Source: Museikon. A Journal of Religious Art and Culture / Revue d'art et de culture religieuse

Museikon. A Journal of Religious Art and Culture / Revue d'art et de culture religieuse

Location: Romania

Author(s): Katerina Seraïdari

Title: Icons as Marketable Objects

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Issue: 4/2020

Citation style: Katerina Seraïdari. "Icons as Marketable Objects". Museikon. A Journal of Religious Art and Culture / Revue d'art et de culture religieuse 4:247-252.

https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=924437

Icons as Marketable Objects
Diffusion and Popularity of Russians Icons in Greece (19th-Early 20th Century)

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RÉSUMÉ : L'étude examine les raisons pour lesquelles les icônes russes, ou imitant un style russe, sont devenues des objets à la mode, commercialisés en Grèce du milieu du XIXe au début du XXe siècle. Elle met ainsi en lumière un phénomène social : la diffusion et la popularité des icônes russes dans ce pays, mais aussi au Mont Athos – une région considérée comme étant le 'gardien' de la tradition orthodoxe et de l'authenticité qui faisait encore partie de l'Empire Ottoman pendant l'époque en question. Les conséquences de cette circulation sont également analysées. Ce phénomène culturel a mené à une banalisation du commerce des icônes et à une confusion croissante entre le domaine de la spiritualité et celui des transactions économiques. La production d'icônes émerge donc comme une arène d'intérêts concurrents ; ce qui révèle l'asymétrie de l'influence que la Grèce (un état récemment fondé et économiquement instable) et l'Empire russe exerçaient dans le monde orthodoxe.

MOTS-CLÉS : Mont Athos, fabricants d'icônes, art byzantin, influence russe, icônes sur papier.

REZUMAT: Articolul studiază felul în care icoanele rusești sau în stil rusesc au devenit obiecte la modă, comercializabile în Grecia, într-un interval de timp cuprins între mijlocul secolului al XIX-lea și începutul secolului XX. Cercetarea vizează un fenomen social, anume difuzarea și popularitatea icoanelor rusești în această țară, dar și la Sfântul Munte – regiune considerată drept „păstrătoare" a tradiției și autenticității ortodoxe, dar care se mai afla încă la acea dată în Imperiul Otoman. Sunt analizate și consecințele acestei circulații, felul în care s-a ajuns la banalizarea comerțului de icoane și la o confuzie din ce în ce mai mare între domeniul spiritualității și cel al tranzacțiilor economice. Producția de icoane se întrevede ca o arenă a intereselor concurente, care relevă felul extrem de dezechilibrat în care Grecia (un stat nou fondat și instabil din punct de vedere economic) și Imperiul țarist au exercitat influențele lor culturale în lumea ortodoxă.

CUVINTE CHEIE: Muntele Athos, autori de icoane, artă bizantină, influență rusească, icoane pe hârtie.

This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No. 818791).

Gabriel Hanganu recently argued that "the lives of religious objects are interlaced with the biographies of their makers and users, and at the same time with those of the spiritual beings they represent".[1] However, worshippers do not always differentiate among iconographic patterns. They are equally unaware, more often than not, of the doctrinal interpretations associated to them. From such a point of view, icons are not necessarily 'readable' objects. What matters to the devotees is the miracle-working power of the image, not its theological meaning or its esthetic value: for them, devotion is often dissociated from any interest in iconographic styles and scriptural allegories.[2]

Therefore, this paper focuses on the process of icon production. I consider icons not only as religious objects of devotion, but also as 'cultural' items and marketable objects, whose production is consequently determined by market forces. My aim is to examine how Russian or Russian-style icons progressively became a recognizable, distinct, and attractive object for Greeks, especially from the middle of the 19th century onwards. It will become evident that Russian icons function in this context as objects of demand and commercial interest. However, I will not try to define the reasons of this commercialization process as far as Greece is concerned. It would be a gigantic enterprise, given the poor documentation available on the topic.[3] The work presented here is still in an exploratory stage. This is why the scope of the current paper is limited to the presentation of a social phenomenon (the spread and popularity of Russian icons in Greece from the middle of the 19th to the early 20th century) and its consequences (the trivialization of icon trade and the attempts of commercial abuse which are facilitated by categorical ambiguity).

