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Russian Christian Orthodox Icons of the Mother of God

by George Contis, M.D., M.P.H. .

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Booklet created for the exhibit:



Icons from the
George Contis
Collection

Revelation Cast in Bronze

SEPTEMBER 15 – NOVEMBER 13, 2015

Marian Library Gallery
University of Dayton
300 College Park
Dayton, Ohio 45469-1390
937-229-4214

All artifacts displayed in this booklet are included in the exhibit.



The Nativity of Christ Triptych. 1650 AD. The Mother of God is depicted lying on her side on the middle left of this icon. Behind her is the swaddled Christ infant over whom are the heads of two cows. Above the Mother of God are two angels and a radiant star. The side panels have six pairs of busts of saints and angels.

Christianity came to Russia in 988 when the ruler of Kiev, Prince Vladimir, converted. He did so because that was the condition he had to accept in order to marry Princess Anna, the sister of the Byzantine Emperors Basil II and Constantine VII. Until that time, Vladimir had been a vicious pagan ruler who was known for his barbaric acts and for his many wives and concubines. His conversion to Christianity resulted in a dramatic change in his behavior. He focused on helping the poor and infirmed and he strongly urged his people to become Christians. After marrying Princess Anna, he was completely faithful to her until his death.

Sensing the importance of maintaining Russia's role as a friendly ally, the Byzantine Patriarch in Constantinople sent bishops, clergymen, church architects, and iconographers to Kiev. In return, Vladimir provided thousands of soldiers to support the Byzantine emperors who were experiencing rebellions instigated by several of their generals.

Before long, Orthodox churches and cathedrals began to be built in Russia based at first on Byzantine architectural models. Icons, a fundamental feature in the Orthodox Christian religion, were also introduced. For centuries, they had been an integral part of the Christian faith among all classes of Byzantine Orthodox believers. The religious images portrayed on these icons have included Jesus Christ, the Mother of God, saints, and feast days such as the Annunciation, the Transfiguration, and the Ascension. The emperors of Byzantium frequently sent icons as gifts to Russian Czars and princes. The most famous of these was the Virgin of Vladimir which became the palladium of Russia.

Orthodox Christian churches, cathedrals, and monasteries displayed icons, particularly on the iconostasis, a wall separating the altar from the congregation. In addition, the Russian people hung icons in the *Icon Corner*, a place on a wall in their homes where prayers were said anytime from morning to night.

Metal icons were made in several different forms: singles, diptychs, triptychs, and tetrptychs consisting of one, two, three, and four panels. They ranged in size depending on who owned them. For individuals who wore metal icons, they were about 5 x 6 cm, while triptychs and tetrptychs used during the liturgy by military units were 16 x 42 cm. Some icons were owned by individuals who rubbed the icons while praying. As these metal icons were passed down in a family over many generations, they often became worn and many of their features are now indistinguishable. The larger icons usually were placed in churches. Most are plain metal and others are enameled in rich colors. While early metal icons were usually coarse because of simple casting techniques, the icons of the 18th-20th centuries were crafted in fine detail.



The Dormition of The Mother of God. 19th Century. This is one of the largest and most complex of the Russian metal icons. In the lower center lies the body of the Mother of God. Above her is a standing Jesus Christ holding a small child in His left hand – symbolic

of the soul of the Mother of God. On either side of Him are angels. Surrounding her are 12 standing disciples and several saints. Below her, an angel is waving a sword at a man seeking to overturn the bier. Above are the twelve disciples being carried by angels to attend the Dormition. At the top are two angels and a bush, a symbol of the Holy Spirit.



The Old Testament Trinity and the Mother of God. Diptych. 18th Century. On the left panel is the Old Testament Trinity icon and on the right panel the Mother of God of the Sign icon.

The poor were particularly devoted to icons because they were mostly illiterate and icon images helped them understand Christian theology. As they could not afford painted icons, inexpensive metal ones were initially imported from Constantinople and, soon thereafter, were produced in Russia. At birth, a metal icon was usually given to an infant. As the child grew older, that icon was often worn around the neck together with a baptismal cross. When a soldier went off to war, he continued to wear his metal icon. If he died in battle or in a prison camp, his icon was buried with him. If he survived the war and returned home, the icon was often placed in the nearby church for 40 days before being returned to him.

When a couple married, they were usually given metal or painted icons which they placed in the *Icon Corner* of their homes. When people become sick and there was no physician to care for them, their icons were positioned in bed next to them. And, when one died, the icon was often nailed to the cross at the gravesite. In addition, icons were often attached to posts next to the roads leading

into a village. That way, strangers could cross themselves and say a prayer before entering the community. To this day, these simple metal icons play an important role in the lives of Russian and other Orthodox Christians.

Contemplation of icons permit believers to meditate about the deeds of the sacred figures and the significance of the feast days which are depicted. Praying before icons also gives people the opportunity to meditate about their feelings and problems, as well as express their gratitude for the inspiration the icons provide.

