

TOPIC 2

Do icons always come from Russia?

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Icons are the devotional images of the Eastern Orthodox Church. As a general rule, they are painted on wood in egg tempera. The paint is applied glazeliike, layer by layer, on a primed panel. The methods and rules of production are very complex and include specific rituals for consecrating icons. As devotional images of the Eastern Orthodox Church, icons can generally be found wherever the Christian Orthodox faith is practiced. Most icons come from Russia where, in most cases, they were made by monks in monastic schools of painting. A far smaller number come from Greece and the Balkans.

Only a consecrated icon that has been painted in accordance with the strict rules of the Orthodox Church can be called an icon. An image of a saint that is similar in overall expression to an icon but was executed in oil paint, for example, and perhaps painted on canvas instead of wood, is, as a rule, not an icon.

With a bit of experience, one can relatively easily distinguish Greek icons from Russian icons. The board used for Greek icons is usually much thinner; it does not have the raised border—that is, the recessed central section (*kovcheg*)—typical of Russian icons; and its proportions are more elongated. Blue colors are quite often found on Greek icons, whereas the palette of Russian icons is dominated by shades of red.

Russian icons are generally labeled in Church Slavonic. Exceptions to this are, as a rule, extremely high-ranking heavenly representatives, such as Christ, Mary, angels, and God the Father (if he is shown).

Greek icons have inscriptions in Greek. There are also panels with Romanian script, those with Arabic script (known as Melkite icons), and so on.

Icons of the Russian and Greek schools basically depict the same things, namely, scenes from the life and work of Christ, Mary, and the saints. The traditional iconographic types are also often very similar. In terms of style, however, the two schools are fundamentally different. In Russian icon painting, there is a far greater tendency to miniaturize the depiction, even resulting in a number of icons with extremely small figures executed in highly detailed *Feinmalerei* ("fine painting"). In Greece, such an idiosyncratic approach to detail is less often encountered. The figures in Greek icons are also as a rule more voluminous—one occasionally gets the impression that everyone just barely fits into the image. Whereas Russian icon painters placed



München

figures and architectural surroundings from the start with a far greater economy of space.

The two schools also differ with regard to the types of wood used. In Russia, hardwoods, which are very common, were frequently employed, such as birch in the north. Softer woods, such as limewood, made it possible to produce borders with multiple moldings and recessed central sections. In Greece, olive wood, a very slow growing, very hard wood, was often used. It is generally free of pest infestation and immune to warping when moisture loss occurs. Consequently, fewer measures were necessary to stabilize olive wood. The special techniques for reinforcing Russian icons with battens/slats (shponki) on the reverse or on the short sides is found in Greek icons at best in a comparatively simple form.