

Make change,
"Theotokos"
meaning
Mother of God

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Fieldworker(s): Maggie Holtzberg, Lian Jue (intern)

Interviewee(s): Xenia Pokrovsky, Russian Iconographer & Marek Czarnecki, apprentice

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Brief summary of tape contents: Ms. Pokrovsky specializes in the art of 'writing' Russian Orthodox Christian icons. Her apprentice Marek Czarnecki and she discuss the writing of icons, what an individual artist brings to the tradition, two great iconographers, Andrei Rublev and Theophanes the Greek, linear perspective versus inverse perspective, Bulgarian icons, Ksenia's teachers, the Soviet Union during the 1960s when to write icons was considered religious propaganda, the use of natural pigments, egg tempera and wax, woman from Old Believer family who sings laments, why Marek wanted to study with Xenia, the sacramental nature of icons, the use of icons for prayer, principle of composition and balance, discussion of particular icons, the destruction of Russian icons, Xenia's pallet, the grinding of pigment and mixing with egg tempera, the use of cinnabar, discussion of Christopher Gosey.

Counter/ABS	Contents
000	MH: Tell us your name, both of you since we're interviewing two people today. XP: My name? My name is Xenia Pokrovsky. MC: Marek Czarnecki. MH: OK. And..um..well we can start any number of places. But uh..the way I found, that I know about both of you is because of an apprenticeship you're involved with through Connecticut and Massachusetts. So, why don't you talk about how you two met each other perhaps and what that is that you're doing? It doesn't matter who starts you can both..you can engage her in conversation.
007	MC: I'm a student of iconography, and I needed a good teacher. Because iconography is not something you can learn on your own. Um..and a lot..and iconography is made of this idea of a canon, of a body of knowledge. And um..I

learned it's not something you can just pick up in a book. It's something that somebody has to show you.

So I was studying with another iconographer..um..and I had seen Ksenia's work in a monastery and just thought it was so amazing. I was just immediately drawn to it. And then I saw you're work in New Jersey, at the Orthodoxy exhibit, right? [Xenia mumbles] No, there was an exhibit of treasures of Orthodoxy, right? And you did one icon, a little icon? Life of St. Herman, something like that?

XP: Yeah, I think so.

MC: And that's when I knew I wanted to study with Ksenia.

So, and um..I received a small grant from the Connecticut Commission on the Arts. And I found Ksenia out and that's how I've been able to study with her.

017 MH: OK. Tell me something about..um..your background. We were just talking about where you were born and coming to this country. So can you begin talking about where you were born and at what point and why you came to the United States?

020 XP: I came here in the United States as a political refugee. I was born in Russia. I grow up in Moscow, and I was educated..it's funny but I was educated as a scientist. By a physicist or molecular biologist..that..that stuff. But after two years of work in Academy of Science, I understood that, it's not for me. To be scientist is not my way, for my life. And my spiritual director, father Alexandramin [?], who was martyred in 1990, he was killed by Russian fascists because he was Jew. And he recommended me, if I want to stop my scientific work, I have to start to write icons. And it was in the end of 60s. And I tried, I started. And little by little my experience is more than 30 years. What can I say 'bout me? (chuckling)

032 MH: When you say 'write' icons, what does that mean?

XP: Uh..it's very important. We never say 'I paint' icons. I write icons, he writes icons..because icon it's not picture. It's principally not picture. It's some theological text. And that text must be written grammatically correct. Grammatically correct, I mean in um..in correct terms. In correct movements because, in position of uh..hands, for example, always means something. It's some..some very spiritual..it's like to study and to use new language. And that language was very common in Middle Ages, but little by little when iconography start to lose sacral meaning and sacral..um..heart, it became more and more secular, that language of iconography becomes not so easily understandable.

047 And now we have to study that language practically from beginning. And we must be correct in dogmas, in some vision of church. And any picture of any artist, it is picture of his vision of things. His vision of universe. His vision of being. But iconography is not your personal spiritual experience. It's not your personal vision of invisible world. It is church vision. It is church understanding. And in your icon, you express not your understanding, but church understanding of being, of universe, of meaning of life, of meaning of death, of meaning of eternity and everything.

057 MH: So what is it that the individual brings to the icon? If it's not your vision what is it you're bringing to it?

XP: Your character, your temperament. Your..manner, your artistic manner. Your talent. And you're understanding of balance between artistic and spiritual. And that's very important. If it's spiritual meaning is lost, is became picture. If it's made without any artistic talent, it's very poor icon, very primitive. And..

064 MC: When Xenia talks about icons a lot she always uses the metaphor of music, right? And..it's like a piece of classical music. You have a score in front of you but there's radical difference between the way Liberace would play something and the way Glenn Gould would play something. So I think that's a good metaphor for the way that the personality comes through in the work of iconography.

XP: For example, I can tell about two great iconographers. They lived at the same time in 14th century. I mean Andrei Rublev and Theophanes the Greek. They lived on the same place in Moscow or near Moscow. But if you will compare their icons they're totally different. Icons of Rublav is high-top, is the best synthesis of spirituality..spirituality and artistic talent. And what makes his icons like..something icons of genius. It's extremely balanced. It's um..in his icon you can, you can feel very high, very deep hesychstic..hesychastic? Spiritual experience.

079 MH: What's the word?

MC: Hesychastic.

MH: How do you spell that?

MC: H-E-S-A..wait..H-E-S-Y-C-H-A-S-T-I-C.

MH: And it means?

MC: It's a specific kind of spirituality. It's a specific spiritual experience..silence.

082 XKP: It is praying in silence. Silence of um..[Russian word boydya ?]. Silence of all emotions. You must be out of any emotions. It's like transcensos [?], like..(MC: Meditation.) No, it's not meditation. Meditation and praying is totally different things, not the same. As praying.

It was..it was practically, it started in the 4th century in Egyptian desert. By the great hermits like Anthony the Great, Marcario the Great. And it was formed as a church teaching by Gregory Palamos by 14th century in Greece on Mount Asus [?]. And Rublav, he was..he had great spiritual experience. At the same time he was great artist. But, Theophanes the Greek. His icons are higher than..he's over than art. He's higher than art. If you can..if you can compare icons of Rublav with the best music, what you can imagine, the perfect, absolute, heaven music. Icon of Theophanes the Greek, you can compare with divinity silence? Or, divine silence (MC: Divine silence.) Divine silence. What is absolute, absolute.