A short story written in 1901 by Alexandros Moraïtidis[4] and bearing the title "The poor and his fate" (*Ο πτωχός και*

η μοίρα του),[5] will become the center of the current analysis. It may glean some useful elements about the Russian icon trade in Greece during the period examined here. However, given their diversity, Russian icons do not represent a single market genre. This is why the second half of the study will examine a more prestigious part of this market: the Russian icons made at the Holy Mountain, a region which was still a part of the Ottoman Empire.

Russian icons and the danger of fraud.

The story of Moraïtidis is about a poor man, Mistòklis, who has four children and whose wife is pregnant, almost ready to give birth to a fifth child. Mistòklis has a new job and in order to gain money without a lot of work, he desperately needs to go to the religious festival in Tinos: this is why he hopes that the childbirth will take place a week after the feast of the Virgin Mary in Tinos.[6] Unfortunately, his wife gives birth before his departure and the poor man loses once again the chance to improve the economic situation of the family.

What is interesting here is the new job of Mistòklis and his "golden hopes, like those of every new businessman" (*το νέον του επάγγελμα, όπερ ανέλαβε με χρυσάς ελπίδας, ωσάν κάθε νέος επαγγελματίας*). Mistòklis sticks Russian paper icons on little wooden panels. He then leaves the panels to dry under the sun. He does this very carefully, in order to make it look like a wooden painted icon, and at the end of the operation, he adorns them with a tin framework. After a few days of work, our hero manages to assemble a rich collection of icons ready to be sold. Mistòklis starts also preparing a second collection, with portraits of the Russian imperial family. Yet, before undertaking the (ultimately postponed) trip to Tinos, he makes a test in the surroundings of Attica, where his elegantly framed icons are eagerly bought by peasants (*αι κομψώς πλαισιωμέναι εικονίτσες του ηγοράζοντο προθύμως υπό των χωρικών*). The most inquisitive clients ask him to reveal his craft, and Mistòklis deceives them by saying that these were his own handmade icons and that he had learned the art of painting Russian icons in Kiev. When others start being even more curious, requesting details about his manner of working, Mistòklis explains that he had changed the inelegant and coarse Russian outlines (*τα άκομψα και χονδροειδή ρωσικά σχέδια*) in order to make them more ecclesiastical. In other words, closer to Byzantine iconography.

Fig. 1. *Alexandros Moraïtidis (1850-1929) before and after he took his vows in the island of Skiathos, becoming monk Andronikos fourty days prior to his death.*
Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Moraïtidis gives us even the economical details of the venture. The protagonist purchases each icon for the price of ten cents (*μιά δεκάρα*), but he sells them, according to his estimations, for two or three drachmas. Mistòklis paid fifteen drachmas to a priest coming from Mount Athos, in exchange for a thousand Russian paper icons. The wooden panels are given to him for free by his wife's cousin, who is a carpenter. The only thing that he had to buy was the fish glue and some pieces of tin and glass (since his icons are placed under a glass panel).

This short story shows that the Greek public of that time was fully aware of the massive circulation of Russian icons in Greece. The author does not even need to describe such objects or describe their features. It is as if everybody was familiar with them. To give but one other example, we know for sure that Russian icons were regularly sold on Tinos. The writer Anastasios Goudas (1816-1882) was greatly annoyed when he realised that pilgrims could buy only icons 'made in Russia' and bearing Russian inscriptions if they attended the religious feast there. Some religious items from Mount Athos were also among the commodities proposed to customers, but almost nothing was made in the Kingdom of Greece.[7] It is thus clear that Russian icons had won a significant market share in Greece from the middle of the 19th century onwards. People like Goudas, who were passionate about what may be called the "Buy Greek" campaign, did not hesitate to condemn such a trend.

