

## Splendour from Above

Icons of Angels by Michael Galovic

Exhibition at the Australian Centre for  
Christianity and Culture, Canberra.  
March 9th-19th (excluding 12<sup>th</sup> March)

*Thoughts on a unique exhibition...*

All images reveal and make perceptible those things which are hidden. For example, a man does not have immediate knowledge of invisible things, since the soul is veiled by the body. Nor can man have immediate knowledge of things which are distant from each other or separated by place, because he himself is limited by place and time. Therefore the icon was devised that he might advance in knowledge, and that secret things might be revealed and made perceptible. Therefore, icons are a source of profit, help, and salvation for all, since they make things so obviously manifest, enabling us to perceive hidden things. Thus, we are encouraged to desire and imitate what is good and to shun and hate what is evil.

St. John Damascene

Michael's most recent project has been a very challenging and self-imposed task. Its focus has been primarily on the representation of 'the Celestial Ranks', predominantly as shown in Orthodox art, but also with examples from late medieval, early Renaissance and Islamic art. Each of the many wonderful images expresses what would seem almost inexpressible: non-corporeal beings made manifest.

As many of you will be aware from Michael's 'Along Came Angels' newsletter, his scope was to be wide-ranging, while also incorporating two of the most significant and defining events in Christianity, The Annunciation and the Resurrection, as portrayed in the icon of 'The Myrrh-bearing Women'.

It has resulted in the creation of around 20 works, predominantly from the Orthodox tradition, that stands as a testament to the myriad ways in which the same concept or event can be expressed. The exhibition also highlights both the meaning and the beauty of the variety of portrayals, whether it be in terms of the images' backgrounds or in such elements as the stunning array of angels' wings. The icons in the exhibition illustrate a journey that is both geographical and through time while the Medieval and Renaissance images highlight changes in perception and portrayals. Nonetheless, each image deepens one's understanding of the religious art of the past and present, and a sense of tradition while also expressing the perception and perspective of its creator:

*Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:  
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;  
Selves — goes itself; myself it speaks and spells,  
Crying 'What I do is me: for that I came.'* (1)      *Gerald Manley Hopkins*

In terms of the Orthodox tradition, Icons are perceived, Annemarie Weyl Carr observed, as participating in the divine:

*'As angels and saints are images of God, icons, in turn, are images of them and so participate in the emanation of their sanctity. The crucial synapse between divinity and created matter was bridged by the incarnation.'* (2)

The richness and variety of the icons is expressed through new iterations that nonetheless remain firmly grounded within the Orthodox tradition. As Michael has noted, the icons of the past were not mechanical copies of previous work. The tradition evolved not through meticulous repetition but through observing and understanding the symbolism and underpinning of theology inherent in the creation of the icon. Each is also influenced by the time, background and perception of the person making it.

Hence, there is an enormous variety of subjects and techniques in icons: there can be different ways of expressing the same concept, just as there are different levels of abstraction and forms of perspective.

What remains fundamental is that the image remains true to its theological underpinning. Icons are certainly not a static form of religious art, but a living tradition.

Icons can evoke a sense of wonder and delight in the viewer and a deeper appreciation of that which they represent. The focus of the iconographer is to make the best possible image they can of the event, person or concept that they wish to convey. This is not a skill that can be mastered in a few lessons or even a few years – as Michael has noted in his statement for the March exhibition, it is a long and challenging journey. To appreciate the beauty and theology of an icon is ultimately to be able to appreciate the immanence of God in creation.

*'He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change: Praise Him.'*(3)

The changes in in the images of the **Archangels Michael and Gabriel** highlight aspects of the icon in its journey from Byzantium: both the history and continuity of the tradition, as well as its evolution. The beautifully elongated images of Michael and Gabriel in the exhibition are inspired by the work of one of the three great masters of Russian iconography, Dionysius. He grew up in the tradition of the Novgorod school, with its elegant attenuation of figures, yet the richly embellished garments echo those worn by Byzantine rulers, with the red footwear usually reserved for royalty.

The sense of the power and role of the Archangel Michael ('who is like God') is present in the Byzantine-style image of **Archangel Michael standing, holding a sphere**, *highlighting his role as leader of the heavenly host and protector of humankind:*

*Then war broke out in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him.*

*Revelation 12:7-9*



It is interesting to compare this image with that based on a fresco of the **Archangel Michael** from the Serbian Patriarchate of Peć- both emanate a sense of power. The dynamism and vibrancy of the blue-backgrounded image highlight Michael's triumphal role as the *Archistrategos*, or 'Supreme Commander of the Heavenly Hosts'. There is a wonderful sense of movement throughout the piece. It is expressed in the dramatic and sharp folds of the cloak streaming from the figure and highlighted in electric blue while the wings add to the effect with their asymmetrical sweep and contrasting colours. The curve of the sword and the angle at which the scabbard is held also contribute to this. It is as if the weapon has just been unsheathed, yet the pose is one of victory. The Archangel's stance, poised upon his shield against an abstract background creates a sense of permanence and timelessness.



