

LAURA GASCOIGNE

THROUGH EYES OF FAITH

Two exhibitions highlight an intense debate about how icons can beckon towards eternity, while also reflecting the times of their making

Today, the word “icon” means one of two things: an image of a celebrity, or a computer graphic. It has come a long way from its Orthodox meaning of a sacred image suffused with divine light – a painted window onto Paradise – but its origins were in fact rather more modest. In classical Greek *eikon* meant simply a “likeness”, and *eikonographia* – with the addition of *graphe*, meaning “drawing” or “writing” – the drafting of a likeness. Debate continues in Orthodox circles today over which translation of *graphe* to favour: since iconoclasm, the suspicion lingers that the painted image is too close to this world for comfort, and purists still prefer the term “icon writing”.

In the past, such specialist arguments have raged behind the closed doors of Orthodox monasteries, but this spring they’re getting a public airing in London at two exhibitions of contemporary icons: “Sacred Iconography – A Living Tradition”, at The Prince’s School of Traditional Arts (until 12 May); and “Richness and Diversity – Balkan Icons” at the church of All Hallows by the Tower (until 19 May).

That two separate selling exhibitions of Orthodox icons should be in London at the same time testifies to the renaissance that the tradition is currently enjoying. After centuries of stagnation, in the past 50 years new schools of iconography have sprung up in Greece, Egypt, Russia and even London, where icon painting is now an option on the MA course at the Prince’s School of Traditional Arts. The subject’s tutor, Dr Stephane René, is the man responsible for the school’s present exhibition, the first to unite Eastern and Oriental styles – Greek, Russian, Coptic and Ethiopian – under one roof. The makers of the 80 icons on display represent an astonishingly wide artistic diaspora: New Zealand-born Aidan Hart trained in the Greek tradition at a Serbian Orthodox monastery in Masterton, New Zealand, while the French Dr René studied the Coptic style in Cairo and has painted icons for Coptic Orthodox churches from California to Kensington.

Another surprise is the range of variation among individual exponents of the same style. Within the Russian school, Tatiana Koliba-

ba’s use of gilding and glowing colours conforms to traditional expectations, whereas Alexander Gormatiuk’s experiments with silicate-based paints achieve a look more commonly associated with fresco. Still greater diversity is displayed by the “Balkan Icons” at All Hallows, collected by the young Serbian curator Lazar Predrag Markovic from 20 contemporary artists working in Bulgaria, Serbia, Romania and Greece. The 70 examples on show range from faithful copies of fourteenth-century prototypes to bold experiments by the controversial Greek icon painter Fr Stamatis Skliris, whose expressionistic colour and brushwork lends his image of St Isaac the Syrian a distinctly modern angst. Between these two extremes comes a selection of paintings on glass by Romanian artists reviving an eighteenth-century peasant tradition that combined Orthodox with Catholic and folk art sources. The eclecticism lives on in Sorin Mirea’s *Stabat Mater*, whose unorthodox off-centre composition derives from Japanese prints via Gauguin.

Like the Ethiopian examples at the Prince’s School, these Romanian glass paintings, charming as they are, seem more concerned with sacred storytelling than the creation of sacramental objects. They’re art, all right, but are they icons? Doubts were raised after a lecture by Markovic last week, and will presumably be discussed in greater detail at a symposium on 6 May attended by the radical Father Skliris (details on www.balkan-icons.com). Markovic is in sympathy with the modernisers’ refusal to make glorified photocopies of old icons; he believes that if iconography is not to be “a static language”, it must “represent our time and the problems of our people”. After rescuing the tradition from centuries of neglect, it’s not surprising if contemporary iconographers want to rewrite the rulebook: in his interpretation of the Virgin Mary with the Infant Christ, even the veteran Serbian iconographer Dragomir Jasa Jasovic – responsible for the post-war revival in Yugoslavia – has allowed the tassels of the Virgin’s veil to hang cheekily over the picture’s edge, and one of the Infant Christ’s sandals to slip off.



