

The Vitality of the Icon Tradition

by Gail Leggio

A long-established paradigm for Western art emphasizes individual originality and historical progress. For centuries, the counterweight to that forward momentum was a bedrock system of intergenerational mentorship and creative copying. Even many self-proclaimed avant-garde artists maintained special relationships with old masters—Édouard Manet, among other nineteenth-century rebels, with Velázquez, for example, and Picasso and Matisse with Ingres. The notion that showing respect for the past made an artist's work derivative gained a considerable foothold during the twentieth century, although that position seems increasingly aberrant today. Still, the history of Western art is a record of change.

Outside the Western mainstream, other models prevailed. Novelty was not a priority, and artists worked with a relatively limited repertoire of visual tropes. The tradition of icon-painting, as it developed in Byzantium and was perpetuated in Russia, reflects this aesthetic. Because inherited images are faithfully—in multiple senses of that word—reproduced over centuries, dating icons can be problematic. Compared to Western art history, conveniently mapped along a timeline, the icon tradition can seem static. Indeed, a degree of atemporality is cultivated. The history of Byzantine art has its own dramas, notably the wave of Iconoclasm that shook the foundations of the tradition from 726 to 843. Leaving that cataclysm aside, however, icon painters follow a conservative path, finding infinite possibilities within a narrow range of options. The limits of the icon aesthetic are real, but its expressive power is undeniable. The narrow range of movement could be more profitably compared to a sonnet than a straitjacket. In *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, Hans Belting writes, concerning icons: “While they all agree in their *idea*, to the point of exchangeability, in *practice* they share only a common basic schema that left large scope for variants.”¹

A relatively new American institution offers an in-depth experience of a major strain of the icon tradition. The Museum of Russian Icons, established in Clinton, Massachusetts, in 2006, has a collection of 350 works, amassed by museum founder Gordon B. Lankton. The current exhibition, “Two Museums/One Culture,” juxtaposes 150 of those works with sixteen from the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow. This rare collaboration illuminates schools of painting still too little known in the West, challenging art historical assumptions about dichotomies—East versus West, conservative versus progressive. It also raises questions about the role of the image in art and religion. Speculation into these subjects needs to be grounded in the merits of individual works, and many of the icons in the exhibition are formally compelling, by any standard.

*Jerusalem Mother of God
with the Great Martyr Vlasy*
sixteenth century
STATE TRETYAKOV GALLERY
MOSCOW

Take, for example, the stunning sixteenth-century *Transfiguration*, from the Tretyakov. The scene is Mount Tabor, where Jesus has led three disciples, Peter, John and James. There, they witness a transformation: “His face shone as the sun and His clothing became as white as light” (Matthew 17:2). Moses and the prophet Elijah materialize, flanking Christ. The most famous

Western version of the subject is Raphael’s *Transfiguration of Christ* (1517), in which Jesus floats against a spectacular but still-naturalistic cloud, raising his eyes and hands in a gesture of rhetorical piety. The Old Testament worthies are there, along with the three apostles, but the lower half of the painting is crowded with more than a dozen figures—other apostles, onlookers, a paraplegic boy—all executed in High Renaissance style. The audience makes the miracle seem theatrical.

The Tretyakov *Transfiguration* is roughly contemporary, but it belongs to another world. Christ is positioned in the center, right up against the picture plane. Perspective, spatial recession and three-dimensionality are irrelevant. The white-clad Christ, one hand raised in a quiet gesture of blessing, appears in a magnificent starburst mandala of black and gold with three red rays. Moses and Elijah stand on the stylized rocks of the mountain, inclining their heads reverently toward the central figure, their gold haloes overlapping the dark disc of the mandala. The three apostles are more naturalistic: sleeping in uncomfortable positions, they awaken to a startling vision, drapery pulled taut over their surprisingly convincing bodies. Because the space is so flat, however, they don’t really lie on solid ground but form a frieze against the jagged-rock pattern of the stylized mount. The artist knows how to represent the human body and to integrate it harmoniously into a schematic surface pattern. The



result is an image of another kind of reality, conceptually complex and emotionally resonant, and a remarkable work of art.

