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Fr. Saba Shofany and the Faithway of Iconography

BY REYERS PHILLIP BRUSOE

Fr. Abouna Saba Shofany was originally born and raised in the village of Ma'lya near Nazareth, Israel–Palestine. He grew up as a Melkite Catholic in the village and began studying theology there, at age 15. At 16, he was sent to Rome to study at the Greek College for his priestly formation. He was a seminarian there between 1982 and 1988. While studying, he came under the care of the Greek Master iconographer Fr. Stefanos Armagolas, who showed him the authentic styles, techniques, and theology that are imperative to writing icons.

Abouna Saba and his Master spent many long hours together in the ecstasy of the atelier, working on the divine beauty of the icon. Unlike many other students, who had to start with only partial icons, or simple painted icons, Fr. Stefanos had Abouna Saba start with a full icon. For those who are familiar with iconographic training, they will know that this was a rare and propitious opportunity for a young student of 17.

During his studies in Rome, Fr. Saba learned many valuable lessons. First, that it takes a true love of God and an understanding of theology to properly “write” an icon. To write an icon, the iconographer must spend much time in prayer, conversation, and meditation with the saints and allow them to speak to him. There is a reverent perfection and patience that must accompany writing the icons, so that it is more than just art—that it is a departure into Heaven and an experience of the Divine.

In what Fr. Saba describes as the authentic Greek style of iconography, every



Fr. Saba. Photo courtesy of Olga Shofany.



Coronation of the Theotokos icon. All photos by the author unless otherwise noted.

begin selecting the wood to be used. For true icons, only hardwoods like mahogany are appropriate, as they are material that can last through the ages. After selecting a piece of wood that is the right left, grain, and feel, the wood is then prepared with a cloth that is adhered to it. The cloth is then coated with 12 layers of *gesso*, or chalk that is mixed with water and glue derived from rabbit bones.

Rabbit bones are the best for making the glue for the icons, as they have a good consistency and are easy to mix. Other traditional iconographers may use camel glue or whale glue, but these are not as good. Fr. Saba used camel glue once when his Master brought some to the atelier as a student but has not used it since his Master rejected it. Whale glue is too thick and heavy to make good icons.

After the 12 layers are dried, the chalk mixture is sanded with sandpaper until it is as smooth as marble. Altogether, this process takes at least 24 hours of work, waiting for the layers to dry and then sanding them patiently, beginning with 200-grain sandpaper and working up to a 2,000-grain sandpaper.

aspect of the icon must be managed by the writer. The personal nature of what is chosen, and the care given to it, is vital because an icon is not just a painting, not just an exercise in technique or beauty, not meant for the passing world. Icons are the depictions of real images of holy people and the Divine and are meant for eternity.

Fr. Saba begins each icon with days of research, prayer, meditation, and thought. Only when the blessing of the saint comes should the image be undertaken, and only when the intimate knowledge of the theology, life, and purpose of the icon is understood can the writing begin. After an icon chooses him, Fr. Saba begins the process of planning the icon.

The process involves sketching out on tracing paper the various aspects and dimensions of the icon—the size, the shape, and where the icon might be placed in a home or a church. Once the image has also been sketched out, Fr. Saba can



Home altar with hand-painted icons.



Fr Saba demonstrating the use of the *komtas* hammer.

Once the icon board has been sanded, a special red clay from France is applied to the board. This very fine clay is used to smooth over any imperfections, holes, or bumps that cannot be seen with the naked eye. This process is used to prepare the icon board for gilding.

Fr. Saba uses 24-karat gold leaf, a special material that must be kept completely dry to prevent wrinkling and crumpling. The iconographer uses special tools to apply the gold leaf to the icon board, a knife to

cut the leaf and a horsehair brush, using body static, to lift the leaf and place it on the icon, and a *komtas*, a specialized hammer used to smooth and adhere gold leaf to the surface of icons.