Returning to Moraïtidis, what mattered most to him was the extent of abuses generated by this commerce. The story sheds light on one of these abuses, even if the protagonist cannot be actually considered to play the role of a bad character: Mistòklis is ready to cheat and lie to his future clients (who are as poor and as desperate as he is), but he does this out of necessity and for his family's survival. This case may be compared to those examined by Julia Spies: for the purpose of a more rapid production template, inferior material is used; in this context, icons lose their cult-value, since their manufacturers have no masterly painting ability and their production is no longer related to religious piety and to spiritual content.[8]

The process of icon production described here could be summed up in this way: a priest from Mount Athos brings many Russian paper icons to Athens, where the protagonist of the story purchases them, sticking them to a series of supposedly wooden handmade icons that he presents as being fashioned by a Greek who studied in Kiev, in other words, by a person who is able to combine Russian iconography and Byzantine standards. In the end, he plans to sell them not only to the people from the surroundings of Attica, but also to pilgrims of Tinos. The moral of the story is not only "no pain, no gain", but also that the circulation of Russian icons in Greece became a source of confusion. As buyers could not distinguish between a Russian-style and a Byzantine-style icon, or between a paper icon and an icon on wood, they could easily be tricked into buying something else. Russian paper icons are thus related to abusive commercial interactions, since a banal commodity could be presented as a unique handmade artifact.

The icons that Mistòklis intended to sell were not estimated at their true value. They were worthless, even if their buyers thought that they may be valuable. From such a point of view, Moraïtidis writes an ironic text: devotees are ready to buy anything that an unscrupulous seller may have to offer them, since they are unable to correctly judge or value the merchandise. At the same time, the story criticizes the Greeks' consumer passion for foreign goods and their lack of discernment. Is this a story about devotional or

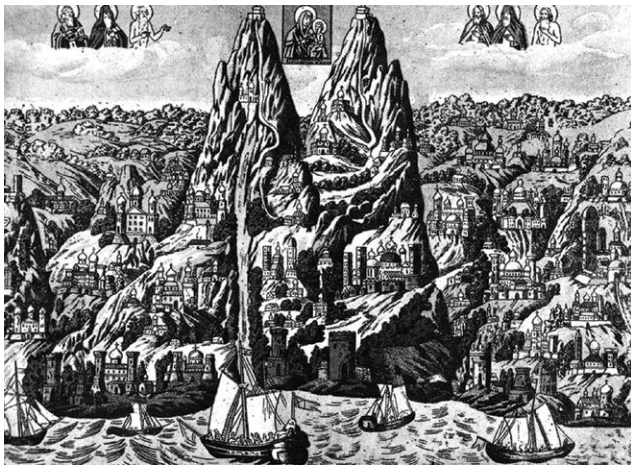
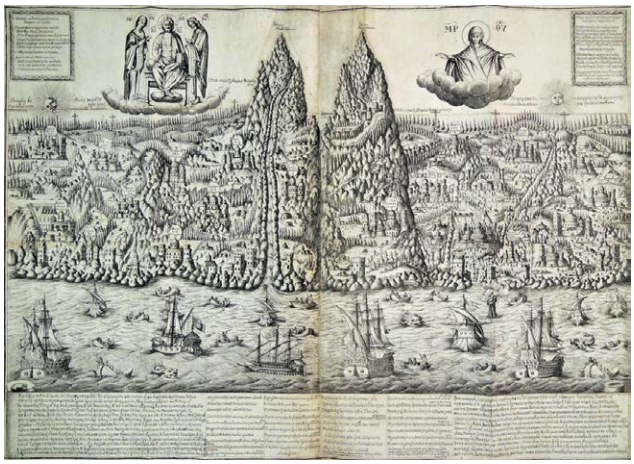
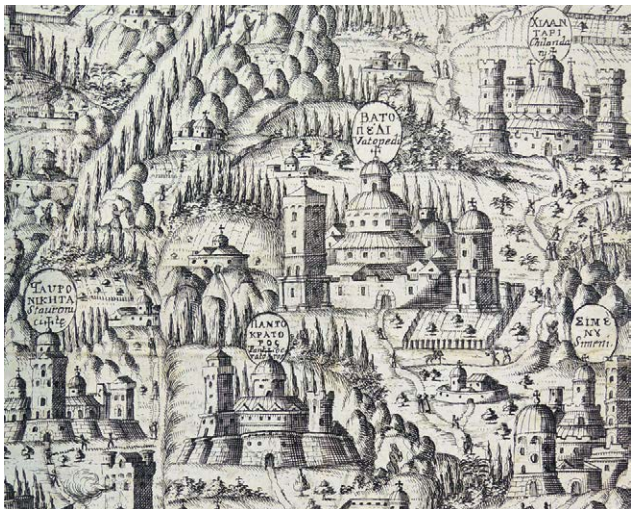


