



MASSACHUSETTS CULTURAL COUNCIL
FOLK & TRADITIONAL ARTS PROGRAM

AUDIO TAPE LOG

Accession No.: MH-06-07-D Date(s): April 19, 2006

Fieldworker(s): Maggie Holtzberg

Interviewee(s): Sister Faith Riccio and Ksenia Pokrovsky – also present was Ksenia's daughter, Ann, and granddaughter, Ksenia

Event: Apprenticeship site visit

Place of Recording: 3rd Floor studio at Ksenia's home in Sharon, MA

Recording Equipment: HHB Microphone(s): Shure

Recorded in: mono X stereo

Tape Brand and Format: Cassette 60 min X DAT 65 min

Cassette 90 min DAT 95 min

Amount Tape Used: Cassette: DAT: ABS time 1:05

Related Accession Numbers: MH-01-02

Brief summary of tape contents:

Log:

MH: It's the 19 and I'm in Sharon Massachusetts visiting the Russian iconography apprenticeship with – tell me your name.

FR: It's Faith Riccio, live on the Cape.

MH: Actually I was curious – is it the Community of Jesus? Tell me what that is.

FR: Well, the Community of Jesus is an ecumenical community, charismatic. It's difficult to describe. It's like a modern-day abbey, is the best way we tend to explain it. We tend to be Benedictine; we follow the Benedictine rule of life. The community has always had a great concern about the older arts. We do a lot of newer arts, but they've had a great concern about mosaics, frescoes, and so my prioress asked if I would learn icons. I really hadn't been an artist. I had done some drawing and I was a computer graphic artist. Tended to be, learning that. So she said would I and I said sure.

I started out kind of on my own, typical American thing to do. So I came up here to see Ksenia. Found her on the Internet. I came up here to see here. And she said, "Well, you really don't know what you're doing," in her just wonderful, diplomatic way. I said, "No I don't. And I'll keep doing that if you don't help me."

So she said o.k. The surprising this is that because all of the people she's taught in Russia, all the people she's taught here, she has sort of a method that's she's come by over experience. And the method honestly works. She starts out by doing big heads. And then she goes from there to half figures. And then she goes from there to full figures. So I did a deuses – a portion of a deuses. I did all the full figures. At this point, the progression was really quite straightforward. I was surprised at how easily I went from one thing to the other.

Then, she said, now that's we've done that, let's combine figures. We'll combine figures and go on to the feasts. So we started out with the feasts. I don't believe I have the Annunciation here. We started out with the biggest figured feasts first. She said let's do it that way and then go down to the smallest ones. So I said o.k. I started out and very soon I hit a real bump. There were too many variables. Too many things to pay attention to. So what we did was, we took it apart. And when we got to the Transfiguration, which is that one on the far left there, we took it apart and we did each of them singly. I got so familiar with them, with the grace of each figure, that when I put it together, I was able to put it together, (she snaps her fingers) just like that.

What I found is that there are so many variables and some icons are so complicated that part of her teaching method is to begin to have parts of it become second nature. And the more second nature all the parts of it become, which include drawing, composition, paint, line, even the line quality has got to have a huge life to it, or the icon doesn't. And the more sure you are of all those different compartments in the painting, the more beautifully free the painting is. So the freedom that she has in her paintings comes from a lot of discipline. And that's part of the difficulty is are you willing to spend the time to work through all of the discipline until you can actually have that kind of freedom. When she starts an icon, I'll look at some of them and think, I'm almost surprised that she can bring it back from being so loose. That the line quality, the paint quality is so loose that – but she knows exactly how far to give it and how far not to. So her paint quality is just very, very graceful and loose and alive. And there's only enough layers to make it have a really, really strong luminosity all the way down to the base layer.

The difficulty I run into of course is the less competent I am, the bigger the layers get.

MH: Describe what you mean by layers.

FR: Well generally with an icon, you start out with dark. And then you paint to light. Well you can have as few as four layers or as many as 25 layers, if the paint doesn't get too thick. If the paint gets too thick you literally just have to take it off. You can't get too thick without it becoming a problem when you varnish it. Or over time it will split and crack off. It just won't last.

