Byzantine Traditions in Russian Religious Art

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Interconnectedness of iconographic studies with other humanities

Iconography:

--a multifarious study of liturgical images with symbolic meanings and icons, presented in the form of visual narratives

--a doorway to broader and deeper understanding of art, language, and the history of Orthodox Christianity

--interconnection with a broad spectrum of other humanities, as it covers specific theological themes and concepts in the context of distinct artistic, cultural, and historical traditions
A passage from analysis to synthesis in iconographic studies is trifold and includes elements of:

--factual and expressional pre-iconographic description, requiring artistic knowledge

--iconographic analysis of specific objects and events in the framework of stylistic and contextual changes

--iconographic interpretation of symbols with references to history
Complexities of analysis

Complexities of iconographic analysis stem from:

- thousand-year-old religious tradition
- allegorical richness
- restoration of unfamiliar to modern viewers deities and historical figures
- reconstruction of bygone events, rituals, and cultural traditions
- description of ritual objects, attributes of power, church furniture, buildings, holy books, communion ware, accessories, or sacred written symbols
- presentation of cities, mountains, rivers, lakes, animals, and plants that are unfamiliar to the modern viewers
Prerequisites and resources of epistemological certainty in iconographic studies

- What does an icon mean?
- How do we know what it means?
- How do we know that our knowledge is true?

Resources:

--religious writings, art criticism, political documents, chronicals, literary works, philosophical literature, social commentaries, and historical investigations

--personal interviews with clergymen and icon painters

--study of museum collections and museum catalogues

Workman, O. (2013). Iconographic resources [Photograph].
Seekers of God

- An Orthodox theologian, Pavel Florensky
  *Beyond Vision*

- Iconographer E. Trubetskoy
  *Icons: Theology in Color*

- An architectural historian Alexei Komech
  *The Golden Ring: Cities of Old Russia*

“While the Lord continues to raise up examples of radical conversion, like **Pavel Florensky**, **Etty Hillesum** and **Dorothy Day**, he also constantly challenges those who have been raised in the faith to deeper conversion.”

---Benedict XVI

“*Felix qui quod amat, defendere fortiter audet.*”

“Happy are those who courageously dare to defend what they love.”

---Ovidius
Recommended museums and cathedrals

**Turkey and Greece**
- Hagia Sophia, Istanbul
- Chora Church, Istanbul

**Russia**
- Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow
- Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow
- Kremlin Armory, Cathedrals of Annunciation, Dormition, St. Michael’s, and St. Basil, Moscow
- Rublev Museum, Moscow
- Museums and Cathedrals of Vladimir, Novgorod, Pskov, Suzdal, Tver, and Yaroslavl

**USA**
- Metropolitan Museum, New York City, N.Y.
- Timken Museum, San Diego, CA
The rise and fall of Byzantium

- In 324 CE, Constantine the Great founded a city with a significant strategic importance for the Roman Empire and called it Constantinopolis nova.

- Constantinopolis became a capital of a strikingly beautiful area stretched over the Thracian Bosphorus, the shores of the Hospitable Sea (”Pontos Euxeinos”), and the Mediterranean Sea.

- The period of 330-1204 marked evolution of Byzantine religious aesthetics.
The rise and fall of Byzantium

- Its glory was darkened by iconoclasm (resistance to images) of 726-843. In 730, Leo III forbade icons for worship and initiated the iconoclastic dispute which lasted almost a century and ended with the victory of iconodules.

- The following years of 1261-1453 separated the Greeks and the Romans in the questions related to obedience to the Pope, the procession of the Holy Ghost, purgatory, clerical celibacy, and leavened bread in the Eucharist.

- Weakened by internal and external tensions, Byzantium fell under the Ottoman Empire on May 29, 1453.
Visual literacy stimulated by the linguistic divide and cultural diversity

‘Philoxenia’ or love of strangers.

- In Byzantium, the first administrative language was Latin, replaced by archaic Greek in the 7th century. Numerous regional languages of Asia, Europe, and North Africa coexisted with the linguistic divide of the official and spoken languages.