The image of the **Archangel Michael defeating the Dragon** is based on an illustration from the '*Tres Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*' and shows the beginning in the shift in portrayal of religious subjects which began in the Late Medieval/ early Renaissance period. There was, increasingly, a trend towards naturalism in art, including religious art, contemporaneous with the emergence of Humanism, with the 14<sup>th</sup> century poet and scholar, Petrarch's discovery of Cicero's letters, seen as a seminal moment in its development.

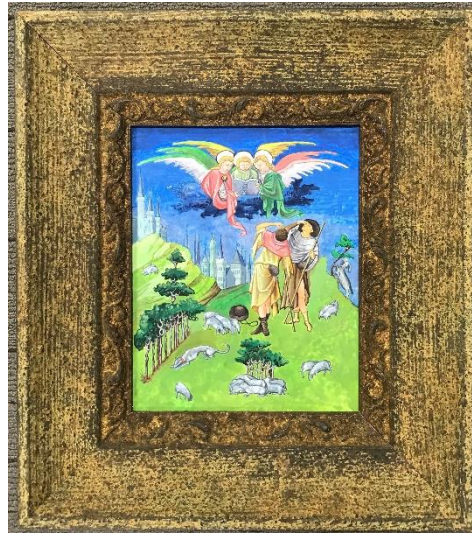
This image resonates with the image of the great dragon hurled down in The Book of Revelation, but is also underpinned by a local legend, which places the events as beginning on Mount Dol in Brittany and finally ending at Mont Tombe. (now known as Mont-Saint-Michel). Michael has captured the protagonists dramatically, basing his work on an excerpt so that the focus is on the Archangel Michael and the dragon with the sense of a celestial duel in its positioning above Mont Saint-Michel. **The deepness and the richness of the blues highlights the vividness of the three other components and the added warmth in the colouring of the buildings links it with its patron in the air. Michael's garb has a fantastical quality that is beautifully iterated in contrasting dark and terracotta tones while the yellow-green tones of the dragon highlight the maroon of its blood or ichor.**



However, while there is still a clear sense of the battle between good and evil and an evocation of the Cherubim in the red-tinged clouds behind Michael, the image moves into the world of contemporary time with its backgrounding of the Mont Saint-Michel of the early Fifteenth century.

**Angels Announcing The Nativity to the shepherds**, from the *'Belle Heures du Duc de Berry'* also highlights this trend – with the garb of the shepherds, the pastoral setting and architecture very much that of 15th century France. The delicately toned (and literate) angels are singing from a hymnbook which also brings them into the era.

Increasingly, religious art in Western Christianity moved to more 'human' portrayals. Concurrent with this was the emergence of artists who had been more broadly trained by study in the humanities and who were often interested in extending the boundaries of art in a variety of forms.



While artists painting religious subject remained faithful to Christian theology in their portrayals, there was a shift in perspective. Whereas in the Eastern Church depictions of the Creation were substantially symbolic, the art of the Renaissance gave us images such as Michelangelo's 'Creation of Adam'.

Clear examples of the shift are most apparent in depictions showing in the highest orders of angels, such as the Cherubim:

*'whose name in Hebrew means "great understanding" or "effusion of wisdom", and are so described because of their closeness to God: the Lord is described as dwelling "between the Cherubim" (2 Samuel 6:2). Because of their proximity to God, and the description of them guarding Eden with "flaming sword", the cherubim are, like the seraphim, often depicted in a fiery red.'* (4)

Cherubim then appear to have been conflated with the Classical putti, 'winged infants who either play the role of angelic spirits in religious works, or act as instruments of profane love'(7).

The shift in perspective in relation to the portrayal of the Deity and angels in Western religious art is substantial. This is not to suggest that Renaissance, and subsequent, religious art has not given us outstanding and enriching images, but merely to explain and express the difference in direction religious art has and can take.

