

Russian Icons Notes Using SFP Framework
2022-2023 Mansion Docent Training
Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens

Some “Big Ideas”

- MMP acquired them for memories they evoked (began collecting icons when in USSR in 1937-38, continued after), sometimes imperial associations, fine craftsmanship
- Their style has changed over time—Western influences, for example
- Hillwood’s icons are a great introduction to the history of Russian icon painting
- Many icons in museums were once part of church or iconostasis—hard to imagine now their original setting

Style

What do these objects’ appearance reveal about the people who made and used them?

- Marjorie Post’s preferred style
 - Liked icons that show the influence of Western paintings, many with oklads (covers). This style had been dismissed as symptoms of decline from modern influences; now seen as signs of style’s change over time
 - At her death in 1973—84 icons dating from 1500s-1900s
- Literally painted images of Christ, Mother of God, and saints
 - Could be narrative—i.e.: saint surrounded by life scenes
- Have a set language
 - Different from secular painting—depicts divine personages, not earthly faces
 - Stylized faces (thin noses, small mouths, large eyes) signifying their divinity, their “refined” state
 - Flat perspective (no shadows) or reverse perspective (objects expand away from viewer)
 - Gold = divine energy/light
 - Colors = symbolic
 - Within a church on icon screen (iconostasis)—has an organizing row system
- Judging from holes, many had oklads (icon covers) or other adornments
 - Oklads adorned as well as protected (symbolically and literally) the icon beneath, and were a way of honoring
 - Oklads could be 1) mostly borders surrounding sacred figure, stamped with patterns and adorned with stones/gems, or 2) less frequently complete metal covers that revealed only faces, hands, feet of the holy personage depicted
 - The sacred figure might also acquire a wardrobe of adornments, like diadems, halo, collars
- Stylistic change happens over time—some reasons for the change include impacts from West, from inside the church (1660s—Patriarch Nikon, Old Believer split), and Peter the Great’s decrees about icon painting and church practices
- Size: Icons for private use (as opposed to those in churches) tend to be smaller

Function

What purpose did it serve? Literally? Figuratively? Who used it?

- For Orthodox believers: sacred liturgical objects
 - Used as a focus for daily prayer
 - “Windows onto heaven” – serve as intermediaries between earthly and heavenly realms
 - You venerate (not worship) the holy personage on the icon, your veneration passes directly to the sacred personage depicted
 - Light candles/lamps before them, purify with incense, bow or prostrate in front of, kiss them
 - Church icons
 - Carried in processions, encased church pillars, displayed near altar, on icon screen (iconostasis) between congregation and sanctuary
 - Mineas—special icons on canvas depict the month’s important saints/feasts
 - Personal icons
 - Integral to life 1500s-1917, in your home for daily prayer
 - Given as wedding gifts, taken to the sick, bless sons going to war, banish evil spirits from home
 - Saints: One got special protection from one’s name saint
- Didactic, narrative – “pictures for illiterate” – visual instructions about church stories, feast days, lives of saints
- In a museum: art

Production

How was it made? Who made it?

- First icons came to Russia from Byzantium (modern day Turkey and the center of Eastern Orthodoxy from 324-1453), when the people of Rus' (later known as Russia) converted to Christianity in 988
 - Over time, Russian Orthodox church built on Byzantine legacy, added own saints and miracle-working icons, and distinctive tradition of icon painting
 - Ex. Kazan Mother of God (1579)—special protector of Russia, “revealed”
- Materials – icon: wood, paint, gold...oklads: precious metals like gold, gems/stones, enameling
- Production is full of sacred and symbolic meaning
- Judging from holes, many had oklads (icon cover)
 - Adorning icons can be an act of special piety; it brought favor to the donor and honor to the holy image
- “Renewal” – touched up or repainted over varnish – sometimes mark political event
- 1800s – rise of mass produced and factory-made icons; tsar set up icon painting workshop in response