and the “mask.” He writes,

The *countenance (lik)* of things manifests its ontological reality. In *Genesis*, the image of God is differentiated from the likeness of God; and long ago, the Holy Tradition of the Church explained the image of God must be understood as the ontologically actual gift of God, as the spiritual ground of each created person; whereas the likeness of God must be understood as the potentiality to attain spiritual perfection: that is, to construct the likeness of God in ourselves from that totality of our empirical personalities called the image of God, to incarnate in the flesh of our personality the hidden inheritance of our sacred likeness to God.¹⁴

The “mask,” according to Florensky, “has physical materiality but no metaphysical substance.”¹⁵ He calls the mask, “the illusory semblance of reality emptied of all essence and strength.”¹⁶

Warhol has been accused of being a propagator of “masks,” images with no metaphysical substance. *Gold Marilyn Monroe* may, however, also be read as a search for the countenance. The image of Monroe, that was Warhol’s point of origin, is a mask. The soup can and its identifying label is a mask. Warhol’s treatment of these motifs explores their potential to be hallowed, beautiful, and transfigured.

Warhol biographer Wayne Koestenbaum stated, “We want to redeem the garbage in our life. When I look at Warhol, what I feel is maximum redemption of lost material. [Warhol] puts meaning back where there was deadness.”¹⁷ This reference to death is insightful. The “countenance,” as Florensky uses the term, refers not only to our first created image, our likeness to God described in *Genesis*, but also to our future resurrected radiance. Florensky writes of the aspiration to,

perceive *all* of creation in its [first-created, victorious] beauty. The Holy Spirit reveals itself in the ability to see the beauty of creation. Always to see beauty in everything would mean ‘to resurrect before the universal resurrection’ to have a foretaste of the last Revelation.¹⁸

In *Gold Marilyn Monroe*, an image of a person who had been recently deceased, Warhol brings her to life, not by resurrecting her but transforming our sight of her such that we see the potential of her radiance. There may be a debate as to whether or not Warhol’s art achieves the ability to see in this transfigured manner; however, his silkscreen process certainly evidences his aspiration to explore what Florensky identified

as the opening “difficult metaphysical question” of *Iconostasis*, namely the boundary between the visible and invisible worlds.¹⁹

In *Iconostasis*, Florensky notes that Christians have historically confessed God the Father to be “the maker of heaven and earth, of things visible and invisible.”²⁰

Florensky wrote,

These two worlds—the visible and the invisible—are intimately connected, but their reciprocal differences are so immense that the inescapable question arises: what is their boundary? Their boundary separates them; yet, simultaneously joins them... within ourselves, life in the visible world alternates with life in the invisible, and thus we experience moments... when the two worlds grow so near in us that we see their intimate touching. At such fleeting moment in us, the veil of visibility is torn apart, and through the tear... we can sense that the invisible world (still unearthly, still invisible) is breathing: and that both this and another world are dissolving into each other.²¹

For Florensky, the iconostasis was not a form of church decoration; it is an instrument of liturgical function mediating, reciprocally, between the visible and invisible. In the silkscreen method, Warhol created paintings by passing material (ink) through the threshold of a screen that is a diaphanous image of his subject.²² This physical process corresponds to a metaphysical state of being. It suggests a method of seeing through (both from one side to the other and by means of) the boundary, which is *both* the veil *and* the means of contact. The work of visual art, as both a material and immaterial substance or visible and invisible form, is a sacramental being that awakens us to the reality of the visible and invisible worlds “dissolving into each other.”

Gold Marilyn Monroe, and much of Warhol’s subsequent silkscreen painting, is visually and materially constructed of four steps, alternating layers of paint and ink. First, Warhol painted the field of gold. Then he used the silkscreen to preliminarily mark where Marilyn Monroe’s features would be. These features, such as the mouth, eyes, and hair, were then painted in acrylic color. This color is applied in flat areas, without variation of tone or value. Finally, the silkscreen was used to apply an ink image that, at once, gives the work visual definition and distortion. This process enabled Warhol to produce paintings of subtlety and significance. *Gold Marilyn Monroe* evidences refined layers of material and marks that are interactive; as these interface, meaning is created.

