

SACRED FACES: ICONS IN OXFORD

An exhibition at Christ Church Picture Gallery, 25 August-22 December 2010

All icons in this exhibition were created after the conquest of Constantinople in 1453, when the Muslim empire of the Ottoman Turks replaced the Christian empire of Eastern Rome (Byzantium). This event is thought to mark the end of the classical period of Orthodox Christian religious art. The works seen here show how masters in Greece and Russia carried the medieval tradition of image-making into modern times. Sometimes they spelled out the images' edifying message in unusually complex compositions. Occasionally they absorbed stylistic influences from Western Europe.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

N. Gendle, *Icons in Oxford: Byzantine, Greek and Russian Icons* (Oxford, 1980)

C. Casley, C. Harrison & J. Whiteley, eds. *The Ashmolean Museum: Complete Illustrated Catalogue of Paintings* (Oxford, 2004)

J. Byam Shaw, *Paintings by Old Masters at Christ Church, Oxford* (London, 1967)

J. Th. Evans, *The Church Plate of Oxfordshire* (Oxford, 1928)

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The Holy Face

Russia, 19th century

305 x 262 mm

Christ Church Picture Gallery, Inv.

PO628

Gendle 1980, pp. 47-48

Two angels carry a cloth whereupon the face of Christ has been miraculously imprinted: “the Lord’s image not made by human hands”,¹ as the inscription explains. Legend has it that Christ sent such a portrait of himself to Abgar, king of Edessa in Syria. The supposed original seems to have been destroyed in the early 13th century. Countless painted replicas bear witness to its veneration throughout the Christian world.

¹ *Нерукотворенный образ Господень.*



The Virgin and Child
 Russia, late 19th century
 300 x 270 mm
 Christ Church Picture Gallery, Inv.
 PO634
 Gendle 1980, p. 41

This icon illustrates a hymn in honour of the Virgin: “Your womb became a holy table, having the heavenly bread, Christ our God...”² One sees the Lord sending his spirit into Mary’s bosom. The youthful Jesus upon her chest presents a symbolic image of the Incarnation. He emerges from a large chalice placed upon the altar of a domed church, and holds a scroll with the words: “I am the living bread and the source of life”.³ The three stars on the Virgin’s headscarf stand for the Holy Trinity. She wears the crown of a heavenly queen.



New Testament Scenes
 Russia, 17th century
 132 x 278 mm
 Ashmolean Museum, Inv. ANT 1988.22
 Casley et al. 2004, p. 254



New Testament Scenes
 Russia, 19th century
 100 x 290 mm
 Christ Church Picture Gallery, Inv. 50
 Gendle 1980, p. 79

These portable folding icons presented their owners with an overview of Christ’s life and simultaneously, of the major annual festivals of the Church. The upper row in the painted triptych contains images of the Annunciation, Nativity, Presentation in the Temple, Baptism, Raising of Lazarus and Entry into Jerusalem, followed below by the Transfiguration, Resurrection, Ascension, Pentecost, Hospitality of Abraham, and Dormition (Death) of the Virgin. (Pentecost is also feast of the Holy Trinity, prefigured by the three angels whom Abraham received as guests: Genesis 18:1-16).

The cast brass triptych has a similar sequence of scenes: the Annunciation, Nativity, Presentation in the Temple, Baptism, Resurrection and Ascension (above), the Birth of the Virgin, Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple, Transfiguration, Entry into Jerusalem, Hospitality of Abraham and Dormition of the Virgin (below). The outside of the cover

² *Бысть чрево твое святая трапеза* (Γέγονεν ἡ κοιλία σου ἅγια τράπεζα).

³ *Аз есмь хлеб и источник животный*.

(not visible here) carries a depiction of the Cross of Golgotha, surrounded by symbols of the four evangelists.