- 102 Because on frescos, his art looks strange, it's not art. It's more than art. It's "over-art". It looks like he doesn't care about art. His spirituality is so..prevalent. Is so great, so expressive that art becomes not so important. Then there's the contemporary iconographers and their icons are so different if you watch, you will be amazed. What can I say (chuckling). Yes, I can show you. You can compare. Just right now.
- 110 MH: And you feel that in your own icon writing you can..
- XP: I'm just tool, I'm just tool.
- MC: I wanted to ask you Xenia do you think that the icon painter is just like a medium?
- XP: Kind of, kind of. But not..if you will say that I am medium, it's mistake. Because you transform. You express..you add your personality.
- MC: It's inevitable.
- XP: Yeah. It's difficult to say. It's very special.
- 116 MH: Um..there was a term that we just heard and touched on briefly in the other room. And I want you to explain the notion of "reverse perspective." Can you tell us something about that.
- XP: Something about inverse perspective. Um..you know linear perspective was known in ancient Greece. It's not something newly discovered in time of Renaissance. But iconography base it on fayoum portraits and on the Egyptian art. Um..we probably choose inverse perspective for some purpose..just time. Because first icons were just very simple images. But the development of icons, of iconography needs to uh..decide three problems: how to put on the same space, events from different times? How to put on the same space, events from different geographical places? And how to put on the same space, space of earth, space of heaven, and space of hell, for example? How to make image of eternity, how to make image of heaven?
- 135 And linear perspective creates illusion of deepness. Inverse perspective makes..it's why we call icon window in eternity. Because if you on that picture..on the picture, you can see only space inside frame. When you are looking in window, you can move your head, and you can see what is on the left side in window. You can see what is from right side on window. You can look on top. You can look bottom. And you can see much more than border of frame of window.
- This I can compare it with inverse perspective. Inverse perspective gives you opportunity to create. It it never looks funny..it never looks funny events from different times, on icon. It looks very organic.
- 146 MC: Can you talk about how inverse perspective effects the proportions of the body? And how it transforms the figure?

XP: Well it's so difficult to explain in words. You can do it better. I can draw but you can..my impression is not enough.

MC: Well, just that the whole figure changes. A lot of times I'll ask Ksenia you know why are their ears turning in? You know why is the nose so small, why is the head shaped, you know. It's like all..all matter is transformed (KP: Yes!) by this by this sense of..this context of inverse perspective. And it's not just furniture, it's not just architecture. It's everything. It's the whole body. So you know, that the head becomes large and wide, because it's the sides coming forward, right?

154 MH: And you talked about the vanishing point?

MC: Well the vanishing point is outside the picture. It's you, it's where you stand. It's not inside the picture, it's outside the picture. So..

XP: Yeah, because point of perspective in picture is behind picture.

MC: But it's an atmos-- it creates a new atmosphere. Right, like inside the icon.

XP: A new universe. (MC: Yeah.) It's practically a new world. It's like kids. Kids, they feel they have list of paper. And it is..his universe or his creation. And they see that it just only two dimensions. And they use only two dimensions. It's not..uh..not taught, who did not learn, kids if they create just like..he understand. Intuitively they use inverse perspective. They create two-dimensions world. Because practically they have flat piece of paper. On um..subway Davis Square. Davis Square? It's in subway station, it's a lot of tiles created with kids. And it's perfect sample of um how they use flat surface. How they never make illusion of third dimension. They use inverse perspective just intuitively. And always when I uh..I'm on Davis Square, I enjoy that styles kids' work.

175 MC: But it's not primitive.

XP: It's not primitive, it's not primitive. You cannot say that it's primitive. It is special vision.

LJ: What do you define as primitive forms?

XP: If you don't understand what you are doing (chuckling).

178 MH: And that actually I'm curious as what you would think of..how would you define folk art? What's folk art to you?

XP: You know I'm not specialist in folk art. But um I just..some years ago I read article of art historian and he's great restorer. Russian, Russian gentleman. His last name is Titiragnigov [?]. And he was known because he um discovered that um Mr. Hand [?] collection it was three-quarters of fakes. And he has great feeling of art. And he wrote article about folk art. That folk art, it was Old Believers reaction. To Western influence on Russian culture. Maybe they didn't understand what they did. They did it intuitively. It's how some very tradition folk Russian art developed in 17th, 18th, 19th centuries. It's like well-known Khokhloma. well

known parych[?]. Uh it's uh hokhloma or someone north (speaks in Russian "pryalchia pryalchia pryalchia") to make yarn.

MC: Spinning.

XP: Spinning, the creation of spinning. I can show you book. And it's all that kind of folk art appeared in Old Believers community.

201 MC: I think iconography I mean..it shouldn't be confused at all with folk art.

XP: That's not folk art.

MH: It's not..why?

XP: Because it's very deep-based art. It's art developed in beginning in uh..(tapping table) Egyptian, in catacombs. Egyptian roads. After that, some Roman..uh..not influence. Influence? It's more strong than influence. Culture. It was culture.

MC: Iconography moved from east to west, and every culture put its stamp on it and helped develop it. Um I think in the United States it's confusing to talk about folk art 'cause what we see as folk art is actually much more sophisticated or deeper than a lot of art that we see in galleries. You know, that we've lost a sort of tradition of high art. So here everything is kind of mixed up.

I think iconography sometimes lapses into it or touches it, and like the Romanian..like the glass Romanian glass..

214 XP: Yeah well that is..became primitive. Why we consider Romanian icons..is a primitive. Because they took too much from folk art.

MC: And also they didn't understand the tradition and they broke forms and broke structures and they just blindly repeated things. There wasn't the inner..the inner understanding.

XP: They didn't understand meaning of what they did. But the same happened in Bulgaria. It's..um..when Bulgaria was part of Byzantine. Bulgarian icons had very high level, but it was Byzantine level. Um in 17..when Bulgaria was under Turkish? It became just folk art, and this became primitive. Because it's not the real folk art. It's not icons. It's something between. It's lost some beauty of folk art, and lost beauty of icons.

226 MC: I think of folk art as also being much more spontaneous?

XP: More spontaneous, yeah.

MC: And um..I was just thinking of something but I'll have to come back to it about..folk art is much more spontaneous and iconography is like something you can never stop studying. Like you'll never hit the bottom of it.

