

TOPIC 8

How do I pick the right icon?

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

For many, the selection of the right icon is, more than anything, a gut feeling. Of course, you need to feel confident that the pieces you are considering buying are authentic, old, and worth collecting. Purchasing an icon is, after all, also an investment, one that can be expected to retain (or even increase) its value. Even experienced collectors prefer to be guided more by their personal preferences than by thoughts such as "What might be particularly valuable about this icon in terms of its art historical significance?" A renowned dealer who specializes in the field will in any case ensure that he or she is always showcasing icons that each have their own specific unique merits.

If you feel drawn to icons but don't have any yet, you might first want to ask yourself if you are one of those people who like old icons (which also tend to be somewhat more expensive than later icons). It is true that old icons are often no longer as well-preserved as more recent panels; however, the traces of veneration and use found on them are precisely what lends them special authenticity. Some people say a particularly well-worn icon is "worn through with prayer" and this holds a particular appeal for them. They think about what the icon has seen and heard.

Others prefer more recent panels because they appreciate the painterly quality and take pleasure in the good state of preservation and fresh coloration of these works. Members of this group include admirers of icons rendered in *Feinmalerei*, such as those produced by painters of the Palekh school.

It is certainly legitimate to also link the selection of an icon to personal or even biographical motifs. Thus, it is perfectly natural that someone who has the name George in his/her family will have a particular affinity for icons of Saint George the Dragon Slayer. Birthdays and name days can also be associated with certain icon subjects, such as "month icons" (icons representing particular months of the year); some collectors set themselves the goal of acquiring the relevant month icon for each family member. Individual professional groups are also familiar with "their saints" in the Orthodox world and their members take delight in owning one or more icons featuring these subjects; these include members of the healing professions—doctors and pharmacists (the relevant saints being Saints Cosmas and Damian and Saint Panteleimon)—and the legal professions (Saint Nicholas). Of course, these kinds of personal connections give icon owners an additional "pleasure dividend."

Interior decor considerations are rarely consequential when selecting icons. This is

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largely because icons can blend into any home environment. Unlike a large-format painting—where framing is frequently an important issue, as is color scheme—an icon fits in almost anywhere on account of its comparatively small size and warm colors made from natural pigments. Icons are seldom intrusive. You can spend a great deal of time looking at and studying them but you do not have to. They do not jump out at you but remain discreetly available for those who seek a dialogue with them. (This unobtrusiveness is, moreover, an advantage much appreciated by many collectors: the charm of icons is that not everyone who stands before them knows what works like this are worth). Icons are therefore not particularly well-suited for show-offs.