The icon aesthetic avoids the illusionism of realist art. This is a conscious choice, not a by-product of lack of skill. The highly sophisticated painters of sixteenth-century Crete, for example, were known for their dexterity in switching from the *maniera greca* (*alla bizantina*), suitable for Orthodox clients, to the *maniera latina* (*alla veneziana*), favored by Roman Catholic patrons.² Eastern and Western artists borrowed motifs from each other, and the Byzantine diaspora had great influence throughout Italy—Ravenna, Rome and Venice, in particular—and the Mediterranean. This is the milieu that nurtured El Greco (1541–1641), who probably received his earliest training at the Monastery of Saint Catherine, the most important school of painting on Crete. The borders between East and West remained porous in Italy during the middle ages and the Renaissance, due in part to the fact that both the portable icon and the master craftsman in mosaic traveled well.

In Moscow, sometimes styled by Russian writers “the Third Rome,” icon painting developed differently, with an emphasis on conservatism, mixing Byzantinisms with the local culture.³ Two of the great masters of modernism tapped into the Russian icon tradition, seeing in its idealism a forerunner of symbolic abstraction. Wassily Kandinsky’s (1866–1944) early work is full of Russian folklore motifs. He collected icons and celebrated St. George’s Day by painting his own image of the saint. A *Saint George and the Dragon* (c. 1500), from the Museum of Russian Icons, has simplified yet dynamic shapes—the white carousel horse, the black-and-red dragon, the crenelated swag of the saint’s red cloak—that would translate well into Kandinsky’s magical forest scenes. Kandinsky, who published *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* in 1912, even drew analogies between St. Vladimir, as the founder of the Russian Church, and himself, as the founder of a kind of holy modernism.⁴

Kasimir Malevich (1878–1935) often installed his paintings on an angle near the ceiling, mimicking the traditional icon corner in Russian homes. Malevich’s Suprematist abstractions are, Belting suggests, descendents of icons, an attempt “to capture the absolute ideal without taking the detour through objective realism.”⁵ The modernists were building on the nineteenth-century revival of interest in icons, which were valued as an authentic—not Europeanized—expression of Russian identity and as a source of spiritual and formal inspiration. The Tretyakov Gallery, founded in 1856, was itself a manifestation of that impulse. The merchant Pavel Mikhailovich Tretyakov (1832–1904) collected both contemporary Russian art and icons. The 1904 exhibition of the sixty-two icons he bequeathed to the museum was considered groundbreaking because the works were presented as art, rather than as church relics.

The icon remains, however, a special category of image. Like a good deal of Western art from the middle ages, the Renaissance and the Baroque, it is

rooted in theology. Yet even those versed in Western Christian iconography may find the vocabulary used to describe icons alien. *Jerusalem Mother of God with the Great Martyr Vlas*, another sixteenth-century icon from the Tretyakov, is categorized as a Virgin Hodegetria. The terminology is toponymic, referring to sites of great sanctity, in this case a monastery in Constantinople. The first Hodegetria-style icon was, according to tradition, given by the Emperor to Prince Vladimir, who brought Christianity to Russia in 988. Regularly carried in procession, the Virgin Hodegetria was an object of public devotion and civic pride.⁶ (The Virgin of Guadalupe holds a similar place in Mexican culture.) Legend attributed the composition to the evangelist Luke, and medieval images showed the saint working at an easel, sometimes with the Virgin and Child as models.⁷ The Virgin Hodegetria is depicted half-figure, cradling the Child in one arm and gesturing toward him with her other hand. Her expression is melancholy, but the connection between mother and child seems formal, rather than emotional. The Christ Child is not the chubby infant familiar from many Western versions of the subject: he is a miniature adult, sitting straight-backed rather than curled up, wearing a toga-like garment and holding a scroll. The image has a hieratic dignity, with the infant already presented as a teacher.

