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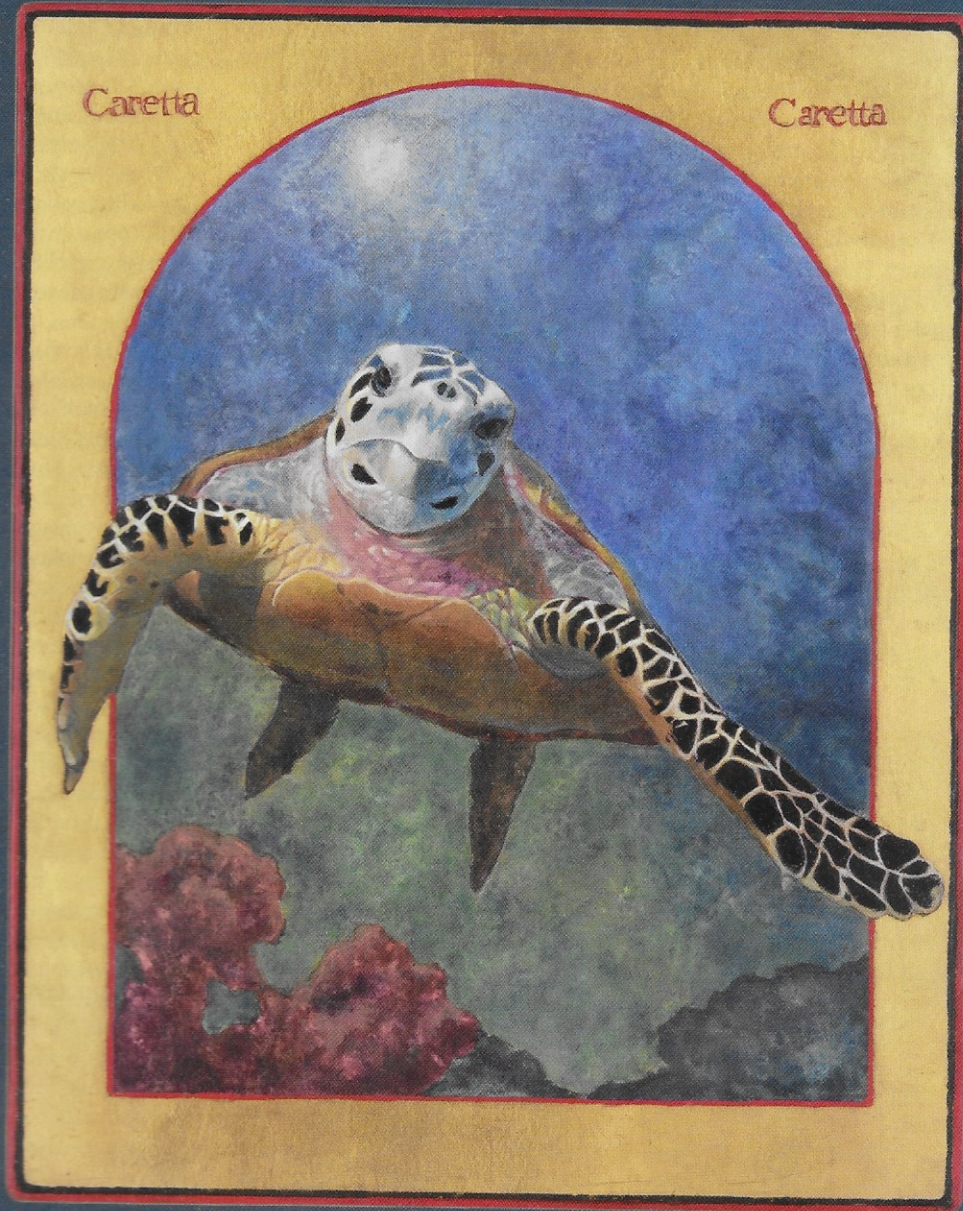


Euphonia cyanocephala

WITH

An interview with icon painter Angela Manno on seeing the Creator through the eyes of endangered species.

RE-ENCHANTMENT



THE EARTH

By Andrea M. Couture | Icons by Angela Manno

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Lascaux is famous for its Paleolithic cave paintings, found in an underground complex in southwest France. The biggest area of Lascaux with the most abundant paintings is an echo chamber. Enveloped in sound, our human ancestors may have drummed and danced around a flickering fire whose shadows animated the natural scenes of people, animals, and their environment on the surrounding walls—all inviting transcendence. In ancient Greek religion, the lyrical music of Orpheus charmed the gods and compelled animals, even rocks and trees, to dance. Early Christian iconography developed a practice of liturgical art that both offered theological instruction and included details of the plant and animal world, both

literal and allegorical, to foster spiritual reverence.