Jonah by Stephane René

But once the taste for *trompe l’oeil* takes hold, where will it end? At what point does naturalism cease to be compatible with holiness? If this is an impossible question to answer, it may be because it’s the wrong one to ask. A more helpful starting point, Aidan Hart says, is the Transfiguration. “An icon depicts the transfigured world, light coming from within rather than without. Iconography, in this sense, is realistic rather than naturalistic. It affirms the material world’s ability to partake in the uncreated light.” This does not diminish the material world’s importance; in fact, the Orthodox religion emphasises the role of the senses. In Orthodox icons, the eyes and ears of saints are enlarged, the better to see and hear God – only their mouths are smaller, so as not to interrupt.

Where Orthodox iconography really parts company with naturalism is in its treatment of space and time. Just as the traditional icon’s multi-view perspective offers a God’s-eye-view of materiality, so its non-linear conception of time allows events to unfold on an eternal timescale. The appearance of St Paul at the Ascension or the miraculous ability of St John the Baptist to carry his own decapitated head are not primitive narrative devices, but sophisticated denials of the earthly rule of time. Iconography, Hart says, distinguishes between two sorts of time, temporal and divine: the icon operates within the latter.

The question is, where does that leave the iconographer? Artists may paint pictures of eternity, but they must function in a world subject to change. While they’re in this world, they may occasionally need to adjust their watches to different artistic time zones: they can always reset them to eternity in the next.

'God also suggested he might like to take numerous wives, and, oddly, begin breeding horses' PAGE 38

CINEMA

Home on the range

Don't Come Knocking

DIRECTOR: WIM WENDERS

The German film director Wim Wenders has an affection for American popular culture which is only matched by his distrust of its political and social values. As with his fellow countryman, Werner Herzog, his profile has slipped somewhat since his 1980s heyday – recent projects include a documentary on the blues and a video for the band U2 – and so it's perhaps not surprising that his latest film, *Don't Come Knocking*, should be an attempt to repeat the success of his best-known movie, 1984's *Paris, Texas*.

It's uncomfortably like a re-run of the earlier film: same basic scenario, same desert setting, same bluesy soundtrack. Sam Shephard plays hell-raising cowboy actor Howard Spence who, while shooting his latest big-budget western in the Nevada desert, does what cowboys are supposed to do: he rides off into the sunset. The only problem is that he does so before the film has been completed, and rather than pay up \$36 million, the insurers send out a scowling loss adjuster (Tim Roth) to bring him back. It's certainly a novel scenario: a gunslinger pursued by an insurance rep.

The truth is that Spence has gone back to his old mum (Eva Marie Saint) for a spot of R&R. He hasn't been there long when she lets



Sam Shephard as Howard Spence in *Don't Come Knocking*

slip that, years before, one of his former girlfriends, a diner waitress by the name of Doreen (Jessica Lange), bore him a child, and so he sets off in his dad's old shark-finned Ford to meet his son and heir.

The film looks and sounds good. Doreen is holed up in Moab, Utah, a town which looks as if it was laid out by Edward Hopper. The streets are wide and empty – ditto poor Doreen's diner – but there is plenty of sunshine and Wenders' camera presents the place as a patchwork of pastelly colours.

But, to borrow a phrase cruelly applied by a Hollywood producer to a well-known actress, deep down the film is shallow. Partly this is due to the miscasting of Sam Shephard as Spence. Shephard has the right grizzled handsomeness, but he looks like what he is: a serious and intelligent man who has written a few Broadway plays. He is entirely bereft of whatever quality set Errol Flynn apart from other men. It takes more than denim to turn a man into a hell-raising redneck.

Jessica Lange – Shephard's real-life wife –

also seems too big for her part. You don't get the impression that she has spent her life in deepest Utah, and it is unfortunate that she found herself in a roughly similar position – being courted by an ex-lover – in Jim Jarmusch's recent *Broken Flowers*. There she was glacially indifferent; Wenders can't resist making her a good egg, with a smile for everyone, even the man who left her with a son and no maintenance.

