

Splendour and Glory

Exhibition review on “Splendour and Glory: Art of the Russian Orthodox Church”, held at Hermitage Amsterdam, from 19.03.2011 to 16.09.2011

The exhibition exhales an air of distant serenity. This comes directly from the old icons which look at us from a distance of centuries. It is like looking at the bright night sky and knowing that the light reaching our eyes might have travelled for billions of years.

Icons are not paintings in the traditional sense. They are not aimed to entertain and only in some measure to confer religious ideas. Icons are gateways, channels for prayer through which believers can connect to the archetype or event depicted on them. They are sacred, and are miraculous by nature (*thaumaturge*). In Ancient Rus, protective icons were placed on city gates. Every Russian home, no matter how big or small, had an icon corner where the family would pray together every morning and evening. Icons were carried as banners during campaigns and as special folding icons on journeys. Practically all actions were consecrated by icons¹.

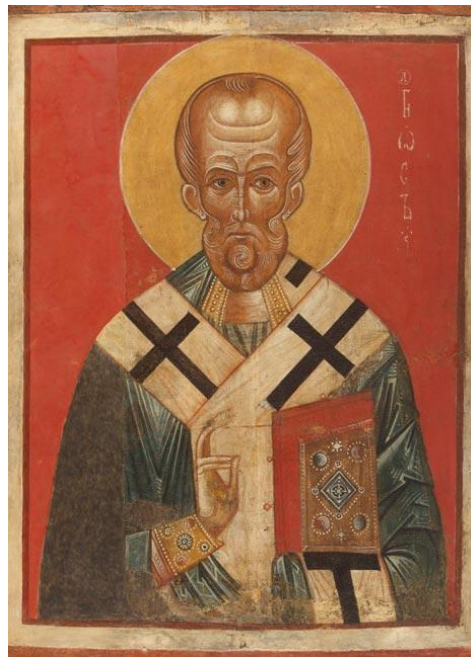


Fig. 1: Icon of St. Nicholas from the late 13th—14th century, Novgorod.

History comes to life in front of our eyes as we walk among the objects of the exhibition. Numerous texts accompany the objects helping us to understand the development of Russian Orthodoxy; starting from the Viking (Varangian)-ruled Kievan Rus whose ruler, Prince Vladimir of Kiev adapted the Orthodox Christian faith in 989; its Byzantine origins but independent development; its heydays in the 15th and 16th century when Moscow appeared as the ‘Third Rome’ after the Turkish occupation of Byzantium; its gradually declining power from the 17th century, hastened by the church reforms of Metropolitan

¹ Maltseva (2011)

Nikon²; the abolition of Patriarchate under Peter I and the deprivation of its financial independence during Catherine II; to the concrete extermination of clergy and demolition of church buildings by the Bolsheviks in the 1920s and 1930s. Nevertheless, the 21st century witnesses a revival of religious interest in Russia. The intrinsic development of religious belief in Russia is excellently mirrored by the exhibits, and –most of all- by the painted icons.

The international recognition of icons as works of art is a recent phenomenon. It is interesting to read the personal account of a British icon expert who, around the 1960s, asked the opinion of the British National Gallery's curator about an icon in his possession. "The curator on duty took it in his hands and quite literally looked down his nose and said, 'Oh, this is a Russian icon. We don't really count these as paintings,' and dismissed me..."³ Within two decades, the opinion of the Western academics has changed profoundly. All that was needed is a different mindset: the abandonment of the Western idea of realism, compared to which the figures of the icons seemed simple, even naïve, purely of historical/religious interest only. The academic opinion was no different in Russia. Starting from the 17th century, Russian artist adopted the more realistic and earthly Western-European ideas of painting, leading first to the development of secular art which than, in turn, profoundly influenced and 'Westernised' icon painting. By the 19th century, the traditionally painted icons appeared inferior and valued as a folk art. (Interestingly, it is from the 17th century, that icon painters started to sign their works⁴.) Presently, there is no more doubt about the great artistic value of early Russian icons. They are recognized of their incomparable depth of expression and unparalleled spirituality. Fedor Ivanovich Buslaev⁵ wrote about the atmosphere in which the traditional icon painting developed: "The whole life of Ancient Rus was permeated by poetry because all the spiritual concerns were conceived on the basis of a sincere faith, although it was not always purely Christian."

² The Church reforms of Metropolitan Nikon, announced in 1653-54, aimed to bring in accord the Russian Orthodox texts and rituals with the rest of Eastern Orthodoxy, maybe in an attempt to establish a Moscow-ruled Orthodox world (in addition to establish a theocratic state in Russia). Those who opposed the reforms were called 'Old Believers'. Although, at the short term, the 'Old Believers' suffered from persecution, their community persisted and, in the long term, they became the propelling force for cultural and industrial development.

³ Interview with Richard Temple, art historian and gallery holder specialised in Russian icon painting. Published in the Antiques Trade Gazette, 12th October 2002.

⁴ Maltseva (2011)

⁵ Fedor Ivanovich Buslaev (1818-1897) was the first scholar who systematically studied early Russian painting. In: Lazarev (1997).



Fig.2: Icon: Christ Pantocrator from the Deesis Row of an iconostasis, Northern Russia, late 13th—early 14th century.

