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How America Discovered Russian Icons: The Soviet Loan Exhibition of 1930-32

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HOW AMERICA DISCOVERED RUSSIAN ICONS

THE SOVIET LOAN EXHIBITION OF 1930-1932

On 14 October 1930, the first exhibition of Russian icons ever to take place in the United States opened at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Over the next nineteen months it traveled to nine venues across the country, introducing the American public to a form of medieval painting virtually unknown outside Russia.¹ Billed as the "Union of Soviet Socialist Republics Loan Exhibition," its avowed goal was to share with the outside world the full story of Russian icon painting's evolution from the twelfth to the nineteenth centuries, thereby adding a vital missing chapter to the history of medieval art.

The exhibition's organizers sent abroad some of the oldest and most significant icons then in Soviet collections. They included the twelfth-century Saint Nicholas from the Monastery of the Holy Spirit in Novgorod; the thirteenth-century Saint John with Saint George and Saint Blaise

from Novgorod; three icons by the fifteenth-century master Andrei Rublev from the iconostasis of Vladimir's Dormition Cathedral; and Dionysius's two great icons of Saint Kirill Belozersky from the late sixteenth century. But it was the story of how such icons were rescued from neglect and restored to their original state that made the exhibition a major cultural event of the early Depression era. Interwoven with the scholarly, objective history of stylistic evolution was a dramatic contemporary saga of discovery and liberation. Photos of the exhibition as it was installed at the Cleveland Museum of Art show how emphatically the marks of scientific conservation were left visible on the surfaces of key icons, a constant reminder of their journey from a dark, soot-encrusted past to a light-filled present of radiant color (fig. 10).

The metaphor of restoration was not lost on the American public. It did much to

resolve the paradox of an atheist, iconoclastic government protecting and promoting the art of a religion that it was determined to exterminate. Here, it seemed, was a revolutionary regime that genuinely cared about cultural patrimony, rescuing art treasures of universal significance from a church whose clergy had neither taken adequate care of them nor allowed others to do so. In liberating icons from the clutches of religion, the Soviets reclaimed them as great works of art that transcended the narrow confines of ritual and superstition.

Even as it promoted the universality of the icon and the striking modernity of its "significant form," however, the exhibition quietly pursued a second agenda: to create a market demand for icons in the bourgeois West. Long before the Cold War made such tactics commonplace, these secularized icons were pulled into the Soviet Union's ideological battle with the West, and the story of the icon's salvation became one of

the regime's most effective publicity stunts. That the Soviets' venture failed, at least as initially conceived, may be deduced from the conspicuous absence of important Russian icons from the great majority of American museums and private collections. Instead, a very different sort of icon captured the imagination of private collectors, icons of relatively recent date whose value lay in their secular aura of human tragedy and imperial splendor.

SOVIET PLANS AND PREPARATIONS

Although its organizers downplayed the fact, the Soviet loan exhibition was essentially a prerevolutionary idea. A thriving market for icons had developed in Russia in the decade leading up to World War I. This coincided with a new culture of concern for national heritage that highlighted the role of conservation, expressly opposing it to the "vandalisms" of the Orthodox Church.² The "discovery" of the icon by collectors,



FIG. 10 View of the Soviet Loan Exhibition at the Cleveland Museum of Art, showing a copy of Andrei Rublev's icon of the Old Testament Trinity, a deesis icon of the Archangel Gabriel, and a partially cleaned vita icon of Saint Nicholas. Archives, Cleveland Museum of Art, Records of the Registrar's Office: Gallery View Photographs, Gallery 9 [Gallery 220], Russian Icons, 18 February–20 March 1932.

aesthetes, and scholars owed much to the skills of a cadre of master icon painters, who used the secrets of their craft to return ancient icons to their original state by removing layers of darkened varnish and overpainting. The extraordinary beauty of the paintings brought about a fundamental reassessment of early Russian art, a process that reached its high point in the exhibition of icons from private collections held in Moscow in 1913.³ "Before three or four years have passed," it was predicted, "Europe will be thinking of a similar exhibition, and Russian icon painting will become an honored guest in Western museums."⁴

These hopes for international recognition of Russia's greatest cultural asset were dashed by the outbreak of war in 1914 and the disruption that followed the 1917 Revolution. When the collecting and restoration of icons started up again, in 1918, it was in a very different world. With the decree on the Separation of Church and State (1918), the Orthodox Church was stripped of its legal claim to the rich storehouses of its churches and monasteries. Throughout the Civil War period monasteries were liquidated, churches demolished or converted to secular purposes, and private property abolished. The result was a flood of confiscated and displaced icons.

As the icon's natural habitat disappeared, opportunities for its scholarly study blossomed.⁵ Once off-limits to profane contact, the church's oldest and most venerated icons were now accessible to scientific study. Under the leadership of Igor Grabar and Alexander Anisimov, the Commission on the Restoration of Works

of Art and Antiquities (from 1924, the Central State Restoration Workshops)⁶ performed heroic acts of rescue and preservation under the most adverse conditions. Driven by the urgency of saving unique works from destruction, but also by the thrill of the hunt, the commission launched a series of expeditions searching in particular for icons of the pre-Mongol period and works by the elusive and legendary Andrei Rublev.⁷ Even miracle-working icons were subjected to intense scrutiny by a team of restorers led by Grigory Chirikov (all of them active in the prerevolutionary collecting boom) and closely supervised by Grabar and Anisimov. The commission used X-rays, insisted on scrupulous photo documentation, and outlawed the dubious restoration practices (so-called antiquarian restoration) of the prerevolutionary period. In the course of the 1920s, the boundaries of icon history expanded and shifted in response to their discoveries. A series of exhibitions featuring newly restored icons was held in Moscow, followed by an exhibition of fresco facsimiles in Berlin in 1926.⁸ The workshops' pioneering work attracted the admiring attention of the European scholarly community through its journal, *Questions of Restoration (Voprosy restavratsii)* (1926–28), and members' contributions to international journals.