MH: And it seems like you need to be shown and mentored by someone. You need to apprentice with a master in iconography. Is that true?

232 MC: Well that's the way Xenia we were talking with Father Paul about studying, and you said you have to study with someone at least three years. And who were your teachers?

XP: My teachers? You know when I started in the end of 60s, practically we had, maybe we had more iconographers than we knew. But it was crime. To write icons in Russia, in Soviet Union it was crime equal to: to make weapon, to make drugs, to make pornography and to write icons. It was four equal crimes (laughing).

MH: Why?

XP: I had these books..because it was a religious propaganda.

MC: Subversive.

XP: And it was danger like drugs and like weapons. And they were right. It was real (laughing). And we were underground. And we didn't know each other. I know only about Mother Ulanya[?]. She lived near uh Sonsergi[?] Monastery. And she started to write icons in 1925, in the terrible time. She was secret nun.

MH: She was what?

XP: Secret nun. She was secret nun. Then her father was priest. He perished in camp. And that it was like usual. And um but I met her after some years of my experience. I met some friend who started to write icons just 6-7 months before me. And uh we just we visited museums, and we tried to understand just how it made. Not how it beauty. Now how it..what is art? But understand technique, like we say like kitchin, cooking all that. Just recipes. And we had the friends in restorers, and we could watch.. You know if um if um something closed one item, you can see layers inside. The ground layers. And we try to understand how to put, how transparent must be every layer. Or how heavy it must be.

266 Just, we learned from um old masters in museums.

MC: And you did conservation work too.

XP: Yeah, yeah. I'd restore it. I'd conserve it. And it gave me a lot of understanding of technique.

270 MH: Can you talk about the pigments, the materials that you use.

XP: Yeah. In ancient Egypt, for sarcophagus painting and for fayoum portraits, they use it only natural pigments of course because they didn't know others. They used lapis lazuli. They used cinnabar. They use different colored clays. Clays could be green, could be violet, could be lilac, could be pink, could be um brown, could be very bright yellow. It's whole palette.

And what they use? They used malachite, they used lapis lazuli. They used..um..I'm not sure about crizacola[?]. It's tradition Byzantine. Diaptoz[?], it's mineral diaptoz[?]. And the same pigments, 'course iconographers started to use. It was just natural. But uh..people discovered that they..they had and fayoum portraits they made only in that technique.

- 286 And we know of two types of fayoum portraits. It's Egyptian funeral portraits. Egg tempera and wax..wax tempura. The wax mixed with the same powder and pigments, or egg emulsion mixed with that. Sometimes they used mixed technique and waxed and egg tempura. But, people discovered that that colors are very light-fast, easy to fine, they're everywhere. And the colors they paint became traditional for icons.

Now, now. I think it's very important to use natural pigments. Because, at first you, you never are able to balance synthetic-acrylic or some, some kind of paints. So harmonic, and so beauty-like, something natural, something gleaming[?]. Natural pigments, if they're powdered, they keep structure of crystals. If you will look some powder pigment in microscope, you can see crystals. They're miniature micro-crystals which reflect light, and they work different way. They're not only color surface, they make light reflect..light reflecting (MC: Uh-hm) surface. They work differently. And usually I say that um..to make, to use acrylic for icons the same like to make jewelry from plastic. Jewelry must be from natural things.

- 311 MC: But I've also heard you um use a much more pragmatic explanation, saying that um..synthetic pigments are dangerous.

XP: They're dangerous. They're not light-fast. They're not tested by time. We can see now sarcophagus..sarcophagus? [MC repeats word] With a perfect colors.

LJ: Are you referring to the Roman funerary masks that were on the..

MC: Fayoum, yeah.

LJ: Yeah. I see what you mean.

- 318 XP: It's not Roman it's Egyptian.

MC: Greco-Egyptian. [Conversation]. Greco-Egyptian..yeah it's time of Roman Empire, it's Egypt..Egypt was under Roman Empire, and why first iconographers appeared in Alexandria, or in north of Egypt. Egypt? [MC: Egypt.] Egypt, yeah.

[Knock at door, someone enters room]

- 326 MH: What form do you get these pigments in? Do you grind them? How do they come?

MC: Some of them come prepared. There's um art supplies stores all across the United States. You can buy prepared pigments.

XP: All from Kramer[?]. Yeah, I know only one company who sell really natural pigments. They don't have..they don't have everything what I know is a pigments.

MC: But they're not always enough for your..you have such specific needs for 'em you often have to make them yourself, or refine them.

XP: Yeah, I just uh..at first, I broke stones. Just for like crumbs. And after that I used special piece glass and special other piece of glass..how do you call that?

MC: Yeah, like a mortar and pestle.

XP: Yeah, like a mortar and pestle.

MH: Oh, yeah.

XP: Yeah, and I make powder. I found a lot of stones here which could be used for icons. And we do it.

340 MC: But this kind of sensitivity, and subtlety only comes with experience.

XP: Yes, yeah..yeah, but it comes.

MC: I remembered what I was thinking before, like what we were talking about folk art. Um, and why it's confused with folk art? It's because iconography is a popular art. Alright, it's different like everyone should be able to, anybody can if they want to. And a lot of iconographers aren't artists, right? They don't have an art background. Um..but it's not..it's confusing. It's accessible, but it's not folk art. Does that make sense Xenia?

XP: Yes, yeah, yeah. Yeah, definitely.

349 MH: Although when you speaking about the woman you know who's Jewish and sings. Remember? [MC: She's an Old Believer] An Old Believer, I'm sorry she's an Old Believer, and she sings..talk about that again.

XP: She's not old believer. She's not old believer.

MC: She's from an Old Believer family.

XP: She's from Old Believer community, I don't know about her family.

MH: But when you speaking about that..in-between singing and crying. I think you talked about it as being a folk, you know, deep, remember?

357 XP: It's very deep, it's very deep..uh..folk north. North folk art. I think it's because there were..there were a lot of sailors, and they..very often they perished in sea, and its connected with funeral cry. And all singing is colored with that, with that hue, something tragic.

MC: But iconography too is too self-conscious to be a folk art. It's too self-aware to be a folk art.

