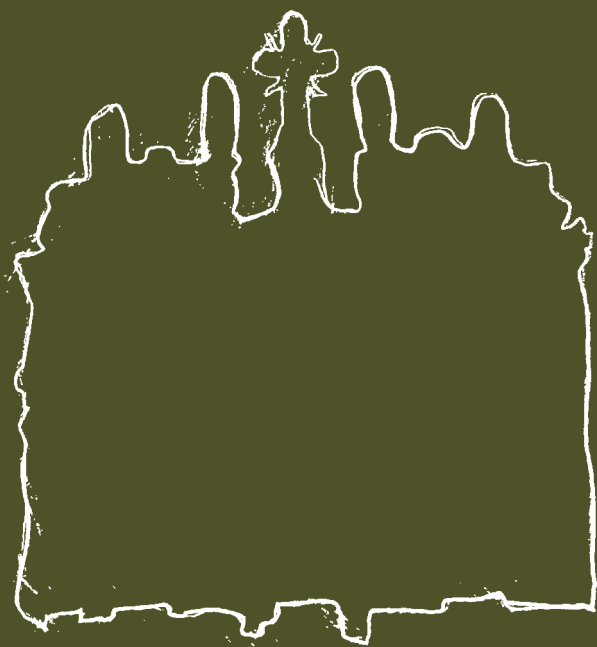


Special thanks:
Lidia Rossner
Carl Johan Högberg
Hasan Halilov







A rare ceramic icon;
this one depicts Saint
Arethas (Byzantine,
10th century)
Walters Art Museum



INTRODUCTION THE ICON AS AN OBJECT



Iconoclasm 1.1.

Iconoclasm 1.2

THE ICON AS A TERM



MIX & MATCH

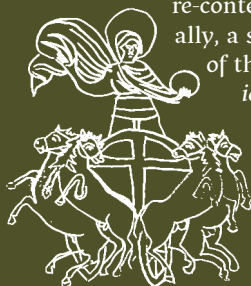






INTRODUCTION

In this paper I would like to look into what an icon¹ is as an object from its initial appearance all the way to where it stands in the 21 century, together with its convergence with the term *icon* itself, and the etymological shift it undergoes. Addressing the initial purpose and production of religious iconography, I will trace how historical contexts and changes in society and culture shaped its transformation and led to repurposing and re-contextualising. Additionally,



a speculative exploration of the history of the word *icon* is presented to examine the representational shift through the prism of Gen Z.

In the following two chapters the concepts will be presented individually, for the reader to be able to get the idea how and when the object and term converge.^{1. & 2}

Having grown in an Eastern Orthodox environment in a family of conservators and Orthodox church fresco painters, I have a strong connection with the aesthetics of religious art. Therefore I am interested in critically reflecting on the connotations of icons in the past and present. By comparing and

1. In the text below we will be referring to "icon" – as the object, and "icon" – as the term

2. Icon comes to us from the Greek word *eikēnai*, meaning to seem or to be like. *Icon* – definition, meaning & synonyms. Vocabulary.com. (n.d.). www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/icon





cross referencing the word and the object on their journey of changes.

What does the term *icon* mean? Hypothetically we could be speaking from ancient relics all the way to admirable figures in contemporary society, or the file

format genre of applications. Although in this text I will be focusing on the beginning of icon history, when it appeared as an object in Byzantine times from 3rd century onwards, I will also attempt to trace its transformation through time and space and elaborate on the metaphorical qualities after the word took off and started a life on its own, far from its religious context.

Eastern Orthodox religious icons fulfilled varied purposes throughout history and this text explores the different aspects through subjects like Christian religious imagery, idolised and fetishised depictions, historical memorabilia, symbols, artefacts, relics, and pictures. It is crucial to differentiate the object of religious rituals and beliefs from the term *icon*.





