

TOPIC 16

Are these icons really old—the colors have a radiance that would suggest the icons are much more recent?

Dr. Stefan Brenske, art historian, icons specialist, author, and frequent guest on German television program “Lieb & Teuer” (NDR)

It is often astonishing how vivid the colors of old icons are, even on icons that date back several centuries. If you remove the heavily darkened varnish of an old panel, you cannot help but be amazed by the brilliance with which the colors beneath reassert themselves. The very special color effect of icons is due, on the one hand, to the pigments—some of them very high-purity—that the painters worked with. On the other hand, quite often it is the luminosity of the underlying golden grounds that reflects the light through the thin coatings of translucent layers of tempera and gives the colors a particular depth, one that is not seen in the opaque colors of oil, acrylic, and emulsion paints. The colors on icons are not immune to bleaching but are by comparison very light-resistant (non-fading); in the dark candlelit interiors of churches and in the homes of individuals, color changes often occur only very slowly.

Most of the icons you see today already have their second varnish (icon varnish is called olifa)—this is because after around one hundred years an icon’s original varnish tends to darken considerably, even to the point of blackening completely.