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# Icons of Presence: Windows to the Soul

Catherine W. Bando

## Introduction

Wisdom emerged from the nothingness of the desert during the early centuries of Christianity. Religious persecution and political unrest under Roman rule drove men and women to the deserts in the regions of the Mediterranean. They withdrew from the absence of all they knew to discover the essential truths of life. Thousands of people left everything; their homes, villages, and families to seek a freedom that was revealed through the isolation and solitude provided by the barrenness of the surrounding deserts. The wisdom literature that came from the hearts and minds of these men and women has endured for many centuries and is chronicled in the works known as *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*.

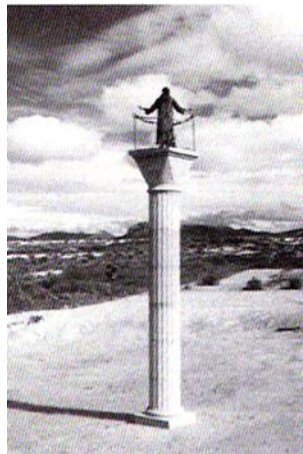
The sacred art of iconography emerged at the same time as *The Sayings*. The history, theology, techniques and the practices of praying with icons reveals a medium that integrated everything that was available at the time to express the transcendent wisdom that was articulated in the words of the desert fathers and mothers. Together, they laid a foundation for spiritual practice that has evolved through the centuries and has survived today in various forms.

Political and economic unrest has plagued humanity for all of history and continues today. While the ancient wisdom of the desert has endured nearly eighteen hundred years, we continue to search for new ways of understanding eternal truths. Like the men and women of the ancient desert, we continue to yearn for new paths to freedom and understanding. The demands of modern life seem to be increasing in intensity as our daily lives are bombarded with information that is readily available through technology. The active but often meaninglessness of our lives makes it challenging to find time to seek the truth of peace and understanding that was encapsulated in words and images many centuries ago in the desert.

Marina Abramović is a contemporary artist who takes art to extremes in search of truth and freedom. Her extremes are not unlike the asceticism of the desert fathers and mothers who abandoned their homes to live in the desolation of the desert. Her work can also be related to iconography which evokes a *presence* of the saint or Christian story depicted. While on the surface her work may seem sensational, her stated intent was to urge her audience to a place of freedom. Such freedom can be compared to the truths that were written in words and images many years ago in the desert. The purpose of this paper is to compare desert spirituality together with the sacred art of iconography and to consider how these early practices can be related to the work of the contemporary performance art of Marina Abramović.

## Desert Spirituality – Origins of Christian Contemplative Life

Christian monasticism first emerged in the desert areas of the Mediterranean during the early centuries of the Common Era. Thousands of men and women fled established communities in response to the oppression of Roman rule. Tensions from the Romans were not simply religious; there was a struggle among the people to control land and water and a peasant-elite emerged where certain villagers dominated the economy. Roman taxation was levied on villages as a whole, rather than on individuals, which drove peasant-landowners to disassociate themselves from villages. There was considerable social disruption among the established social communities.<sup>1</sup> The crises in human relations contributed to the draw of early Christians to the desert and to the establishment of contemplative practices.<sup>2</sup>



Antony of the Desert (c. 251–356) is often credited as the founder of Christian monasticism. He left his Egyptian village in around 270 CE to seek the life of perfection inspired by the Gospel; it compelled him to sell everything and to follow Christ. Antony sold his birthright, left the world and spent twenty years in the solitude of the desert. His withdrawal from the world was followed by a return when he made himself available to others. The desert taught him wisdom and thousands of people were drawn to him. Men and women sought his counsel and emulated his life of solitude. They became known as the desert fathers and mothers and were considered ascetics who abstained from worldly pleasures to seek spiritual wisdom. They fled society and took command of themselves through extreme discipline which lead to an inner freedom.<sup>3</sup> Their training included rigorous self-denial called *askesis* where they not only physically withdrew from the world (*anachoresis*), but they also demonstrated extreme self-control (*enkrateia*).<sup>4</sup> An extreme example of asceticism was Symeon the Stylite (c. 388 –459) who lived outside for nearly forty years on a small platform that was located at the top of a tall pillar.<sup>5</sup> The desert ascetics also fasted unceasingly and relied on sustenance from spiritual forces. It was recorded at the time that they were “fed by the hand of God.”<sup>6</sup>

The desert fathers and mothers started a revolution in Christianity that produced the wisdom literature known as *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*.<sup>7</sup> They cultivated a “counter-cultural way of life” of prayer where lives were transformed to the point of unconditional acceptance of a fragile world.<sup>8</sup> The *Sayings* are filled with profound wisdom that continues to teach eternal truths to us today. During the same period that the Christian contemplative life was being

<sup>1</sup> Peter Brown, “From the Heavens to the Desert: Anthony and Pacomius,” *The Making of Late Antiquity*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 85.