THE ICON AS AN OBJECT

Christian religious icons throughout history always had one purpose or another. The definition of the object icon comes from the Greek word², as most of art related terms do, and it is widely accepted as an image symbolising or mediating a god or a saint. It first appeared in the Byzantine empire where it was not considered an artwork but merely an attribute in religious rituals. The aim of those glorified objects was to mediate and to serve as a record and visualisation of the zeitgeist of their time. Every era provided a shift in the overall image such as the attributes and expressions of the characters portrayed. Showing their idols and spreading ideas and beliefs, they were the strongest visual identity out there. Imagery not intended to suppress and overpower in the beginning became corrupted for “higher” purposes as religion developed. Later on, it was used as propaganda, instilling fear in the regular human being therefore affirming the divinity of their idols. Humbling the viewer into paying their respects through this mediator, leaving coins and flowers around it, and even kissing it for good health and luck. [1.]

The images below show Christian icons

2. Icon comes to us from the Greek word *eikenai*, meaning to seem or to be like. *Icon* — definition, meaning & synonyms. Vocabulary.com. (n.d.). www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/icon





[1.]

Source: Trojan
Monastery

being praised nowadays, in Bulgaria. An Eastern Orthodox country where religion is based on customs and rituals that remained from pagan times. Kissing is a very intimate act and people have been practicing the ritual of kissing icons for centuries. But since the pandemic started this ritual became inappropriate, nevertheless this didn't stop the pilgrims from doing it. [2.] Churches were being disinfected and the juxtaposition of the white-suited men with the holy images is just another example of the shifts happening due to the zeitgeists of different times and the influences they have on the object and term in question. [3.] Is it hypothetically possible that those disinfection workers will appear in future iconography as saviours? We can only speculate. In order to elaborate on



Source:
novini.bg

[2.]





the subject of Orthodox iconography and its theological and philosophical purpose I will present a few examples for their appearance throughout time, all the way to its context in contemporary art. When talking about the first painted Orthodox icons it is important to remember that their status was not one of art works. Unlike nowadays, individual artistic approach was unnecessary, even looked down on, although every author worked in their own way and left something unique behind. Dogmas and rules were strictly followed and imposed throughout the creation and execution of the painted work. The hands behind the image were not what was important and in cases where the human-made factor was absent—an appearance of a so-called *acheiropoieta*³ was empowering belief systems and increasing the sanctity of the painted work in question. An *acheiropoieta* is an ancient Greek word meaning not made by human hands and it was used to classify special

3. & 4. *Acheiropoieta*. Oxford Reference. The Oxford Dictionary of the Middle Ages (n.d.) from <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/author-ity.20110803095347462>



[3.]

Source:
novini.bg





objects depicting Jesus that just appeared. “[Greek, ‘objects not made by [human] hands’] Primarily used of direct impressions of Christ’s face (the Kamoulianai Christ, the Mandylion of Edessa, the Veronica of Rome, and the Shroud of Turin), a category first attested in the 6th century.”⁴

No one claimed to have made them, therefore they were sacred and divine. This was the concept behind iconography in the great Byzantine times where it all started. As the French philosopher, anthropologist and sociologist Bruno Latour says in his text titled *What is iconoclasm? Or is there a world beyond the image wars?*

“More generally, the critical mind is one that shows the hands of humans at work everywhere so as to slaughter the sanctity of religion, the belief in fetishes, the worship of transcendent, heaven-sent icons, the strength of ideologies. The more the human hand can be seen as having worked on an image, the weaker is the image’s claim to offer truth.”⁵ And indeed the lack of human presence behind the image creation and the male dominated characteristic of the images is what helps us recognise the burden of history in the church as an institution as well. Since iconographic portrayals appeared, the male figures were the serious, trustworthy depictions of who should be worshipped. In my opinion this is one of the reasons for the current status of icons being perceived more as relics than a relevant power within my

5. Iconoclasm. beyond the image wars in science, religion, and art: 2002. ZKM. (2002, January 1). Retrieved from <https://zkm.de/de/publikation/iconoclasm-beyond-the-image-wars-in-science-religion-and-art>





generation. The masculine makeover of religious iconography was a mirror of the spirit of time, and perception of females as a caring figure but not one worthy of respect and veneration. The place of women and how they are depicted has been an issue throughout history and we still strive to change it within contemporary society.

