

*The Last Supper*, iconostasis of the Church of the Kazan Skete, Moisenay (France).



EARS TO HEAR, EYES TO SEE

## Sister Ioanna Reitlinger

(1898, St. Petersburg–1988, Tashkent)

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Translated by Michael Berrigan Clark

*Note:* This article uses, with permission, materials from the monograph *Художественное наследие сестры Иоанны* (Moscow and Paris: Russkiy Put/ YMCA Press, 2006).



Sister Ioanna (Julia Reitlinger until she took the veil in 1935)—one of the most remarkable icon painters of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—remains little known in the West, where she immigrated at the age of 23, as well as in her homeland, where she returned after the death of

Stalin, finishing her days in remote exile in Uzbekistan.

Her vocation as a painter had been clear from an early age, but events did not allow her to complete her studies at the art school in her native city. Having withdrawn during the Russian Civil War to Crimea, where her mother and two sisters would die from typhus, she met Fr. Sergius Bulgakov, an encounter that would prove decisive in her orientation toward sacred art. The priest who was to become one of the greatest Orthodox spiritual masters of the modern era would be a crucial influence in her life: “He almost evokes fear, a look of fire, penetrating, a face of such extreme intensity. A prophet!” she wrote after their first meeting.

She met with him again in Prague, where she painted her first icons, and



*Portrait of Fr. Sergius Bulgakov, Paris, 1940s.*  
 "... Bulgakov—[seeing him] for the first time. He is almost frightening: burning, piercing eyes, stern face make a big impression on me. A prophet! ... In a few days—cannot live like this anymore!—set out for Oleiz [a 28-kilometer walk], to Fr. Sergius."  
 —Sr. Ioanna Reitlinger, "Автобиография,"  
 Вестник РХД 159 (1990): 91.

the noted art critic Vladimir Weidlé. "Iconographically and in their composition," he wrote,

"these frescoes are connected to the only possible tradition, to the tradition of Byzantium and of old Russia, a tradition long since interrupted. But the frescoes are connected to that tradition very freely, looking to continue it, not to copy it. In the color scheme, in the representational techniques, in the craftsmanship, they do not deviate from the pictorial vision proper to contemporary art. Vast spaces of color, a condensed design, the transmission of light through color—all of these traits might appear incomprehensible and odd for many, but without these characteristics, painting would not be a living art, but a dead, mechanical styling, in other words, equally remote from both religion and art."

then again in Paris in 1925. There they established a fruitful spiritual and theological collaboration that lasted nearly 20 years. Although she had learned the rudiments of iconographic technique in Prague from a disciple of the Old Believers, her dream was to give new life to iconographic representation, in the style of the great Russian masters of the 15th and 16th centuries, revitalizing it in dialogue with contemporary theology and modern painting (she frequently visited Maurice Denis's studio of biblical art).

In the early 1930s, Reitlinger was invited to decorate the interior of a rather large, sprawling building in the Parisian suburb of Meudon that had been made into a church. This would be her first great pictorial complex. Although little noticed by and large, it received a highly appreciative assessment from



*St. John the Baptist, Holy Protection Monastery, Bussy-en-Othe, 1946.* One of the first icons by Sr. Ioanna's hand was the image of St. John the Baptist that she painted in 1924 using Fr. Sergius Bulgakov as a model. It is obvious that Fr. Sergius remained her model for the Forerunner in her later work.



SS. Zacharias and Elizabeth and SS. Joachim and Anna, iconostasis of the Church of the Kazan Skete, Moisenay. These small icons in the extraordinary church designed by Archimandrite Euthymius Wendt (See Valery Baidin, "Orthodox Architecture and the Avant-Garde," *The Wheel* 3, Fall 2015) reflect Sr. Ioanna's interest in Byzantine mosaic iconography as well as her intuition in developing the iconographic tradition through the techniques of modern times.





