

M Exhibits

Icons of Their Times

By Paul Ruther

“**T**radition in Transition: Russian Icons in the Age of the Romanovs,” on display through Dec. 31, is only the second exhibition organized by the Hillwood Museum and Gardens since it reopened after an extensive renovation in 2000. On entering the grounds, it soon becomes apparent why special exhibitions are few and far between at the Washington, D.C., museum. Any special exhibition is likely to be overshadowed by the spectacular setting with its stunning grounds, beautiful Neo-Georgian mansion, and exquisite collection of 18th-century French decorative arts.

Hillwood founder Marjorie Merriweather Post, heir to the Post cereal fortune, also was an avid collector of Russian luxury items, most notably Fabergé eggs. Her interest in Russian icons emerged when she was living in Moscow in the late 1930s with her husband, Joseph Davies, U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union from 1937-39.

The special exhibition stands apart from the rest of the museum in presentation and analysis. The mansion features thousands of objects displayed in a dozen rooms, but the special exhibition examines a mere 43 icons and two books. Where the mansion is almost entirely devoid of text panels and many large canvases go unidentified, the special exhibition is replete with wall text to help viewers determine what the manufacture, design, imagery, and stylistic development of icons can teach us about Russian political, cultural, and religious life.

“Tradition in Transition” is housed in a small log frame building constructed in

1969 in the style of a Russian country home. That Post was a Russian icon collector is not immediately obvious in the exhibition, and only on departure does the visitor learn that the exhibition contains the holdings of two other collectors. There is also no attempt to explain

the difference between the icons in the special exhibition and a permanent display of Post’s icons in the nearby mansion. All this information could be provided at the exhibition’s entrance to smooth the transition between Hillwood’s opulence and the more austere exhibition space.

With wooden floors and walls painted a deep blue that sets off the wall text, the exhibition space has an overall contemplative effect. Visitors may even feel they are in a chapel where they can fall into a reverie and approach the icons as the objects of religious devotion they were meant to be. But the religion here is not Christianity but art history. The viewer is asked to contemplate the icons as art objects of cultural and social significance.

The display is not strictly chronological; works are grouped to explore the themes identified by the curators. Their goal is to challenge the prevailing and almost century-old view asserted by art historians that Western Europe’s influence on Russian artists led to the corruption of aesthetic quality and meaning of Russian icons. The show also examines the many roles icons played as objects of politics,

religion, commerce, and art.

Throughout the exhibition, the curators contrast innovative influences from the West with the more conservative traditional Byzantine imagery in sections with headings like Tradition and Innovation, the Art of Veneration, and the Merchant Taste. But the idea gets muddled along the way.

At the exhibition’s entrance a section titled “A Tradition Fractures” clearly demonstrates Western influence and traditional imagery by displaying two calendar icons depicting the saints and religious festivals celebrated on specific days. An icon for the month of March represents the traditional style: Saints stand in fixed and stiff poses against gold backgrounds, while their heads are encircled in symbolic halos. Meanwhile, a December calendar icon painted approximately 100 years later reveals Western influences. The figures of the saints are posed with elegant gestures and in a few instances stand in *contrapasto*. It has more naturalistic colors and a pale, blue sky and attenuated trees that would look at home in a 15th-century Florentine fresco.

This contrast of innovation versus tra-



Iverskaia Mother of God from the Hillwood Museum’s “Tradition in Transition” exhibition.

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dition gets murkier in other sections. A section provocatively titled "The Seduction of the West" explains that the transformation of the icon accelerated during the celebrated reign of Peter the Great (1682-1725). Peter's efforts to modernize Russia created a Westernized elite who demanded icons with luxurious surfaces, decorative ornamentation, and more naturalistic imagery equal to their own wealth and sophistication. However, only one of the four icons in this section was produced during Peter's reign.

One icon displayed here, *Christ Pantocrator*, was produced about 150 years after Peter's death. This work features an image of Christ's face and hands painted with feathery, deft brushwork and modeling that expresses depth and some unseen light source. The sensitive handling of the tempera paint is heightened by the orna-

mentation of a sheet of precious metal, in this instance silver, which is worked in a decorative manner and seals the icon in a package of splendor.

The beautiful metal covering, known as an *oklad*, that encases the icon somehow escapes description in the wall text during the first half of the exhibition but is at last thoughtfully discussed in the the Art of Veneration. This section looks at religious imagery for the wealthy and the emphasis is on luxury. Several of the icons, such as the 17th-century *Saint Nikita and the Devil*, are exhibited along with the sealed *oklad* made more than a century later to adorn them—presumably when their antiquated style needed updating with a more elaborate cover. Although schematic and stiff, *Saint Nikita* has an undeniable charm with its picture of a winged angel flinging a trident at the dev-

il's head. The trident's lethal motion is conveyed by one long black line that intersects the painting on a diagonal just below the crown the angel is about to place atop Saint Nikita's head.

The exhibition also presents icons that represent a rejection of Western style and a return to traditional means of expression. Those icons, featured in "The Power of Tradition," open up a discussion about the persecution of the so-called "Old Believers," who rejected the 17th-century reforms of the Russian Orthodox church. There are similarities between the icons exhibited here and in three works grouped under the heading "Artists and Workshops." These icons were manufactured much later by workshops associated with the wealthy Stroganov family. The third 19th-century icon titled *Resurrection* is purportedly indebted to the Stroganov

workshops and therefore represents the continuity of the traditional imagery.

It is frustrating that the wall text does not explain what association, if any, existed between the Stroganov family and the Old Believers. It is not stated whether the Stroganov family fell from power at some point or stopped supporting icon manufacture since the examples shown here are only from the early 17th century. Should the Stroganov family icons—rich in ornamental detail and gilded tempera on wood—be viewed in continuity with or as a departure from the *oklads* and Western-influenced art of the elite classes of the following generations? This is a lapse in the exhibition's narrative and leaves a viewer wanting to know more about the Stroganovs, their eventual fate, and whether the icons associated with them reflect their politi-

cal beliefs or were only aesthetic choices.

The theme of icon as political symbol is explored with depth and contains compelling examples. A section titled "The Icon in Political Life" reveals that icons were made to commemorate military victories. *Kazen Mother of God*, for example, was credited with helping free Moscow from Poland in 1612.

Even the ultimate czar, Nicholas II, used icons to further establish the legitimacy of Romanov rule during his reign (1894-1917). Through the proliferation of icon production, Nicholas II meant to create his own ideological *oklad* (the Czarist equivalent of wrapping ones' self in the flag). The wall text explains that Nicholas used religion in an attempt to perpetuate the rule of his heirs. After the royal couple attended the canonization of 18th-century Saint Seraphim of Sarov, Nicholas

let it be known that the birth of his son Alexi was due to the saint's divine intervention. The icon of Saint Seraphim displayed here is but one of many produced during Nicholas' reign.

If visitors are willing to wend their way through the exhibition carefully, the rewards are plentiful. Hillwood should be lauded for a thoughtful, restrained exhibition that focuses on a small but vital piece of their holdings. What the exhibition accomplishes best is to separate the icons from the multitude of objects crammed into every nook and cranny of the mansion and analyze works that would likely be overlooked and undervalued by even an intrepid visitor. The luxury objects of aristocratic cultures such as Romanov Russia are as rich in meaning and depth as they are in beauty, elegance, and refinement. **M**