Orthodox Christians believe that icons may be venerated but never worshipped as pagans did their idols. For them, icons have primarily spiritual not artistic meaning. They serve to remind the viewer of the lives of Jesus Christ, the Mother of God, and the saints – and their accomplishments and suffering. As such, icons help enhance believers' understanding of the spiritual aspects of the Christian



The Deesis. Triptych. 19th Century. This is one of the most common Russian triptychs and is nicknamed, “The Nine” because it portrays nine figures. The central panel depicts Christ Pantocrator holding an open bible with the Mother of God on His right and St. John the Baptist on His left. On the left panel are a Guardian Angel and the Russian Saints Zosima and Savattij. On the left panel are St. Philip, the Metropolitan of Moscow, St. Nicholas, and St. John the Theologian.

faith. They serve as windows on the spiritual life which Jesus Christ, the Mother of God and the saints experienced. Icons encourage believers to pray and to lead spiritual lives based on love, respect, and good deeds.

The focus of this exhibition is the Virgin Mary and the events in her life that connect her to Jesus Christ. Other metal icons illustrate saints and the twelve important Christian feast days.

In Russia, the Mother of God was probably the most popular icon subject. There are some 200 or more variations of the Virgin Mary on painted icons produced over the 1200 years of Christianity in that country. On metal icons of her, however, only about 12 major types were crafted. The first eight listed below originated in Byzantium and the last four were designed in Russia:

- **Mother of God of Smolensk (Hodigitria)**, “She Who Shows the Way”. The infant Christ is seated on His mother’s lap and she presents Him to the viewer;
- **Mother of God of the Sign**. Christ, as an infant, is shown in a circular setting in front of His mother whose hands are out stretched. Both face forward;
- **Three Handed Mother of God**. The Theotokos holds Christ on her right arm. A third arm, that of St. John of Damascus, is pictured below them. According to legend, St. John was falsely accused of seeking to betray the Moslem ruler of Damascus. For this, his arm was cut off. St. John took his arm, placed it on an icon of the Mother of God, and prayed that his arm would be restored. When this occurred, an icon of this event was painted;
- **Tichvin Mother of God**. Christ is seated on His mother’s lap facing her. His right hand is raised in blessing;

- **Kazan Mother of God.** The Christ child is standing to the left of His mother;
- **Mother of God of the Passion.** Christ is held by His mother while He fearfully looks over His shoulder at an angel holding the symbols of His passion, a lance with a sponge and a spear;
- **The Virgin of Vladimir, “Mother of God, Loving Kindness”.** The Christ child is embracing and kissing His mother who is holding Him;
- **Mother of God of the Burning Bush.** This is a complex image depicting the Mother of God holding the Christ child surrounded by angels and saints.

The four Virgin Mary icon types which originated in Russia are:

- **Bogoljoebskaya Mother of God.** The Virgin is standing holding a scroll and is beseeching Christ on behalf of Christians who are surrounding her. The image of St. Peter, the Metropolitan of Moscow (d. 1326), is shown below her preaching to several Christians;



The Mother of God of Smolensk, (Hodigitria). 19th Century. This large icon panel of the Virgin Mary depicts one of the Russian people's favorite icons.

- **Feodorovskaja Mother of God.** This icon is similar to the Virgin of Vladimir icon in which the Christ child is embracing His mother with His head on her cheek;
- **Mother of God, “Joy of All Who Suffer”.** The Mother of God, holding a wand, is standing in the middle of several Christians;
- **Pokrov Mother of God.** The Mother of God stands before Christ imploring Him to intercede on behalf of sinners. Behind and below her are images of St. Romanos the Melodist who composed hundreds of church hymns, and St. Andrei the Fool for Christ and his pupil, St. Epiphanius.

The icons in this exhibition include artifacts in media other than brass: tempera paint, ivory, wood, painted glass, and colored enamel or finift. In addition, there are several painted icons with embedded metal icons and crucifixes. These underscore the wide range of artistic skills required of iconographers to produce the icons.

The Mother of God with a Scroll.
19th Century.

This version of a Mother of God icon is often part of a Deesis triptych. It is rare as a stand-alone icon.





The Annunciation. 19th Century. The Angel Gabriel with a wand in his hand announces to the Mother of God sitting on a chair that she will give birth to the Son of God. Above this is an image of God surrounded by a cloud. His right hand is raised in a blessing to the Virgin Mary.



Deesis Triptych. Military type. 19th Century. Large and heavy triptychs such as this were given to military units and were used during church services attended by troops in the field.



The Nativity of Christ. 17th Century. This icon is similar to the first illustration but was made somewhat later.



A Crucifix with 17 Smaller Icons and 19 Seraphs. 18th-19th Century. This is one of the most complex Russian crucifixes. Surrounding the crucified Christ are images of feast days and holy figures taken from tetrptych icon molds. The number of Seraphs on such crucifixes varies from four to twenty-one.



A Medallion of the Mother of God of the Sign. 16th Century. Medallions of this type were frequently worn around the neck.



The Mother of God of the Passion. Triptych. 1650 AD. The central panel illustrates the Mother of God holding the Christ child. He is looking over His shoulder at an angel holding the symbols of His passion, a spear and a lance with a sponge. Above the central panel are the images of God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove. The right panel depicts the Guardian Angel and St. John. Above them is the Archangel Gabriel. The left panel shows the Saints Alexander and Sergius with the Mother of God above them listening to the Annunciation message from Archangel Gabriel.



The Mother of God of the Sign. 19th Century. The Christ child is depicted between the upraised arms of the Virgin.

The Mother of God of Feodorovskaya.

18th Century. This is one of the most popular Russian icons of the Mother of God and the Christ child. Above them is the Deesis surrounded by three Seraphs.



For those who wish to learn more about Russian iconography, the following are useful references:

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