# Holy image, sacred presence : Russian icons, 1500-1900 : March 12-June 5, 2011.

Chazen Museum of Art
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*Russian Icons, 1500–1900*

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## WHAT IS AN ICON?

The icon (Greek, εἰκών, "image," "likeness") is an art form used by Orthodox Christians for portraits and narrative scenes of Christ and the saints. Offering a focal point for prayer, the icon evokes a powerful presence that is linked to the image of the person represented or the original icons of a series, known as venerable prototypes. The most authoritative models are *acheiropoieta*—images "not made by human hands" but said to be produced through miraculous imprints, such as the mandylion in this exhibition showing Christ's face (fig. 1). According to tradition, the mandylion originated when Christ wet his face and pressed it against a cloth to

produce a portrait that was sent to heal King Abgar of Edessa. Thereafter, the icon served as the city's palladium until it was brought to Constantinople in 944. At this time, the mandylion began to be depicted in portable icons and in murals as a fully painted face superimposed upon the cloth, comparable to the Chazen icon. This dark-haired, bearded Christ, resembling conventional images of the Greek god Zeus, is found in Russian mandylion icons as early as the twelfth century, but the illusionistic projection of the face reflects European influence on Russian art starting in the seventeenth century.

FIG 1

*Mandylion, 19th-century, oklad: Larion Emilov, 1875, oil on panel, silver oklad with semi-precious stones, 14 5/8 x 12 in. From the collection of Michael P. Kluppel, given in memory by Dolores Kluppel Vetter, 1992.28a–b*

# ORIGINS AND HISTORY

*From Byzantium to Russia*

FIG 2

*The Virgin of the Sign, 17th century, repainted 19th century, tempera and oil on panel, 28 x 34 1/2 in. Gift of Joseph E. Davies, 37.1.3*

Painted icons are documented as early as the mid-second century. The earliest surviving icons, dated to the sixth century, adapted an illusionistic (realistic) style, format, and encaustic (wax-based) medium from funerary portraits (mummy masks) such as those produced at Fayoum in Roman Egypt, as well as images of pre-Christian deities used in household shrines. These early icons, like images of the emperor or of Roman gods, were honored with incense and lamps or candles, and were similarly accepted as proxies for the individuals represented.

Such potentially idolatrous cult practices provoked two periods of iconoclasm, from 730 to 787 and again from 813 to 843, in which icon veneration was forbidden and icons were destroyed. Iconoclasts argued that the only acceptable image of Christ was the symbolic cross because an artist was incapable of capturing Christ's divine nature. Iconophiles responded that Christ's human nature made it possible to represent him in human form; theologians such as Theodore the Studite (759–826) further argued that worship was directed not to the material but to the "prototype" or person represented. After Empress Theodora reinstated icons in 843, they were rendered in a more abstract style, designed to suggest that they represented a different realm of reality, distinct from the material one. Figures were represented close to the picture plane and depicted with linear modeling; the illusionistic background

was frequently replaced with a transcendent gold ground.

It was this formal conception of the icon that was embraced by the Kievan Rus, a collection of city-states with its capital at Kiev, under Yaroslav the Wise after his conversion to Orthodox Christianity in 988. The earliest icons in Russia were imported from the Byzantine Empire, including the Vladimir Madonna, a miracle-working icon venerated as the palladium of the Russian state. From the late eleventh century when Russians began to produce their own icons, they still privileged Byzantine models. Thus Our Lady of the Sign (fig. 2), depicting Mary with arms extended in prayer and the Christ Child within her radiant womb, conforms to a miracle-working icon in Novgorod (ca. 1100) based on an icon from the Blachernai Monastery in Constantinople.

The principal innovations in Russian icons involved the introduction of distinctive iconographic themes such as the Pokrov miracle (Virgin's Protective Veil), and local saints such as Sergei of Radonezh (fig. 3), the spiritual father of celebrated icon painter Andrei Rublev. By the fourteenth-century, Northern Russian painters began to replace the gold ground with opaque bright red fields (especially in Novgorod), blue, or somber green and ocher. Distinctive workshop styles developed by the seventeenth century, including the miniaturist style of the Strognaov School seen in the St. George icon, characterized by large numbers of small figures set within a delicate landscape or against the backdrop of ornate architecture.

