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François Boespflug

The Hospitality of Abraham in the Work of Julia Stankova, Painter of Bulgarian Icons

Translated by Jordan Daniel Wood

Abstract

This article seeks to make the work of the Bulgarian icon painter Julia Stankova better known to readers. It does so first by presenting her person, her trajectory, and her iconographical work. Then it offers an overview of her reflection on the relationships between the Bible and the icon. Finally, it analyzes a dozen icons that she has produced over the past twenty years on the theme of the Hospitality of Abraham as recounted in Genesis 18.

Keywords: Old Testament Trinity, Julia Stankova, Hospitality of Abraham

After centuries of oblivion or misapprehension, Eastern Christian art, especially the art of the icon, was the object of a veritable rediscovery in the West during the twentieth century.¹ This rediscovery unfolded in several stages. The first was the shock felt in Russia upon the cleaning of Andrei Rublev's icon of the Old Testament Trinity in 1905 and the removal of its *riza* (metal cover). Then came the diffusion of Prince Eugene Troubetzkoy's writings² and the impact of artists such as Matisse traveling to Moscow (1911). Most influential of all was the constitution, in a number of European capitals, of Orthodox "parishes" around great figures driven from Russia after the Revolution of October 1917. This included, *inter alia*, the arrival of thinkers like Nikodim Kondakov (1844–1925) and André Grabar (1896–1990) in Sofia,³ Prague, and Athens, and of Sergei Bulgakov (1871–1944), Vladimir Lossky (1903–58), Nikolai Berdyaev (1874–1948), and iconographers like Fr. Gregory Krug (1908–69)⁴ and Leonid Ouspensky (1902–87)⁵ in Paris. But

their presence had a limited effect at the time; it would not reach a large number of Catholics until the sudden spread of the Charismatic Movement from 1972 onwards⁶—it is, incidentally, symptomatic that the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) hardly speaks of the icon at all.⁷ And yet from this date onward the icon spread throughout Catholic churches, and all the more swiftly as “the mysticism of the white wall” that followed the Second World War emptied them to the point that believers no longer knew in which direction to turn when they prayed together. This was the time when reproductions or copies of icons in general and of Rublev’s icon of the Trinity in particular were introduced, within a period of only a handful of years, into an incalculable number of Catholic sanctuaries. The greater availability of books on icons also played a role in this process, beginning in 1952 with *Der Sinn der Ikonen* (The Meaning of Icons), coauthored by Vladimir Lossky and Leonid Ouspensky.⁸ Other works took up the baton, particularly in France. There were the works of Paul Evdokimov, Leonid Ouspensky, and Egon Sendler,⁹ to cite just three. Christoph von Schönborn’s book played an important role too. Published in 1976, it treated the theological foundations of the icon of Christ.¹⁰

But for Western citizens today—whether Christian or not, historian, art historian, sociologist of religion, or simply the cultivated dabbler—knowledge of the world of icons remains fragmentary. Many of these investigators more or less ignore everything that has happened in the study and painting of icons for the past few decades. Some biases continue to reign unchecked. Among those who have an admiring view of the history of European art—of its great strides and successive stylistic mutations—the art of the icon may seem entirely linked to immutable canons about its profound meaning (validated by the Church type after type), a meaning which moves beyond its technical fabrication and beyond the spirit that ought to preside therein. As a result, this art must remain forever fixed.¹¹ Not only does it seem to such observers impermeable to everything that makes up the development of art and that has driven the avant-gardes in the West, from Impressionism to Cubism to abstract art—and *a fortiori* since Marcel Duchamp. But indeed the gap between the two worlds, far from lessening, has actually widened. This is because theologian-historians linked to Orthodoxy, both those mentioned above and others more recently, denounce from the rooftops the real or putative derivations of western artists, “Christian artists” included. Among other reproaches we hear of “naturalism,” “sensualism,” “worldliness,” “arbitrariness,” and “subjectivism,” while their more recent epigones unreservedly excoriate as “false icons”¹² every kind of pious image painted “after the manner of icons” but having not a single root in the tradition. Such images take up, for instance, every sort of supposedly traditional subject (for example, the Holy Family) or more recent, non-canonized figures such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Dom Helder Camara. Here there is no small risk of construing a perfectly dualist idea of the situation of religious art inspired by Christianity: on one side you have Western art, which is supposedly “free” and innovative, and on the other Eastern art, which is perceived as “shackled.”

And yet the art of the icon and the various currents of icon painting rooted in Byzantine and post-Byzantine tradition are far more complex. First of all, the icon’s ability to do justice to regional sensibilities and to tolerate a certain amount of “inculturation” is in clear evidence

over many centuries. This is especially evident since the fall of Constantinople in 1453 in many regions—from Armenia to Crete and from Russia¹³ to Cyprus.¹⁴ On the one hand, we can observe that, in recent times, there are trends in several Eastern European countries that campaign for a renewal of iconography—in Poland and in the Czech Republic, for example. Artists such as Anton Wollenek in Austria¹⁵ and Jerzy Nowosielski in Poland¹⁶ have acquired a reputation and a certain authority in this realm. In a completely different vein, which some might call illicit, we are witnessing the emergence of “divergent,” “scandalous,” even “desacralized” icons, such as those painted by Stelios Faitakis, an artist from Athens born in 1976. During November and December of 2018, a young Serbian who now lives in Hamburg, Nikola Sarić, displayed in a Paris art gallery a series of icons that were innovative (to put it mildly) from a stylistic point of view, but also in their subject matter—the Gospel parables, for instance.¹⁷ Still elsewhere, especially in Eastern European countries and in the studios of iconographers working in the West under the guidance of Orthodox thinkers (we think of a mosaic artist such as Marie-Noëlle Garrigou in France, and of Bose and Seriate’s studios in Italy), in a far less showy and more tranquil manner certain iconographers have begun to reflect fundamentally upon the danger presented by the very idea of a “canon” in this domain.