Koestenbaum notes, “Andy’s genius was that he had a way of making everything mean,

every detail means something. Every mark or splatter or sign of accident... in Warhol's symbolic universe has a meaning."²³

While there are several possible readings of this method of representation, one possible implication of this image is the continual exchange between our "countenance" and "mask" as a state of our existence. This exploration of "essence" in his work becomes both a point of contact between Warhol's art and the icon and a point of departure in his art from the icon. The icon reveals the "countenance" or "essence" of its prototype. Warhol was not so bold. He limited himself to the recognition that our capacity to see our own countenance and that of others is compromised by the material method of seeing that celebrity imagery celebrates. With his silkscreen method, a method most often used in commercial reproduction, Warhol turned this material method of seeing, also evident in the publicity photo, against itself. By a process of double negation, exposing the stark emptiness of celebrity culture, *Gold Marilyn Monroe* arrives at an apprehension of spiritual "countenance."

Warhol's engagement with an Orthodox aesthetic is also evidenced in his 1963 work *Silver Liz*.²⁴ *Silver Liz* has more in common, aesthetically and spiritually, with the sacred Byzantine icon than the Renaissance portrait. Having cropped the image of Elizabeth Taylor to minimize pictorial space and narrative, Warhol challenged a mode of pictorial representation that had dominated Western painting since the Renaissance.

Silver Liz, like *Gold Marilyn Monroe*, participates in one of the overarching themes of Warhol's art, the cycle of life, death, and redemption. When Warhol painted *Silver Liz*, Taylor was one of the most famous movie stars, equally well known for her life off screen as her performances on it. Taylor's life, sensationalized in the tabloids, embodied a tragic disconnection between image and reality. Warhol selected Taylor at a moment when that rupture was becoming increasingly apparent. *Silver Liz* visually manifests a perception of her transfigured from her own state of disintegration.

Painted in a silkscreen method similar to *Gold Marilyn Monroe*, *Silver Liz* is a manifesto of the sacred revealed by the transfiguring power of love. One of the most notable elements of *Silver Liz* is the shape and painterly treatment of her hair. Liz has big hair; it frames her face like a halo. This evocation of the sacred is further suggested by the overhead light, evidenced by the highlights in her hair. The exchange between the

black ink and silver paint, between positive form and negative space, creates a visual impression that the top of her head is dissolving into space. While *Silver Liz* explores the transient nature of our perception of beauty, *Silver Liz* is not a cynical rejection of the possibility of true and lasting beauty. In fact, *Silver Liz* is a beautiful painting. However, tellingly, its beauty does not mainly reside in appearance but also in the sacramental structure of the painting itself.²⁵

Silver Liz might seem to have discarded all that was sacred in the history of Christianity and art and embraced, with full abandon, the transient banality of celebrity, fashion, and entertainment. Challenging much of what is often expected of a picture, *Silver Liz* is an all-or-nothing proposition: banality or sacramentality. Warhol has often been charged with being obsessed with consumerism. Ironically, the issue that many of Warhol's critics have with *Silver Liz*, as an aesthetic object, is that it is not sufficiently consumable. While the publicity stills of Monroe and Taylor promise personal access to the star, Warhol's paintings are confrontational. Perhaps the most fundamental visual and conceptual element that binds the art of Andy Warhol with the icons of the Orthodox Church is that his paintings of soup cans and celebrities establish a reality of *encounter*.

Sacred art visualizes evidence where the eternal truth of God meets contemporary human experience. It makes theological truth publically relevant, revealing the presence of God in the world. It brings into human history the reality of cosmic transfiguration, an anticipation of the resurrection. Warhol's art encourages a method of beholding in which the modern world of soup cans and celebrities are transfigured or in process of transfiguration. The banality, even profanity, of Warhol's subjects directly challenges our faith in the closeness of God at every moment. Believing in the transfiguring power of beauty while in church or a gallery is one thing, holding on to that faith in the supermarket is more challenging. Yet it is to this challenge that Warhol set himself. Canned soup and celebrity images promise quick satisfaction and controlled experiences. (There is no mystery about the contents of a can of Campbell's tomato soup.) In his paintings, Warhol jarringly transfigures this experience-oriented content into works of encounter that cannot be reduced. This paradigm of beholding is rooted in an Orthodox perspective that emphasizes an encounter before, rather than an experience of, the irreducible beauty of God.

In discussing the beautiful and sublime in art, one should include a mention of Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. Situating the sublime within the experience of the spectator, Kant reduces the sublime to the rational experience of the person. To rationally experience the sublime, for Kant, is to have transformed the sublime rather than being transformed by it.