Otherwise the casting is good. Eva Marie Saint makes an adorable mum: at 81 she has the face of an angel, if the hands of Neferiti. Roth is gloriously deadpan as the po-faced insurance man, Sutter. His doleful utterances ("I don't need a family. Some people do. I'm not one of them") are like a plunge into clear water after the cactus-scented stickiness of what has gone before. It may be that the whole film is simply intended as a set-up for the hilarious scene in which Spence, finally cornered by Sutter, suggests that they turn on the radio to pass the time: "Stock reports, Navajo chanting, the Black Death," laments Roth, "The world at large: it's a nasty place – why let it in?" Here, surely, is the true voice of the insurance industry.

I don't want to be too hard on Wenders. He really loves America – only a man who felt that way about the country would make a film with Willie Nelson (*Willie Nelson at the Teatro*) – but it's a movie-goer's America, and not the real thing. It's possible that I am missing the point and that *Don't Come Knocking*, like tequila, should be taken with a big pinch of salt. But in truth it's more like the home-fried potatoes which Doreen serves up in her diner: bland, indigestible, and fatally short on nourishment.

Crispin Jackson

RADIO

Severe weather warning

The Battle for Influence

BBC RADIO 4

Judging from last month's crop of press articles, the newspaper debate about climate change has begun to acquire a slightly different focus. A year or so back the average right-wing sceptic would merely dismiss agitation about rising temperatures and retreating glaciers as alarmism, in the manner of Jeremy Clarkson and his amusing jokes about the need to find another holiday destination should Holland disappear beneath the floods. Nowadays the kind of peevish motorist or cheap-flight habitué who writes in the *Daily Telegraph* seems to have found an alternative slant on

eco-consciousness. This is to write the whole thing off as a fresh out-break of time-honoured English Puritanism: essentially, the argument runs, Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth and the other gangs of superannuated hippies are there simply to stop us all having fun.

There is something in this argument – not much, but a little – just as there is something in those intermittent claims of scientific sensationalism. The first instalment of Radio 4's new Thursday night feature, *The Battle for Influence* pursued this second element in the climate change stand-off to considerable effect. Simon Cox began his enquiry in the north Norfolk coastal resort of Happisburgh – ripe for inundation if the doom-sayers are proved right – asking a bunch of geology students by how much they imagined the earth's temperature to have risen in the past century. Various single-figure percentages were vouchsafed: the correct answer, Cox gleefully assured us all, was a modest 0.6 per cent.

Attention then turned to one or two of the

environmental surveys that have recently decorated the national press, in particular one claiming that by the end of the present century there was a danger of the UK turning subtropical and Norfolk vanishing from the map. A climate change expert Hans Von Storch warned of the dangers of over-statement, and media treatment of a recent project sponsored by the Environment Agency was exposed to some revealing analysis. The vast majority of the study's computer models had suggested a likely temperature increase of 3 per cent over the next century: needless to say quite a few journalists had homed in on the 11 per cent proposed by a small proportion of worst-case-scenarioists.

Nobody, Simon Cox continued to assure us, wanted to deny the existence of man-made climate change: his quarry was the spin brought to the party by scientists anxious to make a splash in the wider world. Another embarrassing piece of evidence came from the Ethiopian uplands where, it was alleged,

rising temperatures had broadened the range of malarial mosquitos, infecting and bankrupting local farmers in their wake. Alas, minute investigation revealed that neither mean nor indeed variable temperatures had increased. The calm certainties of the Tearfund's UK spokesman were lavishly qualified, if not altogether contradicted, by his representative on the ground.

There was a lot more of this. An American academic pointed out that well-intentioned propagandising made useful ammunition for the US anti-environmental lobby. Other contributors lamented the use of "bad arguments in a good cause". A home-grown scientist, examining the claims about England's likely transformation into a sub-tropical swamp, thought that such an outcome would take the more or less immediate incineration of all the world's carbon reserves to bring about. Entertaining and well-researched as this was, I still had my doubts. One drawback, perhaps, was the tone of Cox's interrogations, invariably conducted in the superior manner of the man who knows he has several aces up his sleeve. Another – despite everyone loudly accepting the seriousness of the problem – was the thought of point-scoring in the presence of catastrophe. After all, if, as practically everyone admitted, the majority of the Environment Agency's models show world temperatures increasing at five times the rate of the last century, a certain amount of scaremongering might not be a bad idea. **D.J. Taylor**



A prophet and his followers: Philip and his Seven Wives

TELEVISION

Only fools and horses

Philip and his Seven Wives

BBC FOUR

Presumably polygamy has its enthusiasts, but it seems unlikely that they include many married men. Then again, it's hardly bliss for women, if the documentary *Philip and his Seven Wives* (BBC 4, 25 April) was to be believed.