MH: And they're meant to last –

FR: They're meant to last forever. So the beautiful, beautiful light quality that you get is actually from doing it in a few layers, not a lot of layers. So you have to know where to put the paint and how to put it very, very smoothly and beautifully. I mean every stroke - I'll watch her hand, and every stroke is done with beauty. It's done with care.

It's just taken me a long, long, time. So, we went through all of these doing smaller and smaller heads and smaller and smaller figures. I mean, she can do these little tiny, tiny figures and heads, but I find that exceedingly difficult. But anyway, it worked – by decreasing the head little by little by little. It worked.

MH: Then she talked about buildings and the different –

FR: Yes. We would take on learning about buildings. Learning about what kind of buildings they put in, why they put in. Then what kind of mountains. Mountains themselves are so fascinating because they're – Meteora, they're all mountains from there. That's what mountains that are in icons, because there were so many in Greece originally that looked like you see, that that's why all of the icons everywhere have these same kind of mountains. They really do exist. They have a certain quality to them, a certain flow, and without that, there's a chaotic look to it that loses, the composition of the piece is lost.

So once I'd done the 13 feasts, she said let's go big. Bigger. So I went to real wood with a kopchek, which is an indent. Icons are supposed to have their frame. They're not supposed to be framed. They are just what they are. What you see is what you get. It's supposed to be all-inclusive. Because it symbolizes Heaven, it's supposed to just kind of go off into the cosmos. So anyway, we went to big. Well when I went to big, I had trouble again. So what she had me do was simply, go back again and do each one of them. I just separated them and was willing to go through trying to build them, trying to get that quality. You can tell, these strokes, they're done very lightly and they're done very transparent, so they shine through. It makes the icon what it is. There's a tendency in some icons today to be very plastic looking and flat. And they do not have the same life. They just don't.

MH: Well look at the light coming from her face!

FR: So I was very happy. When I finally finished this, I felt like I had gained some strength of ability. I felt like I had managed a number of things, that they became more natural. But the truth is, to a great degree, most of it isn't very natural to me yet. So, I'm very happy as I see each step.

So then, we went from that, to doing, she said let's do a Jesus. So I did a matching Jesus and Theotokos. And there again, the heads are bigger this time than they were before.

MH: Why was it difficult to go large? You said you ran into trouble.

FR: I did. I think it's because all of the strokes are so much bigger. And you want a fluid, a real graceful fluidity to what you do. You don't want broken strokes. It's not like, it's painting with its own parameters. Much like a lot of other kind of painting is too. But the parameters are such that you want all of the undercoats, they need these nice long, sweeping lines. And if you can't do it because you don't know what you're doing, you're back to square one again. So I was. So I just went from there again.

So then she started to teach me next to start to compose my own.

MH: And what does that involve?

FR: There's a lot what they call canon, canons of icons. Which means there are only certain subjects from the Bible, generally speaking, the life of Christ, the life of the saints. It could be the saints of the east or the west, so it's not limited in that sense. Some icons will be more Catholic looking than other icons. The wonderful thing about working with her is that I do begin to understand better what makes an icon Russian. Or what makes an icon Orthodox. Or, even in this case, what makes an icon Byzantine because the first icons really showed up in the Byzantine era. So understanding a lot of about Byzantine and why they even made icons, the history, the reasons behind why they cared so much about what they did, and why church was

just so important, why icons grew up in the church. You begin to understand better and better how things worked. And why the canons were important, and that the canons were not put there as rules to hem you in, but as guidelines to make sure that a person knew where to start.

Often people talk icons as if they do not have a lot of freedom of expression in them. Like Ksenia says, she says eventually you will not keep your expression out of the icon. She said we all have an expressive part of ourselves. It's not something you have to make happen. It's something better to let happen. (An older gentleman who also studies with Ksenia enters the studio.)

Well, hello Paul.

Hi Sister Faith. How are you? Oh, I'm sorry . . .

MH: I'm curious for you to say what makes an icon Russian.