The radiant icon of **Our Lady of the Sign, upheld by a seraph** highlights this. With its shimmering and delicately patterned background of shades of gold, it is an ethereal and symbolic expression of that which is beyond the human, of a vision beyond the material world, echoing biblical references to the seraphim:

*“I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another:*

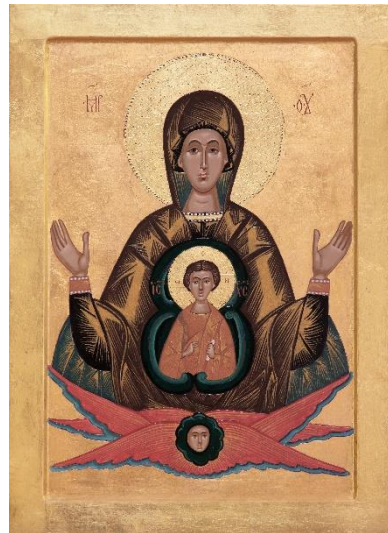
*“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.”*

(Isaiah 6:1-3)

and whose flaming appearance is explained:

*“For our God is a consuming fire.”(Heb 12:29);*

*“[God] maketh his angels spirits; his ministers a flaming fire” (Psalms 103:4)*



### **Archangels Michael and Gabriel holding the medallion image of Our Lady of the Sign**

The image contains the Archangels Michael, whose name means ‘God is my strength’ and Gabriel, whose role as the foremost messenger of events related to the Lord’s incarnation is referenced through the central image of Our Lady of the Sign. It emanates a sense of calm and security. The halos of pale gold intensify the effect of the bands of ornamentation on the angels’ robes, while also highlighting another aspect of many icons. As also noted by Carr, this is an example of an image not constrained by the raised edge of the icon, where the figures are:

‘.. not enclosed by it; instead, the halo overlaps its edge. Thus what seems to be a view through a frame is instead a form projecting forward from it to meet our gaze.’(5)



**The Assembly or Synaxis of Angels** also includes the **Archangel Raphael, whose name means ‘God has healed’**. In conjunction with the image of Christ it highlights, for me, the nature of redemption through the Incarnation. The Christ Child is framed by an intricate rainbow-like aureole or medallion. The golden brightness in the central band of the medallion gives a wonderful vividness and focus to the work. This icon, in conjunction with its vibrancy highlighted through the angels’ garments and royal footwear, nonetheless seems to be set beyond time with a neutral background that portrays the figures as if floating in space. This feeling of weightlessness is enhanced by the folded position of the wings.

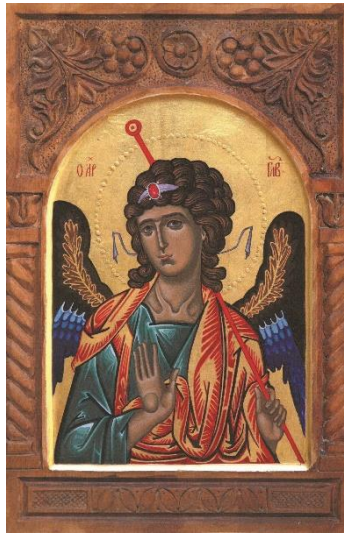


The **Archangel Raphael ( Isrāfil )** in Islamic art also shows a ‘non-Western’ perspective. This image, with its delicate tracteries of flowers and foliage, shows the Archangel seemingly floating just above the ground and carrying a fish, the gall of which was used to heal the blindness of Tobias’s father, Tobit, as recorded in the Old Testament Book of Tobit. The portrayal of the wings is dynamic, with vividly coloured and clearly delineated feathers, yet the image, as a whole, has a stillness and delicacy. Its painter was Mughal court artist of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Hossein Naqqash.

**Gabriel and the Icons of the Annunciation**



**The Carved Gabriel** shows another beautiful variation in the treatment of wings, with the gold and maroon detail curving upwards from the shoulder and seeming almost to cradle the delicate halo. The arched framing enhances the sense of otherness, of the Angel viewing the human world from another realm, while the rod highlights Gabriel's elevation.



The work provides an ideal opportunity to consider some of the aspects of the angel's portrayal and its symbolism in greater detail. Here the hand gesture signifies trust, sincerity and an absence of evil, while in the Annunciations the hand is shown in the gesture signifying the beginning of a speech.

Michael noted that his **'Royal Doors'**, an image of the Annunciation, is a work that has been 47 years in the making. This gives some sense of the process: it takes enormous patience in feeling one's way into the image, as well as an understanding of the level of experience and technical skill needed to do such a work justice. It is a testament to Michael's commitment to creating an image that brings alive the moment of the Incarnation in all its vividness and freshness. There is a wonderful balance between the sense of movement in the depiction of Gabriel, conveyed by both the pose and dynamism of the contrasting highlights, and the Theotokos's acceptance, shown in her gently bowed head and hand gesture. The tonal similarity of the base colour and highlights of her maphorion also contribute to sense of calm in her portrayal.