A significant rupture with Byzantine style emerged later in the seventeenth century under the impact of the Reforms of Patriarch


FIG 3 *Saint Sergei of Radonezh, ca. 1900, oil and gold leaf on panel, 7 x 5 3/4 in. Gift of Joseph E. Davies, 37.1.21*

FIG 4 *Saint Michael, icon: late 18th-century, basma: by BYC, active after 1764, oil on panel, silver-plated gold frame with smoked topaz stones, 15 x 12 1/2 in. From the Collection of Michael P. Kluppel, given in memory by Dolores Kluppel Vetter, 1992.27*

FIG 5 *Saint Basil the Great and Saint Basil "the Fool" Adorning the Holy Trinity, 19th century, oil, tin, and enamel on panel, 12 1/2 x 10 1/2 in. Gift of Joseph E. Davies, 37.1.15*

Nikon and of Tsar Peter the Great, who encouraged the modernization of Russian culture by embracing European artistic traditions. Russian painters, often using oil instead of tempera, began to represent illusionistic landscapes and atmospheric perspective, and copied subjects from European prints, such as the Miraculous Draft of Fishes and Saint Michael as apocalyptic horseman (fig. 4). Icon painters also catered to Old Believers, who insisted on traditional icon themes and forms, as well as a subdued palette based on icons made before the mid-seventeenth century whose forms were modified over time by darkened varnish (for example, Saints Basil the Great and Basil the Fool, fig. 5). By the end of the nineteenth century, when printed icons were common and the quality of painted ones was poor, the Tsar advocated restoring the art of icon painting. Thereafter a fusion of sorts was achieved in many icons, blending Westernizing chiaroscuro with traditional icon types and abstract gold backgrounds, as in the Sergei of Radonezh icon (fig. 3).

# MAKING ICONS

Russian panel icons were made from limewood, alder, birch, oak, and imported cypress. Battens (*shponki*) were inserted in the back of the panel to prevent cracking, and a recessed area was carved out on the front. The front surface was covered with linen overlaid with a fine plaster (*levka*) composed of alabaster or chalk dust applied in several thin layers to create a smooth painting surface. A preliminary drawing was made with brush or pencil, often using a cartoon from a model book, and this same design was engraved into the surface. When gold was used for background and haloes, the areas were prepared with clay-based bole containing an adhesive to which gold leaf was applied. The remaining figures, landscape, and buildings were painted in egg tempera (ground pigments suspended in egg yolk) applied in gradations of the same hue, ranging from the darkest tone used to reinforce the contours of figures in the original sketch to the lightest tones used for highlights and projecting forms. Sometimes gold was applied as linear highlights on clothing. Finally, the icon was sealed with *olipha*, a boiled linseed oil usually containing amber, which warmed the overall color scheme and darkened over time.

Most of the Chazen's Russian icons are painted on wood in egg tempera. From the eighteenth century, however, Russian icon painters began to substitute oil painting for tempera. This allowed the painter to conceal brushwork, which facilitated gradual transitions between areas of light and shadow and fostered a greater illusionism in rendering figures in space, emulating European models (see for example Saint Michael and the full-length Saint Nicholas).

# ICONS, RITUALS, AND THE SENSES

FIG 6

*Virgin Mary from Deësis Tier of Iconostasis, 19th century, oil on panel, 27 5/8 x 10 3/4 in. Gift of Joseph E. Davies, 37.1.6*

Prior to the 1917 revolution icons were omnipresent in Russian society, displayed not only in churches but also in homes, on city gates, in small outdoor shrines, in commercial buildings, and in the workplace. Passing icons in the street or when entering or leaving a room, one acknowledged sacred presence by signing the cross and bowing the head.