FR: The Orthodox have, like Ksenia says, Orthodox icons didn't really start obviously until, or Russian Orthodox icons didn't start until Russia became Christian. So Russia didn't become Christian until the 900s. Right after that was a beginning push where they learned how. She said they're very primitive to start, you can tell if you look back. But the idea of imagery in Russian Orthodoxy, or for that matter, Byzantine Orthodoxy, is very important to them. They had very strong feelings, because of the incarnation, because Christ came to earth, that images should be a part of worship. They should be a part of liturgy. They should be a part of life. And as you know, with their oppressed life, those images are very, very important to them. So, in my eyes, they kind of developed their own strength of what they wanted to express through the icons. And by the time somebody like Rublev, who was so well known, came around, there had been hundreds of years of Orthodox living that he was able to put into them. Sometimes the best way Ksenia has to explain it is by explaining what hesychism meant to the Orthodox – especially the Russian Orthodox. When the original monks or holy men went off to study, went off to try to go into their caves and pray, they did a almost what we call a global experiment where each one of them was a part of that experiment in that they prayed. And that was primarily the way they spent their lives. So there were hundreds of years of coming up with a method of lifestyle, a method of prayer, a method of orthodox philosophy that then went into primarily the Russian icons. It's not that they didn't go into the Greek and the Byzantine too, and obviously Mt. Athos, but the Russians I think did take it and they pushed it to a level of excellence and a level of almost where it resonated with this same prayer atmosphere. Their icons resonated with it. And so somebody like Rublev was able to come along and one of the disputes that was going on at the time was what is the trinity. Well Rublev, his whole point was to instill into his trinity was, to show that kind of prayerful love that the trinity had for each other. Well he was able to do that partly because of this long line of Russians and Greeks that had spent so much time, I don't know; It's hard to explain.

But, needless to say, what happened with the Russians is that they took it to almost a higher level than anybody else. Although I'm sure there would be dispute over that fact. But in my opinion, a lot of the Russian icons, some of the Moscow School, the Rublev School, they have a real classic, not Italian classic, but just a real classic, deep beauty to them that reveals that kind of prayer life that they had worked so hard on. It's a different way of looking at things than say we in the west. We in the west sort at went at everything from an entirely different view. They did experiment after experiment, just living the life and then formulated a philosophy later. We tended to form a philosophy to begin with and then we lived it out. It's just a different way of looking at things but I think it's part of the reason why it's difficult in the west to get your mind around just what an icon is. Part of the difficulty is that a icon, what is there is there. It's not got the depth of symbolism in the sense that we live it. Like you see a vine in a western church, well

the vine may be a grape vine and then it may symbolize the passion. With an icon, the icon of doubting Thomas, that's the icon of Christ. He's right there.

MH: Along that line, talk a little bit about the difference in saying painting icons and writing icons. Why is it important to say one writes an icon?

FR: Well, primarily it's because you're coming under the church, icons are the church's vision of Christianity. They're not your own personal. So it makes a difference. If you've ever tried to live within a church doing any kind of function – even all the different guilds there are in churches, you'll find there's a tremendous amount of creativity. You're not hampered by the fact that you're in a church. It's just that, it's not an unusual western theme of thinking to feel like you are hampered if you're just not you, in every sense of whatever that means. When often I find out that just being me is not always the most wonderful thing in the world to be. Not that I don't understand being creative and being myself but on the other hand, coming under the church I found that the church knew what it was doing. And so within that, I could bring a lot of me to the icon I write. There's no difficulty for me personally in that issue.

People ask me that all the time, "Well don't you feel hampered by copying?" Well according to Ksenia, we never really copy. It's not like you copy a master or you may sit down and paint a Michelangelo.

MH: How is it different?

FR: You're taking the canons that pertain to painting Christ, the normal way that he's pictured through the years, which they believe is quite possibly exactly what he looked like to a great degree. There is too much similarity between icons and it goes back too far, to wonder whether he really looked like that. He probably did look like that. The tendency of how the eyes are made, how the structure is, all of that is somewhat canon, but it's not a canon that is necessarily based on a certain rule from the church. One of the really wonderful things that Ksenia has been able to show me is how much icons are based on anatomical correctness. They're very anatomically correct. They be stylized but the anatomy is there. So if you look at the face, if you look at the hands, if you look at the structure, you realize how much is just filled with anatomy. They didn't lack for knowing it. They came out of a very, I mean, the Greeks and Romans, they knew anatomy. There was no lack for anatomy. But because of the stylization it does look like they may not know exactly what they're doing.

