

Painting Icons, Welcoming Stillness with Mary Jane Miller
St. Peter's Church, Lewes, 211 Market Street, Lewes, DE 19958
March 28 to April 1 | 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Saint Peter's Episcopal Church in Lewes will host artist, Mary Jane Miller for a week-long retreat and workshop, "Painting Icons, Welcoming Stillness" from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Tuesday, March 28 through Saturday, April 1. Ms. Miller returns to St. Peter's to lead this iconography retreat that includes painting, prayer, and fostering a connection with the divine. The cost for the event is \$380. The retreat will include prayer time, solitude, materials, plenty of painting, and lunch. Saint Peter's facilities are handicapped accessible. For additional information or to register, please call (302) 645-8479).

About Mary Jane Miller. When a friend proposed that they paint icons in the church basement one Wednesday afternoon, Mary Jane thought he was crazy. "We don't know a thing about icons!" she protested. The pair had no formal training—save a one-week iconography class in acrylic—and Mary Jane had no experience with egg tempera.

Still, her friend persisted. The two had their hands blessed by an Orthodox priest and they purchased dry pigments to begin their journey. Albeit and curious, Mary Jane painted icons that Wednesday in the church basement just under the altar. She hasn't stopped since.

Byzantine iconography dates back to 300-400 AD. The orthodox churches visual interpretation of the Christ story; it was perfected by the Greeks and the Russians over the course of 1500 years. Iconographers are comparable to scribes: they depict the Bible story while remaining as true as possible to the text.

A native of Nyack, New York, Mary Jane had hardly considered the art. An art student and self-described "closet Christian," she studied abroad in Mexico in her early twenties and met her husband of 40 years, Valentín. While living between Mexico and the United States, Mary Jane made a living off of painting "anything that was printable." When she opted to take an iconography course in Tennessee twenty years ago, she had no idea it would change her life completely.

After the class, she slowly began devoting more time to icons. First, she vowed to devote one whole day to icons per week. Next, she dedicated one whole week working with them per month. And then she realized that even that wasn't enough time. When she proposed to take six months off to paint only icons, Valentín laughed. He claimed that, if she took six months to paint only icons, she would never go back to being a "regular" artist. She took the time anyway. And she's now a full-time iconographer.

Mary Jane and Valentín now live full-time in San Miguel, Mexico, where Mary Jane teaches iconography every Wednesday. This March she will be in Lewes sharing her love of painting icons as she did in 2015.

Everyone is welcome to attend, Mary Jane thinks the retreat is a great time out for art students, religious people, and any local iconographers who want focused attention. She emphasizes one does not need any previous experience or knowledge of iconography to make this art an enriching experience.

"I'm hoping participants will get a little bit of an introduction to this great tradition called Iconography," Mary Jane explains. "I'm hoping they'll have a peaceful encounter with themselves. I'm hoping they'll walk away with a beautiful image; if I can do that, it will be considered a success."

Mary Jane also says that her retreat isn't about the icons themselves; it's about reflection, solace, and fostering a connection with the divine. Icons for her are a way to focus her energy on something greater than our self.

“I offer an opportunity of time for people to come closer to God,” Mary Jane says. “Not church-God or my God or iconography’s God— I just mean God, the energy which is in you and the whole earth, the light source of intuition and the mind of quiet surrender. Iconography is like a room with a window: if you go right up next to the window and push your face up against the glass, you’ll see a lot more light and greater vast space.”

A deepened spirituality might be a success for Mary Jane, but she also acknowledges that painting icons is a long process. After studying iconography over twenty years ago, she says that it’s as endless exploration of her ever-deepening relationship with the divine. Of course, she doesn’t plan to stop painting icons anytime soon.

“When I finally paint that one image that satisfies the desire to paint and prayer, I’ll stop painting,” Mary Jane remarks. So far, she said she’s made “a lot of good copies,” but she hasn’t gotten it quite right. “I’m still exploring the Jesus story,” she says of iconography, of her relationship with God, of her art. “the images seem to be limitless in their meaning and in their beauty.”

For more on Mary Jane Miller, visit sanmiguelicons.com. Her books are available for purchase at www.lulu.com.