

Clarion17

online exclusive



The Museum as Cell, Studiolo, and Microcosm

an essay on a visit to the Museum of Russian Icons

When evening comes, I return home and go into my study. On the threshold I strip off my muddy, sweaty, workday clothes, and put on the robes of court and palace, and in this graver dress I enter the antique courts of the ancients and am welcomed by them, and there I taste the food that alone is mine, and for which I was born. And there I make bold to speak to them and ask the motives of their actions, and they, in their humanity, reply to me. And for the space of four hours I forget the world, remember no vexation, fear poverty no more, tremble no more at death: I pass indeed into their world.

I think of this fragment from a letter by Machiavelli as I sit in the quiet dark and ruminate. I am behind bars in a small underground holding cell, a dim glow lighting the brick closing in on either side of me. My chair faces the back wall, and a small ledge with a computer monitor. A notice on the screen says it is out of order; fine, I prefer not to be distracted. For a moment, I fantasize about solitary confinement and how I might spend my time in long-term isolation. Then I turn around and look through the bars of the cell door. Along the wall of the room outside, I can see a row of samovars glimmering in copper, brass, tin, silver, stainless steel.

The lighting out there too is soft and diffuse, and the gentle illumination from the can lights in the ceiling oozes over the surface of the urns in a pattern of swirling color.

The cell I am in is evidence of the original function of the building which was repurposed to house the Museum of Russian Icons; in its first life, it had been a municipal courthouse. Upstairs, hearing rooms and trials; down here in the quiet dark basement, defendants waiting to see what came next. The cell doors stand open for Museum guests to enter into and take their turn contemplating fate and art and humanity in a space about the same size as a Renaissance gentleman's *studiolo*.

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THE MAIN GALLERY SPACES ARE nothing like the monkish cells in the basement, being open, airy and light-filled, with tastefully neutral surfaces of exposed brick, photographic blow-ups, and flat dark gray paint. A central spiral staircase, with wide treads, slices down through three levels of gallery halls. In some rooms, suspended panels provide additional display space; these can be raised as needed to make way for large visitor groups, a feature Lankton specifically directed his designers to implement. The lighting fixtures are LED; the roof is tiled in solar panels.

From a spot beside the staircase landing on the first floor, visitors can stand and look up through the open floor and see the image of Christ floating high above on the third floor. A replica of the same image hangs on the first-floor wall, next to the first stop on the docent-led tour: a tight grouping of twenty-seven icons as eclectic as anything hanging on the wall of a Brooklyn apartment. The group brings to mind the *iconosta-*

sis or icon-screen in traditional Russian churches, which was the icon-covered separating the nave with its rows of pews from the sacred space of the sanctuary.

On an adjacent wall, in the corner, is a more modest display, an example of the ‘personal iconostasis’ traditionally found in Orthodox homes. The *krasnyi ugol*, meaning “red”, “shining” or “beautiful” corner, was where household icons would be hung for family devotion. During the Soviet era, the government required homeowners to replace their icons with images of Lenin and Stalin, Socialist propaganda art, and Party newspaper-posters. The *krasnyi ugol*—formerly “God’s corner”—became the *krasnyj ugolok*, the “little red corner.” Neither the docents nor the gallery guide materials and plaques hint at the political history the icon tradition has endured through, conjuring in my mind all sorts of interesting conversations among the Museum stakeholders about the need for neutrality, lest useful patrons and contacts, in the US or abroad, be alienated and withdraw their support. Then again, these political questions are just a special case of the kinds of questions confronting any museum enterprise: How should we balance the interests of an art- and history-hungry public with the patrimonial claims of the source culture? What is an appropriate way to display objects originally intended for a sacred purpose? Questions which can only ever be answered tentatively, and for the time being.

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MUSEUM FOUNDER GORDON B. LANKTON is owner of the NYPRO corporation based, like the Museum, in Clinton, MA, about 35 miles west of Boston. It was on a business trip to Russia to supervise the opening of a NYPRO subsidiary there

that he bought his first icon at a flea market, a depiction of St. Nicholas of Myra. The docent explains that it cost him \$25, and that he carried it back to his hotel on a rented motorcycle. The price was low in that era of religious prohibition because the community of faith was hurting, and selling whatever they could. On return trips to Russia, Lankton continued to seek out and purchase icons. Upon his retirement, his wife pointed out that he had acquired more than a hundred, and that perhaps he could find some better use for the collection than filling the walls of their home.