MH: You mean the sort of two-dimensional, lack of perspective?

FR: Yes. But they did that because they wanted to imply the realization of heaven, not so much because they didn't know what they were doing. So that anatomy in itself has really been helpful for me. She will not let me get away with anything. If the shoulder isn't where the shoulder should be, if this line does not come off in just the exact way that it would come off your neck, if the head does not hit the neck right, if the nose is not exactly where it should be, I start over.

MH: But I'm curious to go back to the copying versus in doing a tradition. If I make an analogy to say music, traditional music or any other kind of folk art, it's very true that it's more conservative, that you're holding to a tradition, and yet there is room for individual expression. So this makes total sense to me.

FR: Absolutely.

MH: But I'm still curious – like when I play a fiddle tune, I'm taking the structure, the skeleton of the tune, which is traditional.

FR: It's exactly the same. It's just what makes it difficult for westerners is the fact that it's church. We have an independent streak that, it does make that hard issue. Your fiddle tune does come off a tune that came from, it didn't come from a church. So, if you can get past your western view of this independent streak that makes it difficult for us and understand that the fact that you have the fiddle tune base to work off of, what if you had to recreate your fiddle tune every single time? I'm not saying you wouldn't sometimes, of course.

MH: You could write or compose a tune. So, it's not copying, it's recreating that – what is it in your head? When you think of any one of these things, what do you call it? The thing that you're recreating.

FR: Oh, I would call it an image. I'd call it a prototype. Therefore, if you begin to know icons and you look through the books, you see huge variety. But because it's not modern art or it's not portraits, exact portraits, it's not as applicable in a western sense. In my eyes it's almost more creative in some senses because it's the nuances that really matter. And the nuances are more hard to convey than say realistic portraiture of exactly what you like. I mean who says that has tremendous freedom in it? If I'm making a portrait exactly that looks like you. You can take portraiture and do something with it so that I create not only a realistic portrait of you but the essence of who you are too.

So icons have a lot to give the west. If we there was an open dialogue, so that we could understand another culture. So much of what icons are come from orthodoxy, come from the culture of the country that they came from.

MH: I'm still a little confused. Forgive my ignorance. If your master, Ksenia Pokrovsky, is working in the Russian Orthodox style and that's her religion as a believer. Now you're coming from a differentright?

FR: Very different.

MH: So how does that affect what you're creating? Are you creating Russian Orthodox icons or are you creating something else?

FR: Well one of her ways of helping me understand that is to say that, number one, in almost any country where icons are taught, from a long history, it's a very long process. They say it takes 15 years to become a good iconographer. Obviously, that's not a very favorable idea with the westerners. We're used to being entrepreneurs within a year, so what's new? But, in any case, if you except that parameter that takes that long to learn, then you can give yourself an awful lot of space to try to understand the history. To try to understand where they were coming from, what the point was, why are there icons in the east and not the west? Why they used the colors they did. Why it was important to have the line quality the way it was. Why did they use gold leaf? Why did they use egg tempera? Any of those issues, why? And once you start to really accept learning all those things, then you can sort of let the quality of who you are, the quality of where you come from, rise up as it will. It's not a simple thing. I'm a Protestant. I went to all different Protestant churches when I was young, so I came in to this truthfully not having the foggiest idea what an icon was, really. And it's taken me almost the whole time to just begin to slightly understand why they did it. It's not a western way to do anything. We just don't do things the way they do.

So I suspect, over a period of time, my icons will become much more “me.” One of the things we’ve already noticed about my icons is that they’re strong. And I’ll say to Ksenia sometimes, “What if I don’t want them to be strong?” And she’ll say, “You’re strong. They’re strong. That’s the way they are.” And I say, “What if I want them to be more lyrical and graceful, like yours are?” She’ll say, “You can’t do what you aren’t.” I mean you could if you set out to copy exactly, but that’s not the purpose. She does in no way ask me to copy; she does not want a little Ksenia Pokrovsky running around. That is not important to her.

MH: What is important to her?

