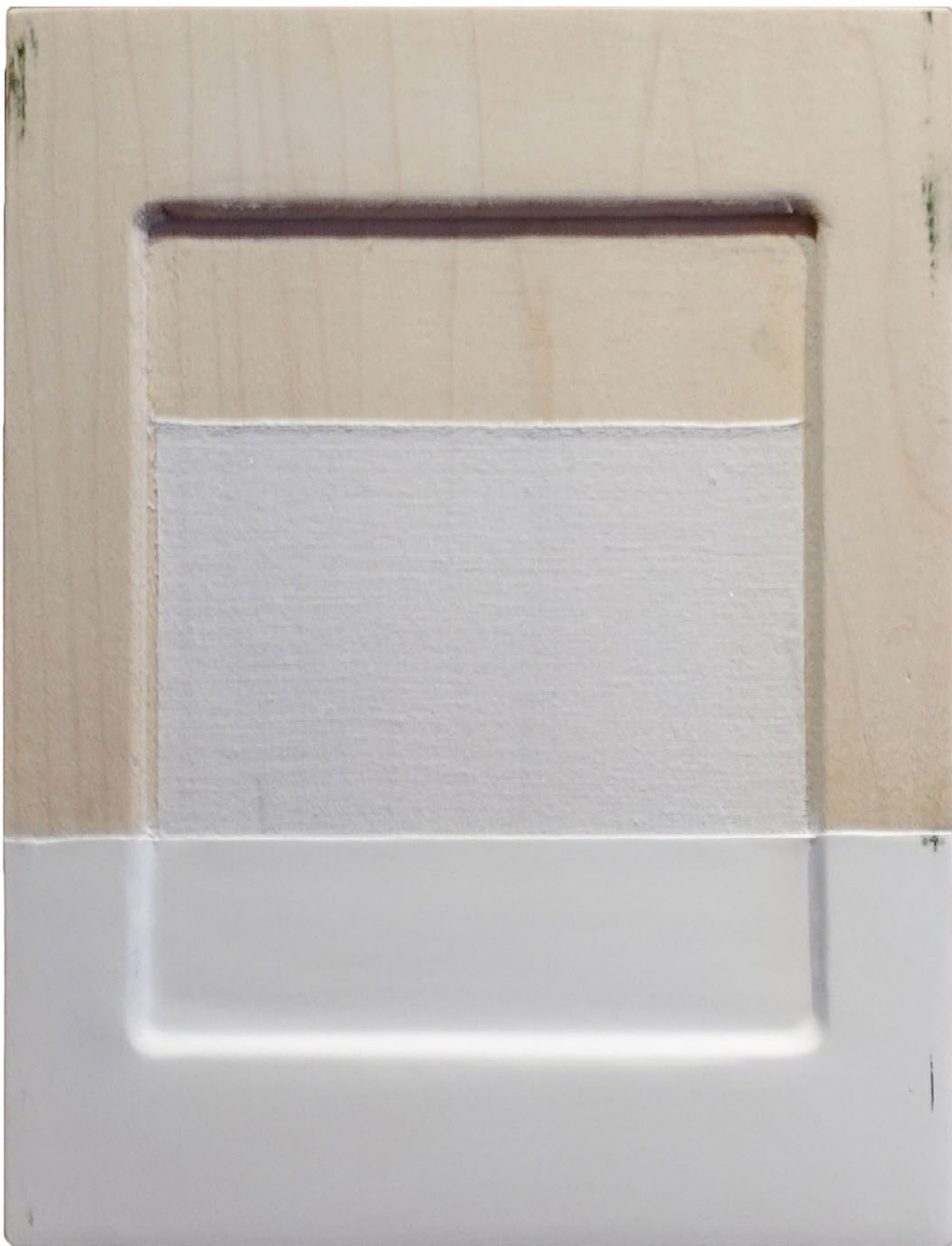


Creation of an Icon

This installation, *Twelve Icons in Varying Stages of Completion*, was created using the Prosopon School of Iconology's methodology, a modern expression of the Byzantine-Russian icon painting tradition. This is just one of many ways to create an icon.

