

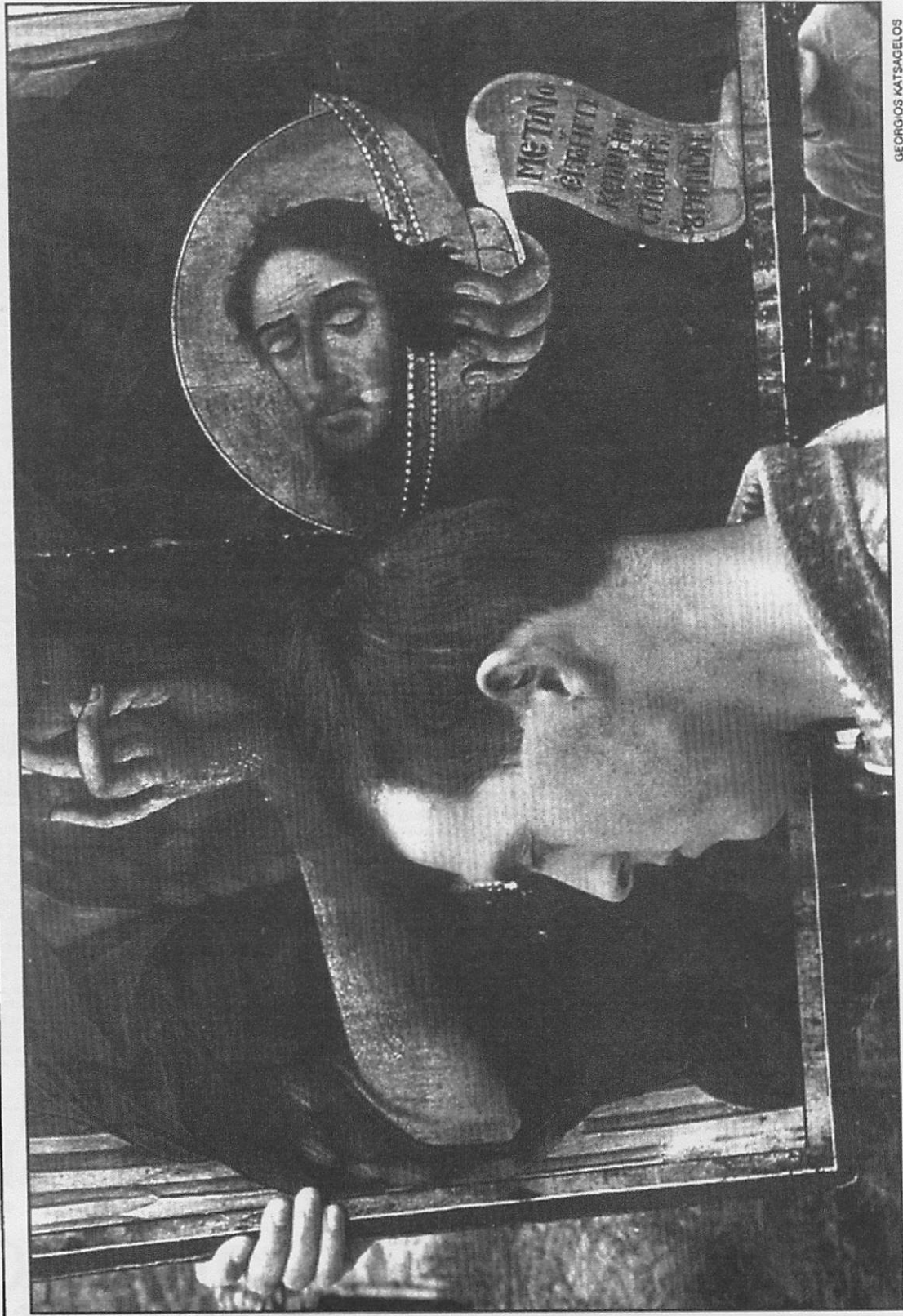
# LIFEStyle

D



Culture desk editor: Jacob Stockinger 252-6480  
E-Mail Address: [tclife@madison.com](mailto:tclife@madison.com)

The Capital Times ■ Friday, July 23, 1999



GEORGIOS KATSAGELOS

Each year, Greek men parade precious religious icons through streets and fields. The integration of religion and art is central to life in Greece, as shown in a new documentary photo exhibit at the Promega Gallery.



# Icon exhibit shows life, religion link

By Jacob Stockinger

The Capital Times

In many of the black-and-white photographs, people laugh as they dance with abandon, eat and drink to excess and socialize en masse.

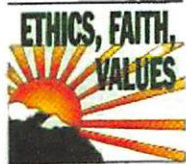
You might think this is a show about partying. But it's really about religion and religious festivals. And its purpose is to document the close daily links among religion, art and daily life in modern Greece.