FR: She wants a competent iconographer that understands what she’s doing well enough and most of it has become so second nature that she can almost, it’s a bad word to use, but almost adequately, she can endeavor to really make an icon that will reveal the hidden reality of the spiritual significance. She wants me to understand well enough that she can trust me with what she feels is a very, it’s very dear to her. It’s very important to her.

MH: And also, in some of the things that I’ve read from both of you, it’s sort of a somber, serious art form.

FR: It is. I mean, people will ask, it’s so funny some of the questions people will ask like, - they ask both of us but they’ll ask me often now, “Why aren’t icons smiling?” I’ll say, if you’ve ever read the gospels, I mean there were some things to smile about but they’re not filled with smileable realities. And normal everyday life is not filled with huge amounts of smileable realities. So wouldn’t an icon look like it does? And once you’ve spent enough time with them you begin to understand the nuances of what has a beauty to it, or what has a serene, almost content or happiness to it. Even if you have a good friend, you know by looking at that friend, even if they’re not smiling, when they’re content, when they’re happy or when they’re not. It’s not a simple thing; it’s not Mickey Mouse we’re doing.

MH: And what are you working on today?

FR: Well I have three boards. I was going to do a Resurrection and a Crucifixion. So I got the Crucifixion one at the stage - it’s 24 x 30. I’ve put on it now, I’ve varnished all the areas that will put gold leaf on it. Then tonight I will take it and put on all of those areas where I’m going to do gold leaf, I’ll put gold size. In the morning, I’ll gold leaf it so it will then be in that stage.

MH: It’s so shiny. Tell me what gold assist is.

FR: Gold assist is what is done on top. So this is gold assist. Your painting can anywhere from a small amount of gold assist to a huge amount of gold assist. And that’s done with a very interesting method; you use beer glue. You take beer and you boil it down. Not boil but –

MH: Distill it.

FR: Distill it so that it’s very, very thick. And then you just take a little water in it and make it thin enough that you can actually draw lines with it. Then once it’s hardened, you just breathe on it slightly and give it a little moisture and put your gold leaf on. It works beautifully. Ksenia said they had beer and that’s how they did it.

So now, I'm working on Washing of the Feet. I find that are certain feasts that appeal to me more because I'm Protestant background. So Washing the Feet has always appealed to me. Pentecost has always appealed to me. When I went through the feasts and I realized how important Pentecost was to me I thought, well of course, why wouldn't I like Pentecost? I've been working on this.

The way you work on a new piece is you go back and you start to look through all the different Washing of the Feet that you can find anyway. All the different styles. There's a Moscow, there's Skav, there's Navdorod Diosynese, Poncylinos. (spelling??) There's numerous ones – Rublev School. I find one that I somewhat want to base it on, which I took the Rublev School. Primarily, I took it because I liked a lot of his figures. I thought that they just had a grace to them that I liked.

I like to know every single disciple. I know to know how he's, in history, how they've described him. There's always three overlooking disciples: Peter, Mathew, and Andrew. So I like that. I like that you almost know who they are. The hair that's a little wild is always Andrew. You know that. A big forehead is always . . . James. Jame's brother John always has a big forehead. Actually, it's Simon. If you look through books you'll see icons that reveal, I mean, Peter looks like Peter. Through all the icons. So it's a little hard to believe he didn't look like he did. In the earliest ones, he looks exactly like he does in the latest ones. So anyway, the ones that look the youngest are always Thomas and Philip and John. I like that. I appreciate knowing who they are. And then when I work on the structure, the drawing of them, I just like to think of them. It means a lot to me. It kind of puts feet on my own religious beliefs, which is important to me obviously as a Sister.

I've worked on each one of these until I know them. Then I'm trying now to put them together so I think it will work on this particular board. The difficulty, when you change boards, you almost have to begin to structure it again new. Because, as you can tell, these are all different kinds – (we are looking at printed icons in a book) this is almost a square, this is long and thin. So all these iconographers were really very knowledgeable about art. They didn't lack for any kind of strength of artistic ability, clearly.

MH: So right now, I'm just describing this because there's no camera running. So I see pieces of paper that you have placed – is that your drawing, or is that a transfer?

