Splendor from Old Russia

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In an ideal world, the art museum and its contents would surely be totally unaffected by politics. In our fortunate country, indeed, this is largely the case; works of art in America, whether publicly or privately owned, have seldom been involved in even the most violent of political upheavals, the wars and revolutions that have destroyed or scattered them so frequently in the rest of the world. We have actually benefited from forced distributions, such as the sale by the Commonwealth government in England of Charles I’s great collection of paintings, some of which, three hundred years later, are among the treasures of American museums.

In fact, though destruction is total tragedy, and no one can approve of illegal transfers of ownership when they occur, in the long run no permanent damage is done when works of art merely change hands as a result of war or revolution.

The Russian revolution is unusual in that it caused very little destruction of publicly owned works of art, though it transferred property wholesale from private to state ownership and sometimes sold it abroad. In the 1930s, especially, there was an active international market in state-owned works of art, such as the two paintings by Hubert van Eyck now in the Metropolitan Museum. Of comparatively minor impor-

Fig. 2. Phelonion (priest’s vestment), silver ground with gold leaves and brocaded design in bright colors. Russian, 1877. Length 4 feet 5 1/2 inches Rogers Fund, 1960
such late Roman costumes as have survived in Egyptian tombs. Thus, the phelonion is a descendant of a classical poncho-like cloak with a hole for the head. In the West this cloak developed into two garments with different functions, the cope and the chasuble; in the East, it retained its primitive form, being merely sometimes cut a little shorter in front, so that the priest could raise his hands despite its great weight. The example now in the Museum (Figure 2) has a silver ground with a gold pattern of scrolling leaves; the brocaded flowers are of such brilliance and startling realism that the date given on a typewritten label attached to the lining comes as no surprise. It reads, in Russian: “Made at the expense of the Lavra (monastery) in 1877.”

The bishop, or the archbishop, in the Russian church wears a saccos instead of a phelonion when celebrating the liturgy. This dress, which so closely resembles the Western dalmatic, was introduced into the Eastern church in the eleventh or twelfth century as a very special privilege for the highest-ranking clergy, the patriarchs; it was copied from an imperial garment and its adoption is connected with the final break between the Eastern and Western churches. Though at first worn only by patriarchs, later the use of the saccos was extended to all Russian bishops. The Museum’s four gorgeous specimens are as luxurious as weaving and embroidery can make them. The oldest (Figure 3) is made of brown silk, brocaded in gold; the design is eighteenth century in style. The fabric is probably not of Russian origin; Miss Sharaja, curator of Russian textiles at the Hermitage Museum, Leningrad, has said that, judging from a photograph, it is probably Polish. The lining is stamped, in Russian: “Cathedral of Saint Sophia, Kiev.”

The three other vestments of this type date from the nineteenth century. They have typewritten labels (presumably copied from earlier records or inventories) attached to their linings, giving their dates as 1802, 1805, and 1829. The fabrics, all of which contain a great deal of gold and silver, are certainly of Russian manufacture, and the exotic character of the garments is enhanced by the addition of silver and gold bells and buttons in the shape of balls to the hems and sleeves. Over the saccos the bishop wears an

Fig. 3. Saccos (bishop’s vestment), brown silk brocaded in gold. Russian, xviii century. Length 4 feet 3½ inches
Rogers Fund, 1960

tance, but still very desirable acquisitions, were a number of ecclesiastical vestments which were also then made available to foreign purchasers. The Metropolitan Museum, as previously announced in the Annual Report, has now been fortunate enough to obtain a small but spectacular group of these unusual border-crossers, brought from Russia in 1935. They may be seen in the ground floor galleries adjacent to the Textile Study Room in the north wing, together with a group of Peruvian textiles to be published in the December Bulletin.

The vestments of the Orthodox Church, like those used in the West, are versions of garments worn by everybody in late classical times; in cut, they are closer to the originals, but, as they are usually made of heavy gold-laden materials, some changes have been made for convenience, and in general appearance they are most unlike
omophorion, corresponding to the pallium of the West; one example, in cloth of silver with gold crosses, is included in this group of vestments and is stamped: “Cathedral of Saint Sophia in Kiev.”

Four large pieces of nineteenth century Russian brocades, originally made up as vestments, are impressive additions to the Museum’s already substantial collection of these showy fabrics.

The Russian liking for splendor, now so strikingly conspicuous in the subways of Moscow and Leningrad, is apparent in all these survivals from another age. It is appropriate that the Metropolitan Museum, dedicated to the preservation of all forms of art and already owning an outstanding collection of magnificent Western garments worn only to the glory of God, should also be able to display some Eastern variants on the same theme.

Fig. 4. Saccos (bishop’s vestment), gold ground with brocaded design in bright colors. Russian, 1802. Length 4 feet 4 1/4 inches Rogers Fund, 1960