- Rich culture embedded in Hellenistic traditions stimulated cross-fertilization of arts and development of a new medium.

Sacred art became a consistent symbolic extension of written language and an expression of divine revelations and true teaching in mental pictures. Icons were canonical and in conformity with authorized symbols. They were considered written like books, not painted like secular images.
Russian Orthodox religious tradition: Inspiration by the beauty of sight and sound

- Exploration of faith before 989
- Vladimir, Prince of Kiev, and the Christianization of Russia in 989.
- The October Revolution of 1917
- Resistance to propaganda, 1917-1989
- Resurrection of the tradition, 1989—present
Mystery of an icon

The Greek word *eikon* denotes ‘image by virtue of likeness or mimesis.’

An icon mysteriously depicts inconceivable, limitless, infinite, and immeasurable Ultimate Reality.

An icon presents a deductic prototype and a letter symbol of an invisible saint or other holy personage.

It invites a faithful to meditate, to soften, and tranquilize a turbulent mind.

In a Russian home, icons are placed in the beautiful (‘red’) corner.

Portable personal icons may be buried with their owners.

Icons as an integral part of liturgy and church architecture:

- manifest Christian theology and concrete religious practices through art
- Invite to follow a liturgical path to God
- represent celestial reality in form of mosaics, monumental frescos, and canvas paintings covering cupolas, arches, and church walls
Difference between Byzantine and Russian iconostases

An iconostasis:
-- a templon or a screen with the doors decorated with tiers of icons, partitioning the altar from the nave.
-- simultaneous visual narrative, showing separate moments in the life of the saints and deities.

Tall and closed iconostases are typical for Russian Orthodox churches. They differ from lower and partially open Byzantine iconostases.
Subject matter:
The Trinity or The Triune God

- Transcendent and invisible God the Father, Logos, the Eternal Word, Wisdom, and preincarnate Christ

- Tangible to human senses God the Son, Christ Emmanuel (“God with us”), Christophany, incarnate Logos or Wisdom, Christ Pantocrator (the God-Man Ruler of all), Our Savior (Spas), the One Who is, the Mandylion (the Holy Face on a piece of cloth), the Almighty, Christ Enthroned, Processional Cross, the King of Glory, and the King and Highest Priest

- Joseph and Semion with the Child Christ, the Baptism of Christ, the Transfiguration, the Raising of Lazarus, the Entry into Jerusalem, the Mystical Supper, the Crucifixion, the Descent from the Cross, Epitaphios or Lamentation (Plashchanitsa), the Descent into Hell, Doubting Thomas, and the Ascension

- God the Holy Spirit, a theophany (manifestation) as a dove, flames, or twelve rays of divine power
Subject matter: The Virgin Mary

Panagia (all-holy)
Theotokos (not Christotokos)

- The Virgin Orans, the Platytera (More spacious than the Heavens), Our Lady of Sign (Znamenie), the Hodegetria (showing the way), the Eleousa, (merciful, tender), the Nursing Theotokos, and Our Lady of Perpetual Help

- Nativity of Mary, Presentation of Mary in the Temple by Joachim and Anne, the Annunciation, the Nativity of Christ, the Presentation in the Temple, Dormition (Koimesis), the Assumption of Mary, Protecting Veil of the Mother of God (Pokrov)
Subject matter: The heavenly court

- Deesis or the heavenly court

- The prophets, such as Ezekiel and John the Baptist

- The archangels (prince messengers): Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael

- The non-corporal beings, such as winged cherubs and seraphs

- The Evangelists: Matthew (man), Mark (lion), Luke the Painter (ox), and John the Theologian (eagle)

- The Holy Apostles, such as Peter and Paul

- Saints and martyrs: George of Lydda, Martyrs of Sebaste, Pakaskeve, and Anastasia

- Fathers of the Orthodox Church: Nicholas of Myra and Seraphim of Sarov
Diverse Iconographic media

Encaustic works, mosaics, cloisonnés, frescos, egg temperas, bone and wood carvings, illuminated manuscripts, bronze, silver, and gold castings, paintings on canvas or fabric, embroidery, images on candleholders, pictorial crosses, engolpions (icons worn by bishops), banners, ampules (portable bottles with oil), and computer-generated icons

Workman, O.(2013). Portable icon with relics of St. Fabian, St. John of Kronstadt Church. [Photograph].

