A LOAN EXHIBITION OF RUSSIAN ICONS

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In 1913, in commemoration of the tercentenary of the dynasty of the Romanovs, a special exhibition of ancient Russian art was held in Moscow. For the first and last time, on the eve of the tremendous events which shattered the world and reversed the historical destinies of Russia, icons were shown, together with an assortment of ecclesiastical and decorative objects. The present exhibition, covering the same scope of subjects, brings to my mind the recollection of that event, which now seems so far remote in the past of a vanished world. With the present, ever-growing importance of Russia in world affairs, the heroic fight of the Russian people for their land, and this new recrudescence of national conscience, it is quite apparent that an exhibition interpreting the ideals and artistic aspirations of the Russian people throughout their past history is particularly timely. Besides, it is bound to attract public attention because of the aesthetic merits and intrinsic value of the art documents contained in it.

The collection now exhibited was assembled by George R. Hann of Sewickley, Pennsylvania, during the years 1935-1937. This assortment, of which the icons form the most important part, contains pieces from Russian galleries and collections known far and wide: the Historical Museum, the Rumiantzev Museum, the collection of A. B. Morozov, and, above all, the Tretjakov Gallery. This gallery bears the name of a noted patron of the arts who was one of the pioneers in assembling Russian paintings and historical pieces. The fact that a number of objects in Mr. Hann’s collection formerly belonged to that gallery constitutes a commendation of their qualifications. The significance of the present collection may be illustrated by a few examples.

An icon showing two saints, both bearing the name of Macarius, derives from the Tretjakov Gallery and happens to be, besides, the very icon that was singled out to be represented in the sumptuous publication of The Antiquities of the Russian Empire, issued by order of Emperor Nicholas I in 1849. This particular icon was illustrated because of its traditional attribution to Rublev or his school. Whatever might be the validity of this attribution to the foremost Russian icon painter of the early fifteenth century, it was a thrilling discovery to identify the work in the Hann collection.

Another icon, of the fourteenth century, portraying the Old Testament Trinity, was the subject of a learned dissertation published some fourteen years ago in the Art Bulletin by the Russian author Olsufiev. Still another icon in the collection, Christ Pantocrator, reproduced in a monograph by Schweinfurth in 1937, was said to belong to the Historical Museum, together with companion pieces now on display in the exhibition. This group of large icons is an exceptionally important set, constituting a Tchin, or Deesis, and forming the central tier in the traditional Russian iconostas—the wall dividing the altar from the rest of the church and adorned by a prescribed row of icons. This set, dating from the sixteenth century, is a typical example of the school of Novgorod, the northern freedom-loving community that formed part of the Hanseatic League and had such a turbulent history before it merged with the unified Russia under the scepter of the Czar. Many other icons in the collection can be traced as regards the former owners in their pedigree and are highly important in illustrating the development of early Russian ecclesiastical paintings.

Altogether the Hann collection contains over a hundred icons, representing examples
of the best period of this type of art—from the fourteenth to the seventeenth century—and a few later samples. These panels portray a wide variety of themes. The Trinity, Christ, the Holy Virgin, archangels, apostles, and numberless saints are among the subjects treated. Some of the figures are of monumental proportions, others are reduced to the diminutive size of miniatures. Besides portions of full-scale iconostases, there are portable churches, or full replicas in miniature of larger iconostases, which would accompany a traveler or a warrior on a military campaign.

There are many notable compositions depicting traditionally sacred themes. For instance, a representation of the Trinity follows very closely Rublev’s illustrious original in the Monastery of Saint Sergius (Troitze-Sergieva Lavra), near Moscow. An icon of the Ascension gleams with the typical reflections in complimentary colors associated with this artist’s paintings. A Transfiguration of striking composition and execution displays the Rublev tradition in the delineation of the figures and the coloristic properties, while it simultaneously denotes some traits of his celebrated successor, Dionysius. The Ascension of the Prophet Elijah shines with a fiery incandescence. The several portrayals of the Redeemer in various icons are sometimes encircled in halos of incredible rainbows in a fantastic sequence of chromatic steps. One of the most striking icons is the colossal panel depicting the Last Judgment, with innumerable figures, subsidiary scenes, and didactic inscriptions. Other icons representing mystical themes include those of the Vigilant Eye and Saint Sophia. The first represents the youthful Christ as Emmanuel, reclining on a couch with formalized scrolls of legendary plants in the background. The second is marked with a peculiar luminescence, since the figure of the Divine Wisdom is traditionally depicted in glowing red.

The schools of Vladimir-Suzdal, Novgorod, Pskov, the northern provinces, and Moscow are well represented in the collection, illustrating changes of style ranging from a tradition imbued with Byzantine-Hellenism through nationalistic ascendance—a distinctly Russian phase of the Byzantine bequest—and reaching the later ornamental stage which shows an amalgamation of obvious influence from Oriental sources with hesitant infiltrations from western Europe.

Certain items bear unmistakable traits of the styles of well-known icon painters of the seventeenth century or their close followers. At that time the association of individual icons with distinct authorship became more frequent, though the authorship of the vast majority of icons remained anonymous.

