

## The Menil Collection to Present *The Iconic Portrait Strand by Nestor Topchy*

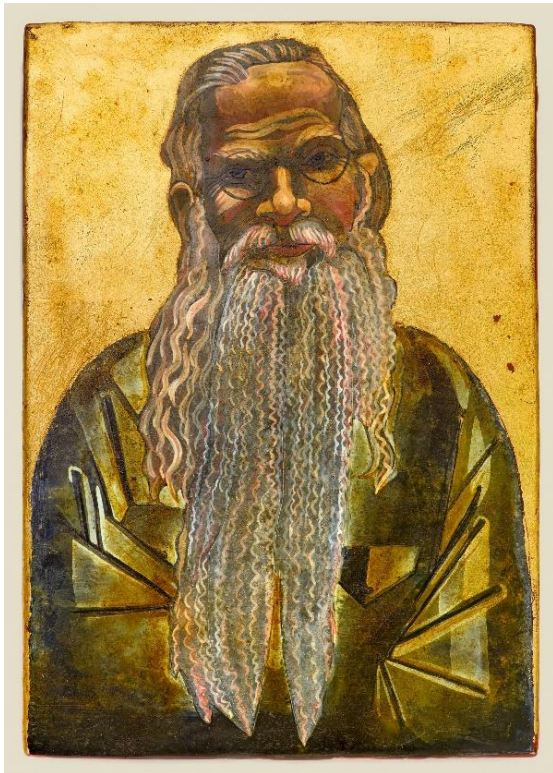
*Houston institution to host the first museum presentation of the artist's portrait series*



HOUSTON—*March 30, 2023*—The Menil Collection is pleased to announce *The Iconic Portrait Strand by Nestor Topchy*, the first museum exhibition of Houston-based artist Nestor Topchy's contemporary portraits (b.1963). Following the traditional techniques and materials of religious icons used by the Ukrainian Eastern Orthodox Church for the last 800 years, Topchy's portraits will be **on view at the Menil from August 4, 2023–January 21, 2024**. The show will include a selection of more than one hundred paintings made over the last fifteen years depicting the artist's circle of friends and colleagues. He considers these contemporary portraits as a single and ongoing work of art, a corpus, that for Topchy, represents and honors his community.

Topchy's work draws connections to the Menil Collection, which is home to one of the most important collections of religious icons in the United States. The museum's holdings span fourteen centuries and include significant examples of devotional objects from the Byzantine Empire and Orthodox traditions. Topchy's luminescent and skillful contemporary versions share a complex array of layered materials (red clay, hot hide glue, powdered marble, gold leaf, pure earth pigments, and egg yolk) on small wooden panels, and are finished with precise brushwork, called "ozhivki", or life-giving lines. What distinguishes *The Iconic Portrait Strand* from historical precedent is that the artist does not depict holy figures or events, but everyday subjects. Through this reverential painting technique, Topchy presents his sitters in a sacred

context, connecting the past to the present, the sacred to the profane. “To paint a mortal in the sea of gold light, alone,” Topchy states, “is to propose a saintliness that dwells within all people.”



Michelle White, Senior Curator, said, “The Menil is proud to present *The Iconic Portrait Strand* by Nestor Topchy. Nestor has been a friend and collaborator of the Menil for many years and given our collection and conservation commitment to the care and study of Byzantine-era art, objects, and material processes, it is an ideal place to showcase his reimagining of the art form. In these iconic portraits, the artist astutely balances his deeply traditional and spiritual approach with familiar subjects. The startling result not only elevates the subject but poses fascinating questions about the relevancy of the divine within contemporary art practices and what it means to capture likeness in a moment flooded with images.”

Describing this work, Nestor Topchy explains, “I began this project as a way of exploring what was innate to myself as an artist. It was a way of bringing together resonant images from my childhood. I grew up in the Orthodox Church and was fascinated early on with the symbolic patterns

of Ukrainian pysanka egg designs. I also enjoy working within the restraints of the craft of icon painting. The controlled and formal language allows many possibilities to emerge, especially through the meaningful connections that take place through my process. I make the sketches for the paintings by drawing each sitter in person, so the work also becomes about that interaction, connecting the temporal, ephemeral moment with history and tradition, a gesture towards the immutable, the divine.”

American-Ukrainian artist, Nestor Topchy was born and raised in New Jersey. He received his bachelor’s degree from the Maryland Institute College of Art in Baltimore and his Master of Fine Arts degree from the University of Houston. Deeply influenced by Ukrainian folk art, Zen philosophy, the Dada art movement, and the work of Yves Klein, he is known for his use of diverse media and attention to craft. Topchy has worked in Houston for over thirty years and is the founder of HIVE (Habitable Interdisciplinary Visionary Environment).

*The Iconic Portrait Strand* by Nestor Topchy is curated by Michelle White, Senior Curator, The Menil Collection.

### **About the Menil Collection**

Houston philanthropists and art patrons John and Dominique de Menil established the Menil Foundation in 1954 to foster greater public understanding and appreciation of art, architecture, culture, religion, and philosophy. In 1987, the Menil Collection’s main museum building opened to the public. Today, the Menil Collection consists of a group of five art buildings and green spaces located within a residential neighborhood. The Menil remains committed to its founders’ belief that art is essential to human experience and fosters direct personal encounters with works of art. The museum welcomes all visitors free of charge to its buildings and surrounding green spaces. [menil.org](http://menil.org)

### **Funding**

This exhibition is generously supported by Mary Hale Lovett McLean; and the City of Houston through Houston Arts Alliance.

### **Image Captions**

1. Nestor Topchy; Photo by Caroline Philippone
2. *Iconic Portrait Strand (Forrest Prince)*, 2008-22; Egg tempera and gold leaf on gesso over cloth on plywood. Collection of the artist. © Nestor Topchy. Photo: Caroline Philippone

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