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ORTHODOX CHURCH ICONS:
An Introduction to Icons as Works of Art

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An Introduction to Icons as Works of Art.

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements.....	ii
Illustrations.....	iv
Chapter I: INTRODUCTION.....	1
The Aim of the Thesis.....	1
Outline and Methodological Considerations.....	2
Limitations.....	3
Chapter II: THE PHILOSOPHY & HISTORY OF ICONS.....	4
Chapter III: CONSTRUCTING AN ICON.....	14
Chapter IV: RIZA: THE METAL COVER OF AN ICON...	20
Chapter V: TYPES OF RIZAS.....	24
Halos and Pendant Collars.....	24
Basma.....	25
Risa.....	28
Oklad.....	30
Chapter VI: MAKING A RIZA.....	34
Chapter VII: CONCLUDING REMARKS.....	44
Bibliography.....	46

ILLUSTRATIONS

Colour Plates

Plate 1.	Iconostasis. The Uspensky Orthodox Cathedral, Helsinki, Finland.....	6
Plate 2.	Detail of the Iconostasis in the Uspensky Cathedral.....	6
Plate 3.	The Miracle-working Mother of God of Kozelchan, The Uspensky Cathedral, Helsinki, Finland.....	23

Black and White Plates

Plate 4	Example of Basma.....	27
Plate 5	Example of Risa.....	29
Plate 6	Example of Oklad.....	31

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 The aim of the Thesis

To the eyes of casual observers, the world of the icon is limited, unsophisticated, even naive. Some notice only the legendary themes, the iconography, while some delve into the theological implications; but others go even further and perceive, beyond what is represented, the artist's vision of the world and mankind. The icon thus possesses several layers of meaning, which makes interpretation difficult but at the same time enriches the work of art. (Alpatov, 1982, p. 243)

The aim of the thesis is to give the reader an introduction to icons as works of art and to highlight areas that the author believes would be particularly suitable and relevant for in-depth research concerning icons.

The Orthodox Church icon is often perceived as having made only a very limited contribution to the world of art. One of the primary reasons for this perception is the traditional restrictive guide-lines and rules surrounding style and creativity in the production of icons. But this static nature and level of uniformity itself over the last thousand years, makes icon production a particularly interesting phenomenon and thus meriting greater in-depth research. Moreover, the closer one examines the production of icons over the

centuries, the more one can see that icon production developed considerably over time. This development over time is particularly evident in the riza, the metal cover which protects and decorates icons, which is why several chapters are devoted to rizas. The great skill, creativity and craftsmanship evident in many rizas also demonstrates that many icons were not merely mass-produced pieces of folk art designed to strict guidelines, but are important as works of art in themselves.

1.2 Outline and Methodological Considerations

In order to introduce the reader to icons as works of art, I begin by outlining in Chapter 2 the philosophy and history of icons. Chapter 3 goes on to describe how an icon was made, demonstrating the restrictive Church guidelines but equally emphasising the important technical skills needed. Chapters 4 to 7 concentrates on explaining the protective and decorative metal riza which surrounds some icons, and argues that of all icon features, the riza is particularly useful for demonstrating the development of icon production over time, the use of new techniques and thus the room for artistic creativity.

My research methodology has been largely two-fold. At one level I used the conventional method of reading material on the thesis area and discussing it with academics in both Ireland and Finland. On another level I visited a number of Orthodox churches in Finland to observe the way icons have traditionally and are currently presented.

1.3 Limitations

As stated above, the aim of this thesis is to introduce the reader to icons as works of art, and to highlight areas the author believes would be of particular value for further in-depth research. Thus this paper is not intended to give a definitive account of the history and make-up of icons, rather the intention is to give the reader a general introduction to the topic area.

The reason for concentrating on Russian Orthodox Church icons was a practical one. There is a broad variety of Russian Orthodox Church icons on display in Orthodox churches in Finland, and I was in a position to make research visits there in the summer and winter of 1995.

