



Natural pigments and sacred art

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Since the dawn of mankind, cavemen has expressed himself through art. The earliest known cave paintings date to some 32,000 years ago and used 4 colours derived from the earth. These pigments were iron oxides and known as ochres, blacks and whites. All pigments known by the Egyptians, the Greeks, the Romans and Renaissance man were natural and it was not until the 18th century that synthetic pigments were made and widely used. Until that time all art, be it sacred or secular used only natural pigments, of which the preparation of many have been lost or rarely used because of their tedious preparation.

As a geologist, a mineralogist and an artist specializing in iconography, I have been able to rediscover 89 natural pigments extracted from minerals. I use these pigments to paint my icons in the traditional Byzantine manner and also to restore old icons, bringing back their glamour and conserving them for years to come. The use of the natural pigments in its proper way also helps to preserve the traditional skills of the iconographer. In the ancient past, pigments were extremely precious. Many took an exceedingly long journey to reach the artists, and came from remote countries. Research into these pigments is the work of history, geography and anthropology. It is an interesting journey in itself to discover that the blue aquamarines came from Afghanistan, the reds from Spain, the greens Africa, and so on. In this contribution I will be describing the origins, preparation and use of some natural pigments, together with their history and provenance. Additionally, I will show how the natural pigments are used in the creation of an icon.

Being a geologist iconographer, for me, is a sacrament that transforms that which is earthly, material and natural into a thing of beauty that is sacred. As bread and wine in the Eucharist, water during baptism and oil in Holy Union transmit sanctification to the beholder, natural pigments do the same when one considers an icon. The iconographer uses earthly creations to create divine images: "Thine own of Thine own we offer unto Thee." (Byzantine Liturgy).

Thus, by combining geology with art and religion, I can render homage to God through His creation by using minerals of the Planet Earth, as natural pigments in painting His image.