Rather than donate or lend his icons to a large established museum for which such items would just be another kind of treasure among many, he decided he would create a niche museum, devoted exclusively to the art of the icon. He walked across the street and bought the old courthouse, stripped the interior down to rough brick and exposed wooden beams, and then rebuilt it in clean plaster and wood paneling. (In the basement cell, the red brick reminds me of Machiavelli's red robe.) After spending about five million dollars between buying the building and renovations, Lankton opened the Museum to visitors in 2006. In 2013, the Museum was visited by over fifteen thousand people. Lankton meets a significant fraction of them personally, emerging from his office on the first floor to greet them and tell them where he bought such-and-such a piece they are admiring. His presence on the scene reminds me of Baltimore dentist Hugh Francis Hicks, described by Michael Kimmelman in *The Accidental Masterpiece*:

[Hicks] amassed some 75,000 lightbulbs and objects related to lightbulbs. For many years [...] he kept his light-

bulbs on view in a private museum in his basement. He called it the Museum of Incandescent Lighting, and invited visitors, admission free, to enjoy his lamp from the original torch of the State of Liberty, a microscopic bulb from a missile war-head, and other oddments and novelties he compiled from the history of electric lighting over the course of roughly seven decades.

Of course, the story of a sale, however avidly told, doesn't serve the same purpose as a label of provenance. For nearly every icon I inspect, I find that I cannot find information about the creator, place of creation, or even place of purchase. The docent explains that even in the marketplace, icons are treated as living aspects of a true spiritual reality, and buyers and sellers observe a certain protocol amounting to a polite fiction. There is no haggling, nor any explicit exchange of money and ownership. Money is put on the table, the icon is likewise put on the table, and the exchange takes place in an indirect fashion. Does this taboo explain the lack of provenance history? We're left to wonder, since the practical reason for this lack of information isn't apparent from the interpretative materials or guided tour.

Given the legal issues involved, the absence of provenance raises worrisome questions. Are the icons over 100 years of age accompanied by a certificate from the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation, as per the requirements of Russian law? What are the circumstances that allowed these older works to be exported? Would Russian authorities want to repatriate the Museum's holdings? Might there be something illicit in the display of these artworks so far from their country of origin? These are questions deserving of treatment in the

gallery guide brochure at least.

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THE AUDIO TOUR FOCUSES MOSTLY on the story of the saints in the icons, rather than on the material or artisanal aspects of the icon itself. This strikes me as oddly in keeping with the original function of icons: firstly, to inspire reverence—here, the awe is secular, in the form of the art-experience—and secondly, to serve as hagiographic textbooks for the lives of the saints. I consider how different the emphasis can be in those larger museums where visitors flock to works by the most well-known artists, less often stopping by to check out the work of lesser-known creators—let alone the unsigned icons of unnamed monks! But then, a key selling point of mainstream art is the recognizable style of the artist: the thick strokes of Van Gogh, the subtle detailing in Rembrandt, the sensual primitivism of Gauguin. A culture that venerates the easy-to-appreciate flair of *individual* genius is necessarily less inclined to celebrate an archly conservative tradition like that of Russian icon-painting. These portraits of saints and angels are achievements in a received and perfected tradition, rather than feats of cosmopolitan creativity. Indeed, the monks who painted them were called “writers,” since their painting was only an extension of the traditional monkish practice of copying the Gospels by hand. In such work, innovation can be a form of blasphemy.

Mindful of blasphemy, the icon-makers respected various taboos on names. It wasn't until the 1400s that the Orthodox church let painters depict God the Father. Before then, they were only permitted to paint the hand of God, or Christ the Son. You would not call Mary “the Mother of God”, since this

would detract from the central holiness of Christ *as* God. So she is simply Mary, or Saint Mary.

Often the icons would be enriched with *basma oklad*, coverings made of brass or repoussé silver and ornamented with glass beads or jewels. Naturally enough, this treasure attracted the interest of thieves who being Christians believed the faces were real in a spiritual sense. For that reason, before cutting off the precious metals and gems, they would slash through the painted eyes, eliminating the witness to their crime. A bride's first dowry was often an icon of Mary, with a particularly expensive covering.

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IN GLASS CASES I FIND collections of crosses, stamps, liturgical artifacts, and the tools and raw materials needed to grind pigment or prepare icons for painting. Many of the icons are bowed away from the wall, as if they'd been painted onto wooden barrel sections. The explanation is a fascinating bit of art history... After the front surface of a hardwood panel to be painted is sanded smooth, the icon-maker coats it with a gesso of marble dust and animal glue made from rabbit skins or isinglass (fish bladders). After the icon is painted and dries, it receives a preserving layer of linseed oil. Since water can only evaporate from the wooden substrate now through the unprotected back of the piece, it curves over time.