Chapter II

THE PHILOSOPHY AND HISTORY OF ICONS

"Ikon" in Greek means an image and Icons as we understand them were originally pictures of Christ or the Saints on a wooden panel as distinct from a wall painting. In the Greek orthodox world such panels are believed to have been used as religious images from about the sixth century, but few examples of this early date have survived, and indeed it was probably only with the twelfth century that painted panels became more common. From then onwards they were produced in large numbers all over the Orthodox world, the art spreading, along with other aspects of Byzantine culture, from the Greek to the Slav worlds, and more particularly to Russia. From around 1350 indeed it was in Russia that the finest work was produced and it is around that time that a specific Russian school can first be distinguished. (J.White, 1968, p.7).

An Icon is a picture used in the context of the Orthodox Church representing Christ, the Virgin Mary and other holy figures. It represents events from the Bible and from history. To an orthodox person an icon is an instrument which helps the beholder to concentrate on prayer. It is a reflection of the unseen; by looking at a painted holy image it is easier to rise to "meet" the invisible God. An icon also reminds devoted Christians about the remarkable events from the history of Christianity. Earlier, icons functioned as a book for illiterate devotees and taught the truthfulness of Christianity to those who had converted.

In an Orthodox church icons are attached to an iconostasis (icon stand) or to the walls of the church (See Plates 1 and 2, p. 6). They are also placed on a table which is situated in front of the church hall where a worshipper can honour the icon. During the service icons are venerated through kisses, bows and by the signs of the cross. In an orthodox home an icon has its own special place, usually in a quiet and peaceful corner where all the disturbances are removed and where it is easier to concentrate for contemplation.

In the old testament God was not visible but rather expressed his wishes by voice, or by appearing in dreams, in metaphorical or symbolic form. In the new testament God sent his son in human form to the earth and so the invisible God became visible through Christ; it was thus possible to create an image, not of God himself but of the son of God made man. The portrait of God himself was considered idolatrous, thus an icon was an image not of God, but of the son of God.

The defenders of images, iconodules, had to face charges of idolatry. Their defence was based on the doctrine of the incarnation, i.e. Christ's two natures. They agreed with the ban on images imposed in the Old Testament, which stated that God cannot be depicted. However, in their opinion the ban was annulled by God taking on a visible form in Christ. (T. Pennanen, 1987, p.34).



6



Plate 1 (top)
Iconostasis, The Uspensky Cathedral, Helsinki, Finland.

Plate 2 (bottom)
Detail of the same Iconostasis.

A particular "language" was developed for icon painting in order to represent Holy matters. The spiritual content is expressed by pure colours; clear, even, stiff forms; and by structural rhythm of the line. By using this non naturalistic style of painting an icon reaches the spiritual dimensions which are more important than external, naturalistic beauty in the eyes of the Orthodox Church.

Icon painting thus tended to embody the opposite aim to that which was before the painters of Renaissance Italy, and their technique was equally distinct. The icon painter thus laid on high-lights in bright colours where a Western painter would shade; there were no attempts at chiaroscuro; colours were used as an intrinsic part of the composition. Western art, again, makes use of everyday figures to express a religious content, whereas the figures of the Icon are not of every day; they were themselves fundamentally religious, of the other world rather than this, the aim being to exalt the spirit to a higher plane.
(J.White, 1968, p.9)

The Orthodox Church developed strict guide-lines for icon painting. The Orthodox religious artist, different from the Western religious artist, did not follow his own personality and creativity. He was expected to follow an icon canon delineated in a book of painting regulations. Through text and illustrations this manual gave the artist the possible subjects, the compositions and the colour suggestions. It was also recommended to copy old works and learn the skill from them. Though painting

styles differed from region to region and developed overtime.

Traditionally there was very little tolerance of the personal interpretation of the painter. An icon painter who applied his own imagination, painted without attending to the required guide-lines, risked losing his icon. The icon could be removed and sold at a bargain price. (Jääskinen, 1984, p. 92)

The icon painter was considered first and foremost a servant of God, rather than an artist. In fact early icon painters were monks who prepared themselves for painting an icon through fasting and by other religious rituals. Consequently with early icons the painter did not sign his icons so that personal glory or honour would not become a priority. The icon was not considered a separate piece of fine art, but rather an integrated part of church dogma.

More important than the materials used by the artist is the spirit which moved him.
(J. White, 1968, p.8).