But in early 1928, official cultural policy shifted drastically. On 23 January, the decree "On Measures to Intensify the Export and Realization of Antiques and Works of Art" was issued, orchestrated to coincide with the start of the First Five-Year Plan. Henceforth, the Soviet functionaries in Gostorg (the state trade organization)

and Antikvariat (its Head Office for Buying and Realizing Antiquarian Objects, created in 1925) were to exercise exclusive control over the selling and export of art and antiques. The foreign currency raised went to fund Soviet industry.⁹ Although such sales had been occurring sporadically since 1921, a period of unprecedented cultural "dumping" now began, paralleling the dumping of Soviet wood pulp and grain on the international market. In such a climate, even icons were potentially realizable cultural assets, and Gostorg was already making plans to market them.

It was at this point that Igor Grabar, director of the Central Restoration Workshops, intervened.¹⁰ Disgusted by the Soviet authorities' inept handling of the international art market (large quantities of museum-quality art were being sold at bargain prices), fearing the heavy-handed tactics they might bring to selling icons, but also eager to promote his workshops' achievements, Grabar sent Gostorg a proposal for selling icons abroad, drawing on the supply-and-demand principles of the capitalist art market: "Experience shows that all major turnovers of specific groups of works of art have invariably been prepared for ahead of time by the appropriate commercial circles, by orchestrating a series of measures geared toward creating a demand and introducing some sort of 'fashion.' If Narkomtorg [the People's Commissariat of Trade] wants to make a big business out of icons, it must quickly start puffing up 'the Russian icon' and creating a fashion for it."¹¹ Grabar's strategy was to arrange a traveling exhibition complete with the scholarly apparatus of catalog, articles, and lectures, its purpose to

celebrate "our achievements in the field of restoration." Only in this manner could a demand be created, proper prices established, and a long-term market assured. "After such a triumphal march across Europe," Grabar argued in another memo, "prices for Russian icons will increase tenfold."¹² To satisfy Gostorg's demand for immediate profits and to offset any expenses, he also proposed that a proportion of the icons exhibited would be auctioned off at the close of the exhibition.

Gostorg approved, and the exhibition was rapidly organized, drawing on the collections of museums in Moscow, Leningrad, and the provinces, on recently restored icons still in the restoration workshops, and on the vast reserves in state storerooms.¹³ Grabar was very clear about the parameters of the selection. This was to be a purely *Soviet* enterprise, including none of the great works from prerevolutionary collections. Against the wishes of his colleagues, who feared the icons would never return from abroad, Grabar insisted on including critical early works of the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries without which, he argued, the full history of icons could scarcely be understood.¹⁴ Where vital works were too fragile to travel, such as the twelfth-century Vladimir Mother of God (pl. 1) and Rublev's *Old Testament Trinity* (pl. 2), exact copies were to be made by the workshop staff.¹⁵ Particular care was taken not to include works confiscated from private collections that could become the subject of lawsuits with émigrés. Also excluded were especially venerated, miracle-working icons that might rouse the ire of the Orthodox abroad. The result was an exhibition in which some

of the newly discovered jewels of Russian icon painting rubbed shoulders with what émigré writer Vladimir Weidle described as a handful of copies and "a whole set of second-class icons."¹⁶ In addition, a stock of more commonplace icons was selected, cleaned, and appraised in preparation for the foreign market.

The itinerary evolved in fits and starts, expanding as the success of the exhibition became assured. From February through May 1929, it toured five cities in Germany, the first country to recognize the Soviet government and the hub of Soviet efforts to sell large quantities of Russian art abroad.¹⁷ After a month in Vienna, the exhibition moved on to the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, where thirty thousand visitors saw it in six weeks. A splendid catalog was published with essays by Sir Martin Conway and art historian Roger Fry.¹⁸

Staff from the restoration workshops in Moscow accompanied the exhibition, giving lectures and demonstrations. They were also charged with negotiating prices and selling, although there is no evidence that they were successful in securing actual sales.¹⁹ Ultimately, Antikvariat abandoned the idea of direct sales for fear of negative publicity, and the exhibition became exclusively promotional.²⁰ By the time it arrived in the United States, Americans were quite categorically informed that "none of the paintings are for sale, the significance of the Exhibition being in that it introduces to the Western world a branch of art produced by a culture different from our own, yet springing from the same parent stem—the art of Byzantium in the twelfth century."²¹