Such is the case of the Bulgarian icon painter Julia Stankova (b. 1954). This article seeks to make her better known to readers. It does so first by presenting her person, her trajectory, and her iconographical work. Then I offer an overview of her reflection on the relationships between the Bible and the icon. Finally, in order better to understand her ongoing evolution and her own vantage point, I analyze a dozen icons that she has produced over the past twenty years on the theme of the Hospitality of Abraham as recounted in the eighteenth chapter of the book of Genesis.

Julia Stankova and Her Oeuvre

The artist’s portrait we paint below derives from three principal information sources. The first is her website, along with publications that either she has written or that were written about her and her work. There we find much already; Julia Stankova is one of those artists who can disclose herself without dissimulation. The second source, which has greatly helped clarify the first, is the respectful and warm friendship that has developed between us. The desire to meet her in person led to our encounter at her home in Sofia, where we were able to converse in a leisurely way. The resulting relationship—rooted in mutual knowledge and stimulated by the convergence of our fundamental interests—has proved to be a source of encouragement to realize our respective potential to this very day. The third is the iconographical analysis I undertook of her works, particularly those that focus on subjects I had explored as a theologian and historian of art with several decades of experience. I did this, of course, while presenting my interpretations to her. I was struck straightaway by the originality of her creations; I had to learn more about them by taking a closer look.

Julia Stankova was born in 1954 in an Orthodox environment and grew up in Sofia, Bulgaria. She says on her website¹⁸ that she knew from childhood that she was born to be an artist, and that she remembers as a young girl contemplating the frescoes of the small church in her grandparents' village. At thirteen years old, she began taking private lessons in design and painting so that she could enter the National Academy of Arts, which she did six years later. But her life took a turn—she is silent about the circumstances and reasons behind this change. She became a mining engineer, graduating from the University of Mining and Geology of Sofia in 1978, and began her professional life by working in this field for twelve years. She says that she did this, though, without ever abandoning the idea of one day becoming a full-time artist.

In 1989, after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the Soviet Bloc with its diverse cultural and socio-political consequences for the erstwhile “Eastern countries,” she decided to quit her engineering profession and to devote the rest of her life to fulfilling her first desire. She was thirty-five at the time and was able to gain employment as an assistant in a studio for icon restoration. This experience was undoubtedly as decisive for her pictorial practice as it was for her theoretical reflections; it allowed her to examine closely, day after day, the specifically Bulgarian style of icons from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which were painted by anonymous iconographers. The finesse of the sensibility that emanated from these icons progressively inspired her with the idea of studying the Bible, and then “the philosophy of the Byzantine pictorial system.” Hence she enrolled in the Faculty of Theology at the Saint Clement University of Ohrid in Sofia, where women, for a long time excluded, were admitted once more. Two years later she left the restoration studio. By that time, she says, she had already mastered the technique of painting icons on wooden panels. This opened for her the possibility of becoming an independent artist. At that point she started to develop a sort of symbolic art. On the one hand, she did this in light of her knowledge of the Byzantine pictorial heritage; on the other, in light of what she calls her “emotional attraction” to the Biblical text. This whetted her appetite for a master's degree in theology, which she obtained in 2000, before devoting herself to painting icons.

She progressively developed her own technique founded on those of the Byzantine masters. Soon she was painting in a style at once rooted in tradition and very original. She then developed her own subjects, to the point that it is doubtful whether she will for much longer be considered, in Bulgaria and other Orthodox countries, a painter of icons in the usual sense of the term, that is, in every way reliant upon and without deviation from the tradition. This is despite the fact that she gladly claims to be an adherent of the specific form of iconographical painting that emerged in the Balkans, a conjunction of local sensibility and Byzantine culture. She explains that this original current, which was thought to have been extinguished after the Ottoman invasion at the end of the fifteenth century, is in the midst of rising once more from its ashes to write new pages of its history. Indeed, she means to apply herself to that very purpose.¹⁹

Her art soon aroused interest. Since 2000, she has enjoyed no less than forty personal exhibitions: in Bulgaria, Macedonia, and Greece, but also in the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Norway, Germany, Italy, and France. In Sofia itself there is a permanent presence of her works in several places: in the Astry, Natalie, and Paris art galleries, and in Saint Nedelya Cathedral, to name but a few. She regularly publishes essays, poetry, theological analyses, and articles on art in Bulgarian journals and magazines.²⁰ Her oeuvre has already been the subject of several publications. There is for instance a catalogue of her paintings (Sofia, 2008),²¹ a booklet called *Healing* (2011) which assembles icons that depict Christ's miraculous healings,²² a lovely notebook dedicated to angels (2013),²³ and the catalogue from an Easter exhibition in London (2015).²⁴ Finally, in 2016 she published a booklet entitled *Watercolor Bible*, carefully designed and reproduced, assembling those of her works inspired by the first chapters of the book of Genesis. There she presents her interpretation of the creation of the world and of humankind in watercolor designs.²⁵ Two collections of poems were also published, along with reproductions of her paintings.²⁶