The prototype of what is portrayed in icons came from transformed, adapted and borrowed images from Egyptian, Greek, Pagan, and Roman cultures and religions that were assigned a new purpose- to serve a religion that would become one of the most widespread shared beliefs. Partially iconography is what enabled such massive circulation of ideas to take place. This mix of already existing faces were made part of the first representation of what Jesus should look like and from then on his face became a visualisation of hope and salvation. This highlights the journey of the icon from an object into an aspiration. The purpose of the object icon hasn't changed at all throughout the ages even though in my opinion its power of influence decreased. And indeed the power of this image that someone arbitrarily came up with or was simply created based on ideals and hopes, to acquire such a transformative impact and influence on people's lives and worldview, was groundbreaking. It still provides a shared experience for over 250 million pilgrims around the world. It contributes to the archive of shared visual literacy due to





the sheer volume. The repetitiveness of production and distribution inevitably turned it into a commodity because it enabled people to bring the Church at home.

Contemporary culture's interest and relation to the object icon are due to the diversity of its background and aesthetics- It serves as a pillar and foundation of our understanding of imagery, an aspect that signifies its crucial importance.

But what does this make us think about, how have the most important items from the past lost their credibility and gained it back in a secular society with a new face? How did sacred objects end up in gift shops? Printed, made into pocket versions, key chains and calendars.[4.] What shifted in our way of thinking and how did images that created so much passion and problems throughout time and were fought against, don't stand the same ground anymore? For example, "The Shroud of Turin (Italian: Sindone di Torino),



[4.]





[5.]

Source:
Wikipedia

also known as the Holy Shroud (Italian: Sacra Sindone ['sa:kra 'sindone] or Santa Sindone), is a length of linen cloth bearing the negative image of a man. [5.] Some describe the image as depicting Jesus of Nazareth and believe the fabric is the burial shroud in which he was wrapped after crucifixion. First mentioned in 1354, the shroud was denounced in 1389 by the local bishop of Troyes as a fake. Currently the Catholic Church neither formally endorses nor rejects the shroud, and in 2013 Pope Francis referred to it as an “icon of a man scourged and crucified”. The shroud has been kept in the royal chapel of the Cathedral of Turin, in northern Italy, since 1578.”⁶ Due to incidents such as this of accepting and denying the authenticity, a movement called iconoclasm appeared and started shaking the foundation of idolatry objects. Doubt and suspicion sprouted and spread within society.

The struggles and darkness of the middle ages altered the way Jesus was depicted as well. It became imperative to represent the

6. Wikimedia Foundation. (2022, February 12). Shroud of turin. Wikipedia. Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shroud_of_Turin





suffering, so that society can recognise and relate to it. As times changed more alterations took place. In the beginning the young person that everyone was praying to, had almost no defined gender, or more precisely it contained a bit of both.[6.] No beard, wide hips and general signs of an effeminate structure. Later on, after Virgin Mary was added to the equation, Jesus received a very masculine makeover, and since shame appeared as a social norm in the middle ages as well, he was never depicted naked again. [7.]

Icons established themselves as a visual language and helped the propaganda of emperors in order to initiate a homogenous empire with one uniting religion. This led to another powerful use of these objects, as a tool instrumentalized in politics. So in a way another use for those objects was political. Even though an iconographic image is all a matter of interpretation, it is fundamental for understanding the origin of its appearance. In a favourite documentary of mine called "Christianity As An Artistic Force" from the British art critic Waldemar Januszczak, the essence of those happenings is described.

"Pictures began to be used in the churches when Christianity was legalised and supported by the Roman emperor Constantine in the early 4th century, and they soon struck roots in Christian popular religiosity."⁷ When you think about religious imagery there are so many questions that arise.

