TOPIC 6

How can I tell if an icon is a fake?

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Making good forgeries of icons is extremely onerous and, considering the prices that can be obtained for them, relatively uneconomical. Nevertheless, forgeries of icons were and are still created. During the first mature phase of the icon market, a lack of knowledge meant the issue was occasionally over-dramatized.

To begin with, it is important to understand that icons are incredibly time-consuming to make (40–50 layers of paint and other substances, some with long drying periods, and an overall production time of several months). Those who make forgeries of icons generally have to simplify the techniques used, something an expert will notice as soon as he/she looks at the work through a magnifying glass, if not sooner. The complex method of making icons has, after all, been applied to give icons a very special visual quality (which they lack when simplified procedures are followed) and to lend them a robustness that also allows them to withstand their “use” (including being touched, kissed, and displayed in veneration with the aid of candles, small oil lamps, and incense) across several generations. Icons that have been produced in a more simplified process are “flat” and can require conservation measures after just a few years hanging on a wall.

Incidentally, these kinds of forgeries trick only the utterly uninformed layperson. Anyone who has ever been to an exhibition featuring original icons or even visited the Orthodox countries where they are made, will immediately recognize that something is amiss with such counterfeit icons. From an economic viewpoint, it only pays to implement a particularly crude production process—such as mounting a print on a panel—for an icon that costs only a few thousand euros on the market. The situation for very expensive pieces is different, especially when they depict motifs that cover a very large surface area and can be painted with relatively little effort. A multi-figure calendar icon with hundreds of saints rendered in *Feinmalerei*—the counterfeiter will think twice before investing several months making something that any trained eye, simply by pulling out a magnifying glass (if not sooner), can expose as a forgery. Things get more interesting in the case, for example, of a Mandylion (the image of Christ’s face on the sudarium), from the fifteenth century which covers a comparatively large area of the painting surface and with the appropriate wear and tear from age is not too difficult to paint. Endowed with the necessary beauty and magic, it certainly nets prices in the five or even six figures. Or a large-format Saint George the Dragon-Slayer on a white gesso ground, which lacks—at least it should on the face of it—the color “setting” of the background. High prices are paid for this motif—a motif that is always in great demand—especially if the

panel comes from a very old period. It also does not make such high artistic and painterly demands on the counterfeiter.

This is why it is precisely spectacular and beautiful panels of this kind that must be examined with particular care with regard to their authenticity and should be purchased only from the most trustworthy and reputable of sources.

In the 1980s, there were some who thought that there were a great many fakes circulating in the icon market. This was, however, based on a misunderstanding. Icons made in the nineteenth century frequently drew on old models from the sixteenth century. This is comparable to what is known as “second period” in the decorative arts of the West, such as second-period furniture or clocks. In many cases, even religious believers who were able to afford this kind of thing were “palmed off” with these supposedly old pieces; others purposefully had such “retro” pieces made for them in painting studios that were known for producing these sorts of works. It was fashionable. These kinds of retrospective icons, however, are visibly different from the earlier works on which they are based, not only in terms of material (signs of aging in the wood and paint, types of paints used, etc.) but also in terms of style, seen, for example, in a discernable coarser, summary approach to the painting.

Even today, non-specialists sometimes think that fakes are being produced in Orthodox countries (particularly in Russia) specifically for westerners who don’t know any better. This, however, would not make any sense, precisely because these works would now find an almost bigger market at home. Furthermore, a lot of knowledge of old icon painting has in many cases been lost. As a general rule, there is much less incentive to fake icons than there is to fake, for example (remaining in Russia) the masters of the Russian avant-garde whose works are comparatively easy to imitate and fetch very high prices.