Kant's experience of the sublime is antithetical to the encounter of the sacred of the Orthodox icon. Visually, this encounter is manifested in the icon's so-called flatness. Pictorial naturalism encourages the viewer to imaginatively enter into the work and take possession of the experience offered therein. By contrast, the icon visually projects itself toward the viewer, thereby creating a visual and spiritual encounter. This encounter with the beauty of the icon capacitates a transformed vision. The vision is one that is open to the revelation of divine beauty, even in places where one might least expect it, even in a can of soup.

Much of the nineteenth and twentieth-century art that is inclined toward the beautiful and spiritual is influenced by Kant. However, Warhol's art refuses to participate in this Kantian sublime. For many critics, Warhol's rejection of the sublime is interpreted as a rejection of the sacred. This essay has argued the opposite. Influenced by the Orthodox icon, Warhol created works of art that explore our encounter with something greater than ourselves. In *Gold Marilyn Monroe*, Warhol demonstrates a method of seeing the world, in the light of that divine grace, as transformed from material sight to metaphysical vision. The results of Warhol's process of transfiguration are works of art that, seen through eyes of faith, have the power to further broaden our own spiritual capacity to behold the beautiful.

¹ John Richardson, "Eulogy for Andy Warhol" in *The Religious Art of Andy Warhol* by Jane Daggett Dillenberger. 13.

² John Richardson, "Eulogy for Andy Warhol" in *The Religious Art of Andy Warhol* by Jane Daggett Dillenberger. 13.

³ Bob Colacello, *Andy Warhol: A Documentary Film* directed by Ric Burns, 2006.

⁴ <http://www.warhol.org/ArtCollections.aspx?id=1734>

⁵ Jane Daggett Dillenberger, *The Religious Art of Andy Warhol*. 33. Warhol's annotated copy of this book is in the possession of his brother John. Some editions of this book are titled *Heavenly Manna: A Practical Prayer Book of Devotions for Byzantine Catholics*.

⁶ Andy Warhol quoted in Jane Daggett Dillenberger, *The Religious Art of Andy Warhol*. 35.

⁷ Pavel Florensky, *Iconostasis*, 79.

⁸ Pavel Florensky, "The Church Ritual as a Synthesis of the Arts" in *Pavel Florensky: Beyond Vision, Essays on the Perception of Art*. Edited by Nicoletta Misler. 102.

⁹ Andreas Andreopoulos, *Metamorphosis: The Transfiguration in Byzantine Theology and Iconography*. 71, italics his.

¹⁰ In the Warhol literature, works from this first group of Campbell's soup can paintings are called "Monchgladbach Type."

¹¹ In the Warhol literature, works from this second group of Campbell's soup can paintings are called "Ferus Type."

¹² Warhol further experimented with the halo motif in images of soup cans with open lids. However, the subtlest of these strategies, simply tilting the can, is arguably the most successful.

¹³ Pavel Florensky, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth*. 71-2.

¹⁴ Pavel Florensky, *Iconostasis*, 51-52, some italics omitted.

¹⁵ Pavel Florensky, *Iconostasis*, 52.

¹⁶ Pavel Florensky, *Iconostasis*, 55.

¹⁷ Wayne Koestenbaum, *Andy Warhol: A Documentary Film* directed by Ric Burns, 2006.

¹⁸ Pavel Florensky, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth*, 226. Italics his. For an alternate translation, see also *The Aesthetic Face of Beauty: Art in the Theology of Pavel Florensky*. 35-6.

¹⁹ Pavel Florensky, *Iconostasis*. 33.

²⁰ Florensky mistakenly attributes this statement to the Apostles' Creed. Pavel Florensky, *Iconostasis*, 33. In fact, it is the Nicene Creed.

²¹ Pavel Florensky, *Iconostasis*, 33, Italics removed.

²² The silkscreen is created by taking an image and creating a negative image in the screen such that only those places where the image is are transparent. As ink is pressed across the surface of the screen, the material is only able to pass through the screen in those places where the image is. The image is the aperture that allows the material to pass from one side of the screen to the other.

²³ Wayne Koestenbaum, *Andy Warhol: A Documentary Film* directed by Ric Burns, 2006.

²⁴ While *Gold Marilyn Monroe* is a unique work, *Silver Liz* is part of a series of similar works sharing the same title.

²⁵ For a more in-depth discussion of the sacred structure of *Silver Liz* and of Warhol's art as an anticipation of restoration of the sacramental, Trinitarian, equilibrium of the universe, see James Romaine "Loving Liz: Andy Warhol's Sacramental Vision" in the journal *Comment*.