7. Christianity as an artistic force (Waldemar Januszczak-YouTube. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qUZdV7xL_Ds





Trying to decipher the purpose they bear is fundamental for their understanding and interpretation. The manufacturing of religious art in the middle ages is a fascinating subject for me. What was driving these artists and craftsmen to create imagery that would have global influence later on? Was it just an economic necessity, or part of a duty of being devoted believers, did they get recognition for their work? Even though it might seem like a more conservative take on art, I believe in the importance of iconography and its role in the construction of Western contemporary art imagery. This distribution and manufacturing was noticed by many, including the Austrian founder of Psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud. He expressed his fascination on the subject with the following: “Towards the end of the 19th century, in the major European

8. Schorske, C. E. (2020, September 3). Freud's Egyptian dig. *The New York Review of Books*. Retrieved from https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1993/05/27/freuds-egyptian-dig/?lp_txn_id=1313203



[6.]





capitals, it was possible to purchase gods. 'The ancient gods still exist,' Freud wrote to his friend Fliess in 1899, 'for I have bought one or two lately, among them a stone Janus, who looks down on me with his two faces in a very superior fashion.' You know the gods still exist, Freud jokes, because you can buy them. They had become a new kind of commodity, just as the personal past was becoming something you could buy in the form of psychoanalysis. Recent archaeological discoveries have given vivid form to the idea that the dead do not disappear. And Janus, we may remember, the Roman god of gods, was the opener and closer of all things, who looked inward and outward, before and after, a pertinent god to have acquired, given Freud's new-found preoccupations at the turn of the century"⁸

This text signifies the changes and devaluation of sacred objects, as I mentioned earlier. And even though he is referring to the more ancient gods, the same is valid for the current status of Christian iconography. So this takes us to the next step, introducing iconoclasm.



[7.]

Orthodox icon of Jesus Christ "Blessing"
Painted by Theophanis the Cretan, 16th cent.,
Iviron Monastery,
Mount Athos. by
Theophanis the Cretan.





Page from the Chludov Psalter 9th C, Byzantine manuscript showing a scene of iconoclasm with the iconoclasts John Grammaticus and Anthony I of Constantinople

Source: Moscow State Historical Museum



ICONOCLASM



A simple human urge is to appreciate but also to destroy what triggers passion or confusion in our being.

Destroying works of art is a powerful statement that brings up debates and can be used both as propaganda and recreation, depending on the context. Representing power structures and destroying them can be





contained in the same act. When it comes to painted work that was not considered an art form, but became one due to external circumstances. You could understand the frustration it was met with.

The truth is that icons used to be the most powerful type of imagery even though they were not perceived as art on their own. They created a spectrum of feelings, for some of admiration and adoration, for others more mixed ones, but there were individuals who passionately hated them and wanted nothing more but their destruction. Everything they were standing for was despised by the ones holding a different worldview. The people wanting change or refusing to be controlled,



together with the fierce believers who thought that objects shouldn't be adored, united with the same mission, to destroy! This enables us to discover why iconography was fought against and chased, and how it turned into a commodity without

losing its value.

The reason I am mentioning iconoclasm is not only because it was the main historical event responsible for triggering the process of change, but also its further reference is relevant. Explained brilliantly in an essay by the Japanese architect Arata Isozaki "To put it another way, the modern art





movement of the twentieth century can be said to have begun as iconoclasm”⁹ because in a similar manner, it stood against what was already established, wanted to destroy it and start over.

There have always been, and there will always be individuals with an affinity for destruction of artistic objects on religious or political ground. Whenever a country was taking over another, erasing their history was the first thing to do in order to eliminate their identity, beliefs, heritage, and hopes. A very recent example of that phenomenon we unfortunately saw in Ukraine, where the Russian troops burned down a museum with the paintings of a beloved folk Ukrainian artist Maria Primachenko.¹⁰

The way artworks were destroyed or distributed throughout history from the losing to the winning countries, and all of the icons misplaced because of egocentric actions of their current rulers is the foundation of iconoclastic actions, but also Western art collections. These matters were picked up by the exhibition *The Art of Iconoclasm*, curated by art historian and writer Sven Lütticken, consisting of two parts: *From Idol to Artwork* at BAK, basis voor actuele kunst and *Attacking the Spectacle* at CM Studio, Centraal Museum. “*The Art of Iconoclasm* investigates the relation between religious iconoclasm and iconoclastic gestures and strategies in modern and contemporary art. It proposes that iconoclasm is not merely a form of “iconophobic”