Within churches, portable icons were placed on piers and walls or on stands known as *proskynetaria* that featured images of the saint or feast of the day. Upon entering the church Orthodox believers customarily acknowledge all the major portable icons, lighting lamps or candles, kneeling at proskynetaria to view and sometimes kiss the icon as part of an intimate evocation of Christ or the saints. The most prominent icons form the iconostasis, a screen dividing the congregational space from the sanctuary. In its definitive form, developed around 1400,

the screen comprised up to five tiers: 1. the Sovereign Row *(Mestnyi Chin)*, including the icon of Christ to the right of the central Holy Doors, the Mother of God to the left, and other locally venerated icons placed at eye level; 2. the Deësis ("Intercession") Row *(Deisusnyi Chin)*, comprising standing saints praying before the enthroned Christ, including the Virgin Mary (fig. 6) and John the Baptist, archangels, apostles, and bishops of the Orthodox Church; 3. the Feast Row *(Prazdnichnyi Chin)*, representing narratives of Christ and the Virgin Mary, commemorated in the liturgy; 4. the Prophets Row *(Prorocheskii Chin)*, comprising the Virgin of the Sign flanked by prophets; and 5. the Patriarchs Row *(Praotecheskii Chin)*, with ancestors of Christ. The Holy Doors feature the Annunciation to the Virgin and the Four Evangelists writing their gospels. The iconostasis not only delimited the sacred space of the sanctuary, but was also a focal point for prayer during worship, a reminder of the liturgical calendar and a means of imagining the heavenly court, resplendent with light.

From the Deësis row, the Chazen possesses two series, and a single panel of Bishop George of Mytilene. These elongated narrow icons reflect the vertical proportions of Russian churches. Four smaller oblong panels with scenes from Christ's life (Baptism, Crucifixion, Pentecost, Anastasis) may derive from the Feast Row. A small circular panel of John the Evangelist once joined the three other gospel writers on the Holy Doors.

From the seventeenth century, smaller icons were increasingly made for lay devotion in the home. Icons of Christ and the saints were frequently grouped in the northeast corner of the home to create what the Russians call the

"beautiful corner" (*krasni ugal*), a sanctuary within domestic space. Portable triptychs of the Deësis or miniature iconostases were designed for travel, so that the owner could create a form of sacred space as a focus for prayer far from home and on the battlefield.

In all these settings, icons contributed to a multisensory religious experience. Sacred figures in icons become present to the worshipper's physical senses through the flickering candlelight dancing off a metalwork *oklad*, through the sweet smell of incense burned in front of the icon, the sound of prayer and chant, the imaginative taste of the embrace, and the touch of the icon's frame. The material icon thus simulates a site of desire for union with the sacred.

# COLLECTING RUSSIAN ICONS

Following the Russian Revolution of 1917, many monasteries and churches were closed and the best icons were collected in state museums. Although the new Soviet Union was an atheistic state, icons—particularly those dating from the eleventh to seventeenth centuries—were prized as manifestations of traditional Russian culture and highly valued for their aesthetic qualities. Russian icons were later denigrated by Soviet experts because their style was "contaminated" by Western European influence. Thus, when the Soviets started selling icons to foreign tourists and diplomats in government-run Commission shops in the 1930s, they offered primarily later icons or heavily restored examples that they did not want to keep in museum collections. American collectors became aware of Russian icons in the 1920s through official Soviet exhibitions in New York (1924) and Boston (1930), and through sales of "impe-

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rial Russian treasures" arranged in American department stores by Armand Hammer between 1930 and 1933.

The museum's icon collection originated in 1937 with the gift of twenty-three icons by Joseph E. Davies, a prominent lawyer, UW alumnus, and American ambassador to the Soviet Union (1937–1938). During his tenure as ambassador, he acquired icons (dated mainly from the eighteenth to early twentieth centuries), Soviet Socialist Realist paintings, and copies of nineteenth-century history paintings to educate the citizens of Wisconsin about Russian culture.

Subsequent additions to the collection included two small devotional icons given in 1962 by Joseph Crane Bradley, an alumnus of UW's Art History department whose interest in Russian icons was fostered by his grandfather, Charles Crane, an industrialist and art collector from Chicago who traveled extensively in Russia. More recent donations include an intriguing double-sided tablet icon with the life of Christ and an icon of Elijah, given as part of the Hollaender collection in 1992, and a group of six late-nineteenth-century icons of saints from the Collection of Michael P. Kluppel, given by Dolores Kluppel Vetter in 1992.