

TOPIC 14

What makes an icon an icon?

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Icons are devotional images of the Eastern Orthodox Church and they were produced in accordance with strictly defined rules. An image that is painted in an icon-like manner and depicts an Eastern Orthodox saint is not necessarily an icon. There are certain "knockout criteria" that right from the start prohibit a work of art from being called an icon. An image painted on canvas, a signed work (with few exceptions, icon writers did not sign their icons, remaining anonymous and taking a back seat to their works) cannot, generally speaking, be called an icon. An icon is not an image invented by its author but a likeness that through a complex artisanal and spiritual act recreates a proven miracle-working prototype. Icons were always made under the Church's supervision. The Church determined whether icons met the requirements of the canon of rules and therefore could or could not be consecrated and approved for veneration. Non-canonical icons had to be destroyed. In Russia, the production of icons came to an end with the October Revolution in 1917. Icons made after this date are generally no longer recognized as authentic old icons. Today, icons are still/once again being painted. If this is done as it was in the olden days, under the Church's supervision and for a religious use, then these panels can also be treated as (modern) icons. There are now also a large number of people who do a bit of icon painting for personal reasons. Some of them have become great masters. While these people have been able to acquire the technical skills to create an icon, they do not have the corresponding religious qualifications, meaning that these icons are not recognized as icons by the Church.