Saint George Killing the Dragon
Crete, AD 1514 (?)
274 x 244 mm
Christ Church Picture Gallery,
Inv. 71
Byam Shaw 1967, p. 64



Saint George Killing the Dragon
mainland Greece,
17th century
420 x 318 mm
Ashmolean Museum,
Inv. WA 1915.192
Casley et al. 2004, p. 252

In these two works, two icon painters depict Saint George as a cavalryman in full panoply. The saint was an officer in the Roman army who was tortured and executed for being a Christian. The legendary story of his slaying of a monster is symbolic of the victory of piety over evil. The hand of God blesses him for his exploit.

The boy seated behind the saint's saddle in the second icon is the subject of a miracle. The child had been taken captive by Saracens and forced to serve as their ruler's cup-bearer. Saint George appeared at a banquet, snatched the youth just as he was pouring out a drink, and instantly returned him to his parents.



The Agony in the Garden
Crete, ca. 1450-1500
365 x 310 mm
Christ Church Picture Gallery, Inv. 70
Byam Shaw 1967, p. 64



The Transfiguration
Greece, 18th century
150 x 100 mm
Ashmolean Museum,
Inv. ANT 1915.192
Gendle 1980, pp. 73-74

These two works show how Greek artists adopted Western European styles. Christ's Prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane was probably painted on Crete, an island ruled from 1204 to 1669 by the Venetians. The human figures, rendered in the traditional Byzantine manner, are placed against a landscape background borrowed from fifteenth-century Italian painting.

In the red marble carving, the figures are arranged as they usually are in icons of the Transfiguration of Christ. The billowing clouds and draperies, however, as well as the high relief, betray the novel influence of Baroque sculpture.



Saint Nicholas the Miracle-Worker
Russia, late 16th century
305 x 261 mm
Christ Church Picture Gallery, Inv. 73
Byam Shaw 1967, pp. 64-65

Saint Nicholas, fourth-century bishop of the city of Myra in Asia Minor, is flanked here by smaller figures of Saint John the Baptist and Saint Catherine of Alexandria, probably namesakes of the couple who commissioned the icon. Above, Christ and the Virgin Mary hand Nicholas a Gospel book and a stole as signs of his episcopal rank. Except for the darkened varnish, the panel is excellently preserved. The collector William Fox-Strangways (1795-1865) presented it to Christ Church in 1834.



The Birth / Beheading of Saint John the Baptist
Russia, ca. 1900 AD
310 x 240 mm
Christ Church Picture Gallery, Inv. PO625
Gendle 1980, p. 51

This tablet has images on both sides, which would be displayed in church for veneration on the corresponding feast day. The side exhibited here depicts the beheading of Saint John the Baptist. The tree and axe above the platter with John's severed head are a reminder of his words: "the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: every tree therefore which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire" (Matthew 3:10, Luke 3:9).



Paradise
Russia, ca. 1500 AD
186 x 307 and 187 x 296 mm
Ashmolean Museum, Inv.
WA 1908.202 and WA
1908.203
Casley et al. 2004, p. 254

The panel, now cut in half, presents a self-contained view of Paradise (something very unusual, since this composition normally forms part of larger images of the Last Judgment). The gates of Eden are guarded by the winged cherubim who once stopped Adam and Eve from re-entering after the Fall (Genesis 3:24). The saved approach in seven groups: monks, bishops and apostles (in the lower row), nuns, queens, martyrs and

prophets (in the upper one). Inside, in fulfilment of Jesus’s promise “Today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43), stands the Good Thief who was crucified next to Christ. Above are further occupants of the paradisiacal garden: the Mother of God served by two angels (their hands covered as a sign of veneration), Jacob, Isaac, Abraham and the innocent children. A few children huddle under Abraham’s cloak, since Jesus referred to Paradise as “the bosom of Abraham” (Luke 16:22).



