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Russia's icons

Cult images and depictions of saints in the Eastern Orthodox Church

29 November 2014 – 8 February 2015

The special exhibition at the Toy Worlds Museum Basle will feature an exclusive selection of 90 exquisite icons from the *Wemhöner-Grabher Collection*. This private collection is regarded as one of the most important in Western Europe, having been built up over several generations by the family who formerly owned it. It distinguishes itself from other Western European private, public and museum collections in many ways. Comprising about 700 objects, the *Wemhöner-Grabher Collection* is unique thanks to its considerable size, the broad spectrum of artisan techniques it documents and the wide range of painting styles it includes. The collection provides an impression of the richness of the Russian repertoire of icon painting. It also gives us an idea of the popular piety and power associated with these icons.

Icons are an important testament to Christian faith. At the same time, however, they are also extraordinary works of art that have been, and will continue to be, venerated for centuries. Icons play a particularly prominent role in the Eastern Orthodox Church. Cult images and depictions of saints are typically painted on wood and sanctified by the church; they have tremendous significance for Eastern Orthodox theology and spirituality. The word *icon* is derived from the Greek *eikon*, which means image. The oldest Christian icons originate from the 1st century AD.

What are icons?

Icon is a Greek word, originally meaning simply *image* or *depiction*. Since the 6th century the word has become associated with the cult images of the Orthodox Church. It is not the way they are made nor the material used, but what the icons tell us that characterizes them and makes them what we call icons.

Icons are saint and cult images of the Eastern Church. They play a particularly important role in the Byzantine Rite of the Orthodox Church. The images, mostly painted on wood, are sanctified by the church. They are of very great importance for the theology and spirituality of the Eastern churches. Icons within the Orthodox Church are neither perceived as pieces of art nor decoration. They are, however, an essential part of Byzantine art. There are some reverse glass painting icons. Also the Oriental-Orthodox Churches such as the Coptic or the Armenian Apostolic Church also venerate icons in their cult. The purpose of icons is to awaken reverence and be an existential connection between the onlooker and the depicted. That means indirectly between the onlooker and God and also between the secular material and the heavenly world.

Origin and development of icon painting in Russia

The difficulty in proving an exact line of development is that the depiction of God was a taboo in

Christian piety. This led to the *iconoclastic controversy*, during which many images depicting God, Jesus and saints were destroyed (726–843). The year 988 is evoked as the official date for the Christianization of Russia. This represented a piece of serendipity for icon painting in Russia, because Russia was completely spared the bloody controversies between the friends and the enemies of images. The end of the iconoclastic controversy in 843 became the feast day of Orthodoxy as such and enabled a completely new uncontested adoption of icon painting and the cult of images. This resulted in the fact that some icons played an important role, in the fighting against the Mongols. During these battles icons were set on standards and carried in front of the army: these were called standard icons. In this way, some icons fought for their proverbial fame as saviours and providers of victory; which in turn was the reason why numerous copies were made of such icons.

History of icon painting

Icons are an essential expression of Byzantine art. This art was cultivated in Greece and Bulgaria but primarily in Russia. Approximately around the 11th century the first icon painting schools were established. Important centres were Kiev, then Novgorod, and later still Vladimir, Tver and Moscow. In the 16th century the first guilds of icon painters were founded. In the 17th century the icon office was instituted and in the 19th century large enterprise icon workshops were established. The icons were painted on a specially prepared wood with traditionally manufactured egg dyes. They were produced according to strict rules. Nevertheless, the painter retained much personal freedom. Icon art presents the painter with great challenges: he has to stand back from his work and remain anonymous. Icons never show the signature of the artist, so only a few artists can be assigned to their creations. The most famous Russian icon painters were Feofan Grek and Andrei Rublev.

Subjects and depictions

The icon serves to envision certain Christian truths. They depict Christ icons, Mary icons, Theotokos icons, Apostle icons and saint icons. Mary the Mother of God, alongside depictions of Christ, is the most frequent image in icon painting. According to the Orthodox faith, many prophets of the Old Testament are protagonists. Saints are shown on icons as well, and some saints from later periods were immortalized. Certain scenes from the Bible and from the life of the saints were painted. Typological grouping such as the Trinity or Resurrection icon were also reproduced. Icons have common traits in their depictions, thus deviating from Western European, post-Gothic art ideas, which are often theologically founded.