Fig. 2. *Chromolithography with the 'general view of Mount Athos', printed in Odessa in the third quarter of 19th century. Copy of unknown origin.* Source: Προβατάκης 1993, p. 63.

Fig. 3. *Russian print showing the 'general view of Mount Athos', work of the engraver Daniel from Athos, c. 1840, with text in Greek (left) and Russian (right). Copy of the State Museum of the History of Religion, Sankt Petersburg.* Source: http://afon.rusarchives.ru

Fig. 4. *Monumental Venetian print showing the 'general view of Mount Athos' (and detail), work of the engraver Alessandro dalla Via, c. 1707, with Latin and Greek texts. Copy of the Graphic Arts Collection of Princeton University.* Source: http://graphicarts.princeton.edu





economical practices? Probably about both. However, a very interesting feature of the story is that someone like Mistòklis was able to make esthetic comments and argue that Russian icons are unsophisticated in comparison with Byzantine art.[9] This is certainly the point of view of Moraïtidis. Moraïtidis visited many times Tinos, as well as Mount Athos. He described how Russian influence expanded in the Holy Mountain before the 1917 Revolution and he wrote about Russian icons on several occasions. Those writings are nevertheless contradictory, as we will see in the following pages.

Russian icons and Mount Athos.

On the one hand, Moraïtidis had to acknowledge that icons had become familiar to all, thanks to the large diffusion of Russian engravings in different Orthodox countries. In the case of an old icon depicting the benediction of Mount Athos by the Virgin Mary, Moraïtidis considered that not only the icon was beautiful, but that Russians also managed to print it in a beautiful way.[10] He also acknowledged that Russians had made icons representing Mount Athos in a charming way (*πολύ θελκτικώς*) – as a pyramid in the middle of the sea.[11] He asserted that those engravings managed to bring the Holy Mountain (inaccessible to women) to all the faithful throughout the Orthodox world. Therefore, Russian engravings also played a certain positive role, since they opened doors which were not accessible to everybody, and enhanced both influence and beauty.

On the other hand, Moraïtidis was very critical about Russian paper icons sold on the Holy Mountain. He stressed the fact that they represent all the monasteries "in an inelegant and coarse way", as if they were built in a Russian architectural style, with their onion domes.[12] He strongly criticized this kind of Russian propaganda and its imperialistic vision. Moraïtidis did not provide more information about them, but what he describes could be similar to a lithograph published by Theocharis Provatakis.[13] That image was produced in Odessa in the third quarter of the 19th century: Mount Athos was depicted as twin-peaked; this view of the Athonite peninsula allowed for a better perspective, simultaneously visualizing its different sides (East and West / front and back), even if this would never be possible under normal circumstances. Perhaps this is the artificial view to which he referred to, since the image represents all the Athonite monasteries with Russian onion domes.[14]

In a book published in 1927, Moraïtidis described another trip he had made to Mount Athos.[15] He referred to the famous icon-maker Ioàsaf (1832-1880), of a Cappadocian origin. This Ioàsaf was considered to have founded a