Closer to our time, great thinkers such as 19th-century German explorer-scientist Alexander von Humbolt looked beyond isolated organisms to the unity among plants, climate, and geography. In the 20th century, French Jesuit and paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's perception that the universe is an evolutionary process moving toward greater complexity and consciousness furthered the understanding that humans are interdependent with the created world. Albert Einstein wrote that human beings experience ourselves "as something separate from the rest—a kind of optical delusion of consciousness" and that "we will have to learn to think in a new way" if humanity is to survive. This view is echoed in new developments in quantum physics that we may be evolving toward a more coherent wholeness among spirituality, science, and art.

The icon paintings of Angela Manno, an internationally exhibited and collected artist, are yet another expression of this lineage in her series "Sacred Icons of Endangered Species." I interviewed Manno by email and telephone in March.



Angela Manno in her studio / Photo by Jane Feldman

Andrea M. Couture: As a contemporary artist, what attracted you to icon painting, one of the oldest forms of Christian art, going back to the third century?

Angela Manno: I've been fascinated by non-Western and ancient art forms throughout my life, from illuminated manuscripts as a child to batik while traveling through Indonesia in my early 20s; icon materials—gold leaf, pigments made from ground up semiprecious stones, earth colors; and the ethereal look of the finished product's images of angels and saints.

In the 1980s, I developed my own personal idiom, combining the ancient art of batik with color xerography to symbolize the merging of intuition and reason. My aim was to convey a sense of the sacredness of the planet Earth. In the 1990s, no longer having access to my large studio and a photocopier, I searched for a medium that would allow me to work in a more modest space and, at the same time, I wanted to explore a truly liturgical art form. In a stroke of synchronicity, I had the opportunity to begin studying with a master iconographer from Russia in the Byzantine-Russian style, and became completely captivated by the symbolism, not only in the images, but in the process itself, and studied with him for over a decade.

Traditional icon painting is notorious for its technical difficulty. How did you learn to make them?

Yes, it's very painstaking and multifaceted, which is why it took a minimum of six months to feel relatively comfortable to practice on my own. I use the word "practice" because icon painting is a spiritual practice. The stages of creating an icon recapitulate the act of our own creation. When done according to the canon [a special set of rules governing spiritual practice and icon painting techniques], each stage—from gessoing the board to applying the final *olifa* [oil sealant]—has a precise liturgical meaning.

The icon begins with a wooden board that represents the "Tree of Life." To this, 13 layers of white gesso are applied, which puts the iconographer into a state of contemplation. The pure white gesso [a white primer base suitable for egg tempera paint] board represents pure consciousness. The next stage, carving the image into the icon board, represents an idea in the mind of God. The image is meant to impress itself upon the iconographer in a gradual process of transfiguration. This is the opposite of

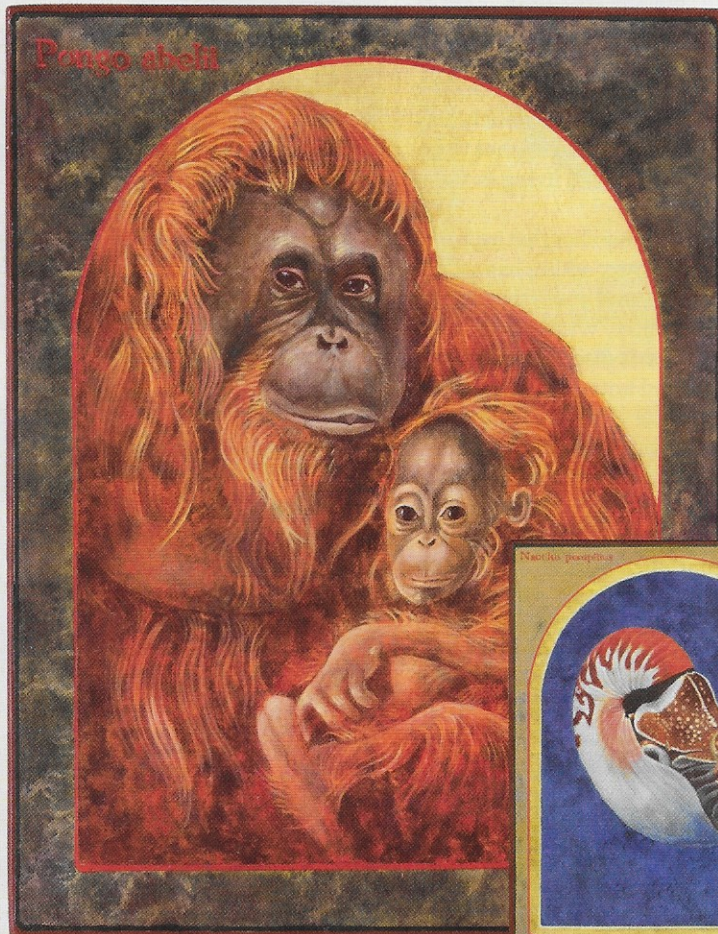
Western religious and secular art, since the icon itself symbolizes the teachings of the saints, ascetics, and leaders in the church throughout the centuries—not attributed to the individual artist.

