

## TOPIC 13

### Why do some icons have metal covers and others do not?

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According to Orthodox belief, icons are miracle-working images. They have an inherent special power that can pass to the faithful through prayer, but especially through being touched and kissed. The need to make physical contact with icons led to the desire to safeguard highly venerated panels. And so fittings were developed that could cover parts of the images for the purpose of protecting the underlying painting against damage. In the case of old pieces, such coverings were only added after the passage of a considerable amount of time—for example, when a believer who had been helped by an icon donated such a protective cover in gratitude. In the late nineteenth century, some icon-makers started producing icons and their covers at the same time. Quite often, the reasons for this were economic in nature when the covers were to be made in series. Then only the uncovered areas needed to be painted.

The spiritual effect of the image was not diminished by these metal covers because they are not plain, straightforward coverings; instead, they are, as a rule, artistically designed creations that assimilate the formal idiom of the icon (reflecting it in relief-like imagery, for example) or even enhance it (perhaps through the use of various precious metals or stones). In actual fact, these covers, which in some cases enclose the icons so completely that only the hands and faces of the figures portrayed peek out, have at times done more harm than good—for instance, when condensation forms between cover and painting and causes damage to the primed surface. This is also why such later additions to icons have occasionally been removed. Another reason is that the metals used for this plating were particularly in demand when they were made of silver or gold and could be converted into cash.

Sometimes only the border of an icon is covered with metal (= basma); sometimes the border and parts of the icon's background up to the edges of the figure/s are covered (= riza); and sometimes—in the most enclosed form—everything except the carnation is covered so that only the hands and faces are left exposed (= oklad). The expansion of an original icon by such means could also occur in stages and, in principle, be extended further through the gradual introduction of other materials and techniques. Many of the icons seen today had such protective metal "clothing" at one time but now no longer do. Sometimes traces of nails can still be found on the icons themselves or their borders, indicating that such a cover was present at some time in the past. Fittings made of precious metals have generally only survived the times in cases where the panels were particularly well cared for (for example, high-



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quality museum pieces), otherwise the fittings that are still extant today tend to be made of base metals.

In certain exceptional cases, collectors will hold such fittings in high regard; as a rule, however, collectors display icons with the fittings removed. This is often better for conservation reasons—plus, in the case of many icons it would be a pity were the beautiful painting to remain hidden under a dark cover.

In terms of value, the presence of a metal fitting usually makes little difference: the cover comes more or less free-of-charge with the icon. Exceptions are certain special lavish variants, such as the enameled fittings—some further enhanced by the inclusion of freshwater pearl embroidery decoration and precious stones—that are highly sought after by Russian collectors.