For a viewer who is familiar with western religious painting it can take time to get used to the different images and style of icons. The icon painter does not seek

to inspire, emotionally touch or, in general, to appeal to the emotion of the viewer; his aspiration is to show the unconditional and undisputable truth in which he believes.

In Western perspective the objects in painting usually get smaller the farther away they are from the viewer. The vanishing point or the point where the lines of perspective appear to meet is within the picture. Conversely, in an icon the vanishing point is situated in the spectator. This emphasizes the two-dimensional rendering of the icon. This type of perspective is called reverse perspective. Also, more than one focal point can occur in the same icon, which makes the postures of the figures look unnatural in relation to one another.

Another method often used to prevent the feeling of depth developing in an icon, is making the main character pictured larger than the others. For example, in a Christmas icon, the mother of God is larger than the other figures. The more important figures are painted facing the spectator, while other characters are pictured from the side, though not in profile because this would suggest a hostile attitude towards the central figure.

There is little evidence to be found concerning the early origins of icons. Until the discovery of the Collection of Sinai, few icons were known which pre-date iconoclasm (c. 700-800 AD). By iconoclasm we mean the action against icons, which took place in the Byzantine region where countless art treasures were destroyed. (Snyder, 1989, p. 126.) This negative attitude towards icons by some early Christians was as a result of their interpretation of the prohibition of imagery in the Bible's Old Testament. Iconoclasm ended in 835 AD with the church synod at which the motion of holy pictures and icons was approved.

There are many beautiful legends about the origin and genesis of icons. According to one story the tradition of icon painting originates during the life time of Jesus. This story claims that St. Luke, also a painter, painted an icon of the Virgin with the Child Jesus on her left arm. Another legend tells that icons were created in the hands of God and fell from heaven as gifts for believers.

In yet another supernatural story, Jesus wipes his face on a linen cloth, leaving a permanent image of his face on the cloth. From this myth started the icon tradition which is called "the image not being made by human hands" (Pennanen, 1987, p.40).

In reality, however, icons followed the development of Christianity and the history of art, to be cultivated into the form we know at present. Icons have established models, such as the portraits of the Ancient Greeks, the Christian paintings of the catacombs and the painted panels used by the Romans instead of death masks. From these Roman paintings, icon painters adopted the wax painting technique (encaustic) to which they added strong brilliant colours. Encaustic is a painting technique where coloured waxes are manipulated with a hot rod, instead of a brush. (Talbot Rice, 1963, p.24.)

The icon tradition, centred in Constantinople, the capital of Byzantium, was spread by monks to other parts of Europe. Christianity came to Russia in 988 AD and with it came icons and icon painters to fill the need of the new Orthodox nation. That time Byzantium art was at its peak and thus Russian religious art benefited greatly. (Rausenbach, 1988, p.4.) Though once the icon tradition developed in Russia, they soon made it their own.

These foreign roots are worth studying, but one should not forget that purely Russian impulses were of decisive significance in the development of the indigenous style, for example, during the period from the end of the fourteenth to the mid-sixteenth century. Having survived the harsh tribulations of the Tatar invasion, the Russians found the strength to begin fighting for their independence while preserving faithfully the legacy of classical antiquity and Christianity that had come to them via Byzantium. (M.Alpatov, 1982, p.238)

In Russian icons, different painting styles are not separated in the same way as in the western arts. They are classified to painting schools rather than to time periods. Important schools included Kiev, Wladimir-Suzdal, Smolensk, Jaroslav and especially the schools of Novgorod. Later important schools were Moscow, Pihkov, Stroganov and some Karelian schools. (Pennanen, 1987, p. 48.)

In the 17th century, Russian icon painting was not able to resist outside influence any more. The way space and light was treated in Western art started to influence icon painting. Also, the increase in the numbers of lay painters helped the tradition to change. Lay painters were very often a part of a craftsmen's group, where the best painter painted the most important parts of the icon, like the faces and hands. And the less talented painter painted the remaining parts. As icons become increasingly secularized, the church saw it necessary to write very exact regulations for lay painters in order to secure the tradition of icon painting.