It is difficult just to convey a sense of the intricacies of the craftsmanship required in the creation of this wonderful depiction of the Archangel Gabriel and the Theotokos.



It began with the painstaking application of multiple layers of gesso to the intricately carved wooden surface and then the gilding of the entire piece. This was followed by the meticulous translation of the drawn images onto the surface, with some parts being carefully embossed or stippled, as can be seen in the exquisite halos.

The actual painting of the image with egg tempera was a further level of challenge, with each layer needing to be completely dry before the next layer was attempted – often a matter of days, rather than hours.

The impermeability of the gold also makes it an exceptionally challenging surface on which to paint! The difficulty of the challenge is underscored by Eva Haustein-Bartsch's comment, in her description of the Royal Door in the Recklinghausen Ikonen-Museum that:

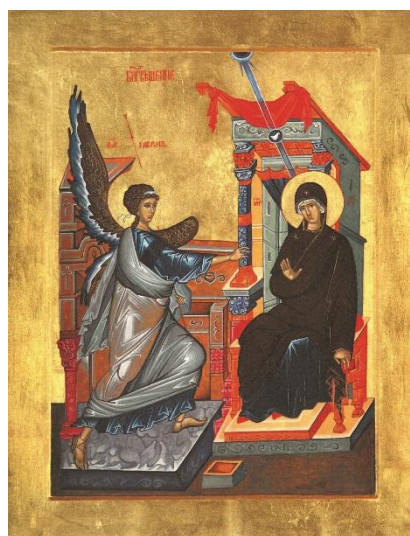
*'... what is completely unusual and probably unique about this door are the images painted on it over a gold background.'*(6)

Michael has created a truly outstanding depiction of the imagery frequently used on Royal Doors, bringing together many theological and technical aspects of iconography to delineate the entry to the sanctuary, considered in Orthodox theology to be 'Heaven placed on earth', as it contains the consecrated Eucharist, the manifestation of the New Covenant.

The Ohrid **Annunciation**, in a more contextualised setting, also captures the moment of the Archangel Gabriel's first addressing Mary. There is the same sense of movement as in the Royal Doors in the placement of the feet, with the role of messenger indicated both by the rod being carried and the hand gesture indicating speech. Mary's gesture here is one of enquiry:

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" (Luke 1:34)

This icon again highlights that Michael's work, while maintaining the theology and often the form of earlier icons, by no means consists of making a mechanical copy of an earlier image! As with the Royal Doors, he has created a truly luminous work. The colours are vibrant, with a masterly use of contrasting highlights which flow through Gabriel's garments and are again used in the buildings behind him. The vivid light blues on a deeper blue background sweep through from the tips of Gabriel's wings to the sleeve of his under-gown with the same tones used in a static mode in the pillar beside Mary. This contrast is repeated in the lower part of the icon, with the rippling effect of Gabriel's hem counterpointing the 'stillness' of Mary's undergarment.



Another beautiful detail is the way in which the beam of light, with its image of the dove representing the Holy Spirit, is transparently overlaid on the red cloth. Each detail is indeed meticulously placed and

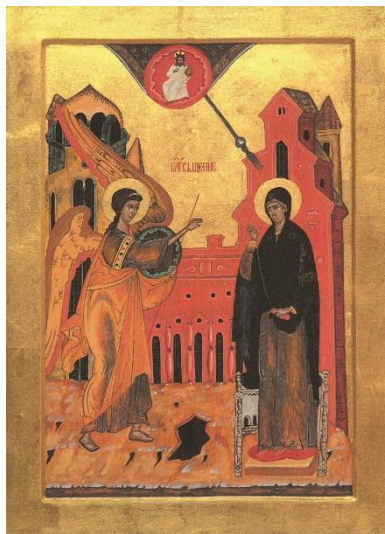


adds to the viewer's understanding and reception of the image, with the draped red cloth indicating that the scene is taking place in an interior. The colour flows through to Mary's cushion, the thread she is holding and her 'royal' footwear. This image again emphasises the way in which the same image (that of the Annunciation) can both take inspiration from the past but also create a new and vivid image. This is what keeps the tradition alive and relevant.

The inspiration for Russian **Annunciation** in the series came from a faded and almost unreadable copy of an Annunciation from 16<sup>th</sup> century Russia which had deteriorated to the point that, while the basic structures could be made out, that was about all! Michael always enjoys a challenge...

