



HOW  
DIVINE  
IMAGES  
BECAME  
ART

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Cover image: Icon of Archangel Michael (fourteenth century). Novgorod School. Tempera on wood, 86 x 63 cm. From the collection of Stepan Riabushinskii in Moscow. Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. Wikimedia, public domain, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The\\_archangle\\_Michael\\_\(Novgorod\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_archangle_Michael_(Novgorod).jpg)

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# Conclusion

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The chapters in this book have endeavoured to show that the way we see and understand the medieval Russian icon today is largely a legacy of the culture of the *Belle Époque* (c. 1871–1914). The German Formalist School of art criticism, above all, shaped the discovery of the medieval icon's aesthetic significance. The re-evaluation of Byzantine and early Italian art that took place in Western European academia was also a key factor. However, the local, historical context of medieval icon collection within Old Believer communities in Russia, and the specific ways in which these communities understood the medieval icon, was also important. A unique body of connoisseur knowledge was amassed over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which included not only the skill of identifying icons as medieval, but also being able to associate them with particular 'Schools' according to their specific artistic features and place of production. This Old Believer expertise featured not only in the academic works of Nikodim Kondakov (1844–1925) and Nikolai Likhachev (1862–1936), but even informed the works of the new generation of art critics, Pavel Muratov (1881–1950), Nikolai Shchekotov (1884–1945), Nikolai Punin (1888–1953) and others. It was Muratov, above all, who combined Old Believer connoisseurship with Western European Formalism and new aesthetic theory in his study of the artistic form of medieval Russian painting from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries. He was one of the first to demonstrate that the medieval Russian icon ranked among the highest achievements of European culture.

It is Pavel Florenskii (1882–1937), however, who must be credited with a genuinely revolutionary discovery of the medieval icon's artistic meaning. I have argued that it was he, rather than Oskar Wulff (1864–1946) and Erwin Panofsky (1892–1968), who managed to reveal the true, eschatological meaning of reverse perspective. The icon is a symbolic form

of transcendence. This means that its perspective leads the viewer's gaze beyond the bounds of the surrounding world and opens a person's 'inner eyes'. As I have shown, Florenskii ushered icon-painting into the realms of philosophical thought specifically in works written at the beginning of the 1920s, thereby inaugurating a fundamentally new era of thinking about and studying the religious image. He understood painting as a special kind of metaphysical activity, and developed his own theory of the icon within the framework of a conception of the metaphysics of religion. In his work 'Ikonostas' ['Iconostasis'], the philosopher demonstrated clearly and convincingly that the Renaissance painting did not set the essence of Christian symbolism before the viewer, but only a façade and a multiplicity of meanings. The underlying rationale for this thesis was also revealed in his article 'Obratnaia perspektiva' ['Reverse Perspective'], which advanced the fundamental difference between theatrical stylization and an understanding of painted forms as inseparable from ethics and religion. Florenskii contrasted the search for the ontological nature of the very language of art with the subjectivism of Renaissance perspective. Something much greater than craftsmanship stood behind iconographic schemas. That special authenticity, shaped by the skill of the anonymous master to elicit the deep meanings of a Christian symbol, is always present in a medieval icon.

A whole series of works (including, in particular, Francis Haskell's (1928–2000) research) has convincingly shown how changes in the cultural system itself resulted in the discovery of new names (Titian (c. 1488/90–1576), Johannes Vermeer (1632–75), Caravaggio (1571–1610)) in the nineteenth century. For my part, I have highlighted how, at the twilight of the modern age (the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century), the concept of the new masterpiece abandoned the narrow confines of Classical taste and was steadily transferred to a system of values of autonomous art. New theory led to a new art and antiques market, and raised questions relating to the work of connoisseurs: what is a masterpiece? What is unique about it? Why is preservation of the original artistic form important? And who should determine all this: the scholar-connoisseur, the art critic or the collector? Prioritizing the analysis of artistic form, and interpreting it on the basis of neo-Kantian aesthetics, allowed (after Friedrich Schelling (1775–1854)) the masterpiece to be defined as an autonomous work of art in

possession of objective artistic truth. Armed with artistic intuition and visual memory, a small circle of specialists (Bernard Berenson (1865–1959), Max Friedländer (1867–1958) and others) attested to this truth. The new masterpiece was viewed in the broad context of world art's historical development, facilitated by the emergence of new art journals, exhibitions and advertising.