In ancient Russia, even in the remote northern regions, no one could pick up a brush who had not at least some elementary idea of painting. The mass production of icons was not known in those times. It was only much later, after the development of consumer markets, that the works of "bad painters" (plokhopistsy) began to appear and arouse the anxiety of the church authorities.
(M.Alpatov, 1982, p.245)

Around the end of 19th Century icon painters began to simplify and speed up the painting process. Instead of using traditional tempera painting the more modern and quicker oil-painting was practiced. Also printed paper pictures sometimes completely replaced paintings. Icon painting become mass-produced and icons lost their individual characteristics. In icon work-shops in St.Petersburg, Moscow and other cities, the serial production of icons was started. The traditional methods of icon painting were supplanted by these commercial principles and hundreds of Orthodox Christians bought and ordered their icons from the shops that specialised in icon painting.

Chapter III

CONSTRUCTING AN ICON

This chapter gives a basic outline of how icons were traditionally made, though of course variation in techniques would have occurred over the centuries and from region to region. It is also worth noting that traditionally a number of different people, such as a carpenter and a painter, would often have been involved in the production of an individual icon.

The type of wood used in the production of icons has tended to be from trees easily obtained in a given locality. Many Russian icons are made from linden, pine and spruce, all common trees in Russia. The carpenter would let the wood season, letting it dry, wetting it again and repeat this process several times, sometimes letting it stand for years. The piece of wood used would then be carved to the desired design by the carpenter. The carpenter firstly carved a flat and smooth picture base, leaving a small raised border. These borders used to be quite thin in early Russian icons but became wider over time. When constructing a large icon several panels of wood would be used, held together with a strong glue. Slats of a stronger wood variety would often be put in behind the panels to prevent them from warping.

To prepare the wood for painting, a number of processes had to be carried out. First the wood was scraped rough using a sharp tool and then was primed with glue that filled the small gaps and holes on the surface of the wood. A fabric was also sometimes glued over the wooden panels as an effective means of covering holes and blemishes in the wood. It also made the wood stronger and was one way of preventing the panel from warping. Research has been carried out showing, that an icon panel which has been covered by fabric, is also stronger than one with just a cesso base by itself. Those icons where the chalk was applied straight to the wooden panel can be badly damaged, especially in cases where the icon had been covered by a metal Riza, and the Riza has been violently removed for example as a result of a robbery (Nieminen, 1968, p.169).

The next stage was to apply a special prime called 'Lefkas'. This is a mixture of chalk or marble-dust mixed with water, glue, olive-oil, linseed oil, honey and egg yolk. Approximately six coats of this mixture was applied, and each coat had to be left to dry for up to 12 hours. When the priming was completed, the surface was made smooth by sanding it down with sandpaper. The surface was now ready for sketching and painting on.

Traditionally the basic sketch was made using a charcoal stick, and reinforced using black paint. Various means of tracing were also commonly used to establish the basic outline of the image. A common one was a system where a copy of an icon was drawn onto paper as a "mirror image", this drawing would then have been hole-punched using a small nail. The paper was then placed over the icon panel, in such a way that the drawing was facing the panel. The drawing was then tapped gently with a cloth bag filled with charcoal. The image would then transfer to the icon panel in the form of small charcoal dots. This image was then strengthened using paint. After the outline was made, preparation for background gilding was undertaken. The area to be gilded was primed with a mixture called 'Bolus', which is a red clay mixed with egg yolk. While the primer was still wet, the gold leaf was usually pressed into place. Once the gold was dry it would traditionally have been polished using the tooth of an animal such as a bear or wolf, or alternatively using a polishing stick of agate stone which was made for this purpose.

With the background drawing and the gilding prepared, the actual painting of the icon could begin. Traditionally the paints used would have been prepared using local ingredients as much as possible, to obtain the various pigments required. The pigment was mixed with yolk and

painted on using a brush. Over the years the yolk emulsion, which was used to bind the paint, hardened and formed a remarkably strong paint layer.

The background and the garments were usually painted first, using a limited range of restrained colours. Once this was done the painting of the face, the hands and the feet would start. Traditionally the first coat of paint applied would be dark and the painter would progressively use lighter layers according to the effect desired.