The image was also a very unusual one in that it shows darkened apertures in both the buildings and the holes in the ground, especially the fissure appearing between Mary and the Archangel. This could conceivably be highlighting the significance of Christ's incarnation through referencing those icons of the Crucifixion where there is a dark aperture beneath the cross, into which Christ's blood flows signifying the redemptive nature of his death. The Crucifixion is inherent in the Annunciation.

The dark spaces dramatically highlight the wonderful luminosity that Michael has achieved in the depiction of both Gabriel and Mary. It, possibly more than any other icon in the exhibition, illustrates the concept of feeling one's way into the image. It required a deep understanding, much thought and subsequently a painstakingly slow application of layer upon layer of semi-transparent egg and pigment washes to create the tonality that brings the image to life. The result is an absolute joy!



The 'blue' **Annunciation** is based on a fresco with a suitably Aegean blue providing a background, against which the figures and architecture stand out vibrantly, capturing the moment of the Incarnation.

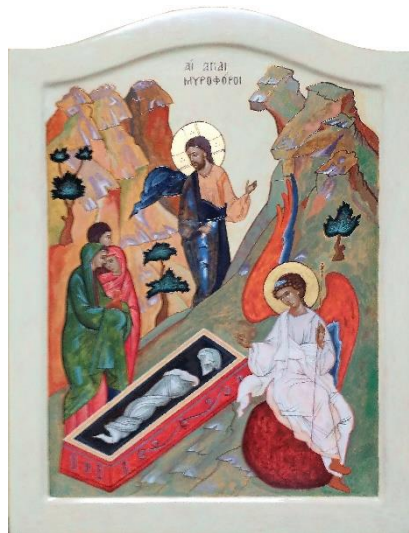
These four images exemplify both the richness and diversity of traditions over at least four centuries and the value of bringing them alive in varied and beautiful iterations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. While each highlights the role of the Archangel as the servant and messenger of God, as identified by the armband, and captures the contrast between movement and stasis, the nuances in the portrayal of Gabriel and Mary and the treatment of the backgrounds, ranging from the 'uncreated light' of the Royal Doors to the texture and abstraction demonstrated in the three following images, exemplify the beauty, scope, and continuing significance of Iconography.

*'At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless; Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is...'* (7)

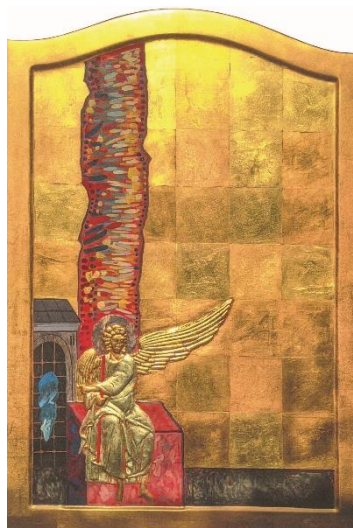


### From the Annunciation to the Resurrection

Gabriel's role as messenger is also highlighted in the icon of 'The Myrrh-Bearing Women', a diaphanously rendered image of the women visiting Christ's tomb. The delicacy and aptness of the detail, such as the fruitfulness of the trees, illustrates the richness in the variety of the use of imagery in the context of the Resurrection.



**The Exuberant Archangel** is another vivid expression of the Resurrection – a dynamic and powerful iteration of a golden **Archangel Gabriel** that captures the light and joy of the event in a contemporary image that also evokes a continuing tradition: that of the **White Angel**, which is a detail of one of the best known frescoes in Serbian culture, situated in the Mileševa Monastery.



It seems fitting that the final image considered should be that of the **Trinity**, which radiates calmness and certainty, as well as embodying a significant aspect of the development of portrayals of the Trinity. The process of the ‘Three Angels’ form for representing the Trinity began with icons of the ‘**Hospitality of Abraham**’, which illustrated the visit of the three angels, in human guise, to Abraham.

This is beautiful and elegant composition, based on a work by arguably (and Michael will strongly argue the ‘for’ case) the best Serbian Iconographer, Longin (16<sup>th</sup>c). It is an icon that expresses the tripartite nature of God as expressed in the New Testament while highlighting the continued relevance and significance of the Old.



This is a truly significant exhibition. It gathers together a substantial body of work created to explore and show how the almost inexpressible has been portrayed through representations of angels in Orthodox, Medieval and Islamic Art. It encapsulates, in one space and time, a ‘Host of Angels’. The richness and beauty of the work is truly spectacular!

Michael has dedicated a year to the completion of this project – one that needed 50 years practice and deepening of understanding for its making. He has brought alive the beauty and essence of differing traditions and forms for a new audience.

Kerrie Magee, February, 2022

Kerrie’s academic background is in Medieval Studies and education. Her interest in icons began in her mid-teens and has continued ever since.