As I pass from piece to piece, skimming wall plaques and overhearing docents answering questions in whispering voices, scraps of alchemical and technical trivia sublimates onto my awareness: Gold leaf must be applied with great delicacy, the artisan carrying and placing the leaf with the end of a soft paintbrush, then blow gently upon it to smooth it against the

surface of the icon. Thus gilt in these paintings is known as “the breath of the monk” . . . Haloes come in varying values of bright goldness; the holier the saint or holy figure, the brighter the gold. In icon versions of the Last Supper, Judas has no halo. He can be recognized as well by the money bag he is invariably holding . . . Icons had a power. If you sewed an icon to the corner of a tablecloth, the tablecloth could be thrown over any rough surface, and by virtue of the holy image it could now be used as an altar . . . The minerals which were crushed to make paint pigment were very expensive and difficult to obtain. For example, lapis lazuli—needed for the blue veil of the Queen of Heaven, Mother of Christ, Mary—had to be imported from the mountains of what is now Afghanistan. (One supposes the high cost of these ingredients explains why the monk artists of the Russian icon tradition became very skilled at painting miniatures: the smaller the picture, the less paint and pigment needed.)

I want badly for there to be more and better information about the icons. In the basement-level grouping, a wooden carving is labeled “Saint Nil Stolbenksy” but might be less confusingly written as “Saint Nil *of* Stolbensky.” Or should that be Stolbensk? In any case, Saint Nil is a fascinating figure, with a gaunt long face reminiscent of pre-Rus depictions of the Slavic father-god Perun. I suppose actually that Nil and Perun both resemble the wooden ornaments carved into the shape of the head of Santa Claus that you can buy year-round at the Christmas Tree Shoppe. For that matter, Saint Nicholas is found among the icons as well, though without any of the latter-day trappings of westernized Christmas. His facial type is nonetheless distinctive, in a way the docent euphemizes as “the Nicholas look.”

Nicholas is not alone in looking a bit bizarre in his stereotyped depiction. There is a traditional motif, the *acheiropoieta* or “image not made by hands”—a version in paint of the image of Christ’s face that appeared on the veil of Veronica. The disembodied head stops at the “wet beard”, and has no neck. It floats in space like the head of Medusa on the shield of Perseus. *Why are his lips puckered?*

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ON ANOTHER VISIT, I PAUSE from admiring icons to take a break in the Tea Room itself. I have a cup of Russian tea, called “Anastasia,” made by the Kusmi Tea Company (Paris, France). Sitting there, sipping, thinking, I can hear the soft sound of traffic outside, through the basement walls. Strains of Russian choral music drift down the hall, filtering through the open floor plan from the gallery upstairs.

There are gaps between louder moments in the song where the music is silent. Its shifting moods reflect the way a museum-goer would experience shifts in thought as they pass from painting to painting, from one evoking reflection to another which evokes emotion. The arrangement and even height of the icons on display around me invite the viewer to stand directly before them, bringing one’s face close to the painted face. I’ve walked through every room, but these are not paintings to walk past, to take in at a glance; the space invites intimate scrutiny. For a relatively small Museum, I don’t feel like I’ve begin to see all there is to see in these works of art and devotion. As I sip my tea I find myself mulling over a metaphor: Just as the frame of an icon represents the material world, and the contents within the frame are the spiritual world, the mundane brick and beams around me contain a

wholly different realm. And in the same way an icon might contain symbolic representations, a red horse or a white dove, alluding to larger spaces of theological or Scriptural meaning, a museum contains within its frame any number of symbols signifying at a larger whole. Any museum, then, is a museum of icons, and any icon is a microcosm—worlds within worlds.

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EARLIER IN MY VISIT, THE docent had explained that before the October Revolution visitors would have seen icons on the walls of buildings at every street corner in Moscow. Believers would feel compelled to stop and genuflect to show reverence before each and every one.

I think I can I appreciate that feeling. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: JENNA BOS studied literature and art history at Boston University. She lives with her husband in Lunenburg, Mass. A gallery of her photos from the Museum visits detailed above can be found at www.bu.edu/clarion/17.

THE MUSEUM OF RUSSIAN ICONS at 203 Union Street in Clinton, MA is open to visitors Tuesday-Friday from 11 am to 3 pm, and Saturdays 9 am to 3 pm. Readers may also be interested in:

- the film *Andrei Rublev*—a sweeping, medieval tale of Russia's greatest icon painter, so experimental and politically complicated that it was immediately suppressed by the Soviets in 1966
- the film *Ostrov* (Russian: Остров, The Island), whose main character is fictional monk at an island monastery where icon-painting is part of the daily monastic routine
- the book *Two Museums, One Culture: The Museum of Russian Icons & The State of Tretyakov Gallery*, published to accompany a joint international exhibition.