FR: Often I will just draw from scratch. In this case, because there were so many figures, I drew them each separately. So then I just blow them up on a copier. And then basically try to start placing them. Then from this, I'll put tracing paper over it and I'll start drawing again until I can get, what I consider, a graceful placement. Different iconographers care about different things. In this case, this is a beautiful icon. The figures themselves are absolutely phenomenal. I don't particularly like the placement that much, but that's just me. I don't know, maybe its' partly being a female.

MH: (Pointing to her work) This has got a real circular movement to it.

FR: It does, which I like.

MH: So once you have the placement you like, and it's on the tracing paper, what do you do next?

FR: Once you're sure of every line, every line has to mean something anatomically and stylization of it. If a line isn't there for a reason, then it shouldn't be there at all. That can get a little tedious but if you're trying to do a beautiful painting that's what it's all about. All the best

artists, in my opinion, through history – those lines – they know that what they're doing means something. So once you've done that, then you draw it on, we just transfer it with transfer paper. We just transfer it onto the board that way.

MH: And the board has already been gessoed?

FR: Yes, the board will have been gessoed with anywhere from 8 to 10 coats of gesso. Takes a lot of time. It does, especially with a kopchek, which is that indented surface that you see on icons. It takes quite a while to put that kind of thing on.

MH: And do you make that or does somebody else that?

FR: I have a friend who does that. Ksenia had a gesso master in Russia. That's smart. She didn't have any gesso master here. So anyway, once it's on, then you take black ink and you draw it again. The point, each time you're doing this, you're refining it. And you're paying attention. I've watched Ksenia, who has done like, for example, she's done probably thousands of Theotokis – Well I watched her the other day drawing Theotokis, off another design that she already had. So they honestly care very much about the beauty in it. It's vitally important.

So once it's on with ink, you draw it on lightly. Make sure your strokes are thick and thin, according to what you're going to want it to do. Once that's done, then you put red stain wherever you're going to put the gold leaf. The major reason for that is then any places where the gold leaf, where it shows through, you don't notice it as much as if it were white. So, you put the red down, then you put a varnish over that whole area. Once that's done, it usually takes about 24 hours to dry, you put a thin, thin coat of gold leaf varnish. It's like a glue. And the next day, you just gold leaf it. Once that's done, you have to varnish the gold again. If you don't, you'll brush it off eventually.

MH: It's too delicate.

FR: It's too delicate. So once that's done, you can start painting.

MH: Wow – so it takes a very long time to create one of these, not to mention all the years of training.

FR: But once you start painting, if you know it well enough and if are trained, you'd be surprised how fast good iconographers can paint. They know what they're doing. And they have a flow to it that just grows with time. One other thing I thought it might be interesting for you to see is this.



Ksenia told me that one of the ways she learned in Russia was to spend a lot of time doing this. So she started me off doing it And that was to go into books and with as good a line quality as you can, draw what you see. So that every line is doing what you want it to do. It's really revealing the essence of whatever the icon is, whomever it is. So I started doing that. The interesting thing I found out over a period of time was that I got more and familiar. You get so that you understand what kind of stylization they used for hands, and why they did. The interesting things about the hand is, for the most part, they're done off of a 5-sided, a pentagon.

So because of that you can begin to find out that you can take a hand structure that you find in a photograph and make it into icons. It's really the biggest test of whether you really understand what they've done or not. Because of inverse perspective in icons, we haven't talked about that yet, there are some issues in all the stylization. If you don't understand that and you haven't practiced like this – so this is the kind of practice I did. She said this is what she did. I said o.k., I'll do it too.

MH: And you're using what kind of pen?

FR: I'm using ink and a brush. Absolutely. I do big ones, small ones. They take a lot of time. A page like that can take me four hours. But you also learn control of the brush. Which iconographers have a phenomenal control of the brush. You should see the two of them on those big icons.

MH: It's also so similar to the Chinese calligrapher, amazing. I'm going to switch lenses.

FR: I'm trying to find the page that took me the longest. I don't know why that's so important to me to show people.

MH: I understand that.

FR: This is how I began to learn it for disciples though. I would go through books and I would find the disciples and then I would draw just their heads.