1. Preparing of the Board

The wood is cut to size and a shallow indentation is carved into the surface. This recessed area is called the *kovcheg*, which in Russian means “ark.” Linen is glued to the surface which supports several layers of gesso (a mixture of chalk, marble dust, water, and glue). Once dried and polished the board will have a hard but absorbent surface.



2. Image Transfer and Gilding

The image is drawn or traced onto the surface. To ensure that the design remains visible during the painting process, lines are either incised into the surface of the gesso, as has been done here with the face, or painted, as shown here in the fabric of the cloth.

A layer of bole, a mixture of refined red clay, water, and glue, is applied to all areas that will be gilded. Once it has dried, it is burnished smooth with a tool that has an agate or hematite tip. The iconographer then exhales a deep, moist breath onto the surface of the bole and lays down a sheet of pure gold leaf. The moisture reactivates the glue, making the gold leaf adhere to the surface. Finally, the gilded surface is burnished to a mirror sheen. Designs are sometimes selectively burnished, incised, or punched into the surface of the gold. When illuminated by candlelight such designs allow the light to play across the gilded surface. Through gilding, the iconographer can be said to paint with light itself.



3. First Layer of Paint

The traditional medium for icons is egg tempera, made by mixing dry pigments, from natural or man made sources, with diluted egg yolk. The tempera sinks into the gesso and binds the pigments to the surface of the gesso.

The vermilion line around the halo is the first to be painted and marks the end of the preparatory steps and the beginning of the iconographer's journey.

Next, flat planes of color are applied. In the Russian tradition, this first layer of paint is called *roskrysh*, meaning "to open." Like a prism that separates white light into the spectrum of visible colors, the white light of the gesso is "opened" to color. This primary layer of dark pigment echoes the "formless void and darkness that covered the earth" at the beginning of Creation (Genesis 1).

The brownish-green pigment applied to areas of flesh and hair is called *sankir*, which forms the base for successive layers of increasingly bright pigments that will create the contours of the face.



4. Redrawing the Image

If the original lines of the drawing were incised, they are now painted, creating the blueprint of the design.