MH: Well it depends how you define a folk art. Cause in my view, folk art is very conscious, and there's a respect for tradition, you know, there's a common definition of folk art that is, I think, what you're thinking. But my view of folk art, or traditional art..um..this fits in because its um..very conscious there's a great deal of craft. And often many folk arts are melding aesthetics with spirituality. And balance. Or a functionality with aesthetics. And that's in balance. And the individual doesn't matter, you know, you're adhering to a tradition. So it's..there's..there are many definitions of folk art.

377 XP: Because it's many kinds of tradition. It could be just cultural tradition. Its could be ethnic tradition. Its could be spiritual tradition. Its could be pagan tradition. And it depends with what kind of tradition that folk art is connected. And what kind of tradition expresses that folk art.

MH: Absolutely. Yeah. And we look at all those things. Um. So it's complicated because this seems as if one has to study it. And there are often traditions..folk art traditions that are passed down within families, within ethnic communities, within occupations.

MC: But also maybe they've just seen a lot of really bad iconography. [MH: Could be.] Because it's a new tradition here. So when we see iconography here it's very primitive.I've seen some..I mean, some icons look like just coloring books. [MH: Right.] And that aren't properly developed.

MH: I know, and that's the thing. You know some people think folk art is just bad imitations of fine art. But I don't believe that.

[Interruption]

395 MH: This is a cutting board?

XP: It is..yeah. It is from, it's folk. It's traditional Russian north folk. They use it only practically only two colors. Red ochre and charcoal. Black and that reddish. And, you can see it's very simple, and it's typical north. But from old believers, they make the same cutboards absolutely different. I can show you book. They're very sophisticated. They have a lot of flowers. They have some ladies, gentlemen. It's north. It's very poor colors, it's no flowers.

MC: The 20th century though I just thought there's an inversion. Before folk artists looked up to what sophisticated academic artists were doing. And in the 20th c. it switched, and everyone looked to folk art for inspiration like Matisse, like Picasso, like Braque. You know.

MH: And composers. Beethoven.

MC: Right. Listz.

MH: Uh-huh. Right. Yeah. I think there's always been an exchange. But is this..this cutting board looks like it's not used. It's more decorative. I don't see any..

MC: Why would you spoil that? [MH: Yeah.] Especially if it's painted.

MH: Right.

417 MC: I think mostly that's why people in the United States confuse iconography with folk art. As it's..here it's a very new tradition. Um and we have so many bad examples of it. You know, but it's also..I mean maybe that's good because it's a popular art.

MH: It's more like a popular..yeah.

MC: You know, and there are people who do it excellently. You know.

MH: Right. Well there's masters in any tradition.

MC: And I think once you get used to seeing really classical, sound traditional iconography it will change the criteria and the understanding of it. It will improve it.

424 MH: Well what was it in..in um..how do you say her name? [MC: Ksenia.] What was it in Xenia that drew you to want to study with her in particular?

MC: Oh it what was apparent in her work. You know it was so balanced. It was so harmonious. Um and the looks on the faces of the saints were so compassionate. You know it was interesting because I was studying with another iconographer and would look at her work and everything I had learned was wrong. And I just was so..it was..just so spoke to me that I just thought this is what I want my work to be like. This is what I want to see come out of me as well. And um..something very intangible about a teacher that can pass that on.

437 LJ: I was going to ask you a question on..on you were saying how you can't just look at this iconography in a book and copy out of it. [MC: No.] So what aspects about learning the art form that goes beyond just looking at and studying the forms and copying out of it..what have you..

MC: It's a living experience. You know, it's a living thing. Um and it's not something you can pick up like a correspondence class, you know. It's much smarter than you, it's much bigger than you, and it's something that a simple document can't transmit. You know, and there's also just..it's really small stuff like the way Xenia can hold a brush, the kind of brushes she uses. Um you know the way she makes her marks. It's very different than I would have even guessed. You know, and it's not something you can see in the piece. You have to see how it's constructed.

451 MH: And usually on Friday's what do you do? I mean I just realized we're in the way of your learning. Um..what would you..if we weren't here what would you be doing right now?

MC: Well when you leave we'll start working. [MH: OK.] I'm working on an icon of the Trinity. And you know first we start with a very sound drawing. And after I do a drawing Xenia checks it and then there's usually lessons to be found in

the drawing, of understanding the structure. Um..and after we get a sound drawing we transfer it on to the panel, and then we start painting. So then we begin with balancing the colors, and balancing the composition, and making sure that nothing is dis-harmonious. And then we start by developing the figures with lights. So today we'll be working on..bringing out the first lights on the icon.

462 MH: Lights, what do you mean?

MC: Like you start with uh..the icon goes from dark to light. So you start with a ground color, and then you build tones up on top of it. And today we'll start working on the first tones. And but there's something wonderful about Ksenia that she has this very classical grounding, it's very stable. It's very pragmatic, you know, and she's answered a lot of the questions. Like when you look at an icon and you try to paint it, there's a lot of things that you just can't figure out. You know so you make a literal copy without understanding what it really means.

LJ: What kind of things?

MC: Well like say the way the fold of the fabric comes down. There's actually a compositional idea and a structure behind it. It's just not a zigzag with lines drawn onto it, you know. And she really had to point that out, you know you can make a very dumb copy. I mean dumb in the best sense like very straightforward without understanding it. But to internalize what you're really doing you need to have someone point out to you and say 'look at this, look at this.' And iconography is so deep.

MH: With meaning yeah.

MC: With meaning, but also a lot of it is not apparent. There's an immediacy to it, but when you want to construct it, when you decide to take it on for yourself it..it's a different, you have to have a much different understanding. You really need to have someone sit down and point out to you what this is and how it's done. But it's a living experience.

486 LJ: Yeah, and going further into your experience of it, you said how engaging with the iconographic forms was a form of spiritual meditation? [MC: uh-hm.] And I think you mentioned earlier how if you don't..if you're not kind of within that realm it shows up. Can you maybe talk more about when..I guess when you're not engaged with it and something shows up like that? I'd like to know more about that experience.

MC: Well you have to believe in what you're doing. You know you have to be the authority for it. You know if you don't put that in the work than nobody else can put it in there for you. You know you work for your own sanctification and for the sanctification of people who use your work. You know so you have to be careful. You know it's not something you can do with any kind of distance, you know which is a very..like traditionally of painting in the Western..you look at it with a very cold objectivity. It's not like that.

503 LJ: Talk more about um..then the act of being the first one to pray in front of it after it's finished. Kind of..I guess the meaning behind that gesture.