School, whose progress was linked to 'the pious Russian Empire', since gigantic icons of the Virgin Mary decorated crossroads, train stations, and all public buildings in this Empire. Therefore, the Russian monks of Mount Athos made an agreement with Ioàsaf, who accepted not only to make this kind of icons, but also to paint them as if he were a Russian himself (*ανέλαβε την υποχρέωσιν να ζωγραφίζῃ τας τοιαύτας εικόνας ωσάν από Ρώσου ζωγράφου, ίνα ευκόλως εξοδεύωνται*). In this way, the icons were more easily "spent" – a word probably chosen by Moraïtidis on account of the fact that it would be improper to refer to Athonite icons as being bought and sold.

These elements show the extent of the reputation already acquired by Russian icons: people demanded Russian icons and even the Greek icon-makers of the Holy Mountain had to pretend to be Russian in order to satisfy the increasing demand. Greek Athonite monks thus limited themselves to the execution of commissions made by Russian monks. In a way, this is yet another type of abusive commercial interaction: a Russian-style icon could be made by a Greek monk.

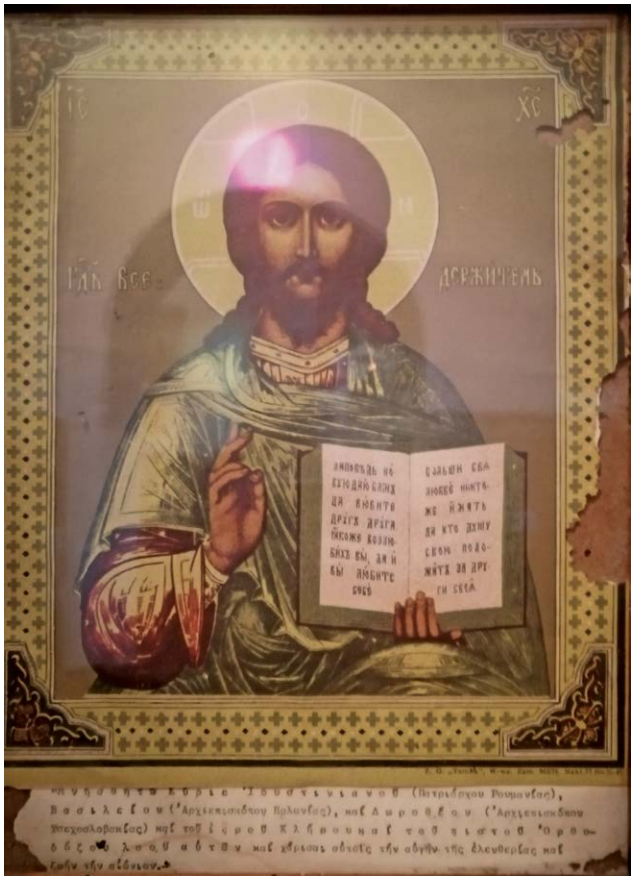
The Athonite monk Patapios Kafsokalyvitis published several articles about Ioàsaf and his relations with Russian monks and clients. In one of them, he even considered that Russians presented his work as Russian because the art of Ioàsaf was clearly superior.[16] This argument implies that, if Russian clients knew who the real icon-maker was, they would hand down their orders directly to the Greek icon-makers. In order to remain privileged intermediaries, Russian monks preferred to conceal the real identity of the Greek icon-makers. Consequently, only Russian monks were cheating in this case, whereas Ioàsaf never tried to personally profit from the situation.