In 2018, Julia published a meticulously produced booklet depicting sixteen of her painted icons in color, with both Serbian and English descriptions.²⁷ These icons are painted on wooden panels, and are inspired primarily by the Gospel of Mark. Julia says she especially appreciates Mark's Gospel because of its brevity and simplicity, but also because of the characteristic care with which it recounts in detail Christ's healing gestures. This collection includes one icon of the Baptism of Christ and another devoted to the Stilling of the Storm, but here once more Julia focuses on Christ's healing miracles (though now in a more systematic manner than in *Healing*), notably the Gerasene Demoniac, whose healing appears in Mark 5:1–19, the Hemorrhaging Woman (Mark 5:22–34), Jairus's Daughter (Mark 5:35–43), the Deaf-Mute (Mark 7:31–7),²⁸ the Blind Man at Bethsaida (Mark 8:22–6), and Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46–52).²⁹ The booklet closes with certain scenes from the Passion-Resurrection cycle: the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem, the Anointing at Bethany, the Last Supper, Christ at the Column, the Myrrhbearers at the Tomb, and the Ascension. Julia's artistic productivity continues with the same endurance and coherence. She has indicated that in December of 2018 she tendered her application to the Senate for an exhibition in the Galerie du Palais du Luxembourg in Paris, which should open in the summer of 2019 with a dossier on "The Women of the New Testament." She foresees with good reason that sooner or later she will continue this theme in another pictorial campaign, this time focusing on the women of the Old Testament.

In sum, then, Old Testament theophanies and the cycle of Christ's life already figure prominently in Julia Stankova's pictorial creation. It seems that her attention inclines principally toward the encounters and the contact between God's messengers or Christ and human beings, and does so in a thoughtful and attentive climate that excludes the spectacular in order to privilege a certain sweetness, which we could nonetheless without exaggeration qualify as "miraculous."

The Bible and the Icon According to Julia Stankova

As Julia's artistic production is readily accessible on the Internet, one can easily follow its development from year to year.³⁰ After discovering her work online, and having been touched by its freshness, its density, and its novelty, I had the strong desire to meet her and so went with my wife to Sofia during Easter 2017. I returned with an idea for an article on one of her icons (since published³¹) and above all with the desire to learn more about and help better publicize her work. This encounter allowed me to converse at length on several occasions with her and her husband, as well as to contemplate a number of her works. Then I studied different catalogues of her exhibitions. All of these sources deeply piqued my curiosity and stirred my own reflections in equal measure. Our discussions focused particularly on a point whose significance she herself has never ceased to emphasize, namely the structural link between Byzantine painting and the Bible. In her view, this link's principal characteristic is to relate a certain number of human-divine facts which are expressive, even paradigmatic, but to do so in such a way that they are never interpreted either verbally or pictorially. The reader is left to do that work and to draw the consequences, while the artist must translate them into visual representation. It is precisely the particular silence of the Biblical texts that births within the reader, whether painter or not, the desire to contribute to the birth of a complete language—hence, according to Julia, the appearance of pictorial, iconographical language. Julia Stankova draws on the consequences of this approach to the Bible, which she perceives as a text that keeps sufficient silence as to create free spaces that call for creative response. Only this inspired text can be considered divine. All the paintings we can make from it, however, will be *de facto* human. The error, she never shrinks from stressing with vigor, would therefore be (or rather *has been*) to “canonize,” even to “sacralize” or to “divinize” this pictorial echo, particularly that of the first icons that treat Biblical subjects. This echo too is but human. It must therefore remain living, evolving, changing. Every generation, every country—if we adequately grasp our vocation—is tasked with making the invisible pass into the visible, passing this on to subsequent generations by stirring within them the same reactive and inventive response to God's call. A given generation's new wine of perceiving Holy Scripture must be put into new wineskins, that is, poured into an original iconographical language, lest it be spoiled by bursting the old wineskins—the old iconographical styles.³² This conviction comes quite close to the one expressed for the first time with such clarity in the Roman magisterial tradition. It appears in the seventh chapter of Vatican II's famous constitution, *Sacrosanctum concilium* (1965), where we find the substantial declaration that “the Church has never made any style its own.”³³ Each epoch and region is left to invent its own style; here the Church recognizes in persons a non-programmable “right of response” and the fact that every baptized person is called to invent his or her own form of sanctity.

Julia Stankova is not afraid to oppose certain theoretical and practical consequences of the very first theoretical exaltation of the icon. This exaltation was conceptually forged by restoring full legitimacy to the icon after the iconoclastic controversy and the Seventh Ecumenical Council (Nicaea II) in 787. Especially after the council, under the pretext of protecting the icons, there

was a tendency to bestow upon them a sanctity equal to that of the Bible itself and therefore an iconographical fixity allegedly intended by the Fathers of the council in question. Julia unambiguously rejects this tendency, and with good reason,³⁴ insisting that this view leads to all kinds of illusions. Principal among them is the notion of an “iconographical canon,” which is an invention of seventeenth-century Russia. It was indirectly encouraged by the Russian Orthodox Church’s increasingly antagonistic relations with the West and its conception of religious art, and exacerbated even more during the time of Communism, when the Church favored a sort of rigid stiffening regarding icons *qua* symbols of the believers’ resistance against atheistic Marxism. The logical consequence of such a conception, precipitated by this series of circumstances, is a still-born art that, in order to avoid theological errors, consists mainly in recopying what was made in former times. However, for Julia Stankova,

Creative work, including iconography, is one of the ways given to people to get closer to the secret of their existence, to discover the face of God, which resides in every one of us. Through seeking and finding the image the artist sets reference points and treads a path for others to walk on as well. The way of art is one of the ways to the Heavenly Kingdom, to the face of God, which we all begin to recognize from the created images.³⁵

This bouquet of convictions joins those of other creators of modern icons, with the exception that Julia Stankova does not “canonize” any period or trend. But it is clear that she is not the only artist with Eastern roots to plead in favor of a profound renewal of iconography.³⁶ She believes in the possibility of renewing iconography from within. It seems to me that she contributes to proving this possibility. And if she wants her icons, which respect the canons but speak to twenty-first-century people, to be the place of an encounter, then I think this wish has every chance of being granted. That is the sense I would now like to convey about the following subject.