With the late addition of the United States to the exhibition's itinerary, Grabar hoped to see vindicated his personal conviction that the United States was the most fertile ground on which to build a commercial icon market. In 1924, he had accompanied an exhibition of contemporary Russian art to New York and had come away with the impression that "in contrast to the meager European market, America presents a quite sufficient demand for the work of Russian artists."²² He had specifically noted that "the best-selling are the 'Russian goods,' everything that in the American imagination is 'very Russian,' and particularly religious things."²³ Moreover, he knew that American collectors had dominated the international art market over the past three decades.²⁴ In April 1929, he reported to Antikvariat from the exhibition's Cologne venue: "More than once people approached me to ask whether it was possible to buy in Moscow anything remotely equal to the icons being shown here, and also whether it was possible to buy copies. To the first question we answered that in Moscow one can buy first-class icons. . . . I propose that the only country where they will be able to be liquidated is the United States of America and perhaps Paris."²⁵

AMERICAN RECEPTION AND PERCEPTION

When the crates containing the icons arrived in Boston, in August 1930, the American public was very much a *tabula rasa* on which to inscribe a new Soviet history of icons. "It is not altogether unreasonable that the word 'icon' should summon a mental image of something very dim and esthetically rather dull," wrote one

journalist.²⁶ In prerevolutionary times, an American's encounter with icons was generally "limited to those small metal-bound panels with perforations for showing the painted figures underneath"—in other words, the mass-produced icons that populated the visual landscape of late imperial Russia.²⁷ Anyone wishing to read up on the subject could consult a meager handful of recent publications by the émigré scholars Nikodim Kondakov and Pavel Muratov, but these were already outmoded, since they depended on information and collections formed before the revolution. Those intrepid individuals who made the pilgrimage to the Soviet Union were almost certain to come across icons for sale in markets or on the street, and they often bought them as souvenirs. But with no icons in American museums to educate their taste and little information available in English, these occasional collectors were babes in the woods when buying these misleading and ambiguous images.²⁸

Yet while they knew next to nothing about Russian icons, Americans were fascinated by every aspect of life in the young Soviet Union, and the media offered a steady stream of information and commentary. Coverage was especially heavy throughout 1930. The campaign for establishing diplomatic relations between the United States and the Soviet Union was being vigorously fought in the Senate, a scandal on the dumping of lumber and pulp had just broken, and reports of slave labor ("a murderous harvest soaked with human blood," to quote Representative Hamilton Fish) were rife.²⁹ But the most emotionally charged item of news on Russia was the Soviet government's war on religion, which

had reached a crescendo that spring. The U.S. press gave daily bulletins on the closing of churches, the persecution of clergy and believers, and the demonstrative destruction of icons. On 2 February 1930, Pope Pius XI launched a "holy crusade against the Soviet Union." Prayer meetings were held in New York's Cathedral of Saint John the Divine and Saint Patrick's Cathedral as a "protest against the religious persecutions in Soviet Russia." In March, the American Committee on Religious Rights and Minorities issued a report that "religious persecution appears to prevail in Russia on a scale unprecedented in modern times." It was in this climate that the exhibition opened in Boston that October and would continue to operate over the next two years. Thus in 1931, the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, Moscow's largest church, was demolished, while the "war on Easter" produced "great bonfires in which sacred articles are burned, torchlight processions, mock-religious carnivals with floats ridiculing sacred customs."³⁰ In 1932, the final year of the exhibition, the Alexander Svirsky Monastery was turned into the Soviet Union's largest colony for prostitutes and beggars, Leningrad's Kazan Cathedral on Nevsky Prospect reopened as the Museum of the History of Religion and Atheism, and mass arrests of clergy began nationwide.

The discrepancy between the Soviet regime's iconoclastic campaign of destruction and its sudden sponsorship of icons was an inevitable theme in press coverage of the exhibition. On the whole, though, the trend was to isolate the aesthetic value of the exhibition from the ethical and political complications. As an article in *International*

Studio blithely put it, "The critics who condemn [the icon exhibition] are divided into two camps: those deprecating the sacrilege of removing holy objects from the churches, and the opponents of intercourse with an unrecognized government. Nobody bothers much about either dissenting faction."³¹ A note in *Commonweal* summed up the argument of the exhibition's supporters in these terms: "If it is art, it doesn't matter in the least who wrought it, or who instigated it or even who stole it."³² Whatever the experts, the pious, and the patriotic might say against it, the exhibition "was for the average gallery goer an experience and a revelation. . . . Here, for those jaded with western painting, were virgin fields."³³

The public profile of the icons very quickly shifted from that of booty confiscated by an impious regime to that of cultural ambassadors, functioning not unlike the model prisons and hydroelectric dams that formed the itinerary for thousands of tourists then flocking to Soviet Russia. Reviewers repeatedly pointed out the regime's commitment to the preservation of cultural patrimony, even as the demolition of churches and the forced sales of art abroad continued unabated. Especially effective was the way in which the church became the villain of the piece, while the Soviet state figured as the icon's rescuer from certain destruction. In his brief introductory essay to the catalog, Grabar described the damage caused to masterpieces of "early Russian painting" (a term increasingly preferred to "icon") by those who used them. He conjured up "a flat damp country" where icons were placed in "somber, unheated, badly ventilated churches," and wrote of sensational finds

like Rublev's iconostasis from the Dormition Cathedral in Vladimir, left by clergy to molder in an outbuilding. This theme of clerical neglect had been widespread before the revolution, but now it acquired ideological urgency as a further nail in the coffin of the Orthodox Church's credibility. Even those disturbed by current events took the long view that "when the perspective of years has robbed the antireligious and confiscatory action of the Soviet regime of its unfortunate contemporary significance, the world of art and culture will be thankful for the work that it has accomplished."³⁴