An example of a more intimate icon type is the *Umilinya Mother of God* (c. 1500, Museum of Russian Icons), called the Virgin of Tenderness. The proportions of the child are still close to those of an adult, but Mary cradles him like a baby. He reaches out to clasp her neck, and they nestle cheek-to-cheek. The viewer seems to be happening upon a loving moment, rather than being presented with a theological argument. Some icons

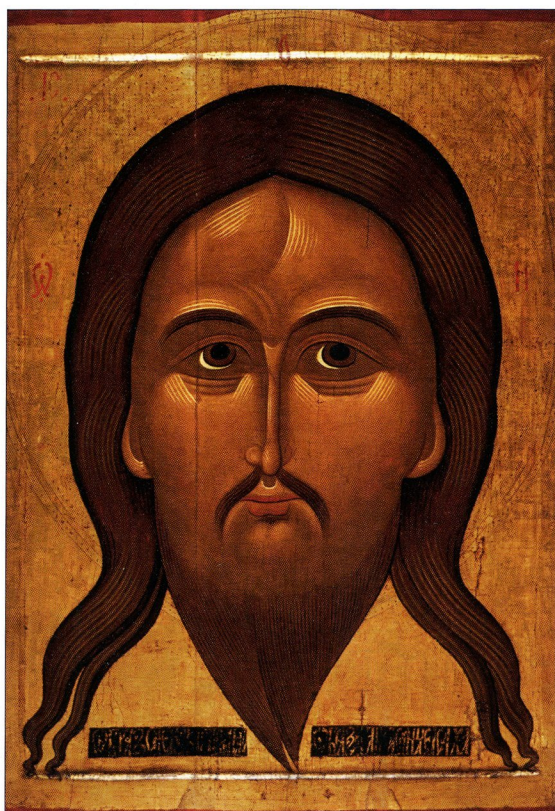


Image Not Made by Hands
sixteenth century
STATE TRETYAKOV GALLERY
MOSCOW

strike a balance. The early sixteenth-century *Vladimir Mother of God* (Tretyakov) keeps the formal position of the hands, which present the lord of salvation to the faithful, but adds the intimacy of the cheek-to-cheek position. In these three icons of Madonna and Child, in tempera on wood, the supports show considerable wear, and the paintings have been stripped of the elaborate metal-work with precious or semi-precious stones that encased the images and turned them into a kind of reliquary. A number of icons in the collection of the Museum of Russian Icons retain these vestments.

Byzantine icons had immense authority in the West, an authority that was both aesthetic and spiritual. The transition between the middle ages and the Renaissance was dominated by the Italo-Byzantine style, and two founding masters—Cimabue (c. 1240–1302) and Duccio (active 1278–1318)—made the Eastern visual trope of Madonna and Child a vehicle for Western devotion. Cimabue's *Enthroned Madonna and Child* (c. 1280) was the pre-eminent Florentine expression of Marian devotion. Duccio's *Maestà* (1311) was even more successful, carried in procession to the cathedral in Siena. Siena was



Baptism of Christ
sixteenth century
STATE TRETYAKOV
GALLERY, MOSCOW

identified as *vetusta civitas virginis* (ancient city of the Virgin), and the procession showed how intertwined civic pride, religious devotion and artistic expression were. Icons imported from the East were both relics and archetypes. Belting remarks that they “conferred a kind of divine sanction on the making of all images.”⁸ In many standard art history texts, Byzantine influence is often characterized as a phase that early Renaissance artists needed to outgrow, but the full story is richer and more complex. Miracle-working Byzantine madonnas continue to hold places of honor in many Roman churches, which may incorporate art from various stylistic eras in a single space. Santa Maria in Trastevere, for example, established in the fourth century and probably the first church in Rome dedicated to the Virgin, has a renowned Byzantine Madonna of Clemency, dating from the eighth century or earlier, as well as a magnificent Byzantine-inspired *Christ and Virgin Enthroned* apse mosaic (twelfth century). But the church’s various stylistic idioms also include a seventeenth-century *Assumption* by Domenichino, a Baroque-domed side chapel and twenty-one ancient columns, taken from Roman buildings, lining the nave.