FR: . . . in our community we do Gregorian chant. It's a perfect analogy for me for icons. Because I'm able to say Gregorian chant was a church music. It was developed, it was originated, it came from and so because of that there may be a variety of Gregorian chant tunes, parameters, canons, whatever you would like to call them. And icons fall into the exact same category. They're not Mozart, they're not Bach, but they're church music. Music is a really good analogy because if you want to learn to play an instrument well, you have to put in a lot of time. One of the things Ksenia has a lot of difficulty explaining to American is, for some reason, people don't put art in the same category as learning an instrument. It's a problem. If you're an artist, it's just kind of exudes from your being and falls out.

In any case, it's been a great learning experience for me. (Ksenia enters the studio.) I've been talking all about you.

KP: You know, that icon is not [?] that's little Ksenia did it. (She is referring to two icons on the table that were done by her granddaughter, also named Ksenia, who has entered the studio as well.)

MH: You did? Wonderful. You have a good teacher. (Ksenia's mother Anna is also present.) And you are how old?

KP: Five.

AP: But she was four when she did this. (We introduce ourselves to each other.)

MH: Amazing – all the family members do this.

AP: Yah, Pokrovsky dynasty.



FR: How are you pumpkin?

KP: Fine.

FR: (To Ksenia -) I've only told her good things about you.

MH: At one point you mentioned the difference between an artisan and an artist. Can you talk about the difference between just being an artisan and being - (Anna translates for her) If you were an iconographer, what would make one a true artist, rather than just an artisan?

KP: A real iconographer is free, inside of icon. Artisan is not. Artisan can be very creative but, I don't know how to explain because it's some mystery of between art and artisan. Because you have to be inside some rules. But if you are a real iconographer, you feel yourself absolutely free in this place. It's like field and in this field you are free. And you must be artist.

MH: You mentioned enjoying teaching Sister Faith. What's different about this student for you and why is this apprenticeship important to you?

KP: She works. She really works to understand the essence, what iconography is. And what is behind iconography, what kind of world iconography describes. And it's very different from Catholic art or ? art. It's very specific and she really tries to understand what is the essence. Because, you know, how to say, the real essence of icons, any icon is in this world a transfiguration. And behind this world is a lot of things. What does mean uncreated light? What does mean ? of being here, what does mean how our event in this world reflected in the divine world? And this reflection should show up on icon. It is difficult to understand.

And plus, Sister Faith has time to work at home. When she's coming here for two, three days, she works from nine in the morning to nine at night. She works like an artist. (She chuckles.) And she has started to feel freedom in this field. But she likes this work and she has time to work at home. She can concentrate her mind in this program. But unfortunately most of my students are not able. They have to work. Dilettante level.

MH: I get the sense that this is somewhat of an endangered art form. That it was almost lost, yes, in Russia and thanks to the efforts of people like you. How important is it to continue passing this on artist to artist?

KP: Artist to artist . . . you know iconographer reflects the most important thing in orthodoxy. This teaching of uncreated light, teaching of divine energy, about hesychasm. That teaching of

hesychasm developed in orthodoxy during 1000 years. From 14th century, when it was formulated from the great Saint Gregory Palamas in discussion with other monks. What is the essence of spiritual life? What is the goal of spiritual life? And what does mean the word salvation? What salvation is. And iconography developed as a reflection of that orthodox teaching. From them, after the fall of Constantinople is all the spiritual processes of Byzantine were interrupted. And basically this tradition and this technique was lost. It developed in Russia [sic] during 14th, 15th century. But from 16th century, the same process started in Russia. The understanding what is orthodoxy, under the influence of [?] just because it's very difficult to keep the high level of, really very difficult. All historic times, know that up and down, and the same in spiritual life of human being. And together with laws of essence of orthodoxy, the art of iconography was lost because people lost understanding, what is that, together with spiritual practice.