Moraïtidis explained that since the production of icons depended on the law of supply and demand, the popularity of Russian religious items was responsible for the disappearance of the local Greek craft on the Holy Mountain. Tastes were changing and Greek-style icons were in disgrace. And since the number of potential buyers who liked this style of painting diminished drastically, the Greek monks were forced to abandon their craft, concentrating instead on the cultivation of the land, most of all on the vineyards which allowed them to earn some money by making wine: *όλα τα είδη της ρωσικής αγιογραφίας και μικρογλυπτικής, άτινα εξετόπισαν ούτω την αγιορείτικην τέχνην, ης τα έργα είνε σπανιώτατα πλέον, διότι οι τεχνίται ασκηταί, οίτινες ειργάζοντο αυτά, μη ευρίσκοντες αγοραστάς ετράπησαν εις την καλλιέργειαν της γης και ιδίως της αμπέλου.*[17] In such a situation, the circulation of Russian icons had a direct impact not only on the economic stability of Mount Athos, but also on the esthetic choices of Greek (or Orthodox) people. In this context, the domination of Russian-style icons cannot be dissociated from the decrease in demand for Greek-style ones.

Last but not least, there is also an anonymous text signed with the initials S. H. K., which traces the evolution of Greek-Russian relationships in the Holy Mountain. It focuses on icon production and argues that, when they first came to there, Russian monks had no Russian icon-maker, so they gave a lot of money to Greek icon-makers who executed their commands. As a consequence, the latter started to heavily (and progressively) depend on Russians patrons.[18] But this led to other changes. After having taught the art of icon-painting to the Russians, Greek icon-makers received only 1/4 or 1/5 of their initial salary. However, even more revolting was the fact that Greek icon-makers were forced to relinquish the rules of Byzantine art. They also had the obligation to write the name of saints in Russian. As for their signature, they had to sign in Russian as well, as if there were no Greek icon makers on Mount Athos and all these icons were produced by Russians.

Icon production emerges here as an arena of competing interests between Greeks and Russians. In other words, it reveals the lopsidedness of the very different degrees of influence exercised by Greece (a newly founded and economically unstable State) and the Russian Empire in the Orthodox world.

Fig. 5. *Paper icon with Russian texts found in the church Presentation-of-Mary (*Εισόδια της Θεοτόκου*) in the central settlement of the island of Egina in August 2019. The Greek text added below explains that this was a gift from the patriarch Jusinian of Romania, Dorotheus archbishop of Poland, and Basil archbishop of Czechoslovakia, and also of the clergy and of the Orthodox people of these countries who pray for their freedom and eternal life. The mention of the three hierarchs suggests that the icon was offered to the church in c. 1970-1977. This case shows that even cheap and commercial icons can be invested with spiritual meaning under certain circumstances.* Credits: Katerina Seraïdari



On the elusiveness of 'Russian' icons.

During the period examined here, Russian-style icons were not only massively produced and widely available, but also fashionable. Socio-anthropologists would therefore be extremely interested in understanding why a devotional object became fashionable for a certain period in time. However, in the story of Moraïtidis, Mistòklis decided to transform the Russian paper icons into Greek wooden icons, since he pretended to be the icon-maker. In his case, Russian icons did not seem to be so fashionable, since they were "inelegant and coarse", and there was also the question of a return to a more ecclesiastical, Byzantine style.

▲ Fig. 6. *Commodification of religion. Photograph taken in March 2011, in a seaside resort, 60 kilometres away from Athens. These prefabricated private chapels are sold to those who wish to have one in their garden.*
Credits: Katerina Seraïdari

From this perspective, Mistòklis was not a poor devil who tricked and cheated in order to make a living, but a visionary who foresaw how things would later unfold. He was right to believe that the Russian-style icon of his time would soon fall into disgrace and out of fashion.

Moraïtidis did not seem to consider that this new form of commerce was capable of bringing financial relief to the struggling Athonite monasteries. However, he was not the only one to stress such negative consequences. This was commonplace at the beginning of the 20th century. In 1909, archaeologist and art historian Nikodim Pavlovich Kondakov published his *Macedonia: An Archaeological Voyage*. In this practical report of his trip to Mount Athos, Kondakov argued that the Greek Orient actually suffered from a flood of Russian ecclesiastic merchandise of poor quality and bad taste, which was responsible for the disappearance of genuine Greek art.[19] Moraïtidis and Kondakov arrived at the same conclusion and their value-judgment was rather similar: both Greek icons (on account of the commercial invasion of Russian ones) and the Russian icons (because of their massive production) represented a rapidly vanishing tradition. For both of them, this was a period of decline, defined by an ill-advised Westernization in church art and by the commodification of icons.