Once the gilding is completed, acrylic paints can be applied to areas that are not covered with gold leaf. Once those are dry, an egg tempura paint, which is hand mixed with minerals, is applied to the gold. When the paints are dried, the iconographer can begin carving and engraving the

details into the tempura to reveal the gold underneath.

After all the painting has been completed, and the icon is almost finished, several layers of clear shellac are applied, mixed from shellac crystals and methanol. Once this finish has dried, the icon is finished and is ready for its home, whether it be a church, an exhibition, a museum, or for a parishioner.

Fr. Saba includes the burning of incense before starting work on the icons. This ritual creates a sacred space in which he can work and pray. Iconography is at its core a type of veneration, prayer, meditation, and communion with God.

Fr. Saba's atelier is a humble entrance into the Divine. He has space for preparing the sketches of the icons, for preparing the wood, the *gesso*, and a space for gilding, painting, and finishing the icons.

Over the course of his vocation as an iconographer, Fr. Saba made icons for monasteries, churches, friends, family, and for exhibitions. His work has been featured in Rome, Belgium (Antwerp), San Diego, and many other places.

His planned exhibition was to include over 30 icons, from small icons of Theotokos, the Holy Napkin, St. John the Forerunner, and Christ, to large icons of Theotokos and of the Archangels St. Michael (who Fr. Saba has a special affinity for) and St. Raphael, which are incredibly rare pieces for an iconographer to write, and an incredibly special piece for the sanctuary/altar place in the Church.

The special piece for the sanctuary is the Coronation of the Mother of God. Although Fr. Saba's work is already holy and set apart, this icon stands in a category of its own. It depicts the crowning of St. Mary as the Queen of Heaven, and it includes incredible details like the astronomical positions of the stars as they would have appeared at the Annunciation of Christ's Birth. In addition to the large centerpiece that is 60-inches wide, this icon will be accompanied by eight other smaller icons, as is the tradition, to form a large icon configuration. These eight icons are



French red clay used for preparing icon boards for gilding.



Gilding knife, gold leaf packets, with icon of St. Joseph in progress.



Glue and gold (horsehair) brush.



Mahogany boards being prepared for icon work.



Pigments for tempura.



Tempura testing station.



Rabbit bones for making glue.



Above: Fr. Saba's first icon.

Right: Several icons.



the four evangelists (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) and the four prophets (Micah, Isaiah, Daniel, and Zechariah), that will surround the finished piece.

In addition to these works, Fr. Saba is writing an icon of St. Joseph, the Stepfather of Christ for his wife Olga as a lasting gift from him. It is unusual, as it is more typical for Latin Catholics to have a devotional painting of St. Joseph, some of which are done in “iconographic” style. This image, however, is being made in the authentic Greek style, with corrections to the typical Latin Catholic image.

Fr. Saba has done much educational outreach, including to a group of over 200 artists in Utica. His wife and two of his daughters also help him with his icons, and he has passed down this tradition to them.

It is through Providence that Fr. Saba has been able to do this work. About nine years ago, he became pastor of St. Basil's Melkite Church in Utica after spending

time as a pastor in San Diego. Because of the limited pastoral responsibilities of his parish, Fr. Saba has had an abundance of time to dedicate to his icon-prayers.

Since a cancer diagnosis, the vocation of icon writing has been a refuge and a relief from Fr. Saba's pain and illness. Truly, when writing icons, the pain and the anguish departs from him, and he is in the beatific presence of the Lord. His diagnosis recently became terminal, and so each day that he can offer up prayer, spend with family, and dedicate to his vocations as a priest and iconographer is truly a special and unique gift.



Author's note: Abouna Saba passed away at his home in Ma'lya, near Nazareth, in late August 2021, before this article could be completed. He was surrounded by his family and was able to rest in his homeland. Beyond being an incredibly gifted iconographer and a caring and holy priest, he was an

incredible friend and mentor. May he rest in memory eternal.

This article is based on fieldwork conducted with Fr. Saba in the summer of 2021, both at his home and at St. Basil's Melkite Greek Catholic Church in Utica, New York. ▼

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