This wasn't really a film about polygamy, even disregarding the technical objection that it featured no legal marriages. It was more about the founding of a messianic cult, of which new examples emerge every year. What they tend to have in common is a male leader surrounds himself with female acolytes in sexual thrall; nice work if you can get it.

Mark Isaacs' documentary showed the cult in its infancy, before the induction of anyone outside the bedroom (which should have had a revolving door). Perhaps Philip's ménage will remain a private matter, but he seems rather more ambitious. A former rabbi, living near Hove, Philip considers himself an Old Testament prophet and a biblical king. A spiritual king; but in due course, we were warned, rather more than that.

Not all readers will consider Philip's vivid encounter with God to be evidence of psychosis, but it seems to me to be that and more; a detachment from reality that renews itself and thrives rather than reaching a crisis or burning itself out. It also feeds on others, creating, in this case, a *folie not à deux* but à huit.

In Philip's account, God spoke to him six years ago, and, over a sleepless month, told him he was a prophet, mentioned in the Torah and charged with restoring the nation of Israel. God also suggested he might like to take numerous wives, and, oddly, begin breeding and training horses.

The horses were a prominent motif in the film, which began with the mucking out of stables. I know nothing about horses, but Philip did not seem to me to have a natural talent. You have heard of the horse whisperer; Philip is the horse shouter. "Stop it!" he shrieked. "Behave yourself! Ooh, bitch!"

"If you don't handle them right," he explained, "they do get a bit wild." He was talking about horses, but it might just as well have been wives. When he wasn't lying on the couch, he was bullying them. Speaking through a microphone, though everyone was sitting round the dinner table, he explained: "The whole essence of training a horse is getting the horse to yield ... Everything is about yielding ... And I feel that you are not yielding."

There were painful scenes in which Philip abused his woefully insecure flock for their lack of faith, in God but also in God's local representative. Faith was a problem,

as they sobbingly confessed, but Philip was unperturbed. "What I find with you lot is that there is not enough desperation," he said. "For me the best moments of this family is when people lose all hope."

He got his wish. At least one wife seemed to be waking from the nightmare, but it was a miserable process. "I don't believe, and it's made a mockery of the last five years," she sobbed. Another, who had spent 22 years in an unconsummated marriage before meeting Philip, was distressed because, in late middle-age, she had not yet conceived a child "like Sarah", the 90-year-old wife of Abraham. Philip decided to move her out, but couldn't resist publically denouncing her first. When she attempted a defence of their relationship as part of the divine plan, he attacked her for "religious gobbledegook". Pot, meet kettle.

When Philip's sister came to visit from Golders Green, she was amused, but not taken aback, by his living arrangements. He had been a DJ, she said, and always had a lot of "followers". She was slightly more surprised by his divine elevation to kingship, but giggled knowingly.

Meanwhile, back in the world of pair-bonding, *Wife Swap* (Channel 4, 24 April) began its sixth series. Eschewing its normal class conflict, this first episode chose to contrast two families divided only by their attitudes to housework. Party-girl and cheerful slattern Michelle swapped with enthusiastic drudge Yvonne, and sparks duly flew. Michelle, Ian and their kids lived like pigs, but their sty was full of love. Yvonne and Dave lived in a little palace, cushions precisely aligned and children well-drilled, but barely spoke to one another.

In the swap, Yvonne found she liked going out, while Michelle's efforts to impose a regime of good-natured chaos foundered on the willingness of Yvonne's children to tidy up behind her. The final confrontation, a reliable source of unedifying name-calling, proved surprisingly mild. The men, each oppressed in his own way, bonded over rueful grins, while the women, after a bit of foul-mouthed skirmishing, agreed to differ.

A cheerful coda informed us that both couples appreciated each other more now. Such things can happen, but only when there are two people in a marriage. **John Morrish**

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