"Mother of God Pledge of Sinners" from about 1912, part of the Hillwood exhibition of later Russian icons.

Exhibit

Russian Evolution: Religious Icons After The ‘Golden Age’

By LINDA HALE
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The connoisseur’s playbook for assessing Russian icons hasn’t been updated in more than 70 years. Medieval treasures are viewed as artistic masterpieces from a distinct Golden Age. All that came later—including silver frames studded with jewels, and Renaissance-style renderings of saints amid sumptuous decor—is evidence of a spiritual art form in decline.

Now comes “Tradition in Transition: Russian Icons in the Age of the Romanovs.” The exhibition at Hillwood Museum & Gardens takes an unconventional view. The art form didn’t die in 1700, as scholars often maintain—if it evolved.

For evidence, guest curator Wendy R. Salmont presents 43 icons, highly decorated covers and religious books dating from the 18th to the early 20th century. The artifacts were gathered by Hillwood’s founder, Marjorie Merriweather Post, and two other American private collectors, all of whom benefited from diplomatic postings in Moscow during the 1930s, when
The Image of an Artistic Evolution in Russia

Two icons that bookended the age of the Romanov: Kazan Mother of God, left, ca. 1696-1698, and Iverskaya Mother of God, ca. 1755-1790.

EXHIBIT, From C1

Russian art was selectively made available to westerners in exchange for hard currency.

Post and crew collected "late" icons, meaning they were made long after the so-called Golden Age of the 16th century. Salmond contends that late can also be great. All icons are as spiritual windows to heaven. Salmond believes that icons of the recent centuries provide a window on Russian society during its most tumultuous times.

In the changing facial features of a sain, Salmond reads the impact of Peter the Great. The modernizing corpse not only banished beards and rough table manners as he imported culture from the West, he also tried to rid Russian Orthodoxy of unsophisticated icon painters. Salmond spots the rise of an elite class in the encrustation of pearls on an image of the Mother of God.

Commercialism, even in a country dominated by peasants, sparked a market for icons mass-produced on color presses. In a Darwinian novel, where innovations were needed, what saintly spirit would notice the difference?

An elaborate 1912 icon bears witness to the gap between ruler and subject just before the Russian Revolution. Called the "Mother of God Peace of Simonov," the icon begins with the traditional painting of tempera on wood. But this small painting—5 by 3/8 inches—was finished with a cover of finely ground gold, shaded with pearls and gemstones. The Mother of God wears not only a jeweled crown but also a matching double-strand diamond-studded choker and earrings worth of a czarina's birthday ball.

A fine icon could resemble a tableau from the Fabergé workshop, the exhibition says. Indeed, that folk icons created in village workshops were being produced by painters known as "God painters."

Hill's exhibition aims to illustrate how a coherent visual language evolved in the pursuit of modernization. Greek painters gave way to distinctively Russian characteristics, which filtered in the face of western realism, perspective, shading and purely decorative finesse. Some icon makers tried oil paint, in addition to the traditional tempera pigments mixed with egg yolk. During the reign of Catherine the Great, painting flourished.

One branch of the church persisted with old rituals and time-honored conventions of salons, which are still replicated today, and experts are complaining. Richard Temple in London, who is considered the dean of icon dealers, responded to a query by email:

"Personally only like the craftsman of the 16th and 17th centuries. Later they seem to me too often glossy and Munich," he wrote me that "does not fall into the baroque and naturalistic or European style is still powerful, when it conforms to the ancient symbolic and schematic manner."

Gerard Hill, director of Russian works of art for Sotheby's, has no trouble seeing Russia's troubled social fabric reflected in the jeweled icon covers that Post loved to collect.

"It was symptomatic of the whole period," Hill says.

But when considering an icon's value as art, he also returns to tradition.

"I think you can find exquisite painted icons from this period," Hill says, "it only because some late-19th-century workshops were still dedicated to painting in the 16th-century style."

For the ordinary person who hasn't studied the subject, it is hard to tell the difference," he says. "But the wonderful thing is that you can stand before these two icons, and the icon from the 16th century will move you unconsciously. It has a spiritual essence that will be communicated."

Salmond, an associate professor of art history at Chapman University in Orange, Calif., has studied Hill's wood's icons for years. And in this

The word "icon" comes from the Greek word for image. Russians inherit icon painting from Byzantium, where it had evolved from the tradition of mosaic and fresco painting in early Byzantine churches. Images and styles were originally sanctioned by the Orthodox church as an art worthy of spiritual contemplation. Rules dictated how each scene and object should be depicted, which explains how an iconic style of painting abandoned by the West continues today. It was not until the 14th century that Russian painters Russiaized the imagery. By the 19th century, artistry gave way to business. The demand for icons grew with the population, and mechanized reproduction was introduced. Icons were printed, and even imported from Europe. Gold and silver covers were originally made to protect complete. In cheaper modern versions, silver became tin, and painters completed only eyes, hands and feet, which shows the type. The 19th-century revolution halted the production of icons, and workshop painters shifted to making boxes, decorating them with scenes from the Bible instead of spirits from Heaven.

Even in Russia, icons were not appreciated as art until the era was at a close. In 1893, Carl Nikolaus established a commission for the development of icon painting and donated money to sustain the village community. He also staged a major exhibit of icons in 193 to mark the 30th anniversary of his family's dynasty. About that time, restorers began cleaning old icons that had been blackened by the smoke of church candles. It had been common practice to sprinkle icons with the image dry. On the other hand, restorers were able to clear layers of smudge to uncover the rich color and gold lustre associated with icons of the Golden Age.

That's when the rubber in the West began to take place.

So far, Temple says, Russia's new wealthy class is busy buying 19th- and early-20th-century paintings. But he expects that to change, once people notice that a legitimate "medieval" icon painted in 1550 can be purchased for a few thousand dollars.

Hill makes a persuasive case for appreciation, whatever the era or cost.

"Russian icons are the great Russian art," he says. "It's not as if they were painting icons of our current subjects. They were painting icons. This was the rage, the medium of great Russian art."