One of the most charged images in Christian iconography is the portrait of Jesus called *acheiropoietos* (not made by human hands, in Russian, *nerukotvorenii*). As in other icons, the artist follows the prescribed form of a sacred prototype. In this particular trope, however, the stakes are raised because the original image is, according to legend, an impression taken directly from the face of the savior. There are two versions of the image not made by human hands. The one more familiar to Western audiences is Veronica’s Veil, generated when a woman wiped Christ’s face as he walked the way of the cross on the road to crucifixion. Miraculously, blood and sweat formed a portrait on the cloth, called a mandylion in the East and a vernicle in the West. In a different story about the spontaneous generation of an image, King Abgar of Edessa, having heard of Christ’s miracles, sends a messenger to beg a cure for illness. Although the messenger is a painter, he is unable to capture a likeness. Christ, who has been preaching, washes his face and wipes it, imprinting the image of his face. (Some Russian icons feature a distinctive wedge-shaped beard and are called “Image Not Made by Hands, the Wet Beard.”) The story is told by Eusebius in his *Church History* (c. 325), and, Ewa Kuryluk suggests, “illustrates the transition from the linguistic to iconic tradition.”⁹

A sixteenth-century *Image Not Made by Hands*, from the Tretyakov, has aged to the rust-brown patina of many icons. While, in Western art, the Holy Face eventually came to be depicted more naturalistically, weeping and wearing the crown of thorns, the icon shows a serene and powerful Jesus. This reflects the different circumstances surrounding Veronica’s and King Abgar’s impressions. In the Tretyakov icon, parallel golden lines are used to model the contours of the face and highlight the remarkable dark eyes, made especially vibrant by delicate scimitars of white. This is an idealized image of Christ, with similarities to the majestic Panocrator. The face is “the conceptual and pictorial center

of the icon,” writes Gennedy Popov,¹⁰ and the expressive power of these images of Christ and the Virgin is unmistakable.

What may be more unexpected, for visitors to this exhibition, is the icon painter’s ability to tell a story. A sixteenth-century *Baptism of Christ* (Tretyakov Gallery) has a daring composition that seems, in relation to the picture plane, modern. The bodies—John the Baptist, the naked Jesus and three attendant angels—are convincing without being naturalistic. As usual, the topography is stylized. Here, the Jordan’s riverbanks have been translated into sharp-edged curves that frame the dark water and Jesus in a saw-tooth mandorla. The angels, leaning reverently toward Christ, have exuberant wings that fan out in a pinwheel. But the dramatic focus is a human gesture, as the Baptist stretches out his hand in benediction over Jesus’ humbly bowed head. The isolation of that naked body in the center void is moving, suggesting—in purely visual, formal terms—the sacrifice to come. We tend to think of narrative painting as one of Western artists’ strong suits, but the Tretyakov *Baptism* icon is dramatically as well as formally arresting. This remarkable exhibition suggests how piety and aesthetic vigor can coalesce, and opens a window on a vital mode of pictorial expression.

NOTES

1. Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, trans., Edmund Jephcott (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 209.
2. See Demetrios D. Triantaphyllopoulos, et al., *Post-Byzantium: The Greek Renaissance* (Athens: Byzantine and Christian Museum, 2002), catalogue of an exhibition also appearing at the Onassis Center in New York City (November 2002–February 2003).
3. Gennady Popov, *Tver Icons, 13th–17th Centuries* (St. Petersburg, Russia: Aurora Art Publishers, 1993), pp. 28–29.
4. Peg Weiss, *Kandinsky and Old Russia: The Artist as Ethnographer and Shaman* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), p. XV, p. 61.
5. Belting, p. 20.
6. Maria Vassilaki, ed., *Mother of God: Representations of the Virgin in Byzantine Art*, catalogue of an exhibition at the Benaki Museum, Athens (Milan: Skira, 2000), pp. 144–47.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 390–93.
8. Belting, p. 348.
9. Ewa Kuryluk, *Veronica and Her Cloth* (Cambridge, Mass.: Basil Blackwell, 1991), pp. 38–64.
10. Popov, p. 22.