The Holy Trinity

Russia, 19th century

352 x 302 mm

Christ Church Picture Gallery, Inv. PO638

The image is explained by two inscriptions on the icon’s frame: “The Lord said unto my lord: Sit thou at my right hand” (Psalm 110:1) and “And He ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father”. Christ and God the Father are joined by the Holy Spirit, represented as a dove. They are surrounded by archangels, cherubim, seraphim and creatures representing the four evangelists. The Virgin petitions them with a prayer on behalf of humankind: “Most merciful Master, Lord Jesus Christ, my son and God, incline your e[ar]”.⁴ John the Baptist reminds us: “Repent: the kingdom of heaven is at hand, and the axe is laid unto the ro[ot of the trees]”.⁵ The side frames contain images of Saint Charalambos, the Guardian Angel, Saint Sadoc the Martyr and Saint Barbara.



Four Images of the Virgin

Russia, 19th century

310 x 270 mm

Christ Church Picture Gallery, Inv. PO629

Gendle 1980, cat. 39

These images reproduce four miracle-working images of the Mother of God, venerated in Russia under the epithets “Softening of Evil Hearts”, “Re-

⁴ Владыко многомилостиве, Господи Иисусе Христе, Сыне и Боже мой, приклони у[хо свое].

⁵ Покайтесь, приближи бо ся вам Царствие Небесное. Уже бо и секира при ко[рени] древа лежит].

lief from Sicknesses”, “Unexpected Joy” and “Deliverance of the Lost”.⁶ Up on the right, the infant Christ holds a scroll with the words “Judge a righteous judgement and show mercy”.⁷ Below on the left is illustrated the story of a criminal who would regularly recite the *Hail Mary* in front of an icon of the Virgin.⁸ Unexpectedly, the man once saw the Christ Child’s hands and feet on the icon bleed. “Who did this, O Lady?”⁹ he asked. “You and sinners like you crucify my son for a second time”,¹⁰ the image answered. - The saints in the frame are Charalambos, Menas, Hermogenes and Eugraphos.



The Resurrection, with Further Scenes from the Lives of the Virgin and Christ

Russia, 19th Century

535 x 430 mm

Christ Church Picture Gallery, Inv. PO630

Gendle 1980, pp. 45-46

The centre of this meticulously painted icon presents the story of Jesus’s Resurrection. Down on the right, Peter unsuccessfully attempts to walk on water (Matthew 14:30-31). Up on the left, the same apostle finds the tomb of Christ empty (John 20:6-7). The tomb is then shown a second time, with Jesus rising from it in the escort of angels. A rearward angel is smiting Satan. Immediately below, the mouth of Hell (personified by a monster) releases the righteous who have been redeemed by Christ’s self-sacrifice. Jesus is pulling up Adam, with Eve and Abel right behind him. One recognises above them Noah, ark in hand. The procession continues with David, Solomon and John the Baptist, all three carrying scrolls inscribed with their prophecies of the Saviour’s coming (Psalm 67:1, Wisdom 9:1, Matthew 3:2). Ahead of them, the Good Thief (Luke 23:43) is just about to enter the gates of Paradise. He reappears inside in the company of Enoch and Elijah.

The smaller scenes in the frame run in horizontal rows from left to right: (1) the Birth of the Virgin, Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple, Annunciation, Nativity; (2) Presentation of Christ in the Temple, Baptism; (3) Entry into Jerusalem, Transfiguration; (4) Ascension, Hospitality of Abraham (standing for Pentecost - the day of the Holy Trinity),

⁶ Умягчение злых сердец Пресвятая Богородица; Утоли болезни Пресвятая Богородица; Нечаянная радость Пресвятая Богородица; Взыскание погибших Пресвятая Богородица.

⁷ Суд праведен судите и милость [творите].

⁸ Человек неки беззаконник имеяше правило повседневное ко пресвятеи Богородице молитися и повторяюще чaste словеса архангельскаго целования „Радуйся, обрадованная”. Во едину убо ношь хот[еаше]...

⁹ О Госпоже, кто сие сотвори?

¹⁰ Ты и прочие грешники н[ы]не паки распинаете Сына моего.

Dormition of the Virgin and Elevation of the Holy Cross. In the last of these scenes, Emperor Constantine (d. 337) and his mother Helena stand inside of Church of the Holy Sepulchre as the bishop of Jerusalem raises the True Cross discovered on Calvary under Helena’s auspices.