The drama of this rescue story was further intensified by the genuinely thrilling story of how Russian conservators had developed pioneering techniques for stripping off layers of smoke-darkened varnish and later overpainting to reveal the original layer beneath in all its unsuspected brilliance of color and beauty of line. In establishing Soviet ownership of these "reborn" icons, it was consistently stressed that "icons restored before 1917 are not represented in the exhibition," even though the same restorers were responsible for icons cleaned before and after the revolution.³⁵ Only in the workshops of the Central Restoration Workshops were modern techniques like X-ray used. A new scientific purism was adopted, with inpainting and retouching officially outlawed.³⁶

The rhetoric of science's triumph over superstition that permeated the exhibition was especially critical during 1930-32, when the Soviet campaign against religion was reaching unprecedented extremes. Some of the most sensational press photos of 1930-31 showed peasants making bonfires of their icons, young members of

the League of the Militant Godless tearing metal covers off icons, and laughing Red Army men carting icons and church fixtures out of the Simonov Monastery shortly before its demolition. The exhibition, by contrast, seemed to offer an acceptable aesthetic rationale for these acts of iconoclasm. As one reporter wrote, "Russia is not always as bad as she is painted. Not long since the world was scandalized at the pictured representation of frenzied peasants making bonfires of icons, stripped from churches henceforth to be devoted to secular purposes. That little of artistic value perished in these fires is to be presumed from the care given to fine examples of this religious art now gathered into museums."³⁷ The exhibition's secondary message was thus conveyed in the form of an art history lesson: whatever they might mean within the confines of Orthodoxy, once freed from their religious function, icons could legitimately be subjected to rigorous culling. The vast majority was good for nothing and, as the catalog made clear, this applied to virtually all icons produced from 1800 onward, the period of "decay." One or two of these late icons were included in the exhibition as pointed illustrations of the aesthetic decline of the post-Petrine era.

The achievements of Soviet science, the exhibition implied, made possible a new way of seeing icons, without which they could not hope to enter the universal history of art. The exhibition became "another of those dramatic triumphs of aesthetic revaluation that our modern eclecticism has made possible."³⁸ Lee Simonson, the young New York theater designer who worked as Moscow's

go-between in bringing the exhibition to the United States, was an impassioned spokesman for the Russian icon's relevance:

Modern painting for the last century has been struggling to free itself from the transparent glazes and the underlying chiaroscuro of the Renaissance, trying to achieve what we have come to recognize as "pure color" and to organize that color so that it will convey forms without losing any of its color value by interposing the veils of cast light and shadow. To some critics the goal has been approximated by the paintings of Henri Matisse, to others by the frescoes of Diego Rivera. To me at least it has never been more completely achieved than in many of these Russian icons of three or four centuries ago. For that reason I venture to believe that they will ultimately prove to be a source of inspiration to modern painters and eventually exert a profound influence on the development of modern art.³⁹

The obstacle to aesthetic appreciation that the dematerialized otherworldliness of Russian icons presented to a Western audience attuned to Renaissance painting could be removed if they were thought of as powerful visual experiences, above all as pure color. No one better described the inevitability of partial understanding—of form's primacy over content and function—than the English critic Roger Fry, who had written in the London catalog the previous year:

I have no idea of what this passion for the most abstract religious ideas—ideas

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altogether withdrawn from the common world of human life and nature—can have implied to those who felt them. In this sense I find Russian art far more remote than the Byzantine art out of which it came. . . . There is a certain satisfaction in noting that, coming to this art as we do without previous knowledge, without traditional references and predilections, we almost immediately pick out those pictures which Russians have always held in most esteem. . . . [E]ven those who find it impossible, however dimly, to conceive the mental atmosphere of a medieval Russian artist, can meet him on the common ground of his splendid decorative inventions and his unforgettable harmonies of colour.⁴⁰

A vivid demonstration that the icons awakened a responsive aesthetic chord was their incorporation, at the Worcester Museum of Art, into the museum's child-education program (fig. 11). The Educational Department used the loan icons to initiate children into the nature of creativity, situating them within the contemporary debate on the nature of primitivism. The project's premise was that, "because of its clarity and definition, primitive art is more easily understood by the child than the subtle art of a highly developed culture. . . . It is allied in inspiration and in execution with his own work and therefore stimulates him to create instead of to reproduce."⁴¹

On a number of levels, then, the exhibition had prepared the ground for the brisk sales that were presumably to follow. While initial plans to sell the icons straight out of the exhibition had to be reluctantly



FIG. 11 Drawing by fifteen-year-old Vailory Moore, inspired by the thirteenth-century icon of Saint John Climacus with Saint George and Saint Blaise in the Soviet Loan Exhibition at the Worcester Art Museum, March–April 1931. Reproduced from the *Bulletin of the Worcester Art Museum* 22, no. 2 (July 1931): 30. Courtesy of the Worcester Art Museum.

shelved, potential American consumers had been given their first basic lesson in the aesthetic and historical significance of Russian icons.

THE FORMATION OF AMERICAN ICON COLLECTING

Measured by any standard, the exhibition was one of the blockbusters of the early Depression era. The directors of some of America's most prestigious museums scrambled to secure the show for their institutions in response to the quite

unanticipated public interest. Extensive and enthusiastic press coverage was accompanied by a flurry of publications in the scholarly press. Meanwhile, back in Moscow and Leningrad, stockpiles of icons set aside for export awaited their buyers.