After the gesso, a layer of liquid clay is applied where the halo will go. The clay, representing our physical dimension, is followed by an overlay of gold that represents our divine nature. The first introduction of color represents life and consists of coarse and beautiful pigments; their turbulent patterns, the chaos in creation. The second layer of color, which uses lighter and more refined pigments, represents our soul, and the third layer, our spirit. The whole process goes from dark to light until the completed image is revealed. It is a contemplative process and can be very transforming.

To some, a mother and baby orangutan resonant of Madonna and Child imagery might appear sacrilegious. How did endangered species get entangled with icons in your mind?

Before I had conceived of the series, I was a student of ecology, evolution, and cosmology. So, my awareness that all culture, that all life, is derivative of the Earth required that I go beyond the images in the Orthodox canon. I needed to expand the imagery to reflect our empirical understanding of the nature of reality, while maintaining the original process and meaning. I find the intuitive expression in traditional icon painting completely compatible with our scientific understanding of the evolution of the universe. I am trying to convey the sacredness of all life, that all of creation is

“The stages of creating an icon recapitulate the act of our own creation.”



Sumatran Orangutan

Chambered Nautilus



Philippines Orchid

in the image of the divine, to get beyond our anthropocentrism and adopt a biocentric norm of reference. Our survival depends on it.

Given the vast number of life forms in the world, how did you select the 15 subjects for this series, and will there be more?

I intend to continue adding to this collection. I feel it is the work of my lifetime. My goal for this year is to have a total of at least 40 icons for a one-person exhibition. They are very labor-intensive, taking about six to eight weeks each, including research and two periods of drying time. There are many considerations that go into choosing

a subject, and I am always trying to maintain a balance of all of nature's categories because every one of them is in trouble. We mostly hear about charismatic mammals, not plants—when about 68 percent of all evaluated plant species are threatened with extinction. Another important criterion is my sense of how they will all look together, so I am constantly thinking about color as well as shapes that will be harmonious when displayed.

The species you portray are endangered because of intertwining economic practices and policies built on colonial exploitation of countries with limited resources, extractive mining, abuse of cheap labor pools, and

endemic issues of racism and sexism. How can art possibly come to terms with such entrenched, ferocious, and widespread greed and violence?

Most of us know the severity of the problem, and I well understand the temptation to collapse under the weight of present circumstances. We are 30 years behind the curve because we allowed politics to get control of policy instead of heeding the science. However, all creative acts defy what is, in favor of what one wishes to be. In short, there is an art to living in these pivotal times.

We must first remember that each one of us has agency. Every action has an impact on the whole, and concerted action is what's needed now. What stops many people from action is discouragement, or what biologist and anti-fracking activist Sandra Steingraber calls "well-informed futility," limiting our imagination for the good. We must find a way to rise above this traumatic situation. As an artist, my aim is to create images that will reach deep into our psyches and elicit a sense of reverence for each species I depict. Art can motivate people to action if it's powerful enough, if it hits a nerve. We must not give in to what we perceive as corruption or inevitability—it dehumanizes us.

Originally, icons were a medium of instruction for uneducated people to learn Christian theological concepts as well as cultivating reverence and veneration for the Divine. Are you coming full circle by expecting them to now be useful in renewing respect and responsibility for nature and its creatures? Can art really be transformative?

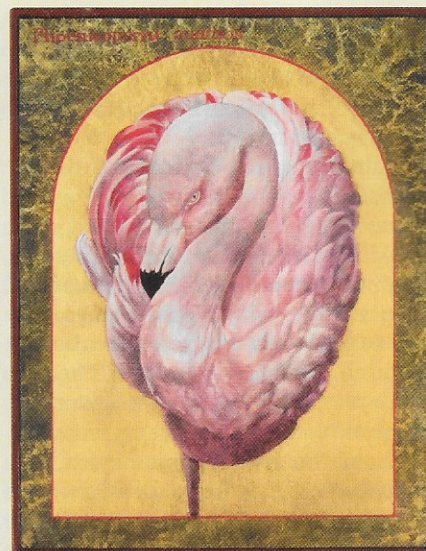
Art *is* transformative when it serves its true purpose. In the book I am working on, *The Art of Evolution: A Vision of the Ecological Age*, I write that art has always had the power to inspire and motivate, but its capacity to effect social change has been severely hampered since the early 20th century with the false notion that true art is divorced from any moral or social function. Happily, this kind of outdated thinking is beginning to give way—not a moment too soon.

