



THE HOLY ART OF IMPERIAL RUSSIA

The *ikona* or Russian icon derives its name from the Greek word *eikon*, meaning image. After the mixture of Greco-Roman and Syrian art that gave birth to icons was modified in Byzantium, that tradition was passed on to Russia when it was converted to Christianity in 988 AD. The Russians modified it in ways that reflected their own skills and character.

The sacred images on view in *The Holy Art of Imperial Russia* exhibition are of a kind once readily found in even the humblest homes of Russia, as well as its churches and public shrines. Icons appeared everywhere in pre-Soviet Russia; there were even small shrines in schools and factories.

The period from the 18th to the early 20th century is very rich in icon types and variations. The images were not regarded simply as religious paintings, but as sacred objects mysteriously linked to the holy figures they depict.

Veneration offered to a saint painted on an icon was believed to pass directly to that saint in heaven. Because of this mysterious link between saint and image, icons were seen as comforters, powerful guardians and helpers that could bring rain, cure disease in cattle, ward off fires from homes and heal physical ailments.



PRINCE VLADIMIR AND THE ORIGIN OF CHRISTIANITY IN RUSSIA

Before Russia converted to Christianity, the people of that region who were known as Slavs practiced a form of shamanism. In 988AD Prince Vladimir of Kiev declared Eastern Christianity to be the official religion of Russia. This followed the established practice of Byzantium, the major power in the region at the time.

According to *The Tale of Bygone Years*, Prince Vladimir began his life as a pagan. Eventually he began to inquire into various religions of the medieval world and was first attracted to Islam. He liked the idea of a sensuous paradise after death. He was also fond of women, keeping some eight hundred concubines in addition to his lawful wife. However, he did not like the Islamic ban on drinking, one of his favorite pastimes.

Vladimir then looked to Judaism but was disenchanted after he found that its people were scattered and without a country, which he saw as a mark of divine disfavor. He then inquired into Latin Christianity but thought it rather dull after emissaries reported back that they “found no glory there.”

Emissaries returning from Constantinople, however, told the Prince of being entranced by the glory of the liturgy service in the Church of Holy Wisdom. They reported, (we were) “out of ourselves, not knowing if we were on earth or in heaven.” Upon hearing this, Vladimir chose Orthodoxy for himself and without asking chose it for his people. So Kievan Russia was converted to Orthodoxy by edict in 988.



ICONS AND COMMUNISM

After the Russian Revolution of 1917, one of Josef Stalin's main agendas was to abolish religion. In the spirit of revolution and through intimidation, thousands of families voluntarily destroyed their icons or gave them to government officials to destroy or sell on the Western market. Many were used for scrap lumber or firewood; others were defaced. Russian Orthodox churches were gutted and converted into grain and equipment sheds. Until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the country encouraged the foreign sale and export of icons from the Romanov era.

Communism, however, never succeeded in abolishing the Orthodox religion. Amid the turmoil, thousands of people fled Russia for Western Europe and the United States taking their icons and their Orthodox religious roots with them. Though countless painted and metal icons were destroyed, many others survived and were carefully protected by believers from all over the former Soviet Union.

THE RUSSIAN RENAISSANCE

From the 11th to the 17th century, Russian icons remained remarkably unchanged in style, rooted in the Byzantine tradition of vivid color and flat perspective. Traditional icons were painted in a non-naturalistic, stylized manner intended to reveal the spiritual nature of the figures depicted rather than accurate anatomical detail. Everything is abstracted from reality to depict a transfigured, timeless world.

The new Russian style of iconography utilizing light and shadow, bold colors and true perspective had its roots in the Royal Moscow workshop of Simon Ushkov (1626-86). The Western influence on Russian icons strongly increased in the middle of the 17th century. During this time there was a great schism in the Russian Orthodox Church, which split into two major divisions- the conservative “Old Believers,” who kept the traditional forms and rituals, and the State Church, which was more open to change and Westernization.