The Byzantine artist conveys the notion of volume by modelling not with shadow, but with light. Over the sombre colour he constructs a series of superimposed planes of colour, which became lighter in tone as the spatial area they cover diminishes. The final plane will be the lightest, perhaps even pure white.
(J.Stuart, 1975, p.47)

Often when the paint on an icon got old and dark, new paint was applied to brighten it up. It has been discovered that some icons received three or four different layers of paint in this manner. Unfortunately the oldest and historically most important layers of paint are often damaged. Sometimes the original painting was even scraped off the painting. It is possible nowadays to sometimes restore old icons by removing the paint with great care layer by layer back to the original painting.

The writings of the icon are placed into the background of the painting, as near the figure as possible. These writings indicate the people in question, (Christ $\overline{\omega} \tilde{\eta} N$). These writings, or initials, were usually done with red paint, but sometimes with black or white paint, depending on the colour of the background. The language used depended on the origin of the painting. The Russian ones were written in the Russian language and the Greek ones in Greek. Two exceptions are the letterings of Christ and the Mother of God which were always written in the Greek language.

The calligraphic inscriptions, beautifully wrought in red paint, also play a part in the composition. They are accompanied by long cursive sweeps which, theoretically a sign to indicate that certain letters have been omitted, can also be appreciated for their decorative value. Together with the lettering itself, they stand out as isolated, detached coloured shapes, integrated at appropriate tactical points in such a way as to balance out the composition as a whole. (J.Stuart, 1975, p. 89).

When the paint work was complete, so called 'Filigree' gilding was sometimes used to further decorate the paint surface. This involved pasting on gold leaf to give an effect of light, such as sun rays, and lines on garments. The stars which always decorate the robe of Mary the Mother of God were also often gilded this way.

Gold mirrors the divine energies of the spirit. It enables the worshipper to comprehend and experience the entry of these energies into multiplicity and into time-thus stirring the cosmos into life. (J.Stuart, 1975, p.90)

The varnishing normally takes place after the icon has been left to stand for several months. 'Olifa', is the name for this varnishing mixture which includes ingredients such as linseed oil, water and lead. This mixture is heated until it resembles liquid amber.

The icon is put on a flat surface and the protective varnish is poured over the icon and spread evenly. The texture of the varnish thickens as it cools and gets solid. When the varnish soaks into the paint and wood the so called 'icon tone' is created. The surface of the icon is then rubbed giving a glossy effect to the paint work making the colours more vibrant and translucent, varnishing also protected the painting from dampness. This treatment is usually repeated a number of times. The fact that the varnishing got tarnished and dark over the years started a practice of sombre icon painting, for the painters who copied old icons copied them the way they had become. Thus icons became darker and darker and this explains for example the "Black Mother of God" style of icon. (Nieminen, 1968, p.170)

CHAPTER IV

RIZA - THE METAL COVER OF AN ICON

A riza is a metal sheet or plate that is placed over a painted icon panel, its purpose being to protect and decorate the painting. Rizas are usually made of precious metals, most commonly of silver, and more rarely gold. They are often also decorated by precious and semi-precious stones. The word riza comes from Slavic church language, and also means the robe that priests wear in service. A riza is, in a way, like a dress - a garment which is dressed on a figure. On the other hand a riza functions as a hard shell-like cover for a box, which can be closed to protect the contents.

The riza has traditionally had many different functions, one of which was to honour the pictured person. The Orthodox Christian believed that by worshipping the painting he showed honour and respect to the depicted. When a saint had answered prayers requesting help, the believer showed his gratitude by contribution. Taking account of his own wealth he might have got a riza made for an icon that carried the name of that particular saint. If the icon already had a riza, he might have financed the adding of gems or pearls to it. In some cases an icon can have more than one riza, rather than making endless additions to the original riza a new one is sometimes commissioned.

We must remember that icons were made primarily for veneration, and that every generation of worshippers felt free to enhance their religious significance and material splendour.
(K.Weizmann, 1982, p.140)

Since the Byzantine period, metal covers have been made to protect and decorate icons. During the centuries, different authorities have, however, considered rizas undesirable and had them removed from icons. For example, many museums have removed rizas from icons so that it might be easier for the visitors to see the tempera painting of the panels. Many reproductions, photographs and postcards of these icons without their rizas have been spread around the world, creating an impression of icons as pictures painted on wood panels without metal covers.