Customers for icons did indeed emerge in the United States in the wake of the traveling exhibition, but not for the icons that Grabar might have chosen. Only the collection acquired in 1935 by Pittsburgh businessman George Hann could legitimately be described as "important," in that it reflected in microcosm the sweep of the icon's long history as first presented in the traveling exhibition.⁴² The unique Hann collection aside, the collecting of icons in the United States turned away from the kinds of serious early icons promoted through the loan exhibition in favor of the late icons it explicitly marginalized.

There is no doubt that the impact of the Depression on the American art market made it extremely difficult for icons to compete for scarce resources with more tried and true forms of art, such as Old Master painting and French eighteenth-century furniture. Despite the exhibition's glowing reviews and excellent attendance figures, no American museum took advantage of the opportunity to actively add important early icons to its collection. When, for instance, at the end of 1931 Count B. Musin-Pushkin offered the director of the Brooklyn Museum both an exhibition of icons and an entire collection for purchase, he was told that he was unlikely to "succeed," because "interest in ikons is confined to such a small number that the chances of sale would be very slight."⁴³ (This was in marked contrast to the

exhibition of Byzantine art held in Paris in 1931, at the close of which a large number of items changed hands.)⁴⁴

Those Americans who did buy icons in the 1930s were attracted to a very different sort of icon, for very different reasons. Almost without exception, they were late icons of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. During "the great tourist invasion" of 1929-30, the legal export of icons as souvenirs was heavily promoted. At the behest of the trade organs, the Soviet Union's new tourist industry, headed by Intourist, actively encouraged visitors to buy liberally in the Torgsin ("Trade with Foreigners") and commission shops. Travelers' anecdotes remind us how ubiquitous such commercial outlets were in the 1930s and how icons acquired there were generally seen as souvenirs or curios.

In addition to icons purchased in the Soviet Union, the effort to create a market on American soil proved decisive for the formation of American icon collections and public attitudes toward icons. Working through intermediaries, the Soviets devised "sale-exhibitions" as a mechanism for liquidating on the American market the personal effects of the imperial family, confiscated from their residences at Tsarskoe Selo, Gatchina, the Anichkov Palace, and the Winter Palace. In January 1931, the Wallace H. Day Galleries at 16 East 60th Street in New York held an exhibition of decorative arts from the Hermitage Palace, the contents of which were sold off after a short delay when Grand Duchesses Ksenia and Olga sued (unsuccessfully) to prevent the sale. The sale included icons, for the most part small nineteenth-century devotional icons embellished with silver

covers, and the purchasers, so it was reported, were mainly women looking for *objets* to decorate their homes.

Then in early 1932, just as the official loan exhibition of icons was moving on to the Cleveland Museum of Art, entrepreneur Armand Hammer and his brother Victor launched the first of their celebrated department-store sales of Russian imperial art at Scruggs-Vandoort-Barney in St. Louis. The previous March, the Hammers had begun marketing "Fine Russian Icons and Relics from Royal Russia" out of their L'Ermitage Galleries at 3 East 52nd Street. The new enterprise involved a marketing strategy that Armand Hammer would later recall with cynical relish: "I promoted the hell out of the sale by giving it a healthy dose of snob appeal. I ordered the printing of fancy price tags embossed with the Imperial Romanoff two-headed eagle crest and prepared an elaborate catalog that paid tribute to the 'skilled artisans devoted to the glory of the czar.' . . . Our success in St. Louis led to sales in eight other stores, culminating in a huge sale at Lord & Taylor in New York."

Repeating his initial success at department stores across the country (three of the cities had also been hosts to the traveling exhibition),⁴⁵ Hammer targeted a particular kind of American collector for the art entrusted to him, including late icons: women (some wealthy but not always so) who found special significance in owning something that had once belonged to the murdered Romanov family. Aesthetically distinct from earlier icons, whose monumental simplicity had elicited comparisons with the modernist aesthetic, they were part of an inventory that included Fabergé *objets*

de vertu, ecclesiastic vestments, and the table linens of the imperial family. Many of the icons that passed through the Hammer brothers' hands, and those of their main American competitor, Alexander Shaffer, in the 1930s, were accompanied by parchment testimonials asserting that they were from the private apartments at Tsarskoe Selo, the Winter Palace, and Gatchina.⁴⁶ Icons now in the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Rochester Memorial Art Gallery, and many private collections were acquired in this way.⁴⁷ Following the department-store sales, the Hammers established Hammer Galleries in New York, which was "fed by a continuing stream of art objects from Moscow . . . a collection of Hammer family and Soviet-owned merchandise."⁴⁸

The Hammers were under no illusions about the aesthetic value of their stock, marketing them not as works of Russian painting, but as "a collection of memorabilia, freighted with human interest and drawn together by a thread of lasting significance." As the Hammers' sales brochure for 1935 put it, "To possess even one of these relics is to own a bit of the world's history, to have at hand tangible evidence of the rise and fall of a great Empire. . . . And too, there is romance in bringing into our homes these various beautiful objects that once delighted the eyes of monarchs, that furnished an imperial background for the young Grand Dukes and Duchesses of far away mysterious Russia."⁴⁹ As for the icons, they were to serve as decorative notes in the domestic interior, helping "to consecrate a quiet corner for a few minutes' rest in the season's busy rush."

