

TOPIC 4

I want to sell an icon—how do I proceed?

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

Icon collectors frequently encounter each other at icon-related events, such as exhibition openings at museums (in Germany, for example, at the icon museums in Frankfurt am Main and Recklinghausen) or at expert talks. The circle of those in Germany, for example, who own one, two, or three icons is immense. There are, however, only a few hundred real collectors, those who own a dozen or so high-quality icons. The more active among them know each other, in some cases visit one another, exchange information, and, occasionally, exchange icons (this is how the first icon dealers quite often got their start—as active early collectors). Friends’ associations at icon museums, travel groups, and similar organizations are also networks. It is often via such circles that icons find new owners.

Dealers constitute a second important channel. In each of the countries where icons are traditionally collected there are usually two, three, or more, dealers who deal in icons—in some cases, these are second or third generation dealers—and who are also continually on the lookout for top-quality works to buy or broker.

Auction houses seldom possess the necessary expertise in icons. An overall sharp decline in the supply of top-quality icons has also meant that good, collection-worthy icons are only very rarely still on the agendas of prominent auction houses.

Basically, today, with the internet, inexperienced sellers and prospective buyers and intermediaries are only a few mouse clicks away from each other. If in doubt, you will be more likely to turn to a known commercial firm than to an unknown individual. The greater the name recognition, visibility (presence on the relevant platforms), and the reputation of the contact, the lower the risk for the seller to be taken advantage of or even cheated (icon gone, payment not received).

The would-be seller should have digital photos (smartphone-quality will do to start) and the accompanying documents (purchase invoices, expertises, and the like) at hand. This makes the decision-making process and, later, the transaction process easier for both sides.