The riza is, however, a significant part of an icon, historically, culturally and artistically integral to the image. Contrary to what is generally believed, rizas were not always added to icons, but were often contemporary to a particular icon. In the best cases the riza is a valuable demonstration of the skills of high-class metal craftsmanship.

An example of a particularly elaborate riza is a riza which was made for the icon of the Virgin of Tikhvin. Made in a monastery in Tikhvin, Russia, in 1836, this golden riza weights 8kg 761.4g. It has 4,809 brilliants,

593 roses of brilliants, 141 diamonds, 412 oriental seed pearls, 4 emeralds, 5 rubies or sapphires, 1 ruby, 2 brilliant stars with roses and a cross made of 11 diamonds. (Jääskinen, 1979, p. 58)

The icon of the Virgin of Tikhvin also has an emerald donated by Empress Anna Yognnova to express her gratitude to the Virgin. In this emerald stone the crucifixion of the Lord is carved by using the most sophisticated skill and patience. Other donations worthy of note were made by Empress Maria Feodorovna who donated a sapphire for the riza, and by Grand Duchess Cathrine Pavlovna who donated a Brazilian topaz. These donations are the biggest and most valuable single donations for this particular riza, other donations were made by devoted Orthodox Christian believers in St. Petersburg.

As an integral part of an icon, the riza in particular demonstrates how precious, sacred and admired these works of art were considered in the Orthodox world (Plate 3, p. 23).

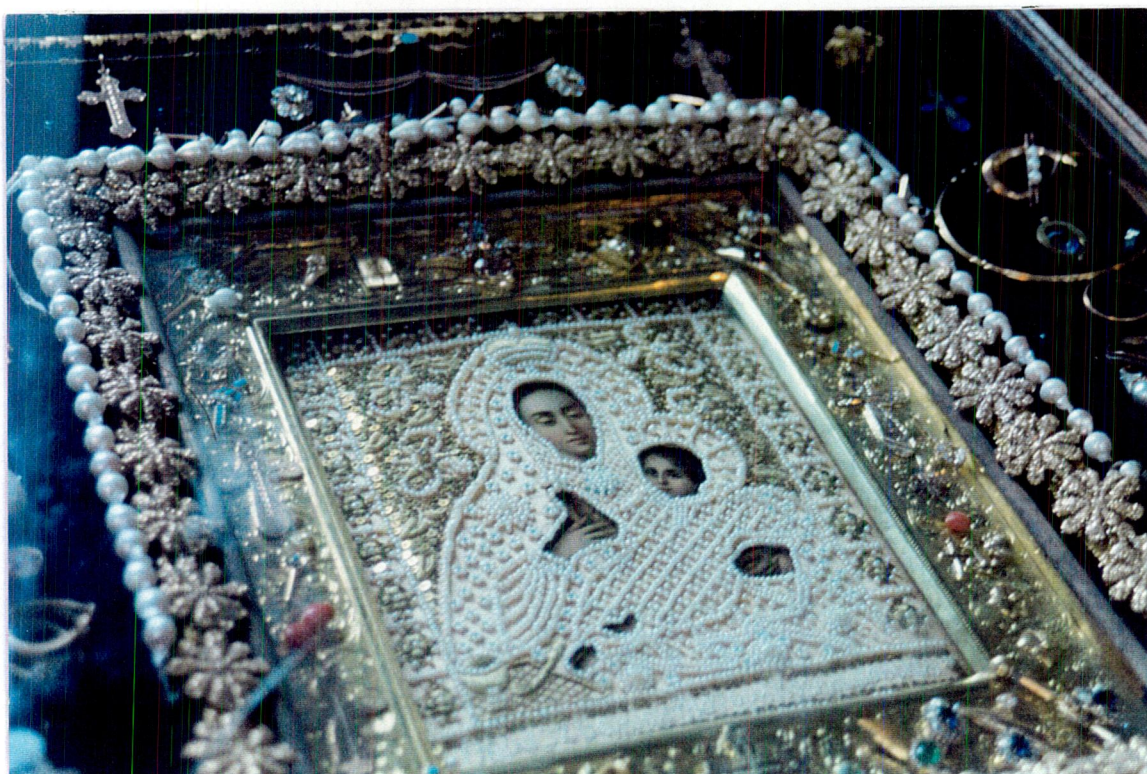


PLATE 3:

Example of a particularly elaborate icon covered with an Oklad riza.
The Miracle-working Mother of God of Kozelchan.
The Uspensky Cathedral, Helsinki, Finland.