Julia Stankova’s Icons of the Hospitality of Abraham

I wanted to see how these ideas were illustrated and borne out in her work on a Biblical passage highly respected in iconography—the Hospitality of Abraham as recounted in chapter 18 of the book of Genesis, which inspired *inter alia* Andrei Rublev’s much celebrated icon of the Trinity. Why did I choose this subject and Julia Stankova’s treatment of it as a test? For two reasons: first and most important, because the theme of the Trinity accompanies her, as it were, all throughout her artistic production—she has depicted it twelve times since 1993 and in several rather different ways, as we will see; second, because I have become quite familiar with the legacy of this Old Testament passage, a legacy spanning several centuries.³⁷ This background will help, I think, to grasp the originality of Julia Stankova’s icons depicting this archetypical subject of iconography.

We can divide eleven of these twelve icons into four categories according to the respective places reserved for the couple, Abraham and Sarah, on the one hand, and for the three angels that visit

them on the other. A fifth category is represented by a single icon; it links the Hospitality of Abraham to the Annunciation to Mary. To keep things simple, I designate all of these images as “icons,” even though Julia’s website classifies only certain of these as icons proper.³⁸

1. *When Abraham and Sarah predominate.* In the very first Hospitality of Abraham Julia Stankova painted (1993), the patriarch and his spouse occupy the foreground of the scene (fig. 1). They are seated facing each other. The patriarch is old while Sarah seems very young. He places his hand tenderly on hers and they gaze at one another, while in the central opening of a triple window, outlined with a light trace against the backdrop of a blue sky, the closely unified group of three angels—their backs turned, wings folded, their figures depicted on a very small scale—depart after their visit, each of them with a small, plate-like halo (what German art historians call a *Tellernimbus*) suspended above its head. The tender gesture between the two spouses can undoubtedly be interpreted as the effect on them of the announcement of Isaac’s coming birth (Gen. 18:10), which made Sarah laugh, given the advanced age of her husband. The painter, herself a woman, was very likely reticent (like many artists across centuries before her) to depict Sarah as an old woman, “having ceased to have what women have” (Gen. 18:11). Painted in quite different hues and in a much smoother pictorial style, yet noticeably in accordance with the same compositional schema, we have the Hospitality of Abraham from 2012 (fig. 2)—again with an old, baldheaded Abraham to the left and a young, veiled Sarah to the right—but this time the patriarch’s tender gesture consists in placing his forearm on his spouse’s.



Fig. 1 Julia Stankova, *The Hospitality of Abraham and Sarah*, 1993, oil pastel and watercolor on paper, 56 x 77 cm. Courtesy of Julia Stankova



Fig. 2 Julia Stankova, *The Hospitality of Abraham and Sarah*, 2012, tempera on primed wooden panel and lacquer technique, 30 x 40 cm. Courtesy of Julia Stankova

2. *The Three Angels Alone.* At the other extreme, so to speak, are the icons where Julia Stankova’s contemplation favors the three angels instead, by removing the initial recipients of the angels’ visit. Abraham and Sarah are actually absent for the first time in the icon from 1998, entitled *Trinity* (fig. 3), which shows the Three seated around a semi-circular table with a bowl containing

the head of a horned animal in the center. None of their arms are visible. The central angel is endowed with a more powerful silhouette than the other two and appears absorbed in contemplation. He also seems to lack wings, though it is better to imagine that they are invisible. The angels are gaze and presence before all else; they have no need of any attributes that might be required *to do* anything. Their clothes are pale blue and green, while only the central angel has a red robe beneath a deep blue tunic. Each of the three is encircled with a uniform halo. The central angel's head is raised toward the sky while the other two seem to gaze fixedly at the table with a thoughtful or contemplative air. The background contains no landscape detail.

Julia has two other icons that represent the three angels alone. The first (2016) is a watercolor painting on paper that shows them in motion taking up three-quarters of the backdrop (fig. 4). Each is surmounted by a halo traced in thick brushstrokes, and they are at some distance from a village in the upper-right corner, symbolized by the architecture of a domed church flanked by buildings, one of which is a bell tower. We might be tempted to imagine that the icon shows them, not in the midst of arriving and heading toward Abraham's and Sarah's dwellings, but rather departing, and that these latter two watch the angels (as in figs. 1 and 2) as they move away from the couple and head toward Sodom—although the text of Genesis suggests only two of the three angels go to Sodom to punish it while the third returns to heaven (Gen. 19:1). Their wings are covered with broad bands of very vivid watercolor; red prevails, a color that could announce the imminent fate of the sinful city, but refers rather to the energy, grace, and fire of the Holy Spirit. (We must here leave aside another image Julia painted that same year and with the same technique. It is reproduced on the back of her booklet from 2016 and depicts three angels dancing completely nude—an unprecedented subject—without relation to the Hospitality of Abraham.)