Images written by philosophers

Greek ‘graphicos’ means to write and paint. As icons connote not the realm of flesh, but the realm of the human mind, icon writers (painters) are also known as philosophers who do not sign their works.

Workman, O.(2013). Icon painter Mila Mina in her workshop.[Photograph].
Images that are written, not painted

Iconographers and icon restorers are divinely inspired, talented, and experienced craftsmen or virtuoso artists. They tend to work in teams.
Russian icons

--a symbolic continuation of Byzantine theological philosophy and artistic traditions in Russian religious art

--works of art rooted in Egyptian sarcophagus paintings, and early Christian cult of burial and worshipping practices

--egg tempera paintings on a solid, well-seasoned wooden panel, covered with layers of gesso, a piece of cloth, and a thin 22 K golden leaf of or without it
Due to perfect filling and tight cropping there is no visual escape for the viewers.

Plain, embossed, or jewel-studded frames are an integral part of icons. Frames decorated with fruits, leaves, vines, and flowers are more common for Byzantine than Russian icons. Icons can be without frames.

Gold halos refer to a holy mind and frame the most important elements of the icons.

Internal frames created by overlapping background mandorlas (elliptical aureoles representing the heavenly world) and lozenges (diamond shapes representing the created world).

Interestingly, mandorlas and lozenges surround the figures of the Virgin Mary and Christ, but not angels and archangels.

Internal frames such as mandy lions represent a background napkin or a handkerchief.

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Transfigured and transformed perspective

- Spatial relationships, presented in a dream-like world
- Arrangements in a vaporous manner, inviting for an extended introspection due to the illusion of disintegration
- Background landscapes presented as minimalistic theatrical decorations or pieces of drapery
- Elimination of background noise by scaling down of insignificant objects

Byzantine perspective or God’s view of the world

Characteristic features of reverse (inverted) perspective:
-- placement of the vanishing point outside the icon and converging lines at the heart of the faithful.
-- cubistic presentation of different sides of objects and subjects
-- a more credible picture space
-- representation of buildings by arches and narrow towers
-- thrown forward tables, footrests, thrones, books, and mountains

Purposes of reverse perspective:
-- presentation of God’s view of the world
-- depiction of space leading to eternity
-- invasion of private space
-- facilitation of direct, person-to-person communication with saints
Loss of gravity due to deliberate subversion of spatial laws

- Formal balance and symmetrical division of compositional parts
- Importance of the geometric center
- Fixed distances between compositional elements
- Mixed time and space references in calendar icons and icons depicting serial events
- Focus on the celestial realm and spiritual life
- A symbolic distinction between internal and external space
- A red veil as a symbol of inner space

Loss of gravity

Figures hang loose and appear floating in gravity-free space.

- Calendar icons and icons depict serial or historical events in simultaneous time and space planes.
- Biblical symbols often coexist with paganistic references.
Living bridge between saints and worshipers

Prayer in front of an icon:
-- a holy event
-- a participatory event and direct encounter with a holy person or God
-- reception of moralistic messages with a clearly visible borderline between good and evil.

- The early Coptic and Byzantine icons with chubby and even cartoonish figures
- The later Byzantine and early Russian icons, especially Russian Novgorod icons, with intentionally elongated and flat figures
- Manifestation of spiritual power over mortal flesh
- Figures without shadows
- Signs of age denoting maturity of spirit
- Holiness of the mind, highlighted by the nimbus
- Consistent depiction in profile all that is evil, such as unrighteous people, Judas, Christ’s tormentors, Satan, dragons, and animals
Expression of abstract and complex notions through personification:

-- a man looking like a king as representation of the Cosmos in icons of Pentecost.
-- a man with a water jar representing the River Jordan in the icon Baptism of Christ
-- a dark man in chains representing death
-- a woman in the dark personifying night
-- a skull as representation of Adam, died in sin
-- flat bodies of saints with flat feet and hands as personification of flesh liberated from corruption
Proportions

Byzantine and Russian anatomically incorrect proportions:

--stumpy Byzantine saints with solid chins, chests, knees, heels, and large heads.