In the slick sales patter of the Hammers' Depression-era marketing, these icons came to the end of a long journey of transformation. Stripped of their original liturgical function, they acquired a new identity, joining the assortment of imperial possessions that could be used in the American home, "either for décor, to embellish the cabinets of your own collections, or for actual use in the routine of everyday living."⁵⁰ Their appraised value had little to do with their intrinsic properties as paintings, still less with their devotional function, and everything to do with the associations the viewer brought with him or her. The intense gleam of small silver and enamel *oklads*, often arranged in symmetrical clusters on the wall, created an aesthetic that is still closely associated with Russian icons in the United States. The "startling modernism" of the great church icons seemed very far away.

CONCLUSION

Much to the relief of Russia's museum community, the icons in the loan exhibition returned home intact at the conclusion of the American tour, although not always to the institutions that had loaned them. In 1934, the Central State Restoration Workshops were purged and closed down, and many of its staff members repressed and imprisoned, including Anisimov and Chirikov.⁵¹ Thereafter, the workshops' functions and collection were transferred to the State Tretyakov Gallery.

In the United States, although the traveling exhibition had been a great public relations success, it had signally failed to produce a systematic and informed market base. The few American icon collections

that emerged in its wake are to this day considered of minor importance (full of "tourist junk," one writer observed).⁵² The exhibition had expressly driven home the point that, by 1700, icon painting was in decline, a determination that was to remain in effect until the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The Hammers' cheap marketing ploys, with their department-store environment and emphasis on icons as decorative touches within a contemporary décor, above all the perceived "decadence" and tinselly surface effects of the icons themselves, so far removed from the "pure painting" and transcendent effects of Golden Age icons—all played a part in situating American collections at the very bottom of an emerging aesthetic hierarchy that answered the expectations of Western modernist aesthetics and Soviet scientific materialism alike. Rhetorically, the exhibition established the uneasy and unequal coexistence of two sorts of icon, one rare and desirable, the other plentiful and despised. Moreover, the emphasis on the problems of attribution and dating—which resulted from Orthodoxy's liturgical practices (repainting, copying)—made potential buyers wary of investing heavily in important icons and contributed to the resistance of American museums to collecting and displaying Russian icons. The complicated legacy of this early experiment in Soviet cultural diplomacy affects the perception of icons in the United States to the present day.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 6

1. After two months at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston (14 October–14 December 1930), the exhibition traveled to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (13 January–23 February 1931); the Worcester Museum of Fine Arts (March–April); the Rochester Memorial Art Gallery (opened 1 May); the De Young Memorial Art Museum, San Francisco (1 July–31 August); the Saint Paul Art Center in Minnesota (9 October–9 November); the Art Institute of Chicago (22 December–17 January 1932); the Cleveland Museum of Art (18 February–20 March); and the Cincinnati Art Museum (April).

2. See particularly the journals *Mir iskusstva* (1898–1904) and *Starye gody* (1907–16) for expressions of the intelligentsia's hostile attitude toward the clergy.

3. *Vystavka drevne-russkogo iskusstva ustroennaia v 1913 godu v oznamenovanie chestvovaniia 300-letia tsarstvovaniia Doma Romanovykh. Imperatorskii Moskovskii arkheologicheskii institut imeni Imperatora Nikolaia II* (Moscow: [Institut], 1913).

4. Pavel Muratov [review], *Starye gody* (April 1913): 31.

5. "By the mid-1920s icons had disappeared from public buildings and remained, according to data for Moscow, in only 76 percent of workers' homes. In 1925 . . . this figure was reduced to 59 percent." N. B. Lebina, *Povsednevnaia zhizn' sovetskogo goroda: Normy i anomalii 1920/1930 godov* (St.

Petersburg: Zhurnal 'Neva'; Letnii Sad, 1999), 133.

6. The commission was part of the Collegium on Museum Affairs and Preservation of Works of Art and Antiques (1918–24).

7. On the theme of Rublev, see Lindsey Hughes, "Inventing Andrei: Soviet and Post-Soviet Views of Andrei Rublev and His Trinity Icon," *Slavonica* 9, no. 2 (2003): 83–90.

8. Byzantisch-russische Monumentalmalerei.

9. *Sud'by muzeinykh kollektsii: Materialy VI Tsarskosel'skoi nauchnoi konferentsii* (St. Petersburg: Tsarskoe Selo, 2000), 130. On the phenomenon of the Soviet sales of art and antiques in the interwar period, see Nikolas Il'in and Natal'ia Semenova, *Prodannye sokrovishcha Rossii* (Moscow: Trilistnik, 2000); Waltraud Bayer, ed., *Verkaufte Kultur: Die sowjetischen Kunst- und Antiquitätenexporte, 1919–1938* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2001); and Anne Odom and Wendy R. Salmond, eds., *Treasures into Tractors: The Selling of Russia's Cultural Heritage, 1918–1938* (Washington, D.C.: Hillwood Museum and Gardens, 2009).

10. Grabar's role in organizing the exhibition is unclear. Anisimov complained that it was essentially he who organized it, while Grabar got to accompany it and "make an 'international' career for himself." See I. L. Kyzlasova, *Istoriia otechestvennoi nauki ob iskusstve*

Vyzantii i Drevnei Rusi 1920–1930 gody: Po materialam arkhivov.

(Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Akademii gornikh nauk, 2000), 289. However, the actual idea and the political clout to realize it seem to have been Grabar's. In March 1927, Anatoly Lunacharsky had agreed to a similar proposal by Grabar for sending an icon exhibition to Frankfurt (Manuscript Division, State Tretyakov Gallery, henceforth OR GTG, f. 106, 16761, line 1). Presumably, Lunacharsky's waning authority prompted Grabar to renew his campaign: in August 1928, he wrote to the Gostorg administration (OR GTG, f. 106, ed. kh. 527) before sending the memo to A. Ginzburg, head of Antikvariat, which is published in his collected letters (see note 11 below). In a letter to Glavnauka of January 1929, however, he disavowed his own role, writing that the exhibition was "formed on the initiative of Gostorg, which conceived the entire exhibition" (OR GTG, f. 106, ed. kh. 529, line 1).

11. Letter from Grabar to A. M. Ginzburg, 20 September 1938, in *Igor' Grabar' Pis'ma 1917–1941* (Moscow: Nauka, 1977), 179.

12. OR GTG, f. 106, 527.

13. The provenance of the icons in the exhibition was as follows: Central Restoration Workshops (26), Antikvariat (13), Novgorod Museum (9), State Historical Museum (13), Tretyakov Gallery (13), Russian Museum (6), Vologda and the Trinity Lavra of

- Saint Sergius (8 each), Vladimir Museum (5), Yaroslavl (4), Arkhangel, Pskov, and Donskoy Monastery Museums (2 each), and one each from Tver, Rostov, and Aleksandrov Monastery Museum.
14. See Grabar's letter to Glavnauka dated 14–15 January 1929, in which he complains about the decision by Glavnauka's Expert Commission to exclude certain works from the exhibition (OR GTG, f. 106, 529). The catalog of the traveling exhibition shows that Grabar won the argument.
15. The copies were of the Vladimir Mother of God and Christ Not Made by Hands from the Dormition Cathedral in the Moscow Kremlin, Andrei Rublev's *Old Testament Trinity* from the Trinity Lavra of Saint Sergius, the Orant Mother of God from Yaroslavl, Dmitry Solunsky (from Dmitrov, head only), and the head of an archangel (from the State Historical Museum, the so-called Angel with the Golden Hair). Six fresco facsimiles from the church of Saint Peter in Yaroslavl were also sent but were not exhibited at the American venues.
16. V. Veidle, "Russkie ikony v Londone," *Vozrozhdenie* (Paris), 14 December 1929), 2. These lower-quality works were presumably originally selected as suitable for sale during the exhibition.
17. On the Soviet transactions with Berlin, see Bayer, *Verkaufte Kultur*; Iu. N. Zhukov, *Operatsiia Ermitazha (Opyt istoriko-arkhivnogo rassledovaniia)* (Moscow: Moskvitianin, 1993).
18. Michael Farbman, ed., *Masterpieces of Russian Painting* (London: A. Zwemmer, 1930). It was Roger Fry who first suggested that the Victoria and Albert Museum take the exhibition. In a 21 May 1929 letter to the director, E. R. D. MacLagan, he wrote: "It seems to me that it was likely to be of great interest to art historians if I suggested . . . that possibly you might find him [Farbman?] some place to show in and to some extent extend your protection and encouragement to it" (Victoria and Albert Museum Archives, VX.1929-006).
19. Accompanying the exhibition to Germany with restorer N. I. Briagin, Grabar was under constant pressure to produce sales. "Find out also what the chances are of selling things of first-class quality that are not in the exhibition. We can also make up collections," went one message from Antikvariat's head in Moscow, dispatched on 30 March 1929 (OR GTG, f. 106, op. 1, 3872, line 1). Ekaterina Dombrovskaya was the initial courier of the exhibition to London, but she was later replaced by Pavel Yudin. When interrogated by the OGPU in 1931, Yudin revealed that the icons in the London exhibition included fifteen high-priced icons earmarked for sale. Kyzlasova, *Istoriia otechestvennoi nauki*, 288, 351.
20. According to Kyzlasova, "The bureaucrats gave up the idea of selling works from the exhibition only after its sensational success." *Istoriia otechestvennoi nauki*, 288, 351.
21. "Early Icons in Boston Show," *Art News* 29 (4 October 1930): 30; *Literary Digest*, 6 December 1930, 18–19.
22. Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (henceforth RGALI), f. 2307, op. 10, ed. khr. 352, line 30.
23. Letter from Grabar to Moscow artists participating in the Exhibition of Russian Art in America, 18 March 1924, in *Grabar', Pis'ma 1917–41*, 120.
24. On the 1924 exhibition, see Marie Turbow Lampard, "Sergei Konenkov and the 'Russian Art Exhibition' of 1924," *Soviet Union/Union soviétique*, 7, pts. 1–2 (1980): 70–88. On the American art market of this period, see Merle Secrest, *Duveen: A Life in Art* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), and Gerald Reitlinger, *The Economics of Taste* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1964).
25. OR GTG, f. 106, 16771.
26. Edward Alden Jewell, "Marvelous Paintings: Flaming Colors Express Symbols of Northern Race—Slavic Love of Drama," *New York Times*, 18 January 1931.
27. Ralph Flint, "Russian Icons on View at the Metropolitan," *Art News* 29 (17 January 1931): 34.
28. An exception was the Kunz Collection at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., but this was considered of purely ethnographic value. See Richard E. Ahlborn and Vera Beaver-Bricken, *Russian Copper Icons and Crosses from the Kunz Collection: Castings of Faith* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1991). Those wishing to read about icons

in English prior to 1930 were limited to two scholarly monographs: Nikodim Kondakov, *The Russian Icon*, trans. Ellis Minns (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927), and Aleksandr Anisimov, *Our Lady of Vladimir*, trans. N. G. Yaschwill and T. N. Rodzianko (Prague: Seminarium Kondakovianum, 1928). For French speakers, Pavel Muratov was the acknowledged authority: *L'ancienne peinture russe*, trans. André Caffi (Rome: A. Stock, 1925); *Les Icones russes* (Paris: Éditions de la Pléiade, 1927).

