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## Studying Russian Icons on the Balkans

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### Abstract

The Russian religious artefacts - icons, liturgical utensils, veils, vestments and books and objects of private piety, held in museums and church or monastery collections in the Balkans and Eastern Mediterranean constitute a body of valuable art objects, and important material evidences related to the historical development of the relations between Russia and large region of South-Eastern Europe. This piety objects comes continually to the region for a long period through official, unofficial and private donations, or by pilgrimage and trade. Applying the cultural transfer approach in combination with the recent theoretically challenging openings of art history into visual studies and social anthropology RICONTRANS studies them not simply as religious or artistic artefacts, but as mediums of cultural transfer and political and ideological influence, which interacted with and were appropriated by receiving societies. Their transfer and reception is a significant and poorly studied component of the larger cultural process of transformation of the artistic language and visual culture in the region and its transition from medieval to modern idioms. In this dynamic transfer, piety, propaganda and visual culture appear intertwined in historically unexplored and theoretically provoking ways.

**Keywords list (en):** Russian icons in the Balkans, Russian religious art, Visual culture, Cultural transfer, Piety, Museification of religious art objects

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5 Russian religious art objects in the Balkans and the Eastern Mediterranean have not yet been the object of systematic research, and synthesizing works on them are still lacking. However, their transfer through donations, offer of alms, or trade is a phenomenon that has not gone unnoticed in scientific literature. Relevant references can be found in the framework of two disciplinary traditions, i.e. Early Modern & Modern History and Art History, both of which, however, have neglected the reception of these objects by the host societies.

6 Scholars of the former disciplinary tradition, i.e. historians, have referred to this phenomenon in the context of the relations between the Russian state and church and the Balkans and the Orthodox East from the Fall of Constantinople (1453) to the beginning of the 20th century, and more specifically with regard to the policy of patronage adopted by Russia towards the Orthodox population of the Ottoman Empire<sup>5</sup>.

7 In particular, the donation or selling of icons, liturgical utensils, books, and cloths for Orthodox churches and monasteries in the Balkans assumes an important place in the study of Russian church history as early as the mid-19th century. Since then, this body of historiography has formed an adequate picture of the historical contexts, in which this transfer developed. It also amassed evidence on the objectives and mechanisms of this transfer, especially for the period before the 19th century, focusing on the official donations directed from Russia to the Balkans and the Eastern Mediterranean. Still, Russian and Balkan historians disagree on the volume and dynamics of the phenomenon, this being an outcome of both the difference in the source materials used and the particular national narratives in which this process is inscribed. Thus, Russian scholars tend to emphasize the dynamics of icon donations and transfer in the 17th century<sup>6</sup> and only recently extend their inquiry to later centuries, whereas, for instance, Greek scholars tend to emphasize the 18th and the 19th centuries, when Russia was involved in the Greek national liberation struggles<sup>7</sup>.

8 The rise of Russia's prestige in the Orthodox world after the Fall of Constantinople and the emergence of the doctrine "Moscow the Third Rome" turned the Russian Tsar into a figure embodying the salvation and defence of Orthodoxy, to whom every Orthodox could theoretically petition for help and support. As early as the 16th century, the Russian Tsar and the higher clergy assumed such a protectionist role and began to send regular donations and offer alms to the Orthodox Christians of the Ottoman Empire<sup>8</sup>. On the one hand, this "spiritual protectionism" led to the formation of a state-regulated, strictly hierarchical system for the distribution of alms to the Greeks, Serbs, Moldavians, Wallachians, or Bulgarians who went to Moscow to petition for help. According to this system, the rank of both the petitioner and the donor determined not only the magnitude of the donations in money, expensive furs or jewellery, but also the quality of the church utensils, icons, and liturgical books, and the number of holy relics offered. On the other hand, church utensils or icons were sent to the Balkans, first and foremost to Mount Athos, "for health" and "eternal peace of the souls", as donations of Russian rulers. These donations were especially intensive in periods of dynastic or political conflicts<sup>9</sup>. For example, the number of donated Russian icons and utensils to Mount Athos rose sharply in 1560, when Ivan IV was expecting the recognition of his royal title by the Patriarch of Constantinople. Likewise, the same ruler made massive donations in memory of the tragic death of his son Ivan Ivanovich.

9 Donations and support to the communities of the Orthodox East and the Ottoman Empire were not interrupted during the Time of Troubles (1598—1613), despite the political instability and the deepening economic crisis in Russia<sup>10</sup>. During this period, the tsar of Muscovy Boris Godunov is trying to strengthen the prestige of Moscow, capital of the only Orthodox state. He seeks the support of the Eastern Patriarchs and the clergy and offers them financial aid and rich gifts, while they offer to Moscow a large number of miracle-working icons and holy relics<sup>11</sup>. It is extremely interesting that in 1603 a particular guidance specified the types of icons to be offered to "Greek" clerics and monks<sup>12</sup>. According to this document, these icons had to reproduce common Christian themes, such as the Trinity, the Virgin with the Child, Christ Pantocrator, or important Russian iconographic subjects and Russian saints.

