

Icon revivalists train a new generation

The fine medieval art of religious icon painting was submerged by the Renaissance, repressed by communism and dismissed by modernism. But in the 21st Century it is finding a modern following as a new generation reclaims the idea of art as a religious experience.

St Petersburg icon painter Philip Davydov learned the art form from his father, who was one of the first Russian artists to rediscover icon painting after the fall of communism.

Now he and his wife, fellow artist Olga Shalamova, travel the world producing icons for contemporary churches and teaching icon painting to other artists, hungry to discover a visual language that was once consigned to the dust of the Middle Ages.

Davydov is in Australia in January conducting icon-painting workshops at the Australian Catholic University. Students will learn how to create icons of Mary and how to draw or paint Crucifixions.

Davydov says painting icons requires a very different approach from classical Western art, which is the basis of most university art courses.

“Western art wants to explore a certain idea, to look at the historical background and to stimulate the imagination. The goal of an icon is to focus your mind, to stay and meditate with that image. The task is very different.”

Historically, Christian art and architecture has moved away from elaborate decoration towards simple churches. But Davydov says a contemporary understanding of how we apprehend the world had led to a new appreciation of the icon.

“There has been a steady growth in interest over the past 30 years. I think it’s because of the openness of everything. Different Christian denominations are looking at their neighbour and seeing what they can borrow,” he says.

“Our bodies use the eyes to gain most of our information. Having a plain white wall doesn’t allow us to use our whole being to participate as fully as possible in a religious experience.”

While contemporary Western artists are encouraged to focus on individual expression, icon painters follow strict rules. But that doesn’t mean icon painting is purely a paint-by-numbers exercise.

“When icon painting was rediscovered in the 19th Century, people just wanted to trace the lines and fill in the colours. That stereotype persists but really that doesn’t work. My father taught me that what makes the icons powerful is the spirit. You have to understand both the art and the theology.”

Philip Davydov is available for interview.

More information and images are available at <http://www.sacredmurals.com/>

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