

MEANING OF COLORS

Gold

The brilliance of gold in mosaics and icons made it possible to feel the radiant light of God and the splendor of the celestial kingdom where there is never any night. Gold symbolized the divine nature of God himself. .

Purple

Purple, or crimson, was a color very important in Byzantine culture. This is the color of the Celestial King and the Byzantine emperor, whom André Grabar called "God's Lieutenant on earth." Only the Byzantine emperor could sign edicts in purple ink and sit in glory upon a purple throne, and it was only he who wore purple clothing and boots -- for all others it was strictly forbidden..

Red

Red is one of the most frequently used colors in icons. This is the color of heat, passion, love, life and life-giving energy, and for this very reason red became the symbol of the resurrection -- the victory of life over death. But at the same time it is the color of blood and torments, and the color of Christ's sacrifice. Martyrs are depicted in red clothing on icons. In red celestial fire blaze the wings of the Seraphim -- angels stationed adjacent to God's throne.

White

White is the symbol of the heavenly realm and God's divine light. This is the color of cleanliness, holiness and simplicity. On icons and frescoes, saints and righteous people are usually depicted clothed in white as righteous ones -- people who were good, honest, and lived by "the Truth." In the same manner, white was used in the swaddling bands of babies, the shrouds of the dead and the robes of angels. Only righteous souls were depicted as wearing white.

Dark-Blue and Blue

Dark-blue and blue indicate the infiniteness of the sky and is the symbol of another everlasting world. Dark blue was considered the color of the Mother of God who combines in her self both the terrestrial and celestial.

Green

Green is the color of natural, living things. It is the color of grass and leaves, youth, flowering, hope, and eternal renovation. Ancient iconographers often painted the earth green to denote where life began -- such as in scenes of the Annunciation and the Nativity. It is also used for martyrs.

Brown

Brown is the color of the bare earth, dust, and all that is transient and perishable. Used in combination with the royal purple clothing of the Mother of God, this color reminds one of her human nature, which was subject to death.

Black

Black is the color of evil and death. In iconography, caves were painted with the color black as a symbol of humankind's grave and the gaping infernal abyss. In some subjects this was also the color of mystery. For example, against a black background, which indicated the incomprehensible depth of the universe, icon painters depicted Cosmos -- an old man with a crown -- in the icon of the Pentecost or Descent of Holy Spirit. The black robes of monks, who have left the path of worldly life, are a symbol of their eschewing the pleasures and habits they formerly kept, and dying a death toward this way of life.

Colors Not Used in Iconography

A color that was never used in iconography is gray. When mixing black and white together, iniquity and righteousness, it becomes the color of vagueness, the color of the void and nonexistence.