At the beginning of the 18th century, the Romanov tsar Peter the Great created St. Petersburg as a “window to the West.” As a result, a second stream of icon painting began to show the influence of Western European renaissance paintings from earlier centuries. Russian artists learned of the painting style through inexpensive Bible illustrations carried by traveling peddlers and by the works of European masters brought to St. Petersburg by Peter the Great. State Church icon painters, who were impressed by religious Western art, began introducing more realism into icons. However, this change did not happen without controversy; Patriarch Nikon had the eyes of westernized icons burned with hot irons.

As time went by, these more realistic icons replaced the traditional abstract forms in popularity. However, the old style icons continued to be the only “true” icons in the eyes of the Old Believers.

THEOLOGICAL CORRECTNESS

The Russian Church has long accepted and embraced icon styles and subjects not considered to be theologically proper by Orthodox believers in other parts of the world. The depiction of God the Father, for example, is considered improper by many because, unlike Jesus, He was never seen. Even the new Russian style of icon painting is thought by some to be too realistic and therefore not properly spiritual.

THE DEFINITION OF AN ICON

An icon is a standardized religious painting. It is usually a re-creation of an existing image or pattern. It is a copy but not necessarily exactly the same in size, coloring or style. Some icon patterns have been handed down for many centuries. An icon may also be cast or embossed in metal, carved in wood or stone, sewn on cloth, or painted on porcelain or other materials.

CONDITION AND RESTORATION OF ICONS

Today many icons are restored by removing layers of old varnish to reveal the original, fresh colors hidden underneath. Often the boards that are the icon's support split and must be re-joined. Because they are wood, they also frequently display structural problems associated with insect damage. In these cases the objects are fumigated and then the damage can be repaired.

THE WOODEN PANEL

Icons were painted on seasoned wood panels with a gesso layer. Softwoods such as pine, fir and larch were common in northern Russia. Hardwoods, among them, birch, oak and alder were used where available. Cypress, a southern wood with a distinctive incense-like odor, was very desirable wherever it could be obtained. Resin-free wood was also preferred.

Many icons were painted on single boards, but large icons often required panels composed of two or more boards glued together. Many of the vertical splits seen in old icons extend along the joint line, which is the weakest point. Joined panels were sometimes used for small icons as well. Because icons are painted on one side only, they have a tendency to warp in a convex form. Warping also results from the part of the tree trunk from which the panel was cut.

СВ. РАВНОАННОС.

PREPARING WOODEN PANELS

Before painting an icon on a wooden panel, the surface of the board was first roughened on one side to increase bonding. Then a cloth was glued on the rough side. Layer after layer of a gesso consisting of rabbit skin glue or fish glue mixed with powdered chalk was applied. The final surface was polished smooth and ready for paint.

Some icons have gesso applied directly onto the wood with no cloth in between. Others, particularly of the 19th century, may have paper instead of cloth.

PATTERNS

Icon painters generally kept a collection of patterns in the form of stencil outline drawings pierced with pinpricks. When a stencil was laid over a blank wooden panel, powdered charcoal or coal in a pouch was pounced through the stencil to form a dark outline. This was drawn over with a pencil and the outlines were scratched permanently into the panel with a pointed tool called a stylus.

A stencil could be taken from an existing icon by tracing over the painting with a small brush dipped in garlic juice or a colored sugar mixture. When a sheet of paper was pressed onto the icon surface, the tacky outline adhered to the paper, which could then be pricked to form a stencil.

СВ. РАВНОАПОС.

GOLD LEAF

Many icons have gold leaf, which was applied after the outlines had been scratched into the surface. It provided a gleaming background called the “light” (*svyet*) of the icon. Unfortunately it is an unstable surface for painting; paint applied over it tends to flake off as time passes.

Not all icons have gold leaf backgrounds. Some have tinted varnish applied over inexpensive metal leaf to make it appear gold. Many icons just have a solid painted background such as green or ochre. Late 19th and early 20th century icons sometimes have a standardized painted background in tones from blue to white.

EGG TEMPERA AND OIL PAINT

Tempera is the traditional paint for icons. It consists of powdered colors (often natural minerals) that are mixed with the yolk of an egg and a little rye beer for preservation. The precise composition of pigments varied from place to place according to what was available.

