

"Traditions in Transition: Russian Icons From the Age of the Romanovs"

Through Aug. 15; Timken Museum of Art, Balboa Park; Free; (619) 239-5548 or www.timkenmuseum.org



A detail (left) from "Iverskaia Mother of God," tempera on wood from between 1875-1900, and "Promise of Those Who Suffer," a 1795 oklad of tempera on wood with silver gilt, grace the Timken Museum of Art's "Traditions in Transition: Russian Icons From the Age of the Romanovs."

TREASURED FIGURES

Despite being adorned in gold, pearls and more, these Russian icons were not always valued in their country

By Robert L. Pincus
ART CRITIC

In Western Europe, from the Renaissance well into the 19th century, Christian art usually took the form of an image from scripture or a statue of a biblical figure. In Russia, devotional art also involved gold, silver, enamels, pearls and jewels — and lots of them. At least this was true during the long stretch of the Romanov dynasty, which endured from 1613 until 1917, when the Bolshevik Revolution gave birth to the Soviet Union and undermined the Russian Church.

In pre-revolutionary Russia, it wasn't enough simply to create a devotional painting of the Virgin Mary, the baby Jesus or a saint. These images needed to wear a fitted coat of gold or silver that partially covered the painting. It's called an *oklad* and

some of the works featured in "Traditions in Transition: Russian Icons From the Age of the Romanovs" possess these shimmering, halfway surreal coverings.

There are 45 selections on view, in an exhibition at the Timken Museum of Art in Balboa Park. It was originally assembled by the Hillwood Museum Gardens in Washington, D.C., where the works are housed.

Three collectors who came to Russia during the 1930s in official capacities — Marjorie Merriweather Post, Madame Augusto Rosso and Laurence A. Steinhardt — bought these works when Russians were only too happy to unload them at bargain rates. They were considered to be inferior to icons from the "golden age" of the 14th and 15th centuries, mostly because they have been polluted by European styles of painting.

Pollution is in the eye of the beholder, however, and the icons that veer toward the rounded faces and realism of Western European painting have their own kind of charm and substance. They make you realize just how subjective taste and history can be.

Look, for example, at "Saint John the Merciful and Saint Catherine," painted about 1850. The artist painted both figures with deft attention to detail of costume and faces. They appeal to contemporary eyes because they are rendered as flesh and blood figures, but surely some of the traditionalists among the Russian Orthodox Church would have thought this picture was too secular to be of any spiritual use.

"Christ Pantocrator," a very late icon (made between 1875 and 1900), had a similar appeal, with its version of Jesus as a handsome fel-

low with a healthy complexion and well-trimmed beard in an Italian Renaissance manner. This work's elaborate *oklad*, with only the face and hands visible from beneath the ornate silver surface, is beautifully detailed and an extravagant expression of devotion.

The icons with stylistic polish held the most appeal for the upper classes. They were the ones, after all, with access to Western Europe and European art. The rise of the *oklad*, though, was tied as much to the growing merchant class as aristocrats. They cared less about the quality of the painting than the sumptuousness of its cover.

For the common man and woman, both were suspect. The peasantry embraced icons in a simpler, homegrown style, similar to

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that of folk painters in the rest of Europe and in North America — and it's not hard to see why. The images may be cruder, as is the case with "Crucifixion in Four Parts" (1800-1900), but they were made more for the sacred stories they conveyed more than the way they were rendered. Ordinary people also saw icons as direct "conduits" to the figures in the pictures, exhibition catalog essayist Wendy Salmond explains.

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This exhibition has a strong connection to the Timken Museum of Art's collection, like nearly all of its shows. The museum has its own extensive holdings in Russian icons. The most remarkable examples in the Timken's collection, like the "The Jerusalem Mother of God," are in indigenous styles. Figures are rendered flat against the picture surface, and with a flair for crisp detail. Byzantine art is the prime influence and original source.

The link between the Timken and Russian icons reaches back to the beginnings of the museum. Pivotal early 20th-century San Diego collectors Amy and Anne Putnam (they were sisters) funded a foundation in their name so that the fledgling Timken museum could acquire works. (The art in the museum technically belongs to the Putnam Foundation.)

Amy Putnam studied Russian at Stanford University, and collected Russian art, books and more than 300 icons. Many of these works hung in their home at Fourth and Walnut streets near downtown.

She would have surely been pleased to see an exhibition like this at the Timken, since it complements the museum's own icons and crystallizes the complex, fascinating history of the art form.

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PHOTO: TIMKEN MUSEUM OF ART