MC: Well I like it because there's no difference between the person who makes it and the person who uses it. And it's primary purpose is sacramental. You know, it's like Xenia said it's art second. It's..it's sacramental first. We call them sacramental. The sacramental is something that you use to help you in prayer. You know and it's good to you know..you do have to be a believer to do the work. But it's not all. You also need a strong artistic grounding. You know because there's a lot of people that have a tremendous amount of faith, and a lot of people who became saints but they couldn't paint. You know they couldn't create icons even though they themselves became icons.

518 MH: Well actually can you tell me, just for my ignorance sake, how does..what is an icon?

MC: Icon? It's a Greek word that means 'image.'

MH: So when you were talking about a saint that becomes an icon, can you run through that again?

MC: Sure. Because the saint manifests the living image of God. You know and the icon tries to capture the dual nature of man - that he has a body and a soul. And that those are articulated in the forms of the icon. And the space of the icon, you know. And a person becomes a living icon when they manifest the image of God. And later the church canonizes him and creates the man-made icon of the living saint. But again it's a living thing. It's a living tradition. It's where Christianity differentiates from Paganism. And why we have the cult of saints and of relics is we have to prove these people were historical, tangible people, and the icon is a representation of that success.

MH: Hm. Ok, great. Well maybe um..yeah I want her to talk about the use of the icons, of the icons she creates, and then maybe..oh smoking.

LJ: Do you want to go maybe in there?

MC: Yeah you can have her talk about the work. Is this what you need Maggie?

MH: It's wonderful.

[Recording in Xenia's studio]

543 MH: Um..I had a question about the use of icons. These we see, five or six in here. What will become of them? That your..who uses them?

XP: Some people have home for a..home for praying. Or in churches, it's not just the creation of church. Because we can see they understand church as a cosmos. And icon of some saint, it means he's real presence here. That just reminds us that all they are here with us. Especially in time of liturgy, in time of service. They really present with us, and they are really praying with us.

566 LJ: I was wondering about your sense of balance and I know you mentioned..like in this one right here your use of arcs. Can you talk about that a little more?

XP: No, it's a..just art. It's principles of composition. Every composition has some structure. Some scheme, some general lines, general shapes. Or for example, this icon is based on the arc lines. You see? Like that, or like that. Everything constructed in that shape.

MH: And could you say again about what's represented in the bottom?

580 XP: This icon, Life Giving Spring. Life Giving Spring, icon of the most holy Fat August[?]. And that image, that Fat August[?] with, it changes, it's sign of or symbol of paradise. It's level of paradise. It's level of our real earth life. That is a real way to hell. It's real way to hell is to be spiritually blind, to be spiritually paralyzed and want to do goods, but 'I paralyzed, I cannot', or to be demonic, to be in power of Satan. And, you have choice, you have choice. You have choice to go up, or to go down. And if you drink that living water, living water in a Hebrew, in usage, in Palestine or Israel, in time of Christ is a..did not mean something special. Because Israel is very poor with water. Um so our springs of fresh water were very rare. Just here and some there. And during wintertime, people collected water in some cisterns, and use in summer time, in some wells in some cisterns. And that water was not fresh.

[Tape Side B]

Water from [MC: Contaminated.]..contaminated from winter. But somewhere where sources of fresh water, some springs. And water from springs, Jewish people called 'living water.' It was just, just common sense of that expression. Living water is water from source, from spring, not from well, from cistern with old water. And in parable with..Semititan [Semitic] woman, he said, Christ said to woman, 'I can give you living water.' And she couldn't understand him because he was talking about Eternity life. Water, which give her life immortal life. But she understood that He was talking just about water from spring. It was just misunderstanding.

626 For her and for us, that expression 'living water' means some holy water. And she asked of Him, 'where will you take this? It's not source here, it's not a..not spring here of fresh water. Where will take that fresh water, living water?' But living water of Christ, it's everything. It's life and Christ, it's Holy Communion. And uh..we can understand [sounds like] Fat August[?] is a book (dog whines), and Christ is logos from that book. Fat August[?] is life-giving spring, but Christ is that living water from life-giving spring. It's many layers, many levels of understanding.

MC: This a more of a..allegorical icon right? It's very, very interactive..

XP: This is more allegorical, yeah.

MC: It's different than like an icon like this which is more devotional. It's more one-on-one, it's more direct.

XP: Yeah, yeah.

637 LJ: Now I was looking at the um..the image of what you modelled this on. And I noticed that he pointed out that you took the Madonna and you lifted her up. Whereas before she was within the well and her feet are cut off.

XP: It's just my artistic decision. (LJ: Yeah.) It's my feeling. My sense of that.

MC: But it also clarifies the meaning, I think.

XP: Yep, yeah.

MC: Because before it can be a very confusing and strange icon sometimes. But the way that Ksenia's changed it really clarified it.

643 XP: And it's just allegorical.If you are spiritually blind, only holy water, only Christ, Christ is holy water, is living water, can heal you. If you paralyzed, you don't have your human power to stand up. You need Christ, you need living water holy water. If you are demonic, only Christ can clean you, to make you free from demon.

LJ: What I'm curious is how do you know when those individual decisions like you did here while remaining within the tradition of you know..painting..

MC: When you feel you have the authority to change things..

XP: I don't know. (laughing)

651 MC: Is it intuitive Xenia? What did you say?

XP: I think it's intuitive. I think it's intuitive.

MC: But it's also better to be conservative than to be..

XP: It's better to be conservative. You must be extremely careful because you can change something a little, but theological meaning can change.

MC: Right. And also the icon is a public act. (KP: Yes). And you know..it makes a difference to whoever looks at it. You know you can misinform people.

656 XP: In Byzantine, when somebody uh..wrote some icon, it was like custom or tradition. If he wrote some new icon, he must to put this icon in church where everyone can see that church. If somebody will see some heresy in that icon, he must write letter to Bishop. 'I think that is something heretical.' If during 40 days, nobody will tell about something heretical, icon becomes blessed by church.

LJ: I also liked how you..in this one right here..you used these modern (points to modern symbols of Lenin's mausoleum and Empire State building crumbling into the Inferno.)

XP: Why not? Why not?

LJ: Yeah, why not?

667 XP: But figure of archangel Michael is very traditional. He's from Revelation of John the theologian from Upper Calypsus[?].