Fig. 3 Julia Stankova, *Trinity*, 1998, tempera on primed canvas and lacquer technique, 50 x 65 cm. Courtesy of Julia Stankova



Fig. 4 Julia Stankova, *The Hospitality of Abraham (Angels on the Road)*, 2016, watercolor on paper, 35 x 50 cm. Courtesy of Julia Stankova

The other icon (2017) appears to be a faithful replica of Rublev’s icon (fig. 5). Rublev may have been one of the very first painters to decide to represent the three angels for themselves, without Abraham and Sarah, in their own perfect communion (their *perichoresis* or *circumincession*, to quote the Greek and Latin theologians, respectively).³⁹ Julia’s icon is warm and relaxed, rendering the gaze of the Three very lively indeed. The resemblance between Julia’s icon and that of her predecessor by six centuries is not a superficial one; it is immediately striking because it remains faithful to Rublev’s depiction on more than one point—from the compositional schema all the way to certain details, like the recessed compartment of the altar table or the *suppedaneum* upon which each of the lateral angels places their feet. In a similar vein, the angel to the left—whom many of Rublev’s interpreters have identified as God the Father—here too performs a gesture of benediction, and the other two regard him. The differences, which are minimal, comprise above all the color, the climate, and the style. Julia placed the sun in the upper left-hand corner; she also slightly displaced the building behind the corresponding angel.



Fig. 5 Julia Stankova, Old Testament Trinity (after the icon of Andrei Rublev), 2017, tempera on primed wooden panel and lacquer technique, 26 x 36 cm. Courtesy of Julia Stankova

3. *The Three Angels with Abraham but without Sarah*. One icon from 2004 and another from 2008 show the Three seated at table. Depicted on a band beneath the table and in a completely different scale, as if viewed from a distance, is the figure of Abraham who is crouched, asleep, beneath a tree positioned between a highly structured city and a rock. In the icon from 2004 (fig. 6), it is certainly the patriarch dozing off under the oak tree at Mamre “in the full heat of the day” (Gen. 18:1). On the table beside the bowl with the head of a sacrificial animal, two plates are visible: one contains white food, the other is filled with a brown beverage. The angels reveal only one arm each. In the 2008 icon (fig. 7), the angels are tightly arranged around a table, which seems to be elevated to the level of their shoulders, and covered by a kind of tablecloth with plant motifs that alternate between greens and reds. The central angel again gazes up toward the sky, the two others gaze at each other. Abraham is found crouching between a tree bearing red fruit, which we recognize with difficulty as the oak tree of Mamre, and a house with a sloped roof—this time, though, underneath a starry sky containing a crescent moon and four distinguishable falling stars.



Fig. 6 Julia Stankova, *The Hospitality of Abraham*, 2004, tempera on primed wooden panel and lacquer technique, 46 x 41 cm. Courtesy of Julia Stankova



Fig. 7 Julia Stankova, *The Hospitality of Abraham*, 2008, tempera on primed wooden panel and lacquer technique, 45 x 35 cm. Courtesy of Julia Stankova

4. *The Three Angels with Abraham and Sarah*. Two icons fall into this category. The first (fig. 8) dates from 1997. The three angels are standing, haloed (but without the sign of the cross), feet bare. They approach on bumpy ground, and face us frontally, each with the staff of a divine messenger, surmounted respectively by a verdant tree for the central angel, a rock for the angel on the left, and a building for the angel on the right. Abraham and Sarah await them, each bearing an offering and represented by their faces situated in one of the bottom corners. Sarah is on the left presenting a loaf of bread and Abraham is on the right with a bowl of wine, their offerings carrying quite a clear Eucharistic connotation.



Fig. 8 Julia Stankova, *The Hospitality of Abraham and Sarah*, 1997, tempera on primed wooden panel and lacquer technique, 30 x 23 cm. Courtesy of Julia Stankova

Three other rather similar icons place the three angels with Abraham and Sarah behind a table. This makes them all dinner companions, for just this once, in a way that could be called “audacious.” The first of the three icons, from 2000 (fig. 9), represents them behind a table that stretches from one side of the oblong icon to the other, and has the peculiarity of being covered with fruit—apples and pomegranates, to be precise. This motif or detail might seem accidental or anecdotal, but it is deeply rooted in the Byzantine tradition and the practices of Orthodoxy regarding the monastic customs that recommend offering fruit to pilgrims and guests to refresh themselves, relax, and even inhale their agreeable odor: it is one of the most traditional symbols of benevolence and hospitality. This hospitality is like an invitation extended to the contemporary spectator of these icons: the table covered with fruit is so accessible that it becomes synonymous with invitation.



Fig. 9 Julia Stankova, *The Hospitality of Abraham and Sarah*, 2000, tempera on primed wooden panel and lacquer technique, 21 x 42 cm. Courtesy of Julia Stankova

The three angels are situated head-on with their chests but not their arms visible, with halos and blondish hair. Between them, a bit toward the back and on a slightly reduced scale, the busts of Abraham (still an old man) and his wife Sarah (visibly much younger than her husband) are inserted. The second icon, from 2014 (fig. 10), of comparable dimensions, follows the same composition, but this time places the protagonists on a green ground beneath small clouds; Abraham and Sarah are identified by an inscription above their halos. A third, very similar icon (fig. 11)

was commissioned from Julia Stankova in 2017. It preserves the same compositional schema, though it varies the colors, manifestly embellishes the clouds, and endows Abraham with an inscription in Cyrillic characters that designates him as “the holy patriarch Abraham,” while the inscription above his spouse, who is depicted as being as beautiful and young as the three angels, reads “Saint Sarah.”



Fig. 10 Julia Stankova, *The Hospitality of Abraham and Sarah*, 2014, tempera on primed wooden panel and lacquer technique, 27 x 40 cm. Courtesy of Julia Stankova.



