

## **Russian Icon as a document.**

Russian icon is an interesting phenomenon. It derived from a rich Vizantian tradition and over centuries developed its own idiosyncratic features. In the course of its development as an art and a craft, it has 'documented' the history of Christianity in general, Orthodoxy, in particular, and the history of Russia from Christianization of the country in 988 to the fall of Romanov's Dynasty in 1917. For the majority of people Russian icons are beautiful, slightly mysterious paintings. But there is much more to it. Russian icon shows many properties of a document with high informational value. This paper analyzes Russian Icon as a document, its semantic structure and informational value.

For centuries, icons in Russia used to be an integrated part of everyday life. They had a well-defined symbolic language, understood even by illiterate people. Then, after the October revolution, when hundreds and thousands of icons all over Russia were destroyed, they gradually disappeared from people's life as its necessary attribute. Some icons survived the revolutionary bonfires and the best ones were put on display in museums, but children did not learn their language anymore and there came generations that perceived an icon only as a beautiful painting, a puzzle, a meaningless old picture, or, worse, as a money investment. Interest to Russian Icons was revitalized among well-educated people in the second half of 20th century, but most of them just wanted to follow a new fashion or admired icons for their great aesthetic value.

Russian Icon, first of all, is an image. Some art historians argue that image should not be interpreted, just perceived as it is, but icons were images intended for interpretation. For those who knew what different postures, gestures, colors, patterns of clothes, and layouts meant, it was always easy to identify main personages of a particular icon and the story behind the image even if they saw this icon first time.

As a document, Russian Icon has some very interesting features. The first thing that strikes the researcher is a desire of its creators to increase its informational value. If it was an icon depicting an event, it not just shown this event but it contained smaller images as pointers to the past and to the future events. In some cases, several stages of one event were shown in one icon as if they happened simultaneously. When iconists painted a building, they almost always showed its interior as well as its exterior. In an icon, depicting one of Russian monasteries, one can see the front parts of the towers of the convent and, at the same time, its whole layout. It is against all laws of perspective but it is very informative. Except that, images of saints were traditionally surrounded by rows of miniatures telling the viewers the story of life of those saints. To make icons even more informative, iconists arranged them in sets, iconostases, which could be easily "read" together. Such manner of presenting things can be indeed puzzling for those who are not familiar with the language of Russian Icons, its semantic structure.

In this context, it is interesting to compare Russian icons of the 15th-17th centuries with European easel painting of the same period. Some say that Russian icons' technique is

more primitive, rigid, somewhat naïve, and highly symbolic. It looks like it did not develop over time as much as the technique of Old European Masters. Of course, it is impossible to compare 17<sup>th</sup> century's Russian Icons with works of, for example, Vermeer. Vermeer's ability to depict reality and, in a sense, enrich it, transforming a simple everyday activity in a masterpiece, is fascinating. But more rigid and seemingly primitive technique of Russian icon can be explained by the fact that as a document it could not allow to many variations and a common people could not become its main characters. Of course, there were variations in style. An art historian can easily say in which century a particular icon was painted because of those variations. But the main structure and the main message of any particular type of icon were the same over centuries because its main goal was to communicate the information it was supposed to communicate.

Icons were closely connected with textual materials and sometimes were substitutes for them. It was an addition to the text and sometimes it was the text. In Russia, icons were called The Bible for the illiterate. Most of the Russian population could not read but they were visually literate and icons were for them an "open book".

As works of art icons were absolutely unique but as documents they were completely interchangeable. Russian peasants buying an icon, was not concerned in the least by its aesthetic qualities. They would buy the one that was available because they knew that the characters, their postures, gestures, clothes would be identical with non-significant in terms of the meaning local variations. They did not buy it as a piece of art. An icon for them was a link in the chain of religious communications. This "uniqueness-duplicability" feature seems to draw the line between Russian Icon as a work of art and Russian Icon as a document.

Those are just few examples of such aspects of Russian icon as a document as information density, uniqueness, duplicability, and connectivity. The paper will focus on all those aspects in detail analyzing Russian icons' semantic structure and informational value.

Key words: Russian icon, document, informational value, semantic structure, visual literacy.

Intended form of presentation: Power Point slides.

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