LJ: I was curious in Russia when you worked underground, what does that mean? Where did you paint then, and how did you keep it hidden from..(laughing).

XP: Oh I had some troubles. I had some troubles with KGB, with some..it wasn't court, in police. I just said 'it's my hobby.' I have five kids, I'm sitting at home, I have to do something, I'm believer.

676 MC: Xenia, did the Soviets do anything to preserve iconography? Did the Soviets preserve any aspect of iconography.

XP: Ah what do you mean?

MC: Well I'm under the impression that when the churches were closed, the Soviets collected all the icons.

XP: They burned millions of icons. They burned millions. And only, only after they discovered that the Russian icons became like currency, they can sell a part of Russia, they started to collect. But before you can find icon of 14th c. on the street or in some barn or in some roof storage.

MC: Are there any, say, in the Hermitage?

[Dog knocks over poster from chair..some confusion.]

MC: Would the great museums like the Hermitage, would they have any in their collection?

XP: No, they had. But, it's just enthusiastic people did it. Just enthusiastic people. Or some um historical museum in Moscow. They have thousands and thousands of items. But in 30s, most of them were burned. And Byzantine icons and Russian icons and 15th, 16th and 17th centuries they were burned. They need storage room for..

MC: There's lots of stories of icons being cut apart and used for stairs and for watering troughs and being nailed up to use as you know to close off windows just because the wood was so sturdy. But that it's sacred meaning being completely secondary to its utilitarian possibilities, as scrapwood.

698 XP: Yeah, my friend, he was working in trade school gallery. He found that icon, 13th c., he found in some small village and it was used just to cover broken window from outside. And he noticed that nail made from oak. And he discovered that its very old board. And he took it in trade school gallery and they discovered that amazing icon. It's Byzantine icon, 13th c.

LJ: Where do you get the wood? Do you actually carve out the shapes?

XP: Ah, I have carpenter who makes icon boards for me. Because it's a special technique to make icon boards. You cannot use fresh wood, because it will bend, warp.

MH: Seasoned wood.

XP: Yes.

MH: What kind of wood is it?

XP: Its could be mahogany, its could be pine, its could be birch. But it must be dry wood. (mumbling).

711 LJ: I noticed you were touching the surface. It seems like this is very durable.

XP: Yeah because it (some conversation)..yeah. Because some here is very thin layer of, one layer of paint. Some very, two, three, four, five.

MC: But when you finish painting it you cover it with copal. A lot of times they used to say it was amber, right? They used to..it's a kind of amber.

XP: Copal is uh..it's kind but it's resin yeah. It's approximately the same peak[?], but amber is very old and copal is younger.

MH: And that protects it.

MC: Yeah but also the egg tempura itself like overtime it fossilizes and it becomes very, very strong.

XP: And very resistant to any chemicals.

721 MH: Can you just describe as we're looking at your working surface what, what do you have here? Can you, describe what you have on your desk?

XP: (laughing) Mess. I have mess. I have just mess.

MH: What do we see here? Many, many brushes.

XP: Brushes. Some varnishes. Varnish. I use everything. I used tooth (picks up long wooden skewers)..I use Q-tips. What I use? I use that. I use everything, what I can find.

LJ: The shishkabob.. MH: a skewer, a skewer.

XP: I use some um..Coca-cola bottles to make some spoon? MH: Oh plastic. KP: Plastic. And I use for bottom of Coca-cola bottles (conversation). Yeah, it's very convenient. It's light. It doesn't scratch and I can put it here. I can mix some base color with something with white with more white. It's easy cleanable.

736 I use pill holders from pharmacy, for pigments. As you can see my palette is more than hundred natural colors.

MH: Wow. Let's see, four times..1, 2, 3, 4..7, 28 times 12.

XP: Yeah, 28, 4. And I have even more. It's my collection of my pigments.

MC: Ksenia, could you show them the box of the ores that you use to grind down? You have a box of the ores?

XP: Ah, it's not ores, it's stones.

MC: Right, ores. KP: Ores. MC: Clays.

(Xenia moves back table and looks for her box of stones.)

XP: Yeah, I have some small colored ones.

727 LJ: Marek, what's the origin of the green pigment?

MC: Clay. LJ: That's clay? MC: It's called terra verte. Greener, greener.

LJ: Where do they get the green though?

MC: Um earth comes in every..I remember driving on a train through Spain and being amazed at the color of the clay.

LJ: Which is green?

MC: Where there it was like this blood red. You know, terra cotta. It's like a deeper red. LJ: Yeah, I've seen that. MC: Venetian is a different kind of earth. Xenia always brings back pink clay. I've never seen it anywhere else except in her studio. Clay that's actually pink. Some of them look exactly like earth, you know like when you look at the umbers. It looks like dirt, because it is. There's green ochres. Yellow ochre comes from green ochre, like if you let the green settle, the lighter pigments are siphoned off and made into yellow ochre.

736 (Some conversation). XP: Ah, these..stores what I found here. They're useable. But where's my colors?

MC: Yeah, you have like a box. KP: I know.

MH: The purple is beautiful.

(Xenia pours out the box of stones on the floor).

MH: Where did you collect these from?

XP: Uh..everywhere. Here, just here around. MH: Yeah. XP:...around Boston. That is hematite, I bought it in some store. But all that I can use.

MH: So you crush it?

XP: Yeah, I crush and after that I make powder with some tools. With that and..

(Xenia takes out a glass surface and a cylindrical pestal. Some conversation and sounds of construction taking place in the other room.)

MC: Terra verte. (Picks out and shows a green stone from the pile).

LJ: Right, there we go.

MC: You can use these as malachite. (Some conversation).

752 XP: You can see I have something left here.

MH: What liquid is that?

XP: Ah, it's water.

(Xenia takes stone powder and begins grinding the powder with water onto the glass plate using a circular motion)

XP: It's powder of stone.

MH: Glass and glass.

XP: Yeah! But it's um. . . I sanded glass. I sanded glass and I sanded that surface. It's matte, it's not shiny. Just this way, just this way. [More conversation.] No, no no no. I know what I need. Where's my samples? There, reconstruction. (Maggie laughs). And I constructed that too.

MH: For light!

765 XP: Yeah it was..the chemical was here. And we raised it and I add windows. I can add. And now it's very light. [Some more mumblin.]

MC: I have some in my backpack I can show you. [Responding to a question from Lian on what color the hematite stone produces.]