<sup>2</sup> Brown, “From the Heavens,” 82.

<sup>3</sup> Kallistos Ware, “The Way of the Ascetics: Negative or Affirmative?” *The Way of the Ascetics* eds. Vincent Wimbrush and Richard Valantasis (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 3.

<sup>4</sup> Ware, “The Way of the Ascetics,” 4.

<sup>5</sup> <http://earlyworldhistory.blogspot.com/2012/02/simeon-stylite.html>

<sup>6</sup> Tim Vivian, ed. and trans., “A Woman in the Desert: Syncletica of Palestine,” *Journeying Into God: Seven Early Monastic Lives* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), p. 44.

<sup>7</sup> John Chryssavgis, “The Desert and the World: Learning from the Desert Fathers and Mothers,” *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 54, no. 1-4 (2008): 141-2.

<sup>8</sup> Chryssavgis, “The Desert and the World,” 148.

formed in the Mediterranean deserts, the sacred art of iconography was being developed as an aid to prayer and as a tool to communicate the Christian story.

## Praying with Icons: History, Theology, Technique and Practice

### History

Icons have a rich history that can be traced to the earliest centuries of Christianity. Icons served as a vehicle for people to *see* the Christian stories. The materials used for icons ranged from small wooden surfaces that were used for individual private prayer to large iconographic frescos painted in underground catacombs for corporate worship to venerate the saints and to honor the dead.

The emergence of Christianity as the state religion of the Roman Empire in the early fourth century led to the construction of many beautifully decorated churches where iconographic images told the Christian stories to a primarily illiterate population. The use of images in worship grew to be controversial and in the eighth century icons were banned for approximately 50 years during a period called iconoclasm. Certain Christian theologians believed that the image of God should not be depicted. Following long and heated debates on both sides of the argument, in 787 CE icons were allowed to be restored to churches, although many had been destroyed. The practice of writing Byzantine icons and praying with icons has continued through the centuries and continues as a contemplative practice today.

### Theology and Technique

In response to the iconoclast movement, theological arguments that supported their use were solidified and related primarily to the incarnation. Christ came from Mary who was human<sup>9</sup> and humans can be depicted in images. Christ also came from God who could not be depicted in images. If Christ could not be depicted, he was not human and if Christ was not human *and* divine the entire Christian doctrine of salvation could be called into question.<sup>10</sup> The Apostle John described that the invisible Word of God became visible in Christ when the “Word became Flesh” (John 1:14). The Word circumscribed God by becoming man. Similarly, the icon circumscribed God by conveying the *nature* of God. Christ’s physical nature could be represented in images and could be recognized as Christ. Icons were used as bridges to proclaim the physical reality of Christ while providing the eternal *presence* of God.

The deepest meaning of the icon is that it serves as a connection between humanity and a transcendent dimension. The icon depicts a particular event or saint and serves as *the* connection between the faithful person looking at the image to the event or saint. When an icon is recognized, it is considered to hold the actual *presence* of the person or story depicted. An icon in the absence of a faithful person is simply an object. Icons are compared to consecrated elements where the bread and wine contain the *presence* of Christ to the faithful participant in the Eucharistic feast.

Icons are considered sacred objects. The techniques used to create them were refined and firmly established early in the fifth century.<sup>11</sup> The images are simple without flourishes that would

<sup>9</sup> The immaculate conception of Mary emerged in the West during later centuries.

<sup>10</sup> Michel Quenot, *The Icon; Window on the Kingdom* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002), 39.

