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A Piece of the Best Story Ever Told: *Icon of the Entry of Christ into Jerusalem*

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The *Icon of the Entry of Christ into Jerusalem* depicts a turning point in the story of Jesus Christ. This powerful scene in Matthew 21 of the Bible encapsulates Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem. In this passage, Jesus is riding into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey accompanied by His disciples on the eve of Passover. For Christians, this scene is the beginning of the end of the story of the Messiah. This piece is on display in the Houston Christian University Fine Arts Museum. To appreciate this piece, one must consider its historical context, style, and symbolism.

Icons have long told stories traced back to the 3rd century (Icon). They give insight into the world of art and the religion that inspired them throughout their many years of creation and circulation. However, as long as they have circulated, they have been disputed. The 8th and 9th centuries saw an Iconoclastic Controversy:

The Iconoclasts (those who rejected images) objected to icon veneration for several reasons, including the Old Testament prohibition against images in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:4) and the possibility of idolatry. The defenders of the use of icons insisted on the symbolic nature of images and on the dignity of created matter (Iconoclastic Controversy).

Throughout the 7th century, icons went through condemnation and re-establishment many times. Ultimately, "in 843...Empress Theodora finally restored icon veneration" (Iconoclastic Controversy). In the 10th century, Russian Orthodoxy became "the country's dominant religious institution" (Religion of Russia). This transition cemented the use of iconography in Russian culture. Although "after the communists took power in 1917, religious institutions suffered," the interest in icons remains prevalent in Russian Society (Religion of Russia). Icons such as the 16th-century *Icon of the Entry of Christ into Jerusalem* have been "and still are displayed in

many households...the rich and poor all shared veneration for these richly decorated icons" (Russian Icons). As culture continues to evolve and shift, the sacred imagery found in icons remains consistent with their traditional roots. They perpetually communicate the beauty of the theological teachings of the church. Society continues to see the value in the stories and beauty that they convey. The relevance of icons today is an excellent defense of why they deserve to be revered. The stories that they represent are paramount, not only in religion but in culture. The suppression and resurgence of the use of icons are a testament to their significance in society.

Traditionally, icons are "painted on a wooden board with egg tempera" (Icon). According to the pamphlet on the piece at Houston Christian University, this icon is consistent with the tradition of using egg tempera on wood panels. Traditional panels "are created from multiple boards of wood held together with additional struts on the back side" (The Art of Veneration). The pamphlet also says, "this icon was cut down" from its original panels. The struts that can still be seen on the lower back of the piece and in the unique carving on its sides support this theory. Upon observation, one can see that the piece has other traditional aspects. One is the line drawing of the picture, and the other is gold paint. The detailed line drawing of the piece livens the scene and gives dimension to each figure. The gold used in the background of the scene brightens the entire piece. The background allows the viewer to notice subtle accents, such as the boys climbing the trees to see Jesus. Additionally, the accents of gold subtly highlight the features of the painting near the top, allowing Jesus to shine in the center. The color palette chosen by the artist is vibrant and plays up the celebratory aspect of this biblical scene. While the icon is undoubtedly a beautiful work of art, its aesthetic value is secondary to its religious function.

This beautiful piece is blooming with symbolism, which aligns well with the classical Byzantine and Orthodox traditions of iconography. Traditionally, an icon's function "is to express in line and color the theological teaching of the church" (Icon). The *Icon of the Entry of Christ into Jerusalem* tells the story of Jesus coming to Jerusalem as King. The passage reads, "Tell the daughter of Zion, 'Behold, your King is coming to you, Lowly, and sitting on a donkey'" (Matthew 21:5 NKJV). In the same breath, this scene depicts the fulfillment of a prophecy of the Messiah. In Zechariah 9:9, Zechariah prophesies the coming of Zion's King. Zechariah's prophecy to the people of Israel says, "Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your King is coming to you...Lowly and riding on a donkey" (Zechariah 9:9 NKJV). Jesus fulfilled the prophecy and received praises such as "Hosanna to the Son of David" and "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" (Matthew 21:9 NKJV). Furthermore, the juxtaposition of Jesus on the humble donkey and the small size of the other figures in the icon captures how honored He was at that moment. This reverence is evident because of the display of the people laying their cloaks and branches on the road. Each of these attributes flows directly into the theological teaching of the Christian Church. The icon captures every element necessary to understanding this piece of Christ's story. Images of Christ are some of the most notable icons as they are "the visible manifestation of His human nature" (The Art of Veneration). This attribute allows the icon to become "an object to be venerated" (HCU).

As the season of Passover and Easter draws near, it is crucial to behold and honor the blessings in artwork like this. This 16th-century Russian icon shares a piece of the best story ever told: the life of Jesus Christ. This icon offers a unique opportunity to ponder the power of this piece of His story. He fulfilled prophecy and was able to come in the name of God because He is God. There is great value in evaluating this icon's style, symbolism, and historical context.

Through each of these aspects, one might be able to draw closer to the beauty of the good news in this piece.

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