9. Isozaki, A. (2020, February 16). Iconoclasm in the 21st Century. Hubert Burda Stiftung. from <https://www.hubert-burda-stiftung.de/neuigkeiten/iconoclasm-in-the-21st-century>

10. Stevens, M., & Bowley, G. (2022, February 28). Treasured paintings burned in Russian invasion, Ukrainian officials say. The New York Times. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/28/arts/design/maria-primachenko-paintings-destroyed-ukraine.html>





vandalism, but a questioning of what passes for visual culture—an attempt to redefine and reimagine the images”¹¹ On the one hand destroying an image that someone, at some point decided will have a certain function and should be worshipped without question, when the religion itself avoids idolatry of objects, really makes sense. But what happens to the legacy an icon carries? Universal images as the icons are, tend to have this immortal status, they have been around for so long, went through good and bad times, survived persecutions and stayed hidden in order to reemerge with history written all over them. So much is embodied in their existence that the way they look is embedded in the collective consciousness, therefore they may never be fully destroyed. Such strong visual identities and their influence are strategically used in contemporary art practices. This is exactly the way an image becomes iconic. The recognisability it carries is a key aspect uniting old religious iconography and contemporary world views.

11. Maas, S. (n.d.). The art of iconoclasm. BAK. Retrieved from <https://www.bakonline.org/program-item/the-return-of-religion-and-other-myths/the-art-of-iconoclasm/>





ICONOCLASH



While researching the subject of my thesis I came across a text called “What is Iconoclasm? Or is there a world beyond the image wars?”, written in 2002 by Latour for an exhibition with the same name. His take on the matter is very interesting. By deciding to combine science, religion and art in one exhibition playing with the similarities they possess, comparing and exploring the aspects of iconoclasm and its relevance today. Quotes from it such as the ones below, found their place all over this text due to their convergence with the subject of my fascinations. Bruno Latour on the destruction of icons for example says,

“To the point that destroying them, erasing them, defacing them, has been taken as the ultimate touch- stone to prove the validity of one’s faith, of one’s science, of one’s critical acumen, of one’s artistic creativity?”¹² talking about the demolition of idolatry objects by the strong believers that don’t accept a mediator for their god. But on the other hand the aftermath of events like this is very much romanticised.

”After every icono-crisis infinite care is taken to reassemble the smashed statues, to save the fragments, to protect the debris? As if it was always necessary to apologise for the destruction of so much beauty, so much horror;”¹³ and it makes one wonder if it was

12. & 13. Iconoclasm. beyond the image wars in science, religion, and art: 2002. ZKM. (2002, January 1). Retrieved from <https://zkm.de/de/publikation/iconoclasm-beyond-the-image-wars-in-science-religion-and-art>





actually a bad thing. As if the destruction was necessary for the immortal status of those objects to be established, much like what they stand for.





THE ICON AS A TERM

It is very important that we try to differentiate the object of religious rituals and beliefs from the term *icon*.

If you ask a Gen Z kid for example, it is most likely to take out its phone and show you one of an app there. The meaning of the word has changed through the ages and will continue adopting new interpretations, but will always keep the initial one mentioned above. "An icon does not necessarily have to be a real image; it can be virtual. After all, an icon is basically a virtual body made perceptible by the imagination. I believe that the concept of icon will be a key to deciphering situations that arise in the new century."¹⁴ is a thought from the Japanese architect Arata Isozaki about the status of its existence today which I completely agree with. Not attempting to generalise but expressing my perspective; the average Western 21 century human has quite some superficial



14. Isozaki, A.
(2020, February 16).
Iconoclasm in the
21st Century. Hubert
Burda Stiftung.
from <https://www.hubert-burda-stiftung.de/neuigkeiten/iconoclasm-in-the-21st-century>

Madonna as The
Madonna





qualities, and it is of big importance to us to possess material objects and have a certain status, because this is how life is now. Therefore when we choose our *icons*, in our Pop culture immersed world, we make sure that they are worthy of the cause- people with a talent, beauty, wealth are being looked up to are the modern icons symbolising social structures.