Two Liturgical Plates and a Chalice

Russia, AD 1658

241 mm high (chalice),
183 mm diam. (plates)

Church of St Barnabas,
Jericho, Oxford

Evans 1928, p. 123

These sacred vessels form a set, since the back sides of the plates and the base of the chalice bear almost identical inscriptions: “Dedicated to the Church of Christ’s Resurrection and of Saint Nicholas the Miracle-Worker at Valukha, on the estate of the Priluki Monastery, in the year 7166, 11 April.”¹¹

7166 corresponds to AD 1658. 11 April was Easter Sunday that year. The Church of Saint Nicholas at Valukha still stands, close to Vologda, in the north of European Russia. Some of its vessels later passed on to Charles Noel, 2nd Earl of Gainsborough (1818-1881), who presented them to the Oxford Parish of Saint Barnabas where his cousin Montague Noel (1840-1929) served as vicar.

The two plates contained bread prior to its consecration for Communion. One of them would hold the principal loaf, called the Lamb of God, and is engraved with a depiction of the Cross of Calvary. A second loaf, dedicated to the Mother of God, would be placed on the other. Just before the Liturgy, pieces are cut out of these two loaves and laid upon the paten: the Lamb in its centre, the Virgin to its right. Further pieces, dedicated to the saints, are placed on the Lamb’s left. The images on the chalice bowl, where Christ is flanked by his mother and St John the Baptist, echo this arrangement.

The rims of the three vessels are inscribed with liturgical hymns: “We venerate Thy Cross, O Master, and we glorify Thy Holy Resurrection,”¹² “All my hope I place in thee, O Mother of God: keep me under thy protection,”¹³ and on the chalice: “Receive the Body of Christ, Taste the Fountain of Immortality. Hallelujah!”¹⁴

¹¹ *Лета 7166-го году апреля в 11 день построены сосуды в вотчину Прилуцкаго монастыря к церкви Воскресению Христову и Николе Чюдотворцу на Валуку.*

¹² *Кресту Твоему поклоняемся Владыко, и святое воскресение Твое славим (Τὸν Σταυρόν σου προσκυνούμεν Δέσποτα, καὶ τὴν ἅγιαν σου ἀνάστασιν δοξάζομεν).*

¹³ *Все упование мое к тебе возлагаю, Мати Божия, сохрани мя во своем си крове (Τὴν πᾶσαν ἐλπίδα μου εἰς σὲ ἀνατίθημι, Μῆτηρ τοῦ Θεοῦ, φύλαξόν με ὑπὸ τὴν σκέπην σου).*

¹⁴ *Тело Христово примете (!), источника бесмертнаго (!) вкусите. Аллилуя! (Σῶμα Χριστοῦ μεταλάβετε, πηγῆς ἀθανάτου γεύσαστε, Ἀλληλούϊα!).*



Benediction Cross

Russia, 19th century

375 x 195 mm

Christ Church Picture Gallery, Inv. 37

Holy images of cast metal were produced in large quantities in imperial Russia. This cross would have been used by a priest for blessing the faithful. God the Father, the Holy Spirit and two venerating angels are depicted above the crucified Jesus Christ, whom the accompanying inscriptions name “The King of Glory” and “Son of God”. Below his outstretched arms run the words of the church hymn “We venerate Thy Cross, O Master, and we glorify Thy Holy Resurrection”. The letters *М. Л. Р. Б.* over Calvary stand for “The Place of the Skull has become Paradise”.¹⁵



Stamp for Liturgical Bread

Bulgaria, 19th century

105 mm diam.

Private collection, Oxford

The *prosphora*, or bread of oblation, is always round in shape and stamped with symbols such as the ones seen here. The Greek letters IC XC NIKA, “Jesus Christ is Victorious”, repeated three times, form the vertical bar of a cross. To the right is a schematic depiction of Calvary. The small triangles on the left echo the shape of pieces that the priest cuts out of the Communion bread.

¹⁵ *Место лобное рай бысть* (Τόπος κρανίου παράδεισος γέγονε).