Process of creation

The creation of an icon is time-consuming. Just the mixing of colours takes its time. The traditional technique of icon painting uses the tempera process. The colours are made of natural pigments such as lapis lazuli, ochre, vermilion and egg yolk, and kvass (beer made from bread) or beer is used to dilute them. The most important technical advantages of tempera painting are its resilience against ageing and the slow drying, meaning that cracks which might occur with oil colours are very rare. Another advantage of the very slow drying process is that the image can be worked on for a long time. The natural colours and the addition of leaf gold bestow the works with a unique

colourfulness and brightness. In addition, these colours provide great symbolism, so a golden background, for example, reflects the ethereal shine of Heaven and, therefore, represents the way to God and the saints.

General art historical characteristics of the *Wemhöner-Grabher private collection*

Among Western Europe's private, and partly also public, collections the *Wemhöner-Grabher Collection* distinguishes itself positively in many respects. Its size alone is impressive: around 700 individual objects documenting the broad range of the different artisanal techniques and painting styles have been gathered into a unique collection. It is evident that the collection is the result of collecting activities of its former owners over several generations. And also that it was created in the country of origin (Russia) or nearby, because even with intermediation of the art trade in those days, such a collection could not have been realized.

The collection includes not only wood panel icons painted with egg tempera, but also icons on canvas and in oil. Even carved panels and embroideries, some of considerable size and which can be rarely found in Western European collections, are included here. Also remarkable is the great number of icons with original metal covers (Russian: *oklady*) that have been preserved. The artistic techniques applied range from repoussé work and engraving up to pressing in the Modern Age. Some icons are even preserved in their original cases (Russian: *kioty*).

But even more impressive than the range of materials and the corresponding variety of artistic and artisanal forms in the *Wemhöner-Grabher Collection* is the fact that it provides a comprehensive impression of Russian sacral art, primarily from second half of 18th century until the Bolshevik seizure of power.

The collection includes some remarkable 17th century icons that are artistically, culturally and historically valuable. The oldest icon is said to date back to around 1600. The majority of the works, however, originate from about 1750 until the beginning of the 20th century.

In this era Russian sacral painting was exposed to a number of new influences. It combined with traditional icon art and contributed to the creation of entirely new iconographic motifs; the reworking of the old types led to the creation of new artistic forms.

This also applies to the partly Italian-influenced academic painting of the 18th and early 19th centuries. These icons have found a place in numerous Russian churches from this period.

Also important was the influence of the German Nazarene style and the Beuron Art School, the spread of which was promoted in Russia in the second half of the 19th century by influential circles, in particular by the Imperial High Commissioner of the Holy Synod, Konstantin Pobedonoscev. He initiated the distribution of art folios in this style to Russian painting schools.

And finally there is the neo-Russian school of the circle around the academic painters Vaznecov and Verescagin, who became popular by painting Saint Vladimir Cathedral in Kiev. They also cooperated with the Moscow Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, and were imitated in numerous icon workshops.

Icons that were influenced by these painting styles are rarely to be found in private, public or museum collections outside of Russia. Such stylistic influences were likely to be rejected by local collectors and gallery circles, which considered them to be the result of Western infiltration. Nevertheless, these icons are intrinsically related to sacral art over a period of around two hundred years. They were also common in the 18th, 19th and well into the 20th centuries in churches and

(primarily urban) private houses as panels in the traditional *Byzantine* style. Also in today's renaissance of church art in Russia icons of this style are very much appreciated for their unique combination of academic and traditional icon art.

Against this background the *Wemhöner-Grabher Collection* can be classified as being a unique private collection in the West. It offers a comprehensive insight into the development of Russian icon and sacral painting since the early 17th century. It includes some old, very beautiful icons from the era before the effects of occidental influences, as well as various stylistic forms from the 18th and 19th centuries. In Europe one can look in vain for a collection that combines both these elements and with such a great number and variety of objects. Among the hundreds of icons in the collection, some works dating back to the 18th and 19th centuries are outstanding in terms of painting quality and sometimes also size. But there are also simpler, more rustic icons. In addition, there are church icons, some from *iconostases*, such as banners and *Epitaphs* (fabrics with the depiction of the Entombment of Christ for the Holy Friday liturgy). These icons, with their rich, sometimes silver-plated and gilded metal covers (*oklads*), stand in contrast to those painted in a simpler style, which were formerly used in peasant cottages.