Transitioning to what is an *icon* for the 21 century human? After Nietzsches claim that “God is dead”, and his critique on religious belief he explains why people believe in the existence of a higher power? The phrase first appeared in Nietzsche’s 1882 collection *The Gay Science* (*Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, also translated as “*The Joyful Pursuit of Knowledge and Understanding*”).¹⁵

Through time and evolution we reached a moment where we choose our own idols, figure out what we want to believe in and why. That can vary from person to person and unlike in the past it can take unexpected forms. There is no specific space assigned for its adoration or a mandatory form it should take. It’s most likely an artist, performer, creative, businessman, scientist, philosopher, successful person that earned the adoration of the masses. Their life and choices are idolised and followed therefore they become *iconic*. If you check the dictionary for example this is what it will tell you about it “The original meaning of iconic was essentially “resembling an icon,” but today it often describes what is

15. ~ 1000-Word Philosophy: An Introductory Anthology. (2022, January 25). “God is dead”: Nietzsche and the death of god. 1000. Retrieved from <https://1000word-philosophy.com/2018/02/13/nietzsche-and-the-death-of-god/>





so admired that it could be the subject of an icon. And with that use, *iconic* has become part of the language of advertising and publicity: companies and magazines and TV hosts encourage us to think of some consumer item or pop star or show as first-rate or immortal or flawless—absolutely “iconic”—when that person or thing is actually simply widely known and—they assert—distinctively excellent”¹⁶ The examples are countless. Like Andy Warhol’s *icon* being Marilyn Monroe, and through her portraits, Warhol became known as a Pop art icon. Or any other artist whose name when mentioned is greeted with an understanding head nod. Same goes for writers, actors, politicians, activists, film quotes, movements, etc. Every niche has its icon. Together with the new Pop culture supernovas Instagram and Tik’Tok constantly creating content that turns *iconic*. Even though those trends have questionable origin, they are being wildly followed, distributed, imitated. And I am quite sure that there is a big percentage of people that will mention something is iconic, but probably have no idea where the term itself came from.

Or even the drop of a crypto NFT icons¹⁷ which I don’t exactly know in which category to put, but are a very curious one.

16. Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Iconic definition & meaning. Merriam-Webster. Retrieved from [https:// www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/iconic](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/iconic)

17. Collection of sacred icons of the Orthodox Church for the ... (n.d.). Retrieved from [https:// opensea.io/collection/collection-of-sacred-icons-of-the-orthodox-church-1](https://opensea.io/collection/collection-of-sacred-icons-of-the-orthodox-church-1)







MIX AND MATCH

In art as well as other spheres of life we come across the term *iconic* quite often, both referring to artists and to their works in cases where they became so well established, known and widespread that their status became one of an *icon*.

Unlike religious icons, with contemporary painted work the *icon* in question is actually the individual that created it, showing the shift from a religious object to a widespread term with a different meaning. A common trait the object and term have is their power to create a spectrum of feelings. The contemporary *icons* or role models as we discussed in the previous paragraph carry the same power as the ancient objects, but the worshipping is just executed in another manner, very often online. How do they interact?

The human instinct to seek a place of belonging is a characteristic relevant for both the object and term we are looking into, due to the fact that they allow you to be part of something bigger than yourself, and as we all know humans beings are herd animals. The choices you make are a reflection of your inner image and probably your choice of icon says more about you than words can. The German painter Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) once





said that an image “is no more responsible for superstitious abuse than a weapon is responsible for a murder.” And yet, the history of destroyed and damaged art is paradoxically a testament to the power of images.¹⁸

And although iconographic images have this power, what is named after them nowa-

18. More stories. Appetite for destruction: a brief history of iconoclasm | Art UK. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://artuk.org/discover/stories/appetite-for-destruction-a-brief-history-of-iconoclasm#>



Kehinde Wiley, Portrait of Malak Lunsford, 2019. Gold leaf and oil on wood panel. Courtesy of the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York. © Kehinde Wiley 2019.





days possesses the same qualities. Modern day messiahs preach and the masses follow.