MH: Is it similar to that color or something else?

MC: I have..this is probably going to come out like a dark black but the stuff I have is like a really deep purple. Like a blackish purple. And then there's another one I have it's like a reddish, reddish-purple, like red wine. But then there's one that's almost black, but it's really purple, a deep purple.

LJ: Um. I like those stones.

MC: Yeah. But I think you can begin to see the palette. MH: Uh-hm. LJ: It's amazing.

775 MC: Pink, yellow ochre. LJ: Are these stones gathered from around here?

MC: Around here.

MH: Wow, amazing.

XP: Now I use hammer.

[Some conversation. Xenia sanding the pigment onto the glass plate. Then taking a razor to scrape the plate and gather up the pigment.]

788 MC: That's a beautiful color.

XP: Yeah, we'll use it immediately.

MH: So you make it and use it and not store it?

MC: You can dry it. MH: You can. MC: Like if you let it dry you can keep it in a powder. Sometimes too you get pigments that are too course, so they need to be ground down. Some are very sandy.

MH: What's that right there, that yellow liquid?

MC: Egg yolk with vinegar. And that's the medium, the binder for the paint.

[Xenia takes the pigment and starts painting the icon. Sounds of camera clicking.]

806 XP: Now, I have to repeat some here. [Continues painting.]

MH: Does it soak in?

MC: But you can feel it here. It's very waxy. Xenia, do you put on all the cool colors first?

XP: No, why? Usual way it must be cooler than base color. MC: Uh-hm.

828 XP: And colors are so noble, and natural. That's why I love it so much. And that red, it is cinnabar. It is real cinnabar.

LJ: What is cinnabar?

XP: Ah? [LJ repeats question.] Mercury, mercury. It is natural mercury.

MH: Wow, gorgeous color. It's so rich.

XP: Rich, and tender. Strong, and tender.

834 MH: Does it symbolize anything that..

XP: You know it's for marches. It symbolize march at dawn. But it's useable for..when you need some red. You can use it.

LJ: Ah, I see there's prayer before writing an icon and a prayer upon completion.

XP: Yep. [chuckles.] Ah for example that icon is very interesting. I don't know much..[some conversation]..my samples.

MC: Well do you want me to look?

XP: Alright. Maybe what you like here. I don't see..

MC: Is this all Christopher's work? XP: Yes, yeah.

844 MH: Oh tell us his name again so I can..what's his name Christopher?

XP: Christopher Gossey.

MH: How do you spell his last name?

MC: G-O-S-S-E-Y. MC: OK.

847 MC: This is fayoum. Did Christopher do this fayoum portrait? XP Yes.

MC: Is this from life or is it a copy? XP It's copy. It's copy.

MC: It's beautiful.

MH: And describe again what's special about his work, Christopher's work?

XP: Um..he..uh renovates uh..how to say?

MC: I think resuscitate is a better word..breathes life into.

XP: Yeah, in a certain style. In that for me he's like extremely talented. Extremely talented, his special gift.

MC: But it's also because of who he is.

XP: Maybe because he is. Maybe because.

MC: Because you bring this up sometimes too that people who try to copy things that aren't authentic to themselves create caricatures.

XP: Yeah, yeah. But he has some real feeling, some very deep feeling.

MC: They're so full of joy. He would be..he would be stupid to do anything else. [Maggie laughs.]

XP: What I saying, what I'm saying during ten years. But, people don't understand, that he's really genius.

867 MH: Are there many people doing this particular style?

XP: I think he's unique. I didn't see anything similar [coughs]. It's not imitation. It's not something like a copies. It's full of life [coughs].

MH: Yeah that's the study for that.

XP: It's [?]. MC: And there's nothing..there's nothing missing from telling the story correctly.

XP: Oh they're very right[?] because they're very canonical, his icons. MC: Very correct. XP: Very correct yeah.

878 MH: Do you feel fortunate that you discovered writing icons in your life?

XP: I think so, I think so, yeah. But it wasn't me. It was my spiritual director, discovered it for me.

MC: But you accept it. XP: Yeah, yeah.

LJ: And you Marek also?

MC: I'm still, I'm still wrestling with it, you know? But you know, when you work on it you're just aware that there's, you know, there's so much there. It's so much bigger than you. So much more important. You know I used to do lots of other things and now none of it matters anymore.

LJ: You found the one thing.

MC: I guess, I hope (chuckling). But if you don't keep working at it, it doesn't stick.

891 MH: Is this part of a triptych that's for someone?

XP: Yes, yeah, it's my commission.

MC: Is it both sides Xenia or just one side? XP: Uh both. Yeah, they finished.

MC: Yeah..icon for Easter, the Easter season.

XP: Great Lent and Easter, yep. I had commission with that, and some persons saw and said: "I want the same! I want the same."

MH: Oh, it's on the back.

XP: Uh-hm. Yeah. It will..it's uh yes but it will be closed.

MH: Yes. Hm. Oh that goes in the . . . (Xenia gathers the three parts of the triptych and sets them up on the chair to show how it will be displayed.)

XP: It is the six Sundays of the Great Lent.

910 MH: And do people find out about you through word of mouth, or the web? How do people know of your work?

XP: I don't know [chuckling].

MC: They find her.

XP: Yeah I don't look for customers, for people, except..

MC: You can also see the difference between what the work is like, before you oil it? Like how when it's sealed it completely changes.

XP: Deeper and more breathe. And it's not gilded yet, yeah. And how it will be open. [Shows how the triptych will look when opened.] It's before Crucifixion, and this after Crucifixion.

MC: This is Adam, and Eve. And they're being pulled out of their graves. And you have the prophets, and Kings. And then you have..who's over here Xenia? Abel, Cane?

XP: That's Moses, yeah Moses. And righteous.

MC: Righteous. John the Baptist. David and Solomon.

XP: And Daniel.

MC: Daniel, right. And this is Adam and Eve being pulled of their graves.

LJ: And what is he standing on here?

MC: The doors of hell. He broke open the doors of hell.

MH: To rise. And is that..what's the skull down there..[?] and others.

MC: This is the skull of Adam.

XP: Symbolize all..uh all humanity? MC: Humanity. XP: Humanity, before Christ.

MC: Sometimes you show Hell with like broken locks, broken hinges.

XP: I will! Yeah. Here it will be. [More conversation. Xenia goes to look for a specific icon.]