Fig. 11 Julia Stankova, *The Hospitality of Abraham and Sarah*, 2017, tempera on primed wooden panel and lacquer technique, 50 x 102 cm. Courtesy of Julia Stankova.

5. *The Hospitality of Abraham and The Annunciation* (fig. 12, fig. 13) are associated in a triptych from 2015, classified as an icon on Julia Stankova’s website. Closed, the triptych depicts two heads in profile facing each other, between them a bundle of stalks that bear red or green apples, and two birds with multi-colored wings. The text in Cyrillic characters comes from Luke 17:20–21, which begins with the question posed to Jesus by the Pharisees on the coming of the Kingdom of God and terminates with the response: “the Kingdom of God is among you,” which indicates how to interpret the open triptych. Its central panel depicts the Hospitality of Abraham: the three angels are seated at table without their hosts Abraham and Sarah, and the compositional schema is once again inspired by Rublev’s icon, even if the style of a contemporary artist (especially in the design of the faces) is easily recognizable. As for the Annunciation painted on the wings, it shows the archangel Gabriel gazing at the Virgin Mary, while Mary gazes at the spectator; both figures are standing. This association betrays an unfathomable richness of theological meaning, simultaneously suggesting that Mary’s gracious hospitality of Jesus’ birth is rooted in Abraham and Sarah’s hospitality of the improbable birth of Isaac, in such a way that the fundamental unity of the Old and New Testaments emerges as the unity of the hospitality shown to life itself as a gift from God. One can sense an implied, still profounder link—more secret and more mysterious too—between the child Mary must birth, who will die on a cross, and the child Sarah births, whom God will ask Abraham to sacrifice for Him. But both are destined for life beyond death.



Fig. 12 Julia Stankova, Old Testament Trinity and Annunciation Triptych shown closed, 2015, tempera on primed wooden panels and lacquer technique, 40 x 60 cm. Courtesy of Julia Stankova



Fig. 13 Julia Stankova, Old Testament Trinity and Annunciation Triptych (fig. 12) shown opened

Conclusion

As we observed in the icons of the Hospitality of Abraham, Julia Stankova's inventive freedom comes through in the creation of compositional schemas, new figures, and unprecedented bearers of meaning. But it is just as evident in her varied and subtle use of colors, which delights the eye and above all refreshes the soul, all the while showing a sweetness and a restraint which go hand in hand with an art that excels at painting expressive faces, moved and moving without being naive. If the Bible and theology are her principal sources of inspiration, and if her choice of subjects extends this tradition in a certain sense, her way of treating them is very original and refreshing.

A commonality in all these icons is the beauty of the angels: their youth, the sweetness and the affability of their faces that renders them profoundly lovable and that points to the idea of the angelic nature—even above that, of divinity and indeed of the Trinity—casting away all *terribilità*. God, to the degree one senses Him through the art of this painter, is a being of great beauty and sweetness who approaches without blinding you. And that, from a vantage point no longer solely aesthetic but theological, is perhaps the principal characteristic that I think we should take away from the work of Julia Stankova. That characteristic is so valuable that we should forgive her other more questionable features, such as the stubborn and formally inaccurate discrepancy between Abraham's and Sarah's respective ages⁴⁰—undoubtedly connected to a centuries-old distaste in religious art (Eastern as well as Western) for depicting the aged woman just as she was, especially when she assumes an important role in salvation history.⁴¹ But the most original thing about her creation is also the most touching and the most unexpected—to have dared to

emphasize the conjugal love between Abraham and Sarah and its consecration by the visit and message of the Three, without omitting the effect of the announcement of Isaac's undreamt-of birth on the two spouses. To my knowledge, iconography has never ventured into such territory. Nor has Western Christian art, which was immensely "gossipy" when it came to depicting Sarah presenting Hagar to Abraham, or the latter driving Hagar and Ishmael away from his home. One would be hard pressed to find a tableau that shows Abraham and Sarah delighting in one another and exchanging a tender gesture after the departure of their three visitors.

A final remark about what might be inferred from the format of these works. Their small dimensions seem to imply a purpose and use characteristic of private devotion and typical of icons. Julia Stankova appears not to have created monumental canvases that bear her name, nor mural paintings nor mosaics. Most of her works, in other words, are of small or even of *very* small dimensions. Her works rarely represent crowds. And even when she depicts compact groups, such as the Twelve Disciples, Christ's figure is emphasized, head-on, in such a way that the most traditional function of icons is reaffirmed—to make of them occasions for an encounter between the "prototype" and the spectator. From this vantage point, Julia Stankova, all the while profoundly renewing the language of icons, remains faithful to what is essential to them.

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About the Author



François Bœspflug, Professor Emeritus, l'Université de Strasbourg, is a theologian, art historian, and historian of religions who specializes in the representation of Christ, God, and the Trinity in art. He is the author of numerous works on the problem of God and the divine in the art of the three Abrahamic faiths, including *Dieu dans l'art* (1984), *Le Christ dans l'art: des catacombes au XXe siècle* (with V. Da Costa, C. Heck and J.-M. Spieser, 2000), *La Trinité dans l'art d'Occident (1400-1460) : Sept chefs-d'œuvre de la peinture* (2000, 2^e éd. 2006), *Dieu et ses images: Une histoire de l'Éternel dans l'art* (2008; 2^e éd. 2011; 3^e éd. 2017), and *Dieu entre Orient et Occident: Le conflit des images, mythes et réalités* (with E. Fogliadini, 2017)

f.boespflug@unistra.fr



Notes

¹ This is far from true of monumental art and mural paintings in sanctuaries and monasteries; on this subject, see François Bœspflug and Emanuela Fogliadini, *La Crucifixion dans l'art, un sujet planétaire* (Paris: Bayard, 2019), particularly chapters 10 and 13.

