

Painting icons on Swami's ashram chapel walls

Swami Vishwananda enjoys being creative and he loves painting. Shortly after Swami Vishwananda's main *ashram* at Steffenshof, Germany was purchased, I learned that there was a little chapel on the property. I was informed that Swami had the intention of painting frescos of saints on the walls of the chapel.

A few days before Christmas I drove to Steffenshof as Swami had asked me to assist with the paintings on the chapel walls. Even though I am an artist, I did not have any detailed information about the procedure of frescos and icon painting. I arrived one winter evening and saw lights in the chapel. Swamiji and some others were already whitening the walls and preparing the drawings. I learned that the chapel was supposed to be initiated December 24th. Swami and his assistants intended to paint fourteen big figures onto the walls in three days, with three of the paintings to go onto the difficult-to-paint ceiling. Additionally, Swami intended to paint the *Madonna with child* above the altar.

Upon hearing all that, I began to have thoughts of my own inner limitations. Everything I heard told me that what Swamiji wanted accomplished in three days would be impossible to do. I am an experienced artist and I have worked with various techniques, also in large formats like the chapel. Through this, I have learned to work very quickly if necessary. To finish this big project in such a small timeframe would go beyond physical laws. However, *Swami taught me through this project to make the impossible possible*. I had to accept that this big volume of work simply could not be done with my usual love for detail. The morning following my arrival at the *ashram*, Swamiji collected a small group of four people who would assist him with the painting. We had to work in a cold room on walls which were not dried out and which had a very rough and uneven structure. Given this situation, we could only paint in a rather generous way. There wasn't so much room in the chapel, due to

the lamps, the paints and the scaffolding. Most of us had very little experience with drawing directly onto walls. It was so cold in the chapel that our fingers were frozen stiff in no time. The heat from the floodlight was our only source of warmth.

One of Swami's assistants made the first drawing. Then I was asked to paint the first saint, freely, with acrylic paints. I had very little experience with acrylic but the paint dried quickly, which was helpful. After the first figure was finished, I was asked to paint the faces of the saints. To my great surprise, this was also a task I finished quickly. I was amazed at how the work almost did itself as I just went with the flow of Swami's icon painting technique. Again, I learned something from him.

My ingrained limitations were tested again when Swami gave me the assignment of painting the *Madonna with child* over the altar. It was difficult for me since the drawing on the wall was not correct. But even this piece of work was finished during the last hour before the initiation of the chapel was celebrated. The painting of the *Madonna with child* left a deep impression in my heart. It was my very first painting of Mary, in the form of an icon, that I had the privilege of painting in the presence of Swami Vishwananda. He gave us all his support during the painting of the chapel, and we all felt drunk from his divine energy. Swami, along with his four assistants, actually created a miracle. In only three days of hard work, 12 – 14 hours daily, the chapel was finished. *When the project was completed, I felt physically exhausted but mentally happy and relaxed. Swami taught us what we can accomplish when we control our mental limitations.*

Many other experiences with Swami were to follow, since over the course of the next two years we established two more chapels with many new icons. In the meantime, a group of *brahmacharis* gathered, all of whom engage very much in artistic work. This happens through drawing and painting of icons, through singing and sometimes even dance. Along with our spiritual development, Swami strongly supports these creative activities. He often points out to us that through artistic work

we can also exercise our capability for surrender and devotion.
This is the way of *Bhakti Marga*.

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