If paper icons are considered to be "the icons of the poor", because of their low cost and affordability, they become "the icons of categorical ambiguity" in the story of Moraïtidis. Because of this absence of categorical clarity, it becomes clear that the question of an icon's origin, especially when it becomes a marketable object, can become a rather tricky issue. In his different mentions of Russian icons, Moraïtidis showed to what extent boundaries were blurred and even abolished: a Russian icon could be a counterfeited product, since Greek icon-makers painted Russian-style icons and paper icons finally became wooden. This was a grey area which introduced ambiguity and disorder. Even Athonite Greek icon-makers who worked for Russian customers were forced to take under consideration the esthetic preferences of the latter. The fact that the production process leading to a diffusion of new standards and models took place in a prestigious religious center like the Holy Mountain is even more troubling. In this context, Mount Athos functioned as a legitimizing structure of categorical ambiguity. This was highly problematic, since the Holy Mountain was generally characterized as the 'gatekeeper' of tradition and authenticity.

From a general standpoint, what seems embarrassing is the very fact that a spiritual symbol (such as an icon) and spiritual figures (such as the monks of the Holy Mountain), were at the center of an intense commercial activity. It is true that icon trade had always been a problematic issue, but the 19th century seems to be a period during which icon trade was not only generalized, but also trivialized. Even the monks of the Holy Mountain were involved in this business venture. To conclude, the popularity of Russian-style icons in Greece created an increasing confusion between spirituality and economic transactions. Because of their massive diffusion, icons and monks were no more set apart from the profane circulation of everyday goods. This is precisely the problem: the market declassifies culture and religion even more so.

Notes:

1 Hanganu 2010, p. 50.

2 Seraïdari 2005.

3 This is one of the aims of the interdisciplinary project RICONTRANS (ERC Consolidator Grant 2018, *Visual culture, piety and propaganda: Transfer and reception of Russian religious art in the Balkans and the Eastern Mediterranean)*, in which Yuliana Boycheva kindly invited me to participate. She already published (in Greek) several important studies on this matter (still largely unexplored). See for example Boycheva 2015.

4 Moraïtidis (1850-1929) is a Greek journalist and writer, known for his deep Orthodox faith.

5 Μωραϊτίδης 1993, p. 219-227.

6 Tinos is a Cycladic island, where a miracle-working icon of the Virgin was found in 1823. For the development of this pilgrimage and the manner in which it attracts pilgrims from all over Greece, see Seraïdari 2012.

7 Γούδας 1875.

8 Spies 2009.

9 Mistòklis was originally from an Aegean island. He came to Athens in order to make a living. He was not illiterate, he could read and write and he assisted the priest during mass. However, all his jobs were manual or commercial: he helped create a more comfortable space for the devotees coming to the Lycabettus Hill church; he was selling cigarettes and traditional 'pretzels' (*κουλούρια*) in the streets of the Greek capital. These were only some of the biographical elements provided by Moraïtidis in his description of Mistòklis.

10 Μωραϊτίδης 1924, p. 13.

11 Μωραϊτίδης 1924, p. 20.

12 Μωραϊτίδης 1924, p. 141.

13 Προβατάκης 1993, p. 63.

14 The prints with a 'general view of Mount Athos' first appeared in Venice by the end of the 17th-beginning of the 18th century (Προβατάκης 1993, p. 58-59). The Russian prints criticized by Moraïtidis were probably based on a common theme: in order to create their own stylistic and ideological interpretation, all it took was to change the aspect of monasteries and make them look Russian.

15 Μωραϊτίδης 1927, p. 61.

16 Πατάπιος Καυσοκαλυβίτης 2012.

17 Μωραϊτίδης 1924, p. 142.

18 Σ. Χ. Κ. 1900, p. 64.

19 Μπονόβας 2012, p. 286.

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