<sup>11</sup> Quenot, *The Icon; Window on the Kingdom*, 15.

otherwise detract from the intended transcendence of the icon. The absence of realism provides a visible sign of the invisible presence of God.<sup>12</sup> Icons have an inverse perspective which has the effect of taking the viewer to another time. Inverse perspective means that objects located in the front are smaller than objects in the back rather than realism where objects fade to a smaller proportion in the back of pictures. The intent is to visually transcend the mind to dreamlike, abstract dimensions.<sup>13</sup> The timeframe of the icon is *kairos* which is an indeterminate measure of time. It lacks chronology which represents sequential time. The abstract dimension of the icon is teleological where life transitions “from the visible to the invisible, from the actual to the illusionary.”<sup>14</sup>

While the iconographer uses brushes to lay emulsified pigments on surfaces, iconography is not painting; it is called “writing.” The iconographer *writes* visual stories and portraits that are used to communicate Christian stories and theology. Iconographers do not sign their work, but they inscribe each icon with the name of the story or the saint(s) and in doing so they give the icon *presence*.<sup>15</sup> The name actualizes the active presence of that which can not be seen and confers the icon with its sacred character and spiritual dimension.<sup>16</sup> Thomas Merton described the icon as “an interior presence in light...the glory of the transfigured Christ...which is transmitted by faith...by the apostles who have seen Christ.”<sup>17</sup> The icon is made to transform the viewer like the Gospel texts are read to transform the reader. The theology of the icon was articulated by Athanasius of Alexandria who said “God became human so that the human could be God.”<sup>18</sup> The icon is a witness to deification and brings presence to the Christian story.

### **The Practice of Praying with Icons**

*“Prayer is an act of simplicity in a complex world.”<sup>19</sup>*

It can be challenging to pray. Prayer requires an active mind to be cleared to the point of abandon where one is truly open to the presence of God. Icons have been used as an aid to draw a person into that presence. It is a contemplative practice where a person first looks at the scene or saint depicted, reflects on the story or saint to the point that the mind is transported to the transcendence of God. The icon has been compared to a veil. A veil covers an object, but the veil is transparent so that the object it covers can be seen. When a person contemplates an icon, it is simply a transparent veil through which a person can experience the transcendence of God.

Individual prayer with icons typically occurs in a fixed place that is quiet with natural illumination such as the flame of a candle. The flame is a metaphor for prayer as it provides both warmth and the ideal illumination to transport the observer through the image.<sup>20</sup> While there are

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>13</sup> Clemena Antonova, *Space, Time, and Presence in the Icon: Seeing the World with the Eyes of God*, Preface by Martin Kemp, (Burlington: Ashgate, 2010), 15-19.

<sup>14</sup> Pavel Florensky, *Iconostasis*, (New York, NY: Crestwood, 1996), 522, as quoted by Antonova, 21

<sup>15</sup> Quenot, *The Icon: Window on the Kingdom*, 85.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, edited by William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1985), p. 637, 642-43. as quoted by Jim Forest in *Praying with Icons*. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997), 21.

<sup>18</sup> Jim Forest, *Praying with Icons*. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997), 21.

<sup>19</sup> Forest, *Praying with Icons*, 34.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 50.

no rules relating to posture or the words to be used when praying with icons, the *Jesus Prayer* “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner,” is often repeated when one prays with an icon. Repetitive prayer helps to transport the mind from other thoughts and, with the aid of the icon, the mind becomes empty by moving towards an awareness of the presence of God’s closeness.<sup>21</sup>

In my personal practice, I am most moved by the eyes depicted in an icon. To me, the eyes give *presence* to the icon and seem to serve as windows to the divine. As an iconographer, I know that the eyes are among the last details completed when an icon is finished. Among my favorite icons is the image of Christ *Pantocrator*. It is believed to be the oldest surviving icon of Christ, dating to the sixth century CE. It is domiciled at St. Catherine’s monastery in Sinai, Egypt; a region that was beyond the reach of the iconoclasm period that destroyed most icons during the eighth century. The eyes of the face seem to depict the dual natures of Christ; with man depicted on the left and God on the right. A mirrored composite of the icon demonstrates how the icon depicts the dual nature of Christ.<sup>22</sup> Gazing upon this particular icon of Christ is transcendent to me. The techniques and prayer practices of iconography survive today and continue to connect the faithful to the transcendence of God.