² Eugène Troubetzkoï, *Trois études sur l'icône* (Paris: YMCA-Press/O.E.I.L., 1986).

³ Given the orientation of our research, we should note that Kondakov was named professor at the University of Sofia in 1920, a post he held until 1922 when he left for Prague. For his part, André Grabar left Russia in 1920 for Bulgaria, where he was appointed Assistant Curator at the Archaeological Museum of Sofia for three years, after which he departed for Paris and became Gabriel Millet's student at the École Pratique des Hautes Études de la Sorbonne.

⁴ Gregory the Monk, *Carnets d'un peintre d'icônes, Écrits sur l'art* (Paris: Éd. L'Âge d'homme, 1994); Barsanuphius the Abbot, *Îcônes et fresques du Père Grégoire* (Marcenat: Monastery of Znamenie, 1999).

⁵ Léonide Ouspensky, *La théologie de l'icône dans l'Église Orthodoxe* (Paris: Cerf, 1980).

⁶ François Bœspflug, "La décret de Nicée II sur les icônes et la théologie française contemporaine," *Connaissance des religions*, special edition (*Lumière et Théophanie: l'icône*) (December 1999): 7–23; François Bœspflug, "La redécouverte de l'icône chez les catholiques. Le cas français," in *Présence de Byzance*, ed. J.-M. Spieser (Gollion, Switzerland: Infolio, 2007), 31–54, 138–49; François Bœspflug, "L'icône et l'art chrétien d'Occident," interview by Tudor Petcu, *Hermeneia. Journal of Hermeneutics, Art Theory and Criticism* (Bucharest), no. 15 (2015): 158–70.

⁷ Jean-René Bouchet, "L'icône, une oubliée du concile Vatican II," in *Nicée II, 787–1987. Douze siècles d'images religieuses*, eds. François Bœspflug and Nicholas Lossky (Paris: Cerf, 1987), 397–402.

⁸ Vladimir Lossky and Leonid Ouspensky, *Der Sinn der Ikonen* (Berne: Urs Graf Verlag, 1952). This work underwent several developments. An English version was published in 1969 in Boston, and then in 1982 and 1999 by St. Vladimir's Seminary Press in Crestwood (New York).

⁹ Paul Evdokimov, *L'Art de l'icône, théologie de la beauté* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1972); L. Ouspensky, *Essai sur la théologie de l'icône dans l'Église Orthodoxe* (Paris: Éditions de l'Exarchat patriarcal russe en Europe occidentale, 1960); Léonide Ouspensky, *La Théologie de l'icône dans l'Église Orthodoxe* (Paris: Cerf, 1980, 2003); Egon Sendler, *L'icône, image de l'Invisible. Éléments de théologie, esthétique et technique* (Paris: DDB, 1981). We have made an inventory of these two works in *La Vie Spirituelle* (hereafter cited as *VS*) 640–41 (1980): 895–907 (Ouspensky) and 653 (1983): 128–30 (Sendler).

¹⁰ Christoph von Schönborn, *L'icône du Christ. Fondements théologiques élaborés entre le I^{er} et le II^e Concile de Nicée (325–787)* (Fribourg, Switzerland: Éditions universitaires, 1976); this book was republished in Paris by Éditions du Cerf in 1986.

¹¹ François Bœspflug and Emanuela Fogliadini, *Dieu entre Orient et Occident : Le conflit des images, mythes et réalités* (Paris: Bayard, 2017).

¹² Jean-Claude Larchet, *L'Iconographe et l'artiste* (Paris: Cerf, 2008).

¹³ Vladimir Ivanov, *Le grand livre des icônes russes* (Paris: Desclée, 1988); cf. our analysis of this book in *VS* 684 (1989): 331–5.

¹⁴ The icon collection at the Musée du Petit-Palais in Paris provides a good idea of these regional diversities; it recently received a larger, renovated space. See the catalogue established by the curator, Raphaëlle Ziadé, *Îcônes. Les arts chrétiens d'Orient au Petit Palais* (Paris: Musées, 2017).

¹⁵ *Moderne Ikonen: theologische Bilder von Anton Wollenek*, with explanatory notes by Ernst C. Suttner (Vienna: Herold Verlag, 1979); Anton Wollenek, *Moderne Ikonen* (Graz, Vienna, Cologne: Styria, 2001).