10 A great deal of donations of Russian icons, liturgical vestments, and church utensils were made by Greek priests or monks who lived in Muscovy, the most outstanding example being

Archbishop Arsenios of Elasson. Arsenios was born in Thessaly, but spent most of his life in Russia (1588—1625) as a high ranking cleric of the Russian church. He donated more than 50 icons and liturgical items and books to the Monasteries of Meteora, the Dousikou monastery in Thessaly, the Tatarna monastery in Euritania, in Mount Athos, Mount Sinai, and the Holy Land<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> During the rule of the Romanov dynasty, particularly in the period of Aleksey Romanov (1645—1676), the relations between Russia and the Orthodox East became very intensive; central to this development was the exchange of church utensils, relics and icons<sup>14</sup>. Very important is also the role and the use of relics and miraculous icons in the political relations between Russia and the Orthodox East and their symbolical impact on the geopolitical intentions of the government of Tsar Alexey Mikhailovich in the middle of the 17th century.

<sup>12</sup> The advance of Russia in the international scene after Peter the Great, and its mounting geopolitical aspirations in the East during the 18th century brought about considerable changes in the character of the above-mentioned practices. Previously based to a great extent on the principles of charity and religious piety, these practices evolved in the 18th century into organic features of a well-organized state-regulated system of cultural and political influence on the “unredeemed” Orthodox Christians of the Ottoman Empire<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> The “Greek project” of Catherine the Great and the Russian presence in the Mediterranean began with the Archipelago expedition in conjunction with the Russo-Turkish War of 1768—1774, specifically with the military actions of the Russian fleet under the command of Count Alexey Orlov<sup>16</sup>. During this period a large series of important donations of ecclesiastical objects and icons were offered by Catherine to churches of Greek communities who supported financially the Russian fleet expedition in the Aegean during the Russo-Ottoman war of 1768—1774 (the Church of Holy Trinity in Livorno /1764, 1782/, Porto Maon, Minorca /1769—1770/, St. George of Venice), as well as to the regions occupied by the Russian forces during the war and the formation of the Republic of Archipelago (1771—1774)<sup>17</sup>. The formation of the Archipelago principality and the rise of Russia to the status of the “official protector” of the Orthodox population of the Ottoman Empire after the Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca (1774) created further openings for cultural influence, and stimulated the influx of Russian icons and utensils to churches and monasteries in the region<sup>18</sup>. Emblematic case which highlights the multifaceted religious, aesthetic and geopolitical dimensions of the transfer is as well the evidence that in 1769 the Russian fleet which reached the Eastern Mediterranean brought no less than 50 sets of icons and church utensils meant to equip the mosques which would be turned into churches<sup>19</sup>. Inaugurated by Catherine the Great, this practice was also followed during the later Russo-Turkish wars in the Balkans, as testified by the icons from the Bulgarian Black Sea region<sup>20</sup>. The same practice is testified in the Imbros and Samothraki islands, according to the Diaries of the Russian naval officer Vladimir Bronevsky during the military actions of the Russian navy in the course of the Russo-Turkish War (1806—1812)<sup>21</sup> as well as in Crete, in the Rethymno district, which was under Russian administration in 1897—1909<sup>22</sup>. Obviously, the Russian soldiers who participated in the Russo-Turkish wars in the region had with them small icons or other religious objects, used as presents to the local Orthodox clergy and communities.

<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the increasing influence of antagonistic religious propagandas in the East (Catholic and Protestant) from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the complex course of the Eastern Question, and the rise of the rival Balkan nationalisms and Russian Panslavism during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, created a fluid ideological and political environment, in which the relation between politics and the cultural patronage became more complex but not less important and intense<sup>23</sup>.

<sup>15</sup> The long-distance icon trade by Russian itinerant traders attested in the region for the first time at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, increased during the 19<sup>th</sup> century as is shown by many documents in the Greek consular correspondence and the press highlighting the activities of Russian icon traders in Ottoman Macedonia and Thrace<sup>24</sup>. The Mount Athos Russian style painting workshops provide from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century an enormous production of painted or paper printed icons for trading with churches, monasteries and pilgrimage centers. This large number of Russian style icons circulating in the Balkans and the Aegean islands reflect the great rise of Mount Athos

icon painting workshops<sup>25</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> Despite the relevant references to the phenomenon outlined in this brief description, the transfer of Russian icons and religious art objects in the complex context of the turbulent transition of the region to modernity has not been adequately studied. There are still important questions to be answered concerning the historical context, the time dynamics and, last but not least, the framework of reception of these artefacts in the Balkans.

