# **Women’s Iconography in the Twenty-First Century:**

# **An Inter-Faith Impact Project**

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# **About the Project**

## **A miraculous painting in Florence**

If legends are to be believed, a Florentine monk, Fra Bartolomeo, once received assistance from an angel while painting the annunciation. He laboured over *Santissima Annunziata* for weeks but couldn’t bring himself to represent the face of the Virgin Mary. He was daunted by his heavenly subject and the task seemed beyond him. After weeks of struggle, he finally fell asleep while at work and awoke to find the Virgin’s face had been mysteriously completed. The event was proclaimed a miracle and the painting became a relic. Today, it lies behind a screen in the Basilica della Santissima Annunziata where visitors flock daily at 6 pm to watch the painting being unveiled.

In the summer of 2014, I crept into the Basilica to watch a handful of elderly Florentine devotees fall to their knees as the mellow light of the Tuscan sun illuminated the Virgin’s face. The magic of the moment came crashing down when a friend whispered in my ear that the painting was a testament to the power of the human imagination. Somehow, her words seemed to violate the cult of veneration that surrounded the painting. There was nothing objectionable in her view that the legend was improbable, but her comment seemed to ignore the very real world of the Florentine women kneeling before the image. At that moment, I found myself asking the question: Would it be possible for my friend to share in the world of these women from her own socio-cultural background? Could she find a way to understand what it might feel like to kneel in front of a painting and believe it is the work of an angel?

Many years later, I found the answer to this question in Christian iconography…

## **What is an icon and how does it allow us to share in each other’s worlds?**

According to St John of Damascus, an icon is defined as “a visual image of what is invisible”. It is a portrait of a holy person who has died and crossed over into another world. The iconographer meets that person through engaging in a set of rituals and refined techniques that were prescribed by the early Christians and passed down along the generations. Traditional iconographers claim that St Luke invented the medium and he painted the Virgin Mary from life. His design, methods and techniques became codified into a set of practices that allow iconographers to meet their subject through following in the footsteps of those who encountered them directly. When the icon is completed, it becomes a “window to eternity” where the subject stands on the boundary between the visible and invisible worlds and looks out upon the viewer. The viewer, in turn, enters into communion with the subject, the iconographer and the creator of the original image. The icon’s viewer therefore inhabits the same space as the Florentine women who kneel before *Santissima Annunciata.*

## **The icon as a window to ‘transcendent reality’**

Pilgrims to *Santissima Annuziata* believe that the painting reflects a higher, spiritual reality. An icon is said to faithfully transcribe the spiritual reality that is revealed to the iconographer. It provides limited scope for self-expression. Instead, it deploys a language of signs and symbols that reveals the sacred identity of its subject and is created out of materials that are said to form connections with the spiritual world. For instance, egg tempera painting combines the raw possibility for life in the form of an egg yolk with ancient earth pigments that represent eternity. These contrasting substances create a symbolic union between the human and divine. Every aspect of icon-making draws the iconographer into a transcendent reality: they paint from darkness to light as the subject appears before them and conclude by creating a gold backdrop that represents the subject’s residence in the invisible world.

Researchers in the field of ontological anthropology claim that ritual practices can connect our personal experience with a reality greater than ourselves. They believe that it is important to encounter alternative worldviews that challenge our perception of reality. This can be achieved through participating in sacred rituals that allow us to encounter the transcendent realities of other cultures and belief-systems. For my friend to share in the world of the Florentine women who knelt before *Sanctissima Annunziata* she would need to participate in the rituals that gave rise to the belief that the icon is a window to eternity. In other words, to appreciate an icon you must make one.

## **Our Vision**

Our project will use practices and techniques associated with traditional iconography to help us understand one another’s belief systems and transcendent realities. In a world where the sacred and secular are increasingly polarised, we want to bring people together to share and express the different ways in which they see that world. For this reason, we don’t just want to introduce non-Christian communities to the practice of iconography; we want to give these communities the chance to express their own transcendent realities through engaging with the icon-making process. We know that when people look at sacred art, or worship spaces, they don’t always see themselves and their communities represented. Our icon-making workshops will draw on traditional rituals and techniques from iconography to give participants the opportunity to create icons of inspirational figures from communities and groups that aren’t always seen in sacred art. In this way, we hope to combine the two definitions of “icon” as a devotional image of a holy figure and a celebrated person who has become a symbol for a wider secular community.

**Why women?**

Our workshops will be led by female iconographers because women weren’t always able to make icons. Like many forms of sacred ministry, iconography was historically dominated by men and thrived in monastic communities. Today, there are many celebrated male iconographers, but women from across the world are also developing this rich tradition in a range of religious and cultural contexts. We feel that female iconographers understand what it means to participate in the rituals of a sacred tradition that hasn’t always made space for them.

## **What we hope to achieve**

Together, we want to create new icons of the people that matter to you, so that we can meet those people in the transcendent reality that is accessed through the icon. While doing this, we hope to have some interesting conversations that will allow us to form a deeper appreciation of the profound and rich aspects of one another’s spirituality. All too often, the study of religion focuses on doctrines, belief-systems, and institutional authority. Together we want to decolonize interfaith discourse by exploring how everyday practices, experiences and human interactions contribute to the development of faith, ritual, and tradition.