There are clear parallels between the collection and study of medieval painting in Russia and the history of collecting Byzantine icons and Western European (especially Italian) 'primitives' in Western Europe and the United States of America. My examination of the academic study and new collecting of medieval Russian painting in the *Belle Époque* era reveals that the notion of the medieval icon as a masterpiece was not only theoretically grounded by the new art critics but also commercially driven by the new wave of collectors. The medieval icon entered the sphere of institutionally recognized art with the creation of Ilya Ostroukhov's (1858–1929) private Museum of Medieval Russian Painting in Moscow (1911) and the new display in the Russian Museum in St Petersburg (1913–14). In other words, for the first time in the upper echelons of Russian culture, the medieval Russian icon was recognized as both a great artistic achievement and a valuable work of art in the broader art market. The preservation of the genuine artistic form of the medieval Russian icon has been considered in a new light in this book, precisely in connection with these developments. It is no coincidence that the idea of the new restoration work was first raised in mass-circulation print by the Old Believer banker and collector Stepan Riabushinskii (1874–1942). It was in the chapel of his Moscow mansion that the essence of the medieval Russian icon as a genuine religious event was fully blended with its preservation as an authentic aesthetic object. How authentically an icon was preserved became, for Riabushinskii, also a question of the identity of a religious message in the context of national tradition. Before this, icons that had been overpainted or renovated – especially the valued miniatures of the Stroganov School – were generally used in Old Believer rituals. Now the symbolic value of the original painting of fourteenth- to sixteenth-century Muscovite and Novgorodian art became of primary importance.

On display in Ostroukhov's Museum of Medieval Russian Painting, as opposed to Riabushinskii's chapel, the icon's aesthetic value as a

masterpiece of medieval painting replaced its religious purpose. Russia's new critics (Muratov, Shchekotov) were especially drawn to reflections of the traditions of Classical art in the medieval Russian icon, which enabled them to view the icon as an integral part of the wider culture of Byzantium and Western Europe. The same may be said about research by Berenson, Frederick Mason Perkins (1874–1955) and others on early Italian painting: the Italian 'primitives', like medieval Russian icons, were described as the work of artists identifiable by their distinct artistic style and as possessing a unique aura of lived aesthetic experience. Moreover, the attentive gaze of connoisseur collectors (such as Herbert Horne (1864–1916) or Ostroukhov), whose artistic instinct – according to new Formalist thinking – allowed them to understand the techniques used to create a work of art, could also reveal the true value of a masterpiece. And who was the consumer of these new masterpieces during the *Belle Époque*? Without doubt it was the aesthete and the affluent gentleman. Well-educated antiquarian restorers and commissioners, likewise in possession of that corpus of Old Believer expertise on the medieval Russian icon that was actively applied not only in academia but amongst collectors too, were also prominent players.

The art of the medieval Russian icon was first put before a mass audience in 1913. I have endeavoured to show that contemporary aesthetic theories and the new collecting, thoroughly permeated by a 'Modernist' style of thinking, lay behind the façade of the famous *Vystavka drevne-russkogo iskusstva* [*Old Russian Art*] exhibition in Moscow. It was after this particular exhibition that the medieval Russian icon became tangibly present in the cultural consciousness of an entire generation of artists. The icon's lines and pure colour helped the Russian avant-garde to regain painting's independence as a special way of understanding the world (see, especially, Kazimir Malevich (1879–1935) and Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944)). In his books, the Russian artist Aleksei Grishchenko (1883–1977) articulated the endeavour to discover the meanings contained in the very language of medieval Russian art.

At the same time, documents clearly convey that the new collections were also significantly shaped by financial considerations. Conceiving of the icon as art immediately turned it into a commodity in the international art market. From 1929 to 1932, the Soviet state organized a grandiose exhibition and sale of 'medieval Russian primitives' in

Western Europe and the USA, and only international intervention (and the opposition of western art dealers) ensured the preservation of many prominent masterpieces of medieval Russian painting in Russian museum collections. Due to historical reasons, therefore, the medieval Russian icon did not capture the attention of the European art market, which continued to develop around the concept of authorial uniqueness. Western European reviews of the exhibition, moreover, confirmed that the search for the transcendent and the irrational in artistic forms was increasingly aligned with the general intellectual and spiritual mood of *modernity*.

Today, the concept of a 'masterpiece' is a matter of faith. The favourite topic of Postmodern theory – that of the non-specialist and the ordinary – essentially elides the difference between a masterpiece and any other artistic work, even those produced for a mass audience. The same applies to the difference between an artist and not-an-artist, in other words, ordinary individuals who paste their texts on social media platforms, such as Facebook, YouTube and X (formerly, Twitter). What we are talking about here is the art market's global domination, which governs each and all with its sign system and codes of behaviour. Moreover, sources detailing the initial discovery and collecting of medieval Russian icons and Italian 'primitives' have already revealed this system in its infancy, showcasing its evolution as it began to incorporate what had previously not been regarded as 'art'. However, the concept of a 'masterpiece' as applied to a work of art has continued to exist because museums, with their permanent exhibitions, continue to exist. The medieval icon (as a historically determined way of artistically interpreting the world) occupies a most honourable place in such exhibitions. The icon, like the abstract paintings of the twentieth century, steadfastly highlights the unreliability of the reality around us. And in this regard, for the most serious research on the limits of visibility in the era of Modernism, the icon was, and is, entirely contemporary.

