

# How to Paint an Icon by the Prosopon Method

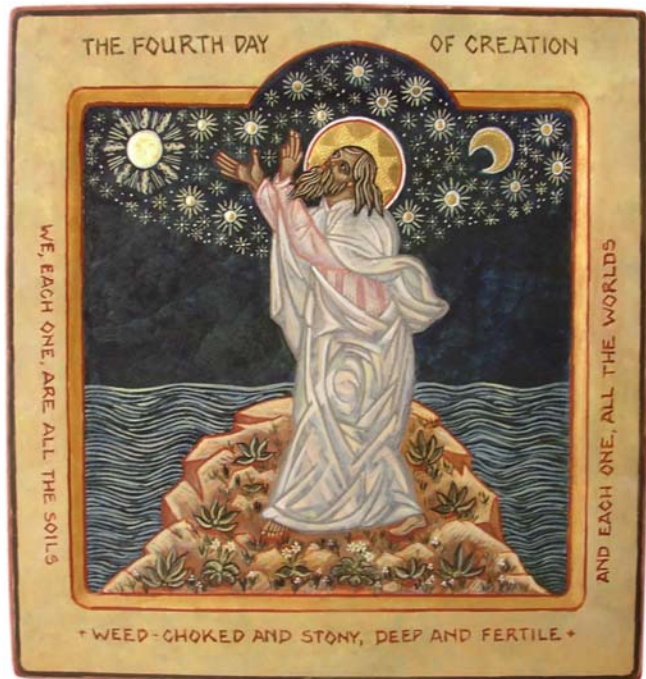
*By Betsy Porter*

Here's a very condensed description. Since recipes and detailed instructions are not included, I recommend that you enroll in a workshop before trying it yourself.

- You need a special wood board. It is usually poplar, carved with a recess or "ark" in the center, then covered with smooth but absorbent gesso. I buy my boards professionally prepared, artworks in their own right. The whiteness of the gesso represents the uncreated light of God, eternally pre-existent before time.
- Find an image you like (available from pattern books and teachers), Xerox to size, carefully position it with the top of the head at the edge of the recess, and transfer it to the board. Locate and mark the center of the halo.
- Incise your drawing into the gesso.
- Apply a mix of finely ground red clay and animal-skin glue to the edges of the board and to any areas to be covered with gold leaf. The red clay symbolizes the earth from which God created Adam. After the clay dries, sand and burnish smooth the areas to be gilded.



The prepared board with red clay applied.



**Fourth Day of Creation**  
By Betsy Porter

- Gilding is tricky! Gold leaf is only a few molecules thick. Wait for a cool morning. Breathe closely and warmly onto the red clay to bring out a bit of condensation, then immediately apply a small piece of gold leaf, smoothing it into place. In this process we remember how God breathed life into Adam. Repeat for 2 or more layers. Within a few hours of gilding, you can burnish the gold leaf



Applying the gold leaf.

to a high sheen, or impress decorative designs with a round-tipped stylus.

- Mix egg tempera base. Separate your egg, and carefully remove the white without breaking the yolk. Puncture the yolk, hold onto the membrane, and let the yellow run into a jar. Mix in a teaspoon of white vinegar and 3 parts distilled water. Refrigerated, it will last up to a week.
- Mix and apply paint. Historically, an artist had to locate and grind his own pigments, so colors are used frugally. Mix a bit of powdered pigment to a paste with a drop or two of egg base, then thin with more egg base and, if needed, with distilled water. Egg tempera behaves similarly to water color, and is suitable for both opaque and transparent effects. Because it does not bead up on a fine brush, this medium is capable of delicate details and elegant line work. It dries quickly on the absorbent gesso. Using a compass with ruling pen attachment, paint a brilliant red line around the halo.



Sophia Savalas applying tempera paint.

- Working with board flat on the table, apply dark and earthy "roskrish" or base colors. Base color for flesh areas is "sankir," typically a dark olive drab, but sometimes nearly black. Use little circular brushstrokes with a fairly full brush for a mottled texture, representing the Chaos or primordial energy at the beginning of creation.

- Paint over the incised lines with a fine brush, to outline the features and the folds of the clothing.
- Now apply the first highlight. Lighter tints, covering 2/3 of the base color and blended for gradual shading, bring out the sculptural quality of each form, and symbolize the light of the Cosmos or natural order. Although crude and chalky, the icon is starting to take shape.
- The first float makes everything better. Apply a thin wash or two of slightly brighter color over each area, including internal lines, again using a fairly full brush and small circular brushstrokes. Paint spreads out ahead of the brush, which barely touches the board. Now the color starts to become rich and luminous.
- A smaller second highlight represents the Anthropos, the light of human intellect and culture. On clothing, it cuts diagonally across the first highlight, producing cubist-like effects. On hands and faces, it blends into and strengthens the first highlight.



Sophia Savalas adding highlights.

- The second float, in a brighter and purer tone than the first, softens the highlights.
- A third highlight symbolizes the Theocosm, the spiritual or angelic light. It is much smaller than previous highlights, reinforcing and embellishing them.

- Apply the third float, using brightest and purest pigments. The surface vibrates with subtly shifting colors.
- Repaint the lines with a fine brush, in colors to complement the color of each area. Use black for the eyebrows, upper eyelids, and pupils of the eyes.
- Details include lettering, a line between background color and red clay edging; and other symbols and decorations. Paint in the whites of the eyes, tiniest crescents of pure white. Now the icon comes alive!
- The final highlight reinstates the Prosopon, the light of God. It takes the form of little sparkles on the clothing and fine lines, especially around the eyes, known as "ozhivki" or life-giving lines.
- Paint a pure white outside line around the halo, recalling the fresh white board waiting for your next icon. The painting phase is complete.
- After the paint has cured for 2 or 3 weeks, place your icon on paper towels and apply olifa, a warm linseed oil mixture. Check periodically, keep it warm under a desk lamp, and spread the olifa for a nice even finish. After a few hours, remove excess oil with the edge of your hand. Oiling increases visual depth so that all layers (including mistakes) become visible. It protects the surface, deepens colors, softens whites, and imparts a characteristic gentle sheen. Place the icon in a warm dust-free place to dry until the surface no longer feels tacky, several days to several weeks.
- Now you can take your icon to church to be blessed! The blessing establishes a formal spiritual link with the person or event pictured, and completes the icon.



**(Detail) Fourth Day of Creation**  
By Betsy Porter