

TOPIC 9

How much knowledge of icons do I need to purchase an icon?

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

People who are entertaining the idea of acquiring an icon sometimes voice thoughts such as, "I have to read a few books and thoroughly familiarize myself with the subject before I'm in any sort of a position to make such a purchase." This is a pseudo-truth. It doesn't hurt, of course, to have background knowledge of icons before deciding to buy one. On the other hand, cognitive knowledge often detracts from an intuitive approach to an icon. And it is this approach that is the crucial one, because icons were not made to appeal to the mind but to the heart.

Major collectors will say that their first icons were their best. I think this has to do with the fact that they selected these works when they still had relatively little knowledge and relied primarily on feeling. Once you know a lot, things get complicated. You start searching for pieces you've seen in the literature but which are no longer available or, at best, only at astronomical prices. There is also absolutely no point in "falling in love" with a picture of an icon because looking at the original always triggers very different personal reactions—reactions that even with the help of a photograph can only be anticipated with difficulty. If you go to a sales exhibition and feel drawn to an icon, you should take this feeling seriously. There is a good chance that this particular piece will bring you great joy for the rest of your life. As it is, the joy that icons provide increases the longer you live with them.

There is a nice saying in Russian: "It is not the buyer that picks an icon, it is always the icon that picks its buyer." This quite beautifully sums up what needs to happen if you're going to find the "right" icon for you.