Christ Pantocrator  
Original Icon

Human Mirror  
Image

God Mirror  
Image

### Marina Abramović: Performance Art

Marina Abramović is a Serbian-American artist who combines performance with visual art to create a medium known as “Performance Art.” She uses performance as a means of expression by controlling her body and pushing herself and the audience to the edges of physical and mental

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>22</sup> Christ Pantocrator and the composite are available in the public domain. JustinGBX created the composite in Photoshop from the original, 3 October 2014.

limits. In her words, she strives to ultimately release the audience “to put you in the focus of now” and “to make people more free.”<sup>23</sup>

She was born in 1946 in Belgrade, Serbia in the immediate aftermath of the installation of a new government that overthrew the old Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Her parents were Yugoslav Partisans and were intensely involved in the newly established government. She had deep roots in the Serbian Orthodox Church; her great uncle was the Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church<sup>24</sup> and, until the age of six, she lived primarily with her grandmother who was deeply religious. Abramović stated "I spent my childhood in a church following my grandmother's rituals – candles in the morning, the priest coming for different occasions."<sup>25</sup> At the age of six, when she returned to her parent's home, she faced a disciplined existence under the rigors of her communist parents. Her mother prepared daily lists of ten achievements that she was required to accomplish. At the age of 29, she literally escaped from the oppressive and disciplined home of her family and fled to become a migrant artist. She joined her lover, the Dutch artist Ulay (Uwe Laysiepen pronounced Oo-way Lay-see-pen), and together they traveled around Europe. They lived in a van-like vehicle and performed art for nearly two decades. The performances included extremes including self-mutilation where they tested their physical endurance almost to the point of death. Abramović's performances have been described as “ritualistic purifications designed to free her of her own past.”<sup>26</sup> She directly and boldly engaged her audiences in the Performance Art and challenged them to discover freedom through her work.

In 2010, New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) featured an art installation of Abramović's Performance Art titled *The Artist is Present*. At the time, the exhibition represented the culmination of her lifetime of Performance Art. It included performances by over 30 artists who, at her direction, re-performed her prior work; much of which was originally performed with Ulay.

At the center of the exhibit, Abramović performed the longest-duration of solo work in her career. Abramović built a set that consisted of a “Square of Light” that was located in the museum's central and large atrium. Two chairs and a table were placed in the Square of Light. Abramović sat in a chair at one end of the table and individual visitors to the museum were invited to sit at the opposite side of the table. Visitors could sit with her as long as they wished, but they were instructed to be silent, to not gesture in any way and to simply gaze into Abramović's eyes. Abramović endured the physical challenges of sitting in the chair without taking breaks of any kind. She wore no makeup and was dressed in a simple gown that was red, white or black. Her appearance was not a distraction to the person sitting across from her or the audience. Between each person's visit to the table, she lowered her head and closed her eyes as if clearing the palette; which was her face. When the next visitor was settled and quiet in the chair opposite to her, she slowly gazed up and looked directly into the visitor's eyes. She spent every day, from the opening of MoMA to its closing for three consecutive months. Abramović described her solo performance art as:

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.lacan.com/abramovic.htm>

<sup>24</sup> Judith Thurman, Profiles, "Walking Through Walls," *The New Yorker*, March 8, 2010, 24

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/profiles/marina-abramovi-the-grandmother-of-performance-art-on-her-brand-growing-up-behind-the-iron-curtain-9449301.html>

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.lacan.com/abramovic.htm>

“people don’t understand that the hardest thing to actually do is something that is close to nothing... it is demanding all of you, there is no story to tell, no objects to hide behind, there is nothing, just pure presence, you have to rely on your own energy, nothing else.”<sup>27</sup>



Over the course of three months more than 750,000 people attended the exhibition with thousands of participants sitting in the chair. People were visibly moved when they gazed into Abramović’s face, and many people seem to be transported to another place as they were mysteriously moved to tears.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Marina Abramović, *The Artist is Present*, Directors: Matthew Akers, Jeffrey Dupre. Producers: Jeffrey Dupre, Maro Chermayeff Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY Released June 13, 2012), 20 minutes into the film.

<sup>28</sup> Images are from <http://www.pbs.org/art21/images/marina-abramovic/the-artist-is-present-2010>.