Do you think that religion and the spiritual can have that impact on environmental justice activism today?

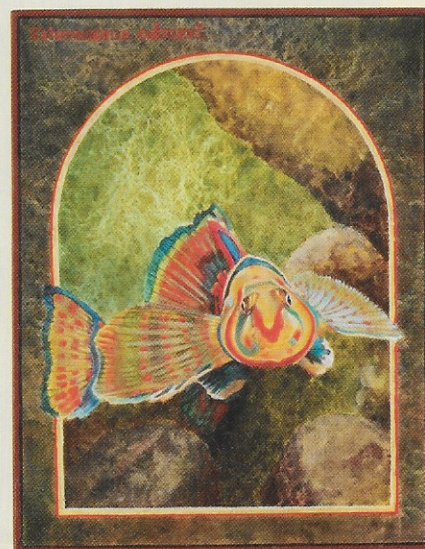
This is the crux of the matter. My answer is a resounding yes! In fact, spirituality—



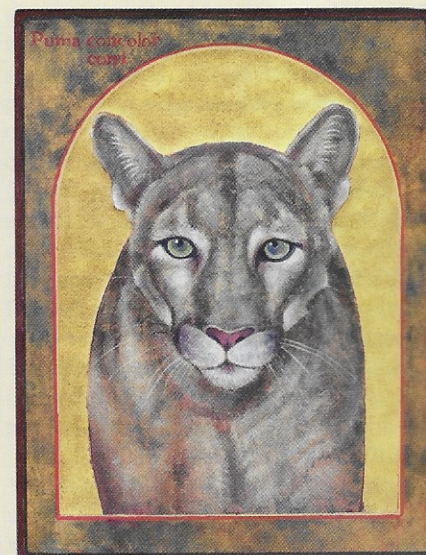
Monarch Butterfly



Andean Flamingo



Candy Darter



Florida Panther

“My aim is to create images that will reach deep into our psyches and elicit a sense of reverence for each species I depict.”

defined as the set of beliefs and guiding principles that inform people's actions—has been responsible for enormous change throughout human history. Religion has a moral code and provides ways to reconnect us to our source, to the dynamic, harmonious balance and order that underlies existence, to the beauty that surrounds us. Our failure to safeguard the natural world is at first a moral failing.

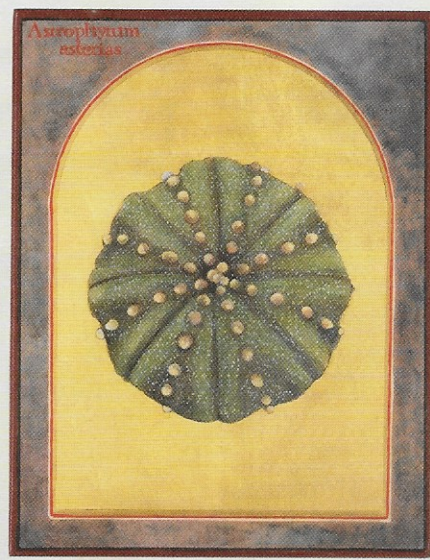
In 2020, there were 227 killings globally of environmental activists protecting their land and water. The Indigenous environmental movement possesses an unshakable sense of righteousness: the conviction that their land and water are sacred; water is a relative and therefore must be protected



Pangolin



Gray Wolf



Star Cactus



Honey Bee



Horseshoe Crab



Andean Marsupial Frog

and treated with respect—they are fighting for their mother!

On the whole, the Western mindset is divorced from nature and as such lacks this sense of kinship with the rest of the living world. If we are to transform our relationship with the Earth into one that is cooperative and mutually beneficial, I feel the only way back—indeed our very survival—depends on nothing less than a re-enchantment with the Earth as a living reality. This requires a new form of spirituality that is ecological at its foundation, a transformational leap from an anthropocentric world view to a biocentric one.

There are two impediments today that are forestalling the natural synergy

that would otherwise already have taken place—corporate obstruction and a stifled media. Despite these formidable impediments, the global environmental justice movement is surging rapidly through efforts such as mounting nonviolent, direct action, the Stop Ecocide movement, and the push for new, benign technologies, to name just a few. It is not a given, however, that this movement will succeed. That is why it's up to all of us.

Do introspection and aesthetics have the power to point us toward the transcendent?

Traditional icons are considered “windows to the divine.” Their symbolism

and beauty draw the viewer closer to the principles that lie beyond the physical form. That is certainly how they affected me. I was drawn at first to their sheer beauty—the gold leaf, textured pigments, images that seemed to glow from within. I can only speak from the experience of an iconographer; working with the liturgical method and materials has provided me with a deep sense of harmony, peace, and joy. ❖

Andrea M. Couture, a writer in New York City, has had two careers—international and domestic social issues and the arts—and delights in combining them.