Presently there is a revived interest in icon painting in Russia as well as in other countries. The organizers of the exhibition are pioneering with the presentation of some more recent, 19th century icons in order to help to reconsider their artistic status. It becomes obvious at the exhibition that icons from this period lost from their sincerity and spirituality meanwhile they gained in perspective, facial expression, and improvisation. The pomposity which once symbolised the power of the heavenly king now became the representation of earthly power. However, deprived of their spiritual content, icons simply became paintings, at times even kitschy paintings.

Early Russian icons sell at very high prices nowadays. They have become the symbols of national pride. Russian tycons are spending hundreds of millions of dollars to reacquire all kinds of Russian art. "A patriotic wave has appeared in Russia," said Mikhail Elizavetin, who made his fortune in construction and now has one of Russia's finest private collections of icons. "There is a pride in returning these icons to their motherland. I'm not talking about speculation in icons, I'm talking about real national pride. Many people have a sincere, pure reaction to this kind of art."⁶ One thing is sure: icons used to and continue to have a deep impression on the Russian public.

It is a special merit of the exhibition to introduce us the different schools of icon painting through wonderful examples from the Novgorod, Pskov, and Moscow schools. Unfortunately, there are but two examples of painted icons from the period prior to 1500. The 14th century frescos from Pskov are exceptional relics, as frescos were rare in Russia where mostly wooden churches were built. They recall the church atmosphere of a firmly based and well organized medieval state. The organizers excelled in reconstituting the sacred atmosphere of an orthodox church inside the exhibition by building an iconostasis. It is placed in the centre, as in real churches, and is equipped with two beautiful wing doors.

⁶ A Rich Market for Russian Icons, The Washington Post, By Peter Finn, Washington Post Foreign Service, Tuesday, February 5, 2008

Next to the icons, the exhibition presents the –perhaps most salient- side of orthodoxy: that of “splendour and glory”. Doubtless, the brilliance of the Byzantine court played an important role in Prince Vladimir’s choice of adapting the orthodox faith. According to the Chronicle of Nestor⁷, written around 1111, Prince Vladimir “sent envoys to various countries to study their religion; the envoys who visited Roman-Catholic Germany found no beauty there, while the Islamic Volga Bulgarians were labelled 'joyless'. However, in Constantinople the envoys were so struck by the magnificent churches, ritual and splendid singing they no longer knew whether they were in heaven or on earth. An attractive bonus for the grand prince of Kiev was the fact that the Byzantine emperor was accorded divine status.” The oriental pomposity of the Byzantine court and that of the orthodox ritual fitted best to the Russian imagery of the divine greatness and power.



Presentation vase for Easter Eggs, Russia, St.Petersburg, Imperial Porcelain Factory, mid-19th century

There is tremendous skill in the decorative and applied art objects. Among them excel some breathtaking examples of chalices, crosses and censers from the Romanov period.

⁷ Chronicle of Nestor ('Tale of Bygone Years'), is a history of Kievan Rus, originally written in Kiev about 1111. Although it is named after the monk Saint Nestor the Chronicler, it is now generally held to be a compilation of the work of many.



Fig.4.: Vestments of a Major Schematic Monk. Late 19th – early 20th century

The vestment of a Major Schematic Monk, worn by the highest initiates in Eastern monasticism, illustrates the deep contrast of the monastic life with the pomposity of the Orthodox Church. The vestment is made of black textile and covers the body from head to toe, making a rather awesome impression. It expresses the Orthodox doctrine of monks being ‘the unburied dead’ who, in a continual spiritual battle with temptation, spend their life in prayer, fasting and hard labour.

Other interesting examples include small bronze coils from the 12th century. On their obverse side there is a Christian image (usually the owner’s patron saint) while on their reverse side a depiction of the evil (a goddess with snakes for feet or a nest of snake) is found. These objects reveal how Christian doctrines were genuinely mixed with “pagan” thoughts in the spiritual life of Ancient Rus.

Altogether more than 300 religious artefacts form the material of the present exhibition. In addition to the thoroughly written texts that accompany the exhibits, moving images and a short film provide insights into the Orthodox ritual and the massive destruction during the Soviet regime.

The exhibition is accompanied by a 250-pages, beautifully illustrated catalogue. In addition to a historical overview, the catalogue contains useful texts on the Russian Orthodox Church: the life of the saints, the great feasts and church architecture.

Bibliography

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Maltseva, O. (2011): *The Russian Orthodox Church. Icons*. In: *Splendour and Glory: Art of the Russian Orthodox Church*. Exhibition catalogue, Museumshop Hermitage Amsterdam, 2011, pp. 70-87.

Photo credits

Fig.1: Icon of St Nicholas, Old Russia, Novgorod, late 13th—14th century, Wood, with ark; pavoloka (linen canvas), levkas (gesso), tempera; 107.5 x 79.3 x 3 cm. © State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Fig.2: Christ Pantocrator from the Deesis Row of an iconostasis, Northern Russia, late 13th—early 14th century. Wood, with ark; levkas (gesso), tempera; 65 x 42 cm. © State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Fig.3: Presentation vase for Easter Eggs, Russia, St.Petersburg, Imperial Porcelain Factory, mid-19th century, Porcelain, overglaze painting in gold; velvet; 22.5 x 36.5 x 36.5 cm. © State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

Fig.4.: Vestments of a Major Schematic Monk. Russia. Late 19th – early 20th century, silk, satin, wool, cotton fabric; machine and hand stitching, satin-stitching, appliqué with silk, kukula 163 x 63 cm, robe 172 x 440 cm. © State Museum of the History of Religion, St Petersburg