--elongated Saints with small mouths, thin but elongated noses, and bulging foreheads in early Russian icons

--expression of divine sincere love and devotion

Depiction of tension

The subject of the icons:
-- detached and involved at the same time
-- appealing to broad audiences
-- reflecting on conflict between freedom and coercion
-- depicting a man as both exalted and problematic
-- contemplating about the rivalry of thought and faith, desire, and restraint.

Archetypal energy and personification of moral qualities

Mediators between the faithful and God, such as Saints and martyrs:

--play deductic roles of dematerialized historical figures
--convey unambiguous historical and cultural references
--denote a departure from classical humanistic traditions in individual and group portraits
--display important social status indicated by placement and regalia


Icons present a silent form of prayer. However, their quiet stillness is effectively complimented by expressive plasticity of dramatic gestures and postures. Icons reflect on a broad range of essential human activities, such as praying, teaching, writing, walking, climbing, flying, sleeping, thinking, drinking, eating, nursing a baby, etc. Postures can be erect, raised, lowered, inclined, bent, twisted, or turned.
Depicting emotions according to humanistic traditions

Exaggerated staring eyes, gestures, and postures communicate awareness and a wide gamut of emotions:

- Love, affection, and sensuality
- Kindness and gentleness
- Hospitality, compassion, vitality, and care
- Peacefulness and contemplation
- Dignity and reservation
- Stoicism and asceticism
- Solemnity and somberness
- Sorrow, pity, grief, pessimism, and tragic passion

Early icons during and after iconoclasm avoided emotionalism. Novgorod and early Russian icons appear more reserved and ascetic.
The Virgin’s eyes floating in the eye sockets express:

- Visible beauty of love
- Love as a faculty of the human soul
- Love as an intellectual property
- Love as affection
- Spousal love
- Parental love
- Devotional love
- Love through obedience and faith

Harmony, purity, and beauty of colors

Icons, painted in quick, little circles, bring joy to the world with harmony and striking beauty of simple color schemes.

Saturated colors demonstrate refined tonal transitions and exhibit geometric purity of details, lines, symbolic letters, and borders.

Color pigments are created from minerals, animals, insects, and plants.

Egg tempera enhances subtlety and luminosity of indigo-deep blue, ivory, jade, raw sienna, Indian red, and sapphire colors.

Local colors become distinct under daylight conditions.
The head and upper body of the Virgin Mary is covered with *maphorion*, a veil. The cherry color of her veil implies royalty. The golden stars denote virginity before, during, and after the birth of Christ.
Hierarchy of colors depicting transition from chaos to order

- **Roskrish** or the dark and muted colors, representing premordial chaos
- **Sankir** is an opaque olive color, used as a base color for heads and throats
- The base color, but two or three times darker, used for outlines
- Layers of colors
- White and yellow highlights
- Changeant colors and double reflection

Connection with divine energy

- Silver, gold, and ‘tvoreynie kraski’
- A flat monochromatic gold background
- Depicting eternal light tonal transitions
- The golden net of foreground highlights
Light mirroring eternity

- Internal light shining in silence and stillness
- Imitation of eternity
- Fluidity of light
- Embossed covers or oklads


Light of eternity

External light as an active and important component of iconographic paintings


In conclusion

"The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new lands but in seeking with new eyes."
~Marcel Proust

- The tradition of depicting decisive moments independent of time and space is not relinquished in modern iconography. Most importantly, its potent influence can be traced in the works of 19th and 20th century art, represented by a constellation of brilliant artists, such as Ge, Serov, Vrubel, Nesterov, Petrov-Vodkin, Korin, and Glazunov.

- Though icon painting strives for new expressive forms, the evolution of icon painting is not simple.

- Canonical principles do not change.

- Praying to an icon remains a mystical and deeply visual contemplative experience. It requires complete concentration, stillness, and control of thoughts.

- It provides a way of palpable and tangible communication with God and the saints.
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