Icons painted in oils usually date from the late 19th to the early 20th century. These were the product of the State Church rather than the more traditional Old Believers. Sometimes painters attempted to mix oils and tempera, often with unfortunate results.

PAINTING AN ICON

СВ. ПАВЛОС.

Early dating icons were typically painted by one artist and usually not signed with his name. To sign an icon was considered vain and even sinful. This would imply that the painter was taking credit for the gifts and talents God had graciously bestowed upon him. Exceptions to this rule were the icons produced in the Stroganoff workshop. These icons included the inscription, “painted by God through the hands of ... (artist’s name).”

By the 19th century many workshops had adopted a system based on the division of labor. One artist applied the gesso; another applied the gold leaf; another painted the garments, etc.

Backgrounds and garments were generally painted first, then the hands of each figure. The senior artists in these workshops were then assigned the faces. Hair and flesh were painted in a dark undertone with successively lighter colored paint applied on top. This resulted in figures that sometimes stand out noticeably above the level of the background. Line details of the hair and facial highlights were added last. The painting was not considered an icon until the last task was complete- adding the title and inscriptions.

THE LANGUAGE OF ICONS

The traditional language of the Orthodox Church in Slavic countries is “Church Slavonic.” It is written in the Cyrillic alphabet and is the language used in the Russian Bible, in liturgical books and for the inscriptions on icons. Church Slavonic is closely related to the modern Russian language but differs in many respects.

The title of the icon was usually painted in ornate letters above, below or beside the entire image. The title and name of each saint, such as the “Great Martyr Panteleimon,” was written above or in the halo. Abbreviations were often used and are indicated by a curved line above the word.

СВ. ПАВНОАПОС.

ICONS COVERS

By the 18th century, a taste for metal ornamentation led to the introduction of a one-piece icon cover known as a “riza” (meaning “robe”). They were typically made of brass or silver, often with silvered brass or gilded silver. From the time of the tsar Peter the Great, silver-work had to be stamped with the town hallmark, date of manufacture and percentage of silver contained. The maker’s initials were frequently added to the cover as well.

A riza typically covers the entire surface of a painted icon except for the face, hands and feet of the figures depicted. Costumes and backgrounds were reproduced on the metal covering by engraving or repoussé hammered work. Although metal was the most commonly used material, a riza could also be made of paper mache.

HOW ICONS WERE VENERATED

Traditional believers made the sign of the cross and bowed down at the waist before an icon. The hand was first touched to the head, which signifies Christ; then to the right shoulder, meaning that Christ sits at the right hand of God; and finally to the left shoulder, indicating that Christ will come again in judgment to punish those at his left hand and to reward those at his right.

After two crossings and bows, the icon was kissed. If the figure in the icon was depicted in full length, he/she was kissed on the feet or on the blessing hand. If he/she was only shown half-length, the hand was kissed. If only the head was shown, the hair was kissed. Kissing garments was also permitted; however, kissing the face or lips was thought extremely disrespectful.

Brass icons were often rubbed or polished as acts of veneration, yet resulting in the loss of detail. Candles or oil lamps (*lampada*) were burned directly in front of icons. Burn marks are seen on some icons for this reason.

ICONS AND CHILDREN

On the 8th day after birth, an Orthodox child would be taken to the church to be given a name by the priest. The name was that of a saint and the child might be given an icon of this patron saint. Such an icon was called a “name day” or “angel day” icon because the name-saint was like a guardian angel to the child. Children were often not baptized until forty days after birth.

There is a particular type of icon called a *razmernaya* (“measured”) icon, which is painted on a wooden panel cut to the length of the newborn child.

ICONS IN THE HOME

Every Orthodox Russian home had its “beautiful corner” in which the family icons were placed. It often contained a corner shelf draped with beautiful cloths and holding icons. Guests entering a house customarily venerated the icons in the corner by making the sign of the cross before them.

ICONS IN THE CHURCH

The Iconostasis

In major churches, icons were painted on walls and pillars and were set into a large icon screen. The screen, known as an *iconostasis* or image stand, is a large wooden framework inset with rows of icons that separates the congregation from the altar. It symbolizes the dividing line between heaven and earth and represents one of the most important architectural features of Orthodox churches.