The colorful school of the artist of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries who was sponsored by the Stroganov family—the merchant princes of Novgorod who have been aptly called the Russian Medici—is represented by many examples in the present collection. The style of this school can be seen in the Stroganov artist’s interpretation of the Nativity and in the highly ornamental figures of saints in sumptuous attire. It follows to a certain degree in the footsteps of the Persian miniaturists, and shows typical instances of the late florescence of a calligraphic style that is in vivid contrast to the majestic simplicity of the very early icons of the collection.

A student of art will gain much information from a close study of Mr. Hann’s splendid collection, which is unquestionably one of the most important outside of Russia. In fact, it would be difficult to name one that is more significant. A lover of art at large will derive a great amount of enjoyment from becoming more intimately acquainted with this exemplary representation of a branch of art that is so imperfectly known to historians, painters, and the general public outside of Russia and so scantily and fragmentarily represented in the museums of the Western world. A more specialized student of art will be delighted by the many problems of research which the collection affords. It offers some fascinating lines of study, among which might be indicated at random: the relationship of the Hellenistic legacy and the nationalistic Russian traits; the continuity of tradition and divergence from it in the styles of Rublev and Dionysius; the identity of individual artists of the Czar’s
painters' school in Moscow in the seventeenth century; the relationship of the traditions of Novgorod and Moscow in conjunction with other regional styles; the various ways of depicting the countenance of the Redeemer, the Holy Virgin, and the Christ Child; the properties of Russian architecture as exemplified by the icons of the collection; the classical, national, and Oriental traits in the delineation of the horse in the equestrian figures of the collection; the treatment of draperies and the folds of garments; the rendering of plant forms, landscape features, and luminous effects; and many other themes. These examples merely suggest the wealth of problems for original research offered by the collection.

There are a number of collateral questions that would be highly interesting as topics of special inquiry. For instance, many icons in the collection are provided with metal adornments, frames, and halos dating from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century. A study of the decorative properties of these ornaments in repoussé, filigree, and enamel would be of definite value, for the subject has not been sufficiently explored.

With these specialized and particularized investigations, the essential significance of the icon as a manifestation of the Russian religious philosophy and a world conception should be noted. The image as reflected in the icon is a demonstration of an immutable order and a spiritual hierarchy of ideas. The Russian word sobor, meaning both “assembly” and “cathedral,” does not easily lend itself to a precise translation, but denotes in icons an idea of a universe embracing humanity and all living creatures in a unified, orderly co-ordination, a supremacy of spiritual principles. The Russian icon often contains a somewhat baffling juxtaposition of the somber and the luminous, the sad and the joyful. The brilliancy of the colors signifies blissful emancipation, a supreme freedom associated with restrained tonalities and lines of suffering and grief—indeed suffering and joy are not far apart in the icon, as in the fabulous twin birds of Mirth and Lamentation in the popular Russian imagery. One of the aspects of the immobility of the figures is the indication of a state of spiritual exaltation by means of a glowing intensity concentrated in the expression of the eyes. The translation to a higher plane is completely fulfilled in the gaze, while the body remains motionless, as if it were gripped by an ecstatic trance.

As illustrated by the Hann collection, however, the Russian icon is far from being rigid and motionless as a general rule. It favors immobility of posture only as a matter of certain principles and fundamental concepts. A fine example of the main properties of composition and color balance is provided by a Transfiguration dating from the end of the fifteenth century or the beginning of the sixteenth and belonging to the Novgorod school. A certain static solemnity shown by the majority of Russian icons does not preclude a vividness in the portrayal of movement and dynamism at large. In this work the serenity of the two Prophets on either side of Christ is sufficiently offset by the unrest in the portrayal of the awestricken apostles in the lower part of the composition. As a general rule, obvious signs of excitement and of violent emotions are relegated to the representation of a state of mankind which has not reached ultimate illumination and which is still incapable of beholding a surpassing vision. A higher state of ecstatic contemplation is treated in the Russian icon with the utmost restraint of posture. So the harmonious accord of the lines in the upper part of the icon of the Transfiguration, coupled with the extreme intensity of color, is in sharp contrast to the agitated composition of the lower portion, which is carried out in a more subdued chromatic key.

To obtain a proper evaluation of its ideology and meaning, the peculiarities and aims of the icon should be understood as a visual reverberation of a transcendental realm. The icon was never concerned with a record of reality, but strove always to reflect a transfigured world.

This angle cannot be neglected in acquiring an appreciation of the Russian icon as a manifestation of what has been a most steadfast devotion of Russian people for centuries.
The Transfiguration. Novgorod school, end of the XV or early XVI century
All the specialized, historical, and stylistic inquiries will be right only if the essence of the spiritual endeavor embodied in the icon is realized in a correct perspective. These remarks on the collection merely allude to the significant possibilities for investigation outside of direct aesthetic enjoyment.

It is a comforting thought that these precious objects of Holy Russia are now safe and secure, preserved in the deserving hands of their present owner. Mr. Hann is to be congratulated upon conceiving a beautiful idea and bringing his endeavor into realization with a rare singleness of purpose. He deserves the fullest gratitude for the generous manner in which all the art treasures he accumulated with so much perseverance and discrimination were made available to the visitors to the exhibition and to even wider circles through the illustrated and annotated catalogue he sponsored.

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