<sup>17</sup> Scholars of the second disciplinary tradition, i.e. historians of art, have studied Russian religious art objects in collections kept in the Balkans and the Orthodox East, focusing predominantly on high quality works, masterpieces of Russian art. Several recent works and important research initiatives mark the revival of interest to the Russian icons in the Orthodox East<sup>26</sup>. In most cases, however, the inquiry does not transcend the iconographic and stylistic analysis of specific examples, accompanied by general references on the donors and mediums of transfer. Apart from these specialized works, a series of disconnected publications of Russian ecclesiastical art objects are contained in various albums of local art collections in the Balkans<sup>27</sup>. Extremely valuable for the perspective of cultural transfer are a series of older and more recent publications by historians of art focusing on the influence exerted by Russian icon painting to local painting schools in several Balkan countries (the Danubian Principalities, Bulgaria and Serbia), not extending to Greece, though with minor exceptions concerning Mount Athos.<sup>28</sup> It is important to note here the strong consensus on the significant influence the influx of Russian icons had on local artistic traditions and tastes; indicative is the chapter “How to paint icons the Muscovite way” in the *Manual of Iconography and Painting* by Dionysius of Fourná (1701—1733). Despite the existence of this literature, art historical inquiries on the Russian icons in the Balkans and the Eastern Mediterranean have not led so far to any synthesizing work or monograph that examines the various national cases, or the region as a whole.

<sup>18</sup> Finally, we should note that there have been some remarkable exceptions to the general rule of poor communication between the fields of history and history of art in the case under study. Indicative is the work of the art historian Oleg Tarasov, who has shown how the increasing needs of religious propaganda inside and outside Russia fostered the emergence of an impressive proto-industrial production system in the region of Vladimir and Suzdal; this system involved many villages of the district, which produced annually thousands of cheap icons for export. By studying the sui generis guild of Russian icon merchants (*ofen'a* merchants people who followed inland itineraries in Russia and the Balkans offering icons produced according to particular local tastes). Tarasov transcended the traditional neglect of Russian art history for these lower quality icons and highlighted the significance of trade as an important mechanism and path of “icon transfer”<sup>29</sup>.

<sup>19</sup> The RICONTRANS project aims to consolidate the new particular field of study the transfer and reception of religious art from Russia, and its multi-dimensional impact (political, ideological, and aesthetic) on the Balkans and the Eastern Mediterranean<sup>30</sup>. For the first time RICONTRANS will map the historical process of transfer and diffusion of Russian icons, art themes and models to the Balkans and the Eastern Mediterranean in its broad geographic and chronological scope. Transcending the existing approaches, the project will systematically construct a representative basis of data (art objects, written source records, oral testimonies and bibliographical references) and document the phenomenon as a whole, its volume, dynamics and different phases. It will furthermore identify, study, and introduce into the scientific discussion new artistic and historical “material”, the analysis and interpretation of which will reveal the dimensions of this historical process and the artistic and social significance of the intercultural mobility of religious art objects from Russia to the Balkans and the Eastern Mediterranean during the long period from the 16th to the early 20th century.

<sup>20</sup> With its broad geographic reference and emphasis on reception, RICONTRANS will show for the first time the complexity and contradictions of the phenomenon. Through specially selected in-depth case studies, the project will highlight the varying responses, both positive and negative, to the transfer of Russian religious art objects in different local and regional ethno-linguistic and confessional backgrounds and changing political settings throughout the region. Apart from the

varying religious and political attitudes, informing in each case the reception of these artefacts in the various Balkan societies, this methodological strategy will also inquire into the importance of non-political aesthetic and economic factors pertaining to wider frameworks through addressing questions such as: How important was the opposition of Eastern to Western art in the reception of Russian icons in the Balkans (an important part of the icons was stylistically and iconographically Western)? Is it possible to trace a “popular”, non-official response to the advent of these objects of art, piety, and propaganda informed by different aesthetic and economic concerns? In addition, how important was the international and interregional itinerary icon trade in shaping these responses?

21 The close communication and cooperation of historians, philologists, and historians of art will enhance the analytical potential of RICONTRANS. It will enable an investigation based on fresh and abundant material of composite questions concerning the interrelationships between artistic form, visual culture, personal piety, political and ecclesiastical propaganda and ideology such as: Through which practices of signification do the transferred icons and church objects, originally objects of private devotion, acquire political meanings and become vehicles of state political and ecclesiastical propaganda? How important is their artistic quality and style in this process? How important is the “political” role of these objects for their artistic impact in local icon painting and in the visual culture of the host society in general? How necessary were the acts of “active” intervention in the objects (such as renaming of icons, replacement of original inscriptions with translated versions thereof, painting of additional explanatory inscriptions a.o.) for their “acceptance” and incorporation to the local liturgical practices and rites? Which other factors determined the fate of these objects?