The number and size of icons included on the screen vary according to the size of the church. There are, however, generally accepted standards for the placement of the particular icon types.

Processional Icons

Icons were also kept on special stands within the church and were carried in processions. Some were specially made with long handles for holding them aloft. Such icons were often painted on both sides with two different images.

LATE ICONS AND THE LAST TSAR

The end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century brought a feeling of spiritual disappointment and pessimism in Russia. This led to the appearance of the idea of “Holy Russia.” It marked the beginning of a revival of the Orthodox faith and Orthodox icon painting.

The last Romanov tsars, Tsar Nicholas and Empress Alexandra, were pious believers in Orthodoxy. They made pilgrimages to monasteries and prayed daily- not only in churches but also in their palaces. The Romanovs were surrounded by icons and religious paintings.

It is said that one hundred and thirty icons covered the walls of Nicholas’ bedroom at the Great Kremlin Palace in Moscow. There were no ancient icons, only contemporary pieces created during that period. At the Alexander Palace near St. Petersburg, Alexandra’s bedroom was full of icons representing new Russian saints that had been canonized during the reign of her husband. More than 600 icons covered the walls of her room.

THE “LITTLE RED ICONS”

Icons referred to as “little red icons” are easy to recognize because of their interesting and distinctive style. They generally have bright, reddish/orange-colored borders and have simply painted images of the Mother of God or other saints. The background of these icons is typically silver or gold-tinted silver, which is present underneath the paint.

These icons were painted by the so-called “Serbian Wandering Painters” who immigrated into Russia to escape Turkish persecution. They date from the late 18th century into the 19th century. In this exhibition, the *Interceding Mother of God* icon is believed to have been painted by wandering Serbs.

THE “APPEARANCE” OF AN ICON

The term “appearance,” when referring to an icon, means the time when an image manifests itself for the first time as a wonderworking icon. Such an appearance may take place in a number of ways:

- An icon may have been previously unknown and found under apparently miraculous circumstances (such as the “*Kazan*” *Mother of God* icon, which was discovered after its location was revealed to a young girl in a dream).
- An icon may also “appear” in a tree or floating in a river or in the sea. Old, damaged icons or images too dark to recognize were often disposed of by placing them in a river.
- An icon hanging in a church may suddenly begin to work miracles.

Many of the *Mother of God* icon types featured in this exhibition are based on famous wonderworking icons that appeared centuries ago. The title often refers to the name of the city or town in which the miracle occurred, such as the “*Akhtuirskaya*” *Mother of God* or the “*Kazan*” *Mother of God*.

MOTHER OF GOD ICONS

Mary, the mother of Jesus, is given the title “Most Holy Mother of God” in the Eastern Orthodox Church. She is considered higher than the angels and is entitled to veneration but not worship.

Mary is often depicted bearing a star upon each shoulder and on her head signifying her perpetual virginity before, during and after the birth of Christ. Typically she is shown wearing a burgundy-purple covering over her head and shoulders (known as a *maphorion*) and a blue gown (known as a *chiton*).

METAL ICONS

Spiritually there is no distinction between painted and metal icons in the Russian Orthodox religion. Cast metal icons were very popular in the 18th and 19th centuries and were a specialty of the *Old Believers*, a conservative sect in Orthodoxy. Most were cast in brass and may be gilded or silvered; some have colored enamel baked onto the surface.

Metal icons had three virtues: they were affordable, durable and portable. They could be conveniently folded up, placed in a pocket and taken along on a journey. They survived the rigors of use that would have quickly damaged a painted icon.

Some metal icons were attached to a cord and worn around the neck despite being uncomfortably large and heavy. There were also smaller cast icons that could be worn with less discomfort. The largest metal icons were often hinged and could be folded. They were displayed in the home along with painted icons.

Metal icons were easily cared for. Tarnish was removed by rubbing the surface with powdered chalk. Unfortunately, icons that were frequently polished show great signs of wear with many of the figures completely rubbed away.