<sup>29</sup> <http://hyperallergic.com/53337/wtf-is-up-with-marina-abramovic-the-movie-a-review/>





### Desert Spirituality, Iconography and the Performance Art of Marina Abramović

Visual art may be considered simply a manipulation of materials with no regard to the temporal dimension of the object.<sup>30</sup> One description of visual art is that it attempts to “smuggle the time factor into a medium which, by definition, lacks the dimension of time.”<sup>31</sup> Iconography and Abramović’s Performance Art differs from this interpretation of visual art; a temporal quality is created in iconography and Performance Art. The observer of Performance Art actually becomes part of the artwork itself and has an opportunity to become emotionally or spiritually moved. The person who prays with an icon also has the opportunity to be transported to another place as they become one with the presence of the person or story depicted in the icon.

The performances in *The Artist is Present* demanded extreme physical endurance and discipline. Such endurance and discipline can be compared to that of the desert fathers and mothers. Abramović trained 30 performance artists who re-enacted her work in the exhibit. The artists were required to maintain silence throughout the training and were required to fast the entire time. They were stripped of sight with blindfolds while they meditated in silence. The training echoed the discipline of the desert fathers and mothers who lived in silence and fasted for extended periods of time. Certain performances in Abramović’s work, such as a nude woman hanging from a wall on a bicycle seat with her arms outstretched like the crucifix, have overtones of the unusual ascetic practices of early Christians.<sup>32</sup>

Abramović’s flight from her Belgrade home at the age of 29 can be compared to the *anakoresis* of the desert fathers and mothers. They fled Roman persecution to live in small caves or cells to cultivate lives of solitude and contemplation. She fled the oppression of her communist parents to live in a small van-like vehicle that can be compared to the cells of the desert fathers and mothers. Her initial twenty year sojourn around Europe can be compared to Antony’s initial

<sup>30</sup> Antonova, 5.

<sup>31</sup> Otto Pacht, *The Rise of Pictorial Narrative in Twelfth Century England*, (Oxford, UK: 1962), 1 as quoted by Antonova, 5.

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/marina-abramovic-luminosity>

twenty years of solitude in the desert. While she was not alone, and was engaged with an audience through her performance art, it may be that the two decades formed her as a performance artist like the twenty years of solitude formed Antony as a saint. An examination of her life reveals that she was no stranger to iconography. She spent her early formative years at her grandmother’s side and it is likely that she may have been influenced by the practices of the Serbian Orthodox church which uses iconography extensively in corporate worship and individual prayer.

The experiences of the visitors who participated in Abramović’s art installation can be related it to the transcendent qualities that occur when one prays with an icon. The visitors were visibly moved, many to tears, when they sat opposite to Abramović. Her presence was a living icon or a window as she sat motionless and did nothing to distract the viewer from the transcendent freedom she sought to impart.<sup>33</sup>



### Conclusion

The wisdom imparted by the desert fathers and mothers has endured to the twenty-first century through a rich cultural heritage of literature in the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* and through the techniques of iconography and prayer practices that have been preserved for nearly two millennia. The Performance Art of Marina Abramović is an example of a new form of expression that equally transports those who wholly participate to the transcendence of truth, understanding and freedom that she strives to impart. Abramović’s performance art conveys wisdom in ways that can be compared to the words of the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* and the sacred images of Christian iconography.

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<sup>33</sup> The Image of Abramović (with the Austrian Decoration for Science and Art she received in 2008) was taken during the screening of *The Artist Is Present* at the Vienna International Film Festival 2012 and is freely available to copy, distribute and transmit. Note the similarity of the composition to Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*.

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Ware, Kallistos. “The Way of the Ascetics: Negative or Affirmative?” *The Way of the Ascetics*  
Assigned reading in Desert Spirituality course.

Christ Pantocrator - Oldest known icon of Christ Pantocrator, from sixth century. St. Catherine’s Monastery, Sinai, Egypt. Available in the public domain.

Christ Pantocrator the composite is available in the public domain. JustinGBX created the composite in Photoshop from the original, 3 October 2014.

Image of Simeon the Stylite <http://earlyworldhistory.blogspot.com/2012/02/simeon-stylite.html>

Image depicting *The Artist is Present* downloaded from  
<http://www.pbs.org/art21/images/marina-abramovic/the-artist-is-present-2010> and  
<http://hyperallergic.com/53337/wtf-is-up-with-marina-abramovic-the-movie-a-review/>

Image of Abramovic from 2012 Vienna Film Festival from Manfred Werner / Tsui - File:Marina Abramović - The Artist Is Present - Viennale 2012.jpg

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