22 We will achieve the above-mentioned research objectives applying a combination of research methods from the disciplines of history, history of art, oral history/social anthropology, visual studies, and Russian and Greek literature. The first step of the research will be the identification and collection of two types of evidence textual and material about the transfer of Russian ecclesiastical art in the Balkans and the Eastern Mediterranean, aiming to construct a large and representative basis of evidence. On the one hand, textual evidence will be provided by extensive and systematic bibliographic and archival research, which will examine selected bodies and types of material (ecclesiastical, state and private archival collections, travelogues, newspapers, and journals) in Russia, Greece, Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia, and the West Balkans, in North Macedonia. We will collect information relative to the paths and mediums of Russian religious art transfer in the Balkans (e.g. Russian official donations of icons to monasteries and churches in the region; missions of Balkan monks and clerics to Russia for alm collection (ζητεία) and various orders of Russian icons; maritime and inland trade in Russian icons; acts of donation of Russian icons by emigrants from the region to their places of origin, etc.). The project will also document publically or privately expressed attitudes (aesthetic or ideological) towards these objects.

23 On the other hand, material evidence (i.e. the Russian icons and other art objects held in churches, monasteries, museum, and private collections throughout the region) will be identified and photographically reproduced through field research missions. These missions will also gather oral testimonies on the ways by which these icons reached their final destinations and observing the attitudes of the people using them or being responsible for them (local clergy and lay population, museum curators and employees, private collectors). This type of evidence (oral) is particularly important for the investigation not only of their first, but also of their “second reception”, i.e. the current place of some of these objects in museum and private collections.

24 The field research and data collection (icons and religious art objects) will be carried out in selected places of the abovementioned Balkan countries, i.e.: 1) Large pilgrimage centres and important monasteries 2) Important urban centres 3) Regions under Russian administration for a period of time 4) Regions with intense commercial relations with Russia 5) Regions with mixed Christian Orthodox and Catholic populations 6) Regions with mixed Slavic and non-Slavic Orthodox populations.

25 The above-mentioned selection reflects a twofold aim to produce a representative sample of both the preserved objects and their transfer. Combined with textual evidence, this sample, studied through the employment of both qualitative and quantitative methods, is expected to render a

clear general picture of the geography, dynamics, and volume of this phenomenon in its various phases; and the focus on particular regions and case studies will enable the research team to investigate more in depth, qualitatively and comparatively, the complex interrelationship between piety propaganda and visual culture in the long process of the transfer under study.

26 Based on this art history groundwork, the quantitative analysis of the large sample of icons with the cross-examination of the abovementioned classification criteria will render important results on the volume and spatiotemporal distribution of particular types of Russian icons in the region. These results will point, among others, to regional preferences for iconographic themes and particular cults, as well as to regional variations in the uses of Russian icons (family icons, icons for church iconostasis and *proskynetaria*, icons for personal devotion). Combined with the written historical evidence referred to above, the analysis of the preserved objects is expected to elucidate important facets of the reception of the Russian icons in the region. Last but not least, iconographic and stylistic analysis will be employed in examining the influences of Russian painting on local schools of religious painting, as well as, more generally, on visual culture in the region. In this respect, particular attention will be given to the transfer of Western European artistic influences to the region via modern style Russian religious painting.

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# Studying Russian Icons on the Balkans

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## **Аннотация**

Предметы русского религиозного искусства — иконы, литургическая утварь, богослужебные облачения, книги и предметы личного благочестия, хранящиеся в музеях и церковных и монастырских собраниях на Балканах и в Восточном Средиземноморье, являются ценными и в большей степени неизученными предметами искусства. Их комплексное изучение обогатит наши представления о развитии позднесредневекового церковного искусства России и предоставит новые источники для истории отношений России с Православным Востоком. Официальные государственные, церковные или личные дарения и пожертвования, паломнические реликвии, предметы торгового обмена, эти предметы поступали в регион в течение длительного периода (XVI — начало XX вв.) и являются частью визуальной культуры региона. Рассматривая их через призму теории культурного трансфера, следует признать их перемещение и восприятие важными и малоизученными компонентами более широкого культурного процесса трансформации художественного языка и визуальной культуры в регионе и его перехода от средневековых к современным идиомам. В этой новой среде, социальная жизнь этих артефактов выходит далеко за рамки намерений их создателей и ктиторов.

**Ключевые слова:** Русские иконы на Балканах, русское церковное искусство, визуальная культура, культурный трансфер, благочестие, музеификация предметов религиозного искусства

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