The art and understanding of iconography was just really lost. And why western influence that [?] or [?] orthodox mind. But at the end of 19th century, and earlier with end of 18th century, with some orthodox teachers, they started that orthodox spiritual practice in some monasteries in Russia. It developed in 19th century and that was start of renovation of orthodoxy. Because all believers, they preserve a tradition of orthodox iconography. But the same as preserving a formal understanding. I'm not sure that they lost, but they formalized it. Iconography became more like craft than like real art because for art, for to feel yourself free, you have to understand, what is that. Why is that? What for is that? But transa[?] is very special for orthodox countries. And simultaneously, the process of Renaissance of real orthodox spiritual practice and the same orthodox iconography, this process started in Greece and in Russia. And [?] in Greece, he started to study the ancient art of iconography together with artistic rules – of fine portraits, early Roman art – that's to understand how the orthodox iconography crystalized; how it was formed. And how it was connected with spiritual practice.

And the same process started in Russia. We were just part of that movement. Didn't depend from social structure, from political regime in recent Russia. Even revolution in Russia could not stop this process; this process continued underground.

MH: And you did.

KP: And I did and my teachers did. It existed, but in the underground. It just happened that I appeared in that process.

MH: What does it mean to you – you've lived here now may 12 years.

KP: Fifteen years.

MH: What does it mean to you to continue this art here in Massachusetts and to spread it to people?

KP: It just happened when we arrived here, I knew that if I will have opportunity to continue my work here, I would stay here. If not, I will go back because, that's my life. I couldn't imagine myself doing something else. It was not my business; it was the essence of my life. But, little by little I discovered that I can work here. And I met some people who really wanted to understand, who really wanted to study, together with understanding how it's connected with orthodox spiritual practice, because they are undivided.

And looks like those people need me. And I have to work here now. Most of the students who are coming to me, when they discover it is a lot of work and it's not just a paint by number, they lost any interest. Or if they have some very special ideas, which are not corresponded with

orthodoxy, they reject me because they want to realize their own ideas. That is problem of orthodoxy.

MH: And so Sister Faith?

KP: Sister Faith, she really wants to understand. And she loves to work. Art of iconography is very similar to performance of music. You know the same symphony performed by different musicians will sound differently. And you know you can't say that musician is artisan; he is artist, he is musician. He cannot be a composer. But any artist plays Beethoven his own way. And the same in iconography. Sometimes, we have to be composers; we have to create new images, because of new events. And for this event icon should be created.

MH: Have you created new icons?

KP: Yeah I created some new icons. I created a new icon of Saint [?], his life. Russian Patriarch Tigin. (She reaches for a calendar) [?] of American saints. Actually it's icon of two centuries of orthodoxy in America.

MH: Columbus?

KP: No, no, no, that's Russian [?] That is Russian monastery, these are missionaries in America, Saint [?] with Aleut, and with Aleut boy who became martyr. Some years later he was killed in California. And that is martyrdom of a Russian monk [?] He was killed by natives in Alaska. And that is enlightenment of orthodoxy in American. Innocent. That is [?] of St. Herman. And that's consecration of Bishop Rafael H[?].

MH: That's your composition?

That's my drawings; that's my composition, made in key of orthodox icon. Because it's many rules, how to deal with space. As with any visual art, space is organized. And there are special rules – how to deal with image, we call it inverse perspective. How to deal with not three-dimensional space. I can show you some icons without understanding of that. (She flips through the calendar.) Look and see here, first plane, second plane, bent around but that is not real icon.

MH: No, I see it. I wouldn't be able to put it in words but I see it's different. So can you define inverse perspective?

KP: A very special way to organize space. The same like any piece of music. You can define key of this music, or rules how jazz music builds. You know that quartet [?] that is rule for jazz music. For symphony it is absolutely different rules. It doesn't mean that s[?] and cannot exist but if you compose symphony, you cannot use jazz square.

(Looking at example) It's loss of any rules, any principles of construction. Or it's like in architecture, you can build a building in style of Corbusier or in style of the Renaissance, but you can't mix them.

FR: Can you give her just a small explanation of your analogy for inverse perspective with the window?

KP: Yeah, you can compare icon not with picture but with window because when you look at something through window, you can look from different positions. You know, from here you will see one picture. From there, you will see other picture. And all together, you have to put on icon. Why icon doesn't have one point of view. You can see from here, you can see sky. You compress them in the space of icon.

FR: With a single figure, the fact is you will notice that because, say you were looking at a window and it goes out like that. So because of that, when you're looking at a single figure ---
Tape ends.