Other similar qualities the object and term icon posses are raising on a pedestal, belonging to a social group, providing sense of comfort and ease, enabling a shared experience, thriving from repetition and recognition.

The artist Ian Bogost explores- “the relationship between technology and religion in a secular age, and the uncomfortable ambiguity between virtue and vice, merit and acquisition in institutions of all kinds.”¹⁹ in his game installation with an altar-like appearance. He plays with the contemporary version of our term, but visualises it through the established aesthetic.

Another artist dealing with the topic is Pablo Vargas Lugo, who has stated that “The point is not to make a biopic about Jesus, but to take certain key scenes and some of the figures that embody symbols and metaphors that we use in our private and public lives, and ask: What would happen if things were not in the right place?

A speculative example where the boundaries are blurred, *Acts of God*, Mexican Pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2019, those questions are being interpreted.

“Stromatolites, stratified sheets of micro-organisms that still thrive in the wetlands of Cuatrociénegas, also find a place in the exhibition as the stone blocks that reveal a ciphered equation, which amalgamates disbelief, laughter, fear, treachery, doubt,



19 Bogost, I. (n.d.).
Simony. Bogost.com.
Retrieved February
9, 2022, from [http://
bogost.com/ games/
simony/](http://bogost.com/games/simony/)



Pop Culture Icons of the 21st Century

by [archersean](#) | created - 14 Nov 2017 | updated - 14 Sep 2018 | Public

100 names

Sort by:

List Order

View:



List of Pop culture icons of 21 century according to IMDB.



1. Oprah Win...



2. Barack Ob...



3. Beyoncé



4. Britney Sp...



5. Michael Ja...



6. Shakira



7. Lady Gaga



8. Will Smith



9. Rihanna



10. Roger Fe...



11. Bill Gates



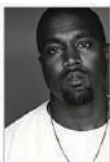
12. Spice Girls



13. Selena



14. Elon Musk



15. Ye



16. Whitney ...





guilt, and remorse. All, human behaviours codified in religious narratives that still seep into the cultural precepts, social norms, and political and judicial systems that shape our contemporary world.”²⁰ Those two artists are an example of how you can play with the unknown within something so familiar. Through their work they provide a different perspective on religious imagery and its connotations.

In my opinion the reason for shared beliefs to be so popular in the past was the sense of reason/meaning they give the individual in order for them to strive a better afterlife. The difference with contemporary society lays exactly in this, a person today doesn't want to put all of their hopes and dreams in the hands of an idol, whose existence is not scientifically proven. They want a better present and they are taught to embrace is themselves. And what could make it easier than having an actual person whose life is perfect, and you want to imitate. Applying this mentality though, presents us with a lot of dilemmas, because blindly following ideas could lead to dangerous paths. Can't we be our own icons?

On a more positive note though an example for a 21 century Byzantine aesthetic icon, but with a different, very beautiful meaning closer to the one of the term, is Kehinde Wiley's , *Portrait of Malak Lunsford* from 2019. “The painting is part of the Iconic series, which stands out due to its magnif-

20. Pablo Vargas Lugo: Acts of god - announcements - e-flux. e. (n.d.), from <https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/257991/pablo-vargas-lugo-acts-of-god/>





icent, architectural gold frames and bright colours on a gold background. Here the artist draws on Byzantine and western icon painting, where these kinds of forms were developed for honouring saints and raising them above the earthly things...By connecting portraits of African-American men from modern urban life in every day, expressly cool street clothes with the traditions of early Christian devotional painting, Wiley draws attention to the absence of Black minorities from the white art-history cannon”²¹ The strength of images that are adored and worshipped, and the ways they can be used is a topic touched upon in this series of works by Wiley. For something or someone to be labelled as iconic, it means there is already something special or different about them. Of course opinions always vary and you can find many different lists all over the internet of peoples favourites. Individuals that helped their community, have a noble cause, stand for something, or in some cases are just there doing their thing, are the chosen ones. “No matter how adamant one is about breaking fetishes and forbidding oneself image- worship, temples will be built, sacrifices will be made, instruments will be deployed, scriptures will be carefully written down, manuscripts will be copied, incense will be burned, and thousands of gestures will have to be invented for recollecting truth, objectivity, and sanctity”²²