Here we have a collection that does not primarily score with splendid unique pieces and rare motifs, but rather with coherence and diversity. It therefore reflects qualities that are typical for Russian sacral art of period in question. This is what makes the collection unique.

Art-historical value of the *Wemhöner-Grabher Private Collection*

Apart from a few exceptions, almost all the icons are presented in their original condition and have not been restored. This provides a rare opportunity to evaluate the original paintings free of later additions or overpainting. An evaluation based on the original paintings, including individual appraisals of each piece. In total, these individual appraisals add up to more than 2,000 pages and around 700 illustrations. Such an elaborate and detailed description including a photographic documentation of the individual pieces resembles a museum catalogue can only be provided for a very few private collections and leads to a significant added value. The volume and quality represent a further increase in the collection's value. The exhibition significantly differs from those of icon museums in Europe up to now. These generally exclude the painting styles of Russian sacral art typical of the 18th to 19th centuries, which means only one aspect of Russian sacral art of that period is represented. The *Wemhöner-Grabher Collection* closes this gap from an art historical point of view.

Material value of the *Wemhöner-Grabher Private Collection*

The *Wemhöner-Grabher Collection* is unrivaled in Western Europe. It includes hundred of icons and images, from masterpieces to simple rustic works that were probably made in wintery village workshops. In this respect, the estimated art historical value can be said to be higher than the material value. This large collection has to be assessed as a whole rather than the sum of the market value of each individual panel and each individual object – especially if we realize that a collection of this size and quality could no longer be compiled by the art trade. The collectors, as representatives of their families, are not interested in the material value. *The value is irrelevant to us. We have furnished wonderful premises, in which we can rejoice in the aura of our collection in silence and in the presence of a very few confidants*, says Dirk Wilhelm Wemhöner. *Our collection*

is not for sale, it was already difficult for us to address the public within the scope of this exhibition, adds his friend and partner Karl-Heinz Grabher. Both of them agree, however, that they intend to provide some selected pieces to renowned museums, as now to the Toy Worlds Museum Basle. *Our collection moves our hearts again and again when we look at it. Remember the many hundred years of devotion and deep faith which have accompanied our wonderful pieces since they have been created. Something that wonderful must not be kept for a the few,* they say with shining eyes. The air is filled with incense floating through the exhibition rooms.

Icons in church

Every Orthodox church, if large enough, has got an iconostasis. It is a decorated wooden wall with three doors separating the believers and the altar. The separated sanctuary assumes the function of a side room, similar to our Western sacristy, where important objects for the church service are stored. On the right of the centre door is a Christ icon, left of it an icon of Mary Mother of God. In between is the Royal Door. Through this door the priest brings the King of Honour in the Gospel Book and in the Holy Supper to the community. During the Holy Supper this door is open and the altar is visible. When the priest does not carry the Gospel Book or the chalice of the Holy Supper, one of the outer doors is used. The same applies when another person enters the sanctuary. Above the Royal Door stands an icon of the Last Supper. Above this is a large icon depicting the saints or the saints of the Feast, after whom the church is named. As a general rule, the second icon seen to the left of the Royal Door depicts the patron saint of the church. Icons are venerated by crossing oneself and bowing before them or by kissing them and prostrating before them. This veneration is strictly distinguished from worship, which is only assigned to God. In addition, this veneration, in accordance with Orthodox doctrine, always refers to the depicted and not to the mere icon. It is *only* an object made of wood and paint. *God's actual concrete closeness:* that is how a Byzantine icon has to be understood from an Orthodox viewpoint. Painted in faith, in prayer and during Lent, it becomes the reflection of divine reality. It alludes with devotion and modesty to the superhuman. This is done in a very easily understandable way. *Icon*, the word originates from the Greek *eikon*, actually means an *image* or *depiction* in general. Since around the 6th century the term has been used to designate the cult images of the Orthodox Church. At the Seventh Ecumenical Council, which took place in Nicaea in 787, the Christianity of the then Roman Empire restored the venerations of icons. Below is an excerpt of the declaration on icon veneration that was made by the Seventh Ecumenical Council:

We define the rule with all accuracy and diligence, in a manner not unlike that befitting the shape of the precious and vivifying Cross, that the venerable and holy icons, painted or mosaic, or made of any other suitable material, be placed in the holy churches of God upon sacred vessels and vestments, walls and panels, houses and streets, both of our Lord and God and Saviour Jesus Christ, and of our spotless Lady the holy Mother of God, and also of the precious Angels, and of all Saints. (...) So we think, so we speak, so we preach, honouring Christ our true God, and his Saints, in words, in writings, in thoughts, in sacrifices, in churches, in icons, worshipping and revering the One as God and Lord, and honouring them because of their common Lord as those who are close to him and serve him, and making to them relative veneration.

Of all the Christian confessions, the Orthodox Church adopted and internalized the decision of this Council into their practice of liturgical life in the most consistent manner. The fascination for icons continues unabated to this day. When somebody really delves into an icon, he/she soon feels that there is a distinct dimension which goes beyond conventional thinking. This is also the reason why icons currently exert an immense fascination for both believers and people seeking something. Nowadays, Western Christians in particular are rediscovering icon art. Icons do not talk about what happens to people in prayer, rather they provide the praying person with the self-revelation of God and his saving work. Icons have proclaimed the same message over centuries, without falling into ossification or change. Icons are therefore created according to strict rules. Nevertheless, the painter retains much personal freedom. An icon painter could be compared to a musician performing according to the score in front of him, but continuously interpreting it anew. Icon art represents great challenges for the painter. He has to stand back from his work and remains anonymous. It is a great honour to design an icon, but the painter has to be aware that, skilled though he is, he is only a tool. What an icon signifies for an Orthodox Christian can be derived from his/her attitude towards these pieces of art. Icons in churches or houses do not serve only to be looked at and to remind us of a saving truth or a saint. They are holy objects treated with devotion by the believer. Before them he bows, he prostrates, he kisses them and lights candles or oil lamps.

Where else can icons be found?

Many Orthodox Christians have icons in their homes. Mostly in the *prayer corner* of the living room, whenever possible on the east wall. Icons can be also be found in various museums and collections and, of course, on the art market. Actually, an icon is a cult object and not an artefact. However, with the opening of Russia and official permits for export business the cult object has also become a foreign exchange earner.

Miracles of icons

Some icons are ascribed with mysterious powers and exciting secrets – and causing many miracles over the centuries, of course. One example might be the icon with the title *Our Lady of Kazan*. It is one of the most famous Russian icons. Nobody knows when it was created. Legend has it that a nine-year old girl found it after a fire in Kazan in 1579. The Mother of God appeared before her and revealed the hiding place of a wondrous icon hidden by Muslim Tatars. Indeed, the girl actually found the icon at the named place. Undamaged by the fire. At this place a monastery was built, and the very same girl became its abbess. And the miracles started from the moment when the icon was brought to the monastery. Two blind men attending the ceremony regained their sight. They were healed. There are many more stories on healings and phenomena, which is explained by the many thousands of icons that have been created. By the way, the aforementioned icon was stolen from the monastery in 1904. Ever since then its whereabouts have been unknown. In the 17th century two copies were made. One of the icons assisted in the war against Poland, the other in the war against Napoleon. People thanked the icons in their own way for support in times of war and crisis. Shortly afterwards two cathedrals were built to venerate the icons, namely the Cathedral of Our Lady of Kazan on Red Square in Moscow and the Kazan Cathedral on Nevski-Prospect in St. Petersburg. Faith is deeply anchored. Whoever believes, shall live ...

Facts & figures

Opening hours.

Museum, shop and restaurant
from 10.00 until 18.00 daily

The Swiss Museums Pass and the Museums-PASS-Musées are valid for the Toy Worlds Museum Basle.

Admission.

CHF 7.00/5.00

Children up to 16 years of age are admitted free of charge and only the company of adults.

No additional charge for the special exhibition.

The entire building is wheelchair-accessible.

Media contact

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