945 XP: I'm looking for..for the picture. And it's six..six weeks before Easter. MH: Um. Oh, look at that. [Xenia displays an icon].

LJ: Yeah, the whale. Is that a whale?

XP: Yeah, hell.

MC: No, it's hell. It's the mouth of Hell with jaws, the jaws of Hell. And that's St. John Climacus. And this is the ladder to Heaven. And it's people ascending to heaven and being pulled down from their spiritual ascent. This is Feast Day of the Icons. And it's the proclamation that iconography is consistent with the liturgy and should be used. So it's the..Xenia, is this supposed to be Constantinople?

XP: What? Yes, yeah.

MC: And the reinstitution of the icons. And everybody is coming with icons. And then St. Gregory Palamas, the feast of the Holy Cross. St. John Climacus. This is St. Mary of Egypt, the great penitent. And then the raising of Lazarus.

962 LJ: Now here again with the reverse perspective maybe you could talk about the architecture and how it seems to surround you. I really liked the way you phrased that.

MC: Well, it comes out into you, surrounds you. XP: Yeah, this will go like that.

MC: Xenia what's the symbol of the drape, the curtain that goes in-between the buildings?

XP: Um, it's um vellum. It was cover of Roman pacha/pachor[?]. And it was read it means some..something very important. It's royal. Only kings, pacha[?]could be covered with red vellum. Of king, empire.

974 LJ: Why is his beard shaped like that?

MC: It's customary. Like, there's an aspect of stylization but there's also an aspect of portrait. And St. Gregory of Pallamus is always shown with that long, rounded beard. The earliest icons of him show him like that. So he's recognizable. He always has this kind of curled hair, and that beard. And he's dressed as a bishop teaching. Like St. Paul is always very recognizable. Like saints who we have an historical likeness of we incorporate their portrait into the icon.

983 XP: That is bronze metal from Vatican. St. Peter and St. Paul. That is icon of Rublav. You can see the same..it is 2nd century. It 2nd century is 14th century.

MH: That's what you spoke about earlier. XP: Yeah. It's very old.

MH: ..comparing their, their icons. (Speaking to Lian). If you could get a picture of that.

XP: Conserve tradition. Conserved title person to make him recognizable.

992 MC: Xenia could you show them the icon you have over here who's the saint..

XP: Ah, yeah!

MC: That's OK? That's a good example?

XP: Which one? MC: This one. XP: Ah! Topf.[?] Yeah, yeah it's..

MC: Because it's a good example of like portraiture.

XP: Yeah I used photo-picture.

MH: OK, so this is different. MC: In what way?

MH: You said it's portraiture.

MC: There's more of a likeness like I'm..there's, it's traditional but it's also innovative. You know you incorporate the features of the individual person so it's recognizable.

001 XP: His type of moustache, moustache and that style of hair. As a base I used his photopicture. It's close to photo.

MH: Yeah. And when was this made, this one?

XP: The second? Five years ago.

MC: You did the icon for his grave.

XP: Ah yeah, yeah. Big one. Yeah I have commission. And if I make something new, I make two icons. And one I keep.

MC: It's a good example of how it's like flexible. And traditional at the same time. And how there's a continuing need for it in the life of the church. It's also not just reiterating traditional prototypes. There is the aspect of the old prototype in here but there's a new manifestation, of holiness. And it's the individuality of the saint. And you have to incorporate that when you can.

017 MH: And when you say they're on the grave is that in the interior of the church?

MC: Xenia it's on the top, like a pall right?

XP: Yes, it's like cover of coffin.

MC: Like a shroud. XP: It's shroud. It's shrine.

MC: The saint is buried inside the grave, and then traditional over the shrine of the saint you would have like a shroud. And in Russia it would all be sewn, it would all be embroidered. And for Easter you bring out the shroud of Christ. Every Orthodox Church has a shroud. Um, and for his Ksenia did the grave painting, the icon that rests on top of his coffin. But I like bringing this up because it shows that it's a living, something that there's a tangible need for.

MH: Yeah.

030 XP: Ah, that icon is interesting.

MH: This one here. What is that?

XP: I love, I love icons um that connect, which connect Old Testament and New Testament. It's my favorite theme. And you can see it is from Solomon parables. Wisdom has builded her house. And Fat August[?] is a book with Christ's logos. And it's two Greek, two Byzantine saints. They wrote amazing prayers to Fat August[?], or hymn, hymns? And wisdom of God is in our understanding of church. Church it's seven first councils before church was plit[?] in 11th century..it's first church councils. And it's collected with revelation of John the theologian, it is seven angels from apocalypses. From end of..um world. And it is image of wisdom of God. It's directly, directly corresponded with birth of Solomon. Here is Solomon. And it's image of Church, base of Church. Because that seven councils are base of our church. Its people are hungry, its people are thirsty. And food and wine are ready and servants are ready to feed spiritual hungry people. And King Solomon blesses that.

065 And it's personification of wisdom of God. Personification of wisdom of God. It's for gospels, evangelists, and it's image of heaven. And that is image of Holy Trinity.

MC: Oh, and I recognize that from the.. KP: Yeah.

MC: They're seraphs. MH: Seraphs, yeah.

XP: Um, cherubs. Seraphims are red. In Hebrew, seraph means 'fire.' But 'cherub', it means 'air' in Hebrew. And it comes from Hebrew that names, their names.

077 MC: It's also interesting is the way this is painted. This is painted with goldleaf. And you put down a beerglue[?]. And you use it very, very sparingly. It's only for special things.

XP: Can you imagine clay this color? And clay that color.

MH: Sort of pinkish.

XP: Yeah and that is clay. And that is clay. It's clay.

MH: Is that cinnabar there?

XP: Yes, yeah. And this lapis lazuli. (Sound of construction in background.)

090 MC: But all of those..the qualities of the materials point to something else. It's not just, from the pure pleasure of it, the pleasure is in the service of something else.

MH: So is there another one like this somewhere out in the world, that you made?

XP: Yeah, yes.

MH: Well, we should let you get to work. This has been wonderful.

XP: Was this thing good for you?

XP: Thank you.

MH: Very. Um, this is a release saying that you authorized us to interview you. Um if you could just sign, or read it first. I want to write down the name of the woman you talked about who sings..

XP: Who sings?

MH: That lives in Brookline. (More conversation about color of rock and pigments).