Bringing the fundamental question—
 Why is art praised so much? Some people

21. Grunenberg, C., Hausdorf, E., Borgmann, V., Horsfield, A., & Freeburn, L. (2019). Kehinde Wiley, Portrait of Malak Lunsford. In *Icons: Worship and adoration* (pp. 39–39). essay, Hirmer Verlag.

22. Iconoclasm. beyond the image wars in science, religion, and art: 2002. ZKM. (2002, January 1). Retrieved from <https://zkm.de/de/publikation/iconoclasm-beyond-the-image-wars-in-science-religion-and-art>





go to churches for religious reasons, but the romantic artistic souls, that appreciate leftovers from the past, like myself are there for a different reason, for the sake of art. While watching the interview of Grayson Perry in the St Paul's Cathedral, contemplating on the "Things that matter" — his words resonated with my thoughts on the same subject.

When asked if he goes to churches often he has the best response possible — "I go into churches fairly often, for kind of aesthetic reasons...I love religious architecture of all sorts, and some of my most numinous experiences of being in churches, in the spaces...I think the whole idea of art, the way we look at art comes from religion."²³

I honestly couldn't agree more with Perry's words knowing how this influenced me as well. I can easily identify with the contemplations of artists who are influenced and inspired by church aesthetics. This helps us understand how religious art and architecture is where the way we look at contemporary art comes from.

People will always need their icons in one form or another a sense of belonging and adoration bring comfort and meaning. So there is nothing left to say except OH MY GOD, THAT'S ICONIC!

23. Grayson Perry speaks at St Paul's cathedral on ... - youtube. (n.d.), from [https:// www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gy-iKPS2N-So](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gy-iKPS2N-So)





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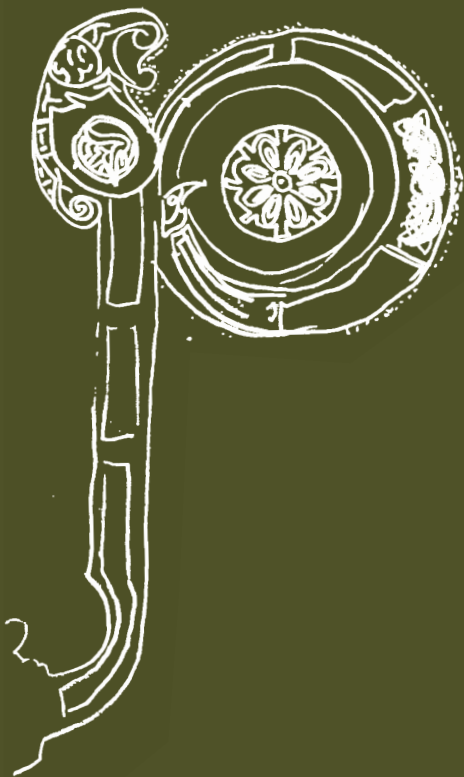
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This is to certify that to the best of my knowledge, the content of this thesis is my own work. This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or other purposes. I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work and that all the assistance received in preparing this thesis and sources have been acknowledged.

Signed: Niya Tsenkova

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several vertical and diagonal strokes.



Niya Tsenkova
Student number: 3198456
Fine Art
Painting and Printmaking
Thesis supervisor:
Carl Johan Högberg

Designed by Hasan Halilov
Typefaces:
Kitsch Typeface by Zetafonts,
Garamon(d/t) by Paul Tubert
GT America by Grilly Type

Royal Academy of Art,
The Hague