Chapter V

TYPES OF RIZAS

Of all icon features, a review of the development of rizas over time, most effectively demonstrates that icon styles were far from being static over time. This chapter takes the reader through the main stages of riza development, from the basic metal halo to the all encompassing oklad.

5.1 The Halo and the Pendant Collar

One of the earliest forms of decoration on an icon was the attachment of a halo to the painting. This halo and the pendant collar were the prefigurations of rizas. The halo, an ornamental circle made of precious metal surrounding the heads of the holy figures, was joined to the painted panel by small nails. The upper edge of the halo was often risen from the background and folded over the edge of the icon panel. Often a smaller halo, the halo of the Child Christ, was attached to a bigger one which belongs to the Virgin Mary. Gems and pearls were sometimes set into the halo but more often it was ornamented by embossing, engraving and cut-out decorations.

A separate, crescent shaped metal plate appears in some Russian icons. This pendant collar, called Tsata was attached by nails to the shoulders of the figure - usually the Virgin Mary - and hung over the chest like a shield. This shield, originally from Byzantium, was often decorated abundantly with gems. The scarf which covered Mary's hair was left visible to be seen under the halo. This part was often also decorated with gems and pearls. It almost looked like a bonnet woven of pearls, placed on Mary before adding the halo. In some cases this net-like piece also covered Mary's and Christ's clothes altogether, leaving only the skin parts visible.

5.2 Basma

Of the many reasons for adding a riza to an icon, the most important reasons were to protect and decorate. The earliest method of protecting icons was with the use of a Basma, that is a metal cover that hides the edges of the icon panel (Plate 4, p. 27). This border, resembling a frame, was generally constructed from four metal strips which had been nailed to the edges of the icon. A Basma was usually decorated with curved patterns and leaf-like designs using embossing techniques. Gems or pearls were not generally used to decorate Basmats but small enamel pictures can be found attached to the metal strips.

Decorating icons with different sorts of metal strips was practiced in Byzantium and in Russia as early as the 12th century. This type of decoration and protection was a very popular addition to an icon especially in the 16th century. (Stuart, 1975, p. 120)

In addition to the application of Basma's it was common in the 16th century to nail hammered metal strips straight into the painting so that the whole neutral area of the background was covered leaving only the faces, hands and feet to be seen. These strips were often lightly embossed and simply patterned. When studying old Russian icons, especially 15th century icons, small dark holes from these nails can be seen at regular distances on the surface of the painting, especially on the edges and around the halo of the figures. Such evidence indicates that originally the surface of the icon was covered by a Basma or by small metal decorations, or both. What happened to those metal strips is difficult to say with certainty other than the possibility that they dropped off and got lost over the years. The fact that these decorations are often totally missing, might suggest that they were purposely removed by the owner so that the painting and the gilding could be seen again. The halo is sometimes attached to the basma. This halo is typically gilded silver, very strongly decorated by embossing and added to a silver Basma.