*Apocalypse*, Altar of the Chapel of St. Basil the Great of the Brotherhood of SS. Alban and Sergius, London, 1945–47. “The subject of the iconography [of the chapel] is the Church. Her history taking place in two dimensions, two tiers. The bottom one is her visible history synthetically depicted in the councils of the historic churches. The top row illustrates the vision of John, the Apocalypse, which relays in a language we do not understand the metaphysical history of the Church. Every new story is illustrated by the corresponding chapter of the Apocalypse. They are intentionally shown out of order so as not to allow one’s attention to imagine the sequence of events since they exist in eternity rather than along a temporal line. The visions themselves illustrate it. The top frieze begins with the depiction of the creation of the world, since it is the beginning of the historic Church—and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.’ In the bottom tier it is juxtaposed with the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles. It is unnecessary to look for further correspondence between the adjacent depictions of the top and bottom tiers. There isn’t and shouldn’t be a correspondence, since the iconography does not attempt to interpret the Apocalypse but to illustrate it, to translate it into the language of lines and colors.” —Sr. Ioanna Reitlinger, unpublished typewritten commentary to the iconography of the chapel, 29 April 1949.



*Apocalypse*, Church of St. John the Theologian, Meudon, early 1930s.





Previous page: *Story of Adam and Eve*, Church of the Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple, Paris, 1937. The composition, colors and even the general style of this work are reminiscent of Paul Gauguin and reflect Sr. Ioanna's fascination with contemporary European art and her attempts at artistic fusion. It depicts one of her favorite subjects—the creation—and reflects her lifelong love for animals. Sr. Ioanna began drawing animals during her walks in the French countryside in the 1920s. In her icons, animals are painted with freedom, charm, and even abandon, and seem to compensate for the discipline of the canonical depiction of human subjects.

This danger J. Reitlinger has completely avoided. She has managed to find that rare point of intersection where the procedures of modern painting find themselves compatible with the tradition of Orthodox style. Those who have seen the ancient icons restored will not be surprised by the jubilant colors of Sister Ioanna's frescoes!



Reitlinger working in the church of St. John the Theologian, Meudon, early 1930s.

They testify to the new possibilities of sacred Russian art that one could not even imagine only recently.

This complex of frescoes nearly perished completely when the abandoned church was inhabited by a group of homeless squatters who set it on fire, burning the iconostasis. Shortly before the final demolition of the building, we were able to save an important part of the paintings that, after restoration, will be exhibited in the permanent collection of the library of the Alexander Solzhenitsyn Center for the Study of the Russian Diaspora in Moscow.

Weidlé, it seems, did not have the opportunity to see the monumental paintings completed fifteen years later by Sister Ioanna in England. These later works reveal an even greater mastery, boldness, and liberty, and are truly inspired by a prophetic vision. But in 1946, with the publication of a catechism for children illustrated by Sister Ioanna, Weidlé confirmed his judgment. "Sister Ioanna is a great artist, after twenty years of her work in the realm of icon painting and frescoes, no one can doubt it... If in the illustrations for children there cannot be the same level of intensity and concentration as in the icons, these qualities are nevertheless consistently present in the detail of the drawing, the choice of colors, and the interpretation of religious themes." Nevertheless, the art of Sister Ioanna that found its expression in monumental painting as well as in icons of smaller dimension remained largely misunderstood: too

sacred for lovers of secular art, too free for adherents of a strict tradition. After her departure for Prague, where she rejoined her sister in hopes of returning to Russia (they would not be allowed to return until the détente of the 1960s), Sister Ioanna experienced a long spiritual crisis that led her to abandon the art of the icon for more than ten years. Her encounter with Father Alexander Men and his young community, during her summer visits to Moscow at the end of the 1960s, allowed her to find a second breath of inspiration. Her work during the last twenty years of her life (between the ages of 70 and 90!) was no less luminous and lively than that accomplished in the emigration, even if it was limited—due to



*St. Mary of Egypt*, Holy Protection Monastery, Bussy-en-Othe, 1946. Icons from Sr. Ioanna's later period in France, before her return to Prague and then Moscow, reveal her deepening interest in the early Russian iconographic tradition, as well as her mastering of the "craft" of the icon which, paradoxically, became a source of frustration and contributed to a crisis and a long period of artistic silence.



Fr. Sergius Bulgakov and J. Reitlinger, Menthon-Saint-Bernard, end of 1920s—beginning of 1930s.

religious persecution—to requests for personal icons. This later work has the merit, moreover, of a stunning victory over old age and its accompanying infirmities.

Discreet, modest, detached from the necessities of life (as an emigrant and later in the U.S.S.R., she lived in total poverty), and extremely critical of her own work, Sister Ioanna was indisputably a great witness to Christian faith in the 20th century—both in her life and in "the theology in color" (to borrow an expression of Eugene Trubetskoi) that she worked to revive. ✽

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