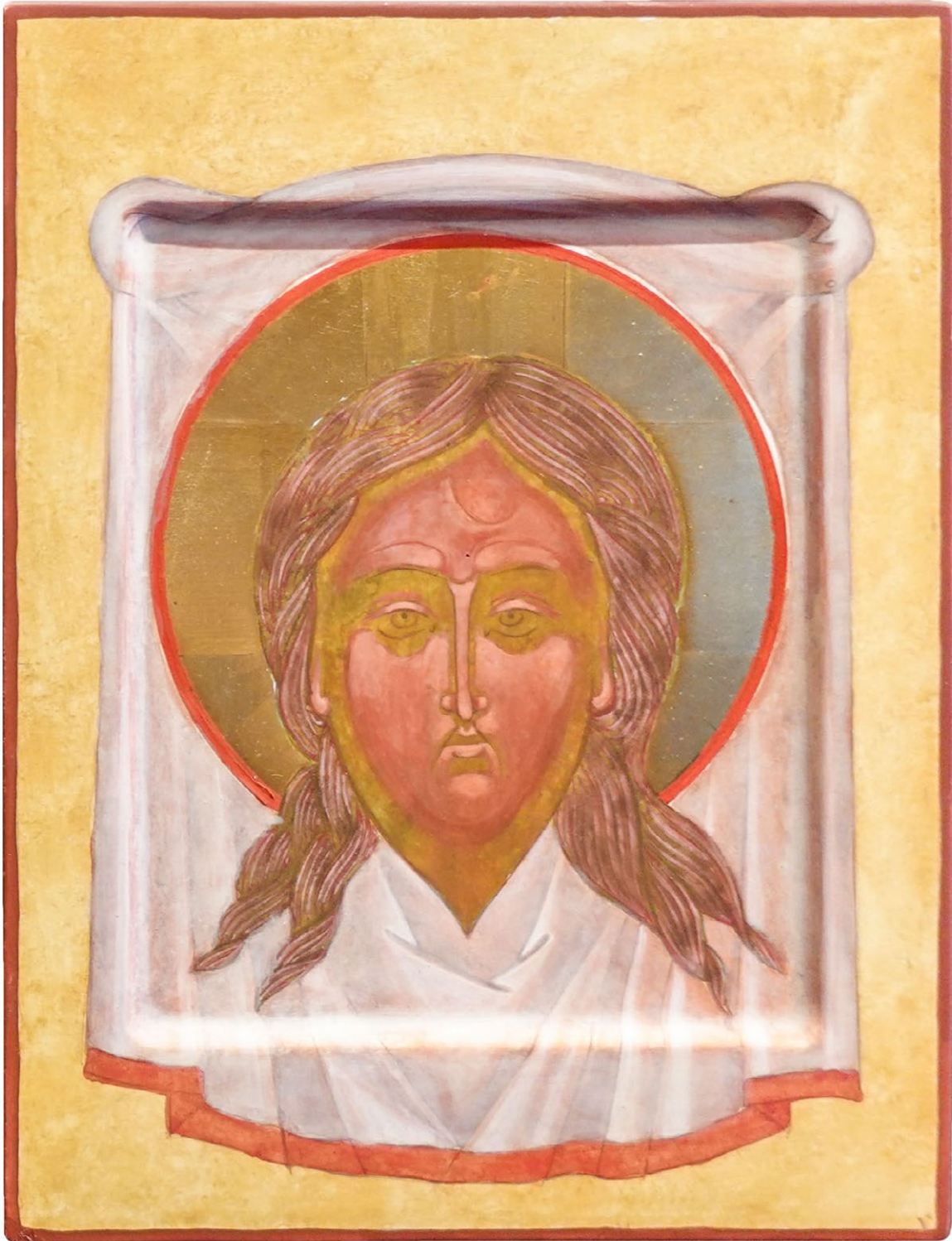
5. First Highlights

Out of the “formless void” of *roskrysh*, three-dimensionality begins to subtly appear through this first of several applications of highlights.



6. First Float

Each layer of highlights is “floated” with a transparent glaze of color to add depth and complexity, allowing the iconographer to build contrast.



7. Next Highlights

The next highlights intensify the previous ones: they reflect the original highlights on the fabric of garments as if to radiate the inner light of the saint into the world. Ancient schools of iconography can often be identified by the style of highlights.



8. Next Float

The use of increasingly warm colors on the flesh gradually transforms sallow colors into skin tones and transforms the *mandylion* (cloth) to white.



9. Final Highlights

Touches of brightness are applied judiciously.



10. Final Float

A final transparent golden glaze of color is applied to the face, unifying the highlights, and giving the flesh its characteristic glow.



11.Final Lines

The original lines of the design, obscured by the many layers of highlights and floats, are re-established and the image comes back into focus.



12.The Finished Icon

Final details complete the icon, such as adding a descriptive title to the top. The title used here is an English translation of the inscription on the prototype icon used to create these steps.



We can identify this as the face of Jesus not only by the icon's design but also by the monogram IC XC, an abbreviation formed by the first and last letters of Jesus Christ in Greek. The three Greek letters on the three arms of the cross inside the halo ω ο Ν (omicron omega nu) translate as "He Who Is," echoing the words of God who spoke to Moses from the burning bush (Genesis 3:14).



From the Russian word meaning “enliven,” *ozhivki* are the rays of light that emanate from the eyes and dance over the surface of the flesh and hair. These final lights bring the icon to life and might be likened to the breath of God that made the first man “a living being” (Gen 2:7).

Once the icon has dried thoroughly and the tempera has cured, a layer of *olifa*, a linseed oil mixture, is applied to all painted surfaces. The *olifa* penetrates the many layers of tempera. It encapsulates the pigments like amber, imparting to the icon its characteristic gemlike glow while sealing and protecting the surface.