Such ties have often been severed or lost. It's easy to forget, for example, that the music of J.S. Bach was first performed in churches, not concert halls.

And even the term icon has taken on a secular meaning, often designating a celebrity or a famous photograph.

But in Greece such ties between art and religion remain strong and alive, says Georgios Katsagelos, whose pictures are on display through Sept. 17 at the Pro-mega Gallery in the BioPharmaceutical Technology Center, 5445 E. Cheryl Parkway, off Fish Hatchery Road and not far from Fitchburg Community Center.

(Admission is free. Hours are 8 a.m.-4 p.m. weekdays. Call 277-2669 for information.)



"When I saw the photos I saw the power in them, regardless of how you feel about religion," says Daniel Swadener, the gallery's Ohio-based curator. "Religion is a legitimate matter for the arts, so why not this photography and why not here? It's challenging for some people and comfortable for others."

"In Greece, they might not be any more spiritual than anywhere else, but religion affects everything they do," Swadener adds. "It's ingrained in everyday life, and these pic-

tures capture that."

The Greek-born photographer was trained at Brooklyn College and now teaches photography in northern Greece — where he shot his documentary series in 1993-95. He agrees that the integration of the spiritual into daily life is also what inspired him to do the project. It resulted in a book and a show that has toured throughout Europe and the United States.

"Religion is an important part of everyday life, and that aspect is more important to my photography than the metaphysical part," Katsagelos says. "In my work, I try to connect everyday life with religion."

"What is important for the Greek Orthodox religion is that people are around the church without being fanatics," he adds, pointing out that the bearded priests are expected to start the dancing at a festival.

"The church doesn't expect people to be spiritually attached to it. They just want them to join together around the church, and they do. The people are in a society, and they hold together because of the church. Even if you are not a religious person, you feel you belong somewhere."

Not that he doesn't appreciate the art in the elaborately beautiful icons, which usually depict holy figures.

"Of course, the icons have art in them," he explains. "But the people don't see them as art but as religious objects. They use them, they don't put them in museums like a piece of art. It's a part of everyday life, like an object that you use to do something. It's a totally different view than of an art object."

• • •

Indeed, one of the most dramatic photos shows a young man shouldering an icon, the paint of which has been worn down by the wear-and-tear of carrying the heavy object around for up to eight miles at a time.

But the church doesn't mind the damage, Katsagelos says, because it is more important that the icons — which are often 200 or 300 years old — serve their social function than remain pristine as art objects.

Once or twice a year, people take the heavy, paint-on-wood icons out of the church and march them around to bless the village, the fields and the olive groves.

"I spent a lot of time with them, so after a while they didn't look at me," says Katsagelos, who has worked with the Greek army and is now documenting Greek mental hospitals. "They trusted me."

In this work, what the viewer does not see is a moralistic disapproval of pleasure. Instead, one sees less hierarchy between leader and believer, and an embracing of earthly pleasures and community.

Perhaps there are lessons to be found in this show for a contemporary American society increasingly marked by religious intolerance, puritanism and disagreement.



JACOB STOCKINGER/THE CAPITAL TIMES

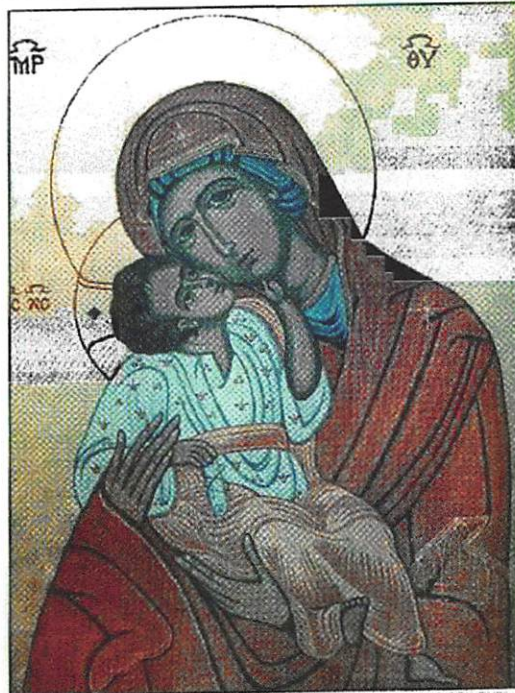
Greek photographer Georgios Katsagelos was trained at Brooklyn College.

## Area artist's icons also in show

As a colorful complement to the Greek show of black-and-white photographs about Greek Orthodox religion and icons, curator Daniel Swadener also has included several modern and quite colorful icons by Wis-

consin artist David Giffey.

Giffey lives in Arena, near Spring Green, and has created portable icons and murals for Greek Orthodox churches around the Midwest.



JACOB STOCKINGER/THE CAPITAL TIMES

Artist David Giffey, who lives in nearby Arena, creates modern-style Greek Orthodox icons such as "Mother and Child."