- ¹⁶ M. Porebski, “The Eschatological Realism of Jerzy Nowosielski,” in *J. Nowosielski* (Cracow: Gallery Starmach, 1990), 171–214.
- ¹⁷ Three booklets about his work have been published: *Irdische Gedichten mit himmlischer Bedeutung. Gleichnisse Jesu in Bildern von Nikola Sarić* (2015); Nikola Sarić, *Zeugen*, with poems by Nikola Dolovic (2016); Nikola Sarić and Sytze de Vries, *Cyclus van het leven* (Hannover: LindenCraft Detlef Reuleke, 2018).
- ¹⁸ <http://juliastankova.com/home.html>
- ¹⁹ Julia Stankova, “A word about the Word,” <http://www.artway.eu/content.php?id=1021&lang=en&action=show>.
- ²⁰ Her writings appear mostly in *Literaturen forum* (The Literary Forum), *EK, Literaturni Balkani* (Literary Balkans), and the electronic literary magazine *Liternet* (<http://liternet.bg>).
- ²¹ Julia Stankova, *Painting* (Sofia: Astry Gallery, 2008); this publication contains ninety-seven “paintings” or “icons chronologically classified,” the earliest from 2000 and the newest portraits all from 2008.
- ²² Julia Stankova, *Healing* (Sofia: n.p., 2011).
- ²³ Julia Stankova, *Mortal Angels. Painting in Wood* (Oxford: n.p., 2013).
- ²⁴ Julia Stankova, *Exhibition Catalogue: Easter 2015* (London: Sacred Space Gallery, 2015).
- ²⁵ Julia Stankova, *Aquarelna bibliia* [Watercolor Bible] (Sofia: n.p., 2016).
- ²⁶ Mario Wirz, Uwe Seidel et al., eds., *Einen Engel schick ich dir. Himmlische Grüße und Gedanken* (Eschbach: sVerlag am Eschbach, 2012); *Alongside Stanzas*, poems from Aleksandra Ivojlva and Aleksandar Dabnishki, with tableaux from Julia Stankova (Sofia: Farrago, 2016).
- ²⁷ Julia Stankova, *Gentle Touch Among the Crowd (Talks with Mark)* (Sofia: n.p., 2018). As she explains in her introduction, this icon series derives in large part from the invitation she received for seven years straight to participate in an exhibition in the Cathedral of Vienne (in France, along the Rhône) dedicated to the healing miracles related in the Gospel of Mark.
- ²⁸ François Bœspflug, “Sur les fonctions des images peintes dans l’évangélisation,” *Diaconat aujourd’hui*, no. 191 (December 2017): 12–13 (about Julia Stankova’s icon of the healing of the Blind-Mute).
- ²⁹ One might wish that Julia Stankova would someday treat other Markan miracles, such as the healing of Simon Peter’s mother-in-law (Mark 1:29–31), the demoniacs (Mark 1:32), the paralytic in Capernaum (Mark 2:1–12), etc.
- ³⁰ <http://juliastankova.com/galleries/2017.html>
- ³¹ François Bœspflug, “Pierre sauvé de la noyade,” *Enseignement catholique actualités*, no. 377 (February–March 2017): 44–45.
- ³² “And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; or else the new wine bursts the wineskins, the wine is spilled, and the wineskins are ruined. But new wine must be put into new wineskins” (Mark 2:22). If the new wine is our feelings and ideas sprung from reading the Bible, then the new wineskins are the new artistic language these feelings and ideas need in order to be expressed.
- ³³ François Bœspflug, “Art et liturgie: l’art chrétien du XXI^e siècle à la lumière de *Sacrosanctum concilium*,” *Revue des Sciences Religieuses* no. 78.2 (2004): 161–81; François Bœspflug, “L’arte cristiana alla luce della costituzione ‘Sacrosanctum concilium,’” in *Nobile Semplicità. Liturgia, arte e architettura del Vaticano II* (Comunità di Bose, Edizioni di Bose, 2014), 179–198.
- ³⁴ Stankova, in “A word about the Word” states: “The determination of the icon as an absolute phenomenon on an equal level to the Holy text is wrong, as the nature of iconography is similar to that of art in general. It is just one of the human languages invented until now.”

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ This is what we have tried to establish in an incontestable way by using the Crucifixion as example in Bœspflug and Fogliadini, *La Crucifixion dans l'art*, chapter 13.

³⁷ François Bœspflug, "Autour de l'Hospitalité d'Abraham dans la Bible et le Coran, et de son écho dans l'art juif et l'art chrétien du Moyen Âge (xiii^e-xvi^e siècle). Essai d'iconographie comparée," in François Bœspflug and Françoise Dunand, eds., *Le comparatisme et l'histoire des religions* (Paris: Cerf, 1997), 315–43; text reprinted and expanded in François Bœspflug, *Les Théophanies bibliques dans l'art médiéval d'Occident et d'Orient* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 2012), 21–67; François Bœspflug, "Une approche des religions par textes fondateurs et images d'art. L'exemple de l'Hospitalité d'Abraham (judaïsme, christianisme, islam)," in *S'initier aux religions. Une expérience de formation continue dans l'enseignement public (1995-1999)* eds. François Bœspflug and Évelyne Martini (Paris: Cerf, 1999), 199–222; "L'Hospitalité d'Abraham dans l'art religieux occidental du Siècle des Lumières," in Isabella Balestreri and Laura Facchin, *Arte e cultura fra classicismo e lumi. Omaggio a Winckelmann* (Milan: Jaca Book, 2018), 301–16.

³⁸ Readers can readily access the works discussed below using this link (click on the desired year): <http://juliastankova.com/galleries/2017.html>

³⁹ François Bœspflug, *Le Dieu des peintres et des sculpteurs. L'Invisible incarné* (Paris: Hazan, Musée du Louvre, 2010), 125; François Bœspflug, *Dieu et ses images. Une histoire de l'Éternel dans l'art* (Paris: Bayard, 2017), 160, 164, 170.

⁴⁰ They are both explicitly declared to be old in the book of Genesis, which Sarah herself recognizes, to the point of laughing when they announce to her that she's going to bear a child (Gen. 18:12–13). But Julia Stankova persists in depicting them in the way many have for a long time depicted Joseph and Mary his spouse, namely with contrasting ages in favor of a very young Mary.

⁴¹ In Western art we have to wait for a precursor such as Giotto, and then pass through two more centuries before seeing characters such as Sarah, Isaac's mother, or Elizabeth, John the Baptist's mother, commonly painted as old women.