29. On efforts in the U.S. Congress to counter Soviet dumping, see "Backs Embargo Bill as Soviet Dumping Spreads over World," *New York Times*, 24 September 1930, 1. For Fish's criticism of Soviet convict labor, see "Fish for Sending Agents," *New York Times*, 3 February 1931, 1.

30. Charles Phillips, "The Soviet Easter," *Commonweal*, 1 April 1931, 597.

31. "Notes of the Month," *International Studio*, February 1931, 49. The legal problem of American museums accepting an exhibition from an unrecognized government was solved when the American-Russian Institute for Cultural Relations with the Soviet Union assumed responsibility for the exhibition during its tour of the United States. The first branch of the ARI was created in New York in 1927 and by 1929 had spread to many other American cities. A major goal was to promote recognition of the Soviet government, but it was generally touted as "an adventure in international understanding. It is

conceived in good will and dedicated to the promotion of cultural relations between the peoples of the Soviet Republics and the American public. It fosters mutual amity, world peace, and cultural unity." *The Art of Soviet Russia*, foreword by Fiske Kimball, introduction and catalog by Christian Brinton (New York: American Russian Institute, 1936). On the protests from émigré groups, see "Icon Exhibit Stirs Protest," *Art News* 29 (10 January 1931): 7; "Atheist Russia Lends the World Her Sacred Icons," *Literary Digest*, 6 December 1930, 18-19.

32. "Icons into Idols," *Commonweal*, 21 January 1931, 312.

33. "A Perspective View of the New York Season (1930-1931)," *Parnassus* 3 (May 1931): 9-10.

34. "Atheist Russia Lends the World Her Sacred Icons," 18.

35. Alexandre Anisimov, "L'Exposition des anciennes icones russes," *Gazette des beaux-arts*, 20 February 1930, 11. For an émigré perspective on the works excluded, see Veidle, "Russkie ikony v Londone," 2.

36. In practice, these uncompromising standards proved untenable, and by the late 1920s retouching was widely used.

37. "Atheist Russia Lends the World Her Sacred Icons," 18.

38. Flint, "Russian Icons on View at the Metropolitan," 34.

39. *Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum of Art* 26 (January 1931): 6.

40. Roger Fry, "Russian Icon-Painting from a Western-Europe-

an Point of View," in Farbman, ed., *Masterpieces of Russian Painting*, 56, 58.

41. "Art and the Child," *Bulletin of the Worcester Art Museum* 22 (July 1931): 29, 32.

42. For a complete catalog of the Hann collection, see *The George R. Hann Collection. Part One. Russian Icons. Ecclesiastical and Secular Works of Art. Embroidery, Silver, Porcelain, and Malachite*, Christie's (New York, 17-18 April 1980). On the details of its formation, see Salmond, "Russian Icons and American Money," 237-63.

43. Letter from William Henry Fox, director of the Brooklyn Museum, to Count Musin-Pushkin. Brooklyn Museum of Art Archives, Records of the Office of the Director (W. H. Fox, 1913-33).

44. I am grateful to Dr. Helen Evans of the Metropolitan Museum of Art for providing me with information on the sales from the Paris Exposition internationale d'art byzantin (28 May-9 July 1931).

45. From St. Louis, the stock went to Marshall Field's (Chicago), Bullocks Wilshire (Los Angeles), Halle's (Cleveland), the Emporium (San Francisco), B. Forman Co. (Rochester), Kaufmann's (Pittsburgh), Woodward & Lothrop (Washington, D.C.), and Lord & Taylor (New York).

46. Alexander Schaffer opened his own gallery, the Schaffer Collection of Russian Imperial Treasures, at Rockefeller Center in 1933.

47. Lillian Pratt bought her first icon at the Lord & Taylor exhibition in January 1933, and Mrs. James Sibley Watson purchased an icon of the Ascent of Elijah in his Fiery Chariot for \$375 at B. Forman Co. That same year she gave the icon to the Rochester Memorial Art Gallery. The icon's provenance was given as the Winter Palace (33.1)

48. Carl Blumay with Henry Edwards, *The Dark Side of Power: The Real Armand Hammer* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 106.

49. Hammer Galleries, Inc., *Treasures from the Palaces of Old Russia* (New York, 1935).

50. *Treasures from the Palaces of Old Russia*, 1935.

51. On the fate of these men and others engaged in the study of medieval Russian culture in the 1930s, see Kyzlasova, *Istoriia otechestvennoi nauki*. On Anisimov in particular, see Shirley A. Glade's chapter in this volume.

52. Edward Jay Epstein, *Dossier: The Secret History of Armand Hammer* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1999), 138.

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