What does all of this mean? We’ll be leading a number of icon-making workshops with local communities across the Lancaster area at the Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery, home to the largest British collection of icons outside of London. And we’ll be compiling the first digital archive of women’s iconography in collaboration with Lancaster University Library’s digital collections. Eventually, we want to create our own method for making art and writing about the icons in our lives, and we hope to curate an exhibition of women’s iconography, too.

Take a look at our aims and outputs to find out more about what we have planned and what we hope to achieve. We’re really grateful to the AHRC Impact Accelerator Fund of Lancaster University for supporting this project.

# **Aims and Outputs**

## **Aims**

* To introduce local communities from a range of backgrounds to iconography and to support these communities in celebrating the spiritual icons in their lives and histories by engaging with this artform.
* To foster inter-faith dialogue about the function of the sacred image in community and cultural life, including such related issues as: the role of art in expressing religious beliefs and spiritual experiences, the visibility of women and minority groups as spiritual icons, the relationship between the artist’s process and their spirituality and the importance of art in commemorating and communicating with the dead.
* To broaden the canon of representation accessed through icon-making and to foster enriching and creative relationships between people from a variety of faith traditions and none.

## **Outputs**

* The first digital archive of women’s iconography, hosted by Lancaster University Library.
* A workshop series on icon-making with different community groups, hosted by the Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery.
* The development of an inter-faith method of icon-making that incorporates the subjects, techniques and rituals proposed by our participants.
* The development of a method for writing poetry and criticism that is inspired by the icon.
* An exhibition of women’s iconography.

**Stay tuned!**

# **The Project Leaders**

## **Dr Azelina Flint**

Dr Azelina Flint is a specialist in women’s writing and creative practice whose research explores the relationship between female faith communities and feminist advocacy. She received her PhD in American Studies from the University of East Anglia in 2019 and has published extensively on nineteenth-century British and American women’s writing. Her creative practice encompasses poetry, memoir and the reflective essay and is primarily concerned with how contemporary creative writing is shaped by our engagement with the writers and artists who inspire us, especially forgotten women in history. Azelina has taught American Studies, Victorian Literature, and Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia, Royal Holloway and Lancaster University. She is a former Fulbright Fellow and is about to undertake a Houghton Library Research Fellowship at Harvard University.

## **Brian Baker**

# **About our workshops**

In the academic year 2023-24, we’re leading a workshop series on icon-making at the Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery: home to largest British collection of icons outside of London. These workshops will introduce local community groups from Lancashire to the techniques and methods associated with iconography. These groups will create icons of the women who inspire them from their own cultures and backgrounds to diversify the types of people we see represented in sacred art. We’ll talk about how art allows us to express our religious beliefs and spiritual experiences and what it might mean to make devotional rituals and worship practices more inclusive and welcoming. The workshop programme is designed by Azelina Flint and Brian Baker, and we’ll be collaborating with a number of female iconographers to roll out this programme. Get in touch with us here if you’re a female iconographer whose interested in leading one of our workshops or a local community group who’d like to take part.

As part of the development of our workshop programme, we’ll be leading a free pilot workshop at the Storey, Lancaster on 16th June. You can find out more about this event and register here. We’ve already started to develop the programme for this event with our colleagues. Here’s what they have to say about the experience…

# **Gallery of Community Icons**

Here you can find images of the icons you’ve created of the women who inspire you. Remember, iconography is not about being a great artist, it’s about the spiritual encounter you have with the person represented, which is made possible by the creative process.

# **Participant Testimonials**

Here you can find out about our participants’ experiences making icons of the women who inspire them…

“What fun! It was terrific learning about the Icon making process, and the intricacies that go into it. It's such an involved process, but we were taken through it very well (and very patiently). The presentation at the start was an excellent introduction to contemporary takes on the Icon as a form, as well as its history, and definitely went some way towards sparking the conversations we had while working on our Icons about faith and art. Those conversations felt as if they were the heart of the process”—Dr Oliver Langmead, Lancaster University.

“I wasn’t sure what to expect from the first icon making session. I was expecting it to be quite research centred and conceptual so I was surprised to find it was going to be a really hands-on session but I enjoyed this a lot.  I loved the framework Brian put in place and I liked the slow process of practicing the lines and measuring out the face. I actually found it very interesting to engage with colleagues through art. Sometimes in my field I go walking with colleagues and I always find this really revelatory because the different space allows a different dynamic. I felt this with the group dynamic in the icon-making session which I thought was really positive”—Professor Sally Bushell, Lancaster University.

“I found the workshop to be really well paced. There was enough space and time to let the ideas sink in properly, and the approach to the artistic process was methodical, well-explained and well-supported. There was the perfect mix between explaining to us the formal constraints of the artistic endeavour (such as the shape of the eyes / the proportions of the head, etc.), and the freedom for artistic creativity and exploration within and beyond these formal constraints”—Dr Benjamin Dalton, Lancaster University.

# **Get in Touch**

Are you a female iconographer who’d like to share your practice with people across the Lancaster area? We’ll cover your expenses to the Blackburn Museum and pay you for your time. Please be in touch at … if you’d like to lead one of our workshops.

We’d also love to hear from local community groups who’d like to learn more about iconography. Get in touch at … if you’re interested in participating in one of our workshops.