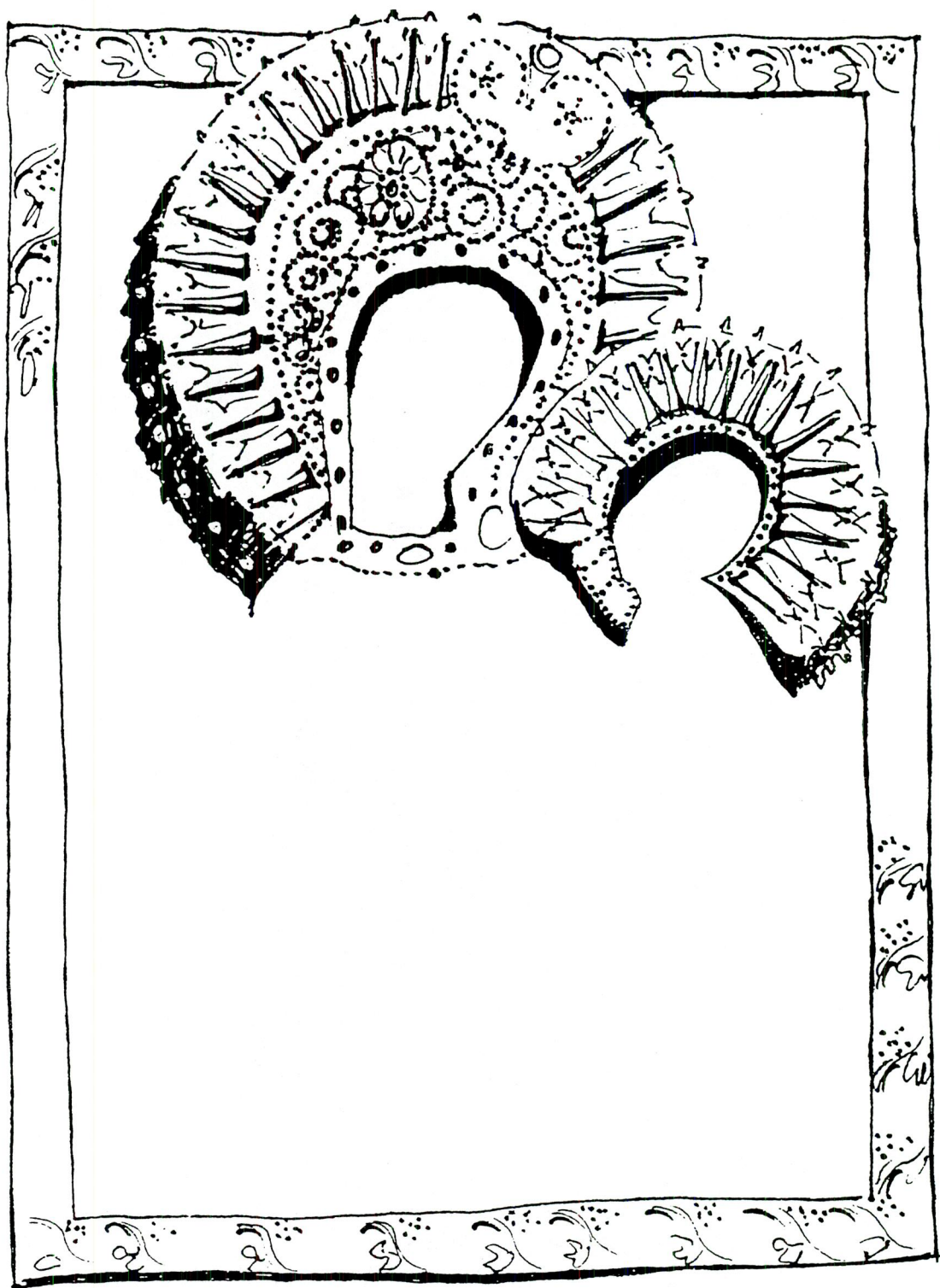


PLATE 4.

Example of Basma.

Icon of the Virgin of Tikhvin from the Konevitsa Monastery.

5.3 Risa

Although Basmās and halos were very popular decorations, it was soon realised that these were not enough to protect the icons. Around the 15th - 16th centuries, the Risa was developed *. In this type of riza the metal cover is expanded to cover the whole painted surface leaving the figures "open" to be seen under it (Plate 5, p. 29). The Risa was usually decorated using ornamental embossing, symbols and writings. The frame was often more richly ornamented while the background was left quite bare. Commonly, gems and pearls were not added, except to the halo which was always joined to the Risa. Halo's of the Virgin Mary and Christ were usually beautifully decorated, raised from the main riza, casting strong shadows on the silver background. A little crown was often designed for Mary's halo, symbolising her majestic being. Christ's halo was divided into sections and holy symbols embossed into silver. (DE Caluwé, 1980, p.43)

* Note I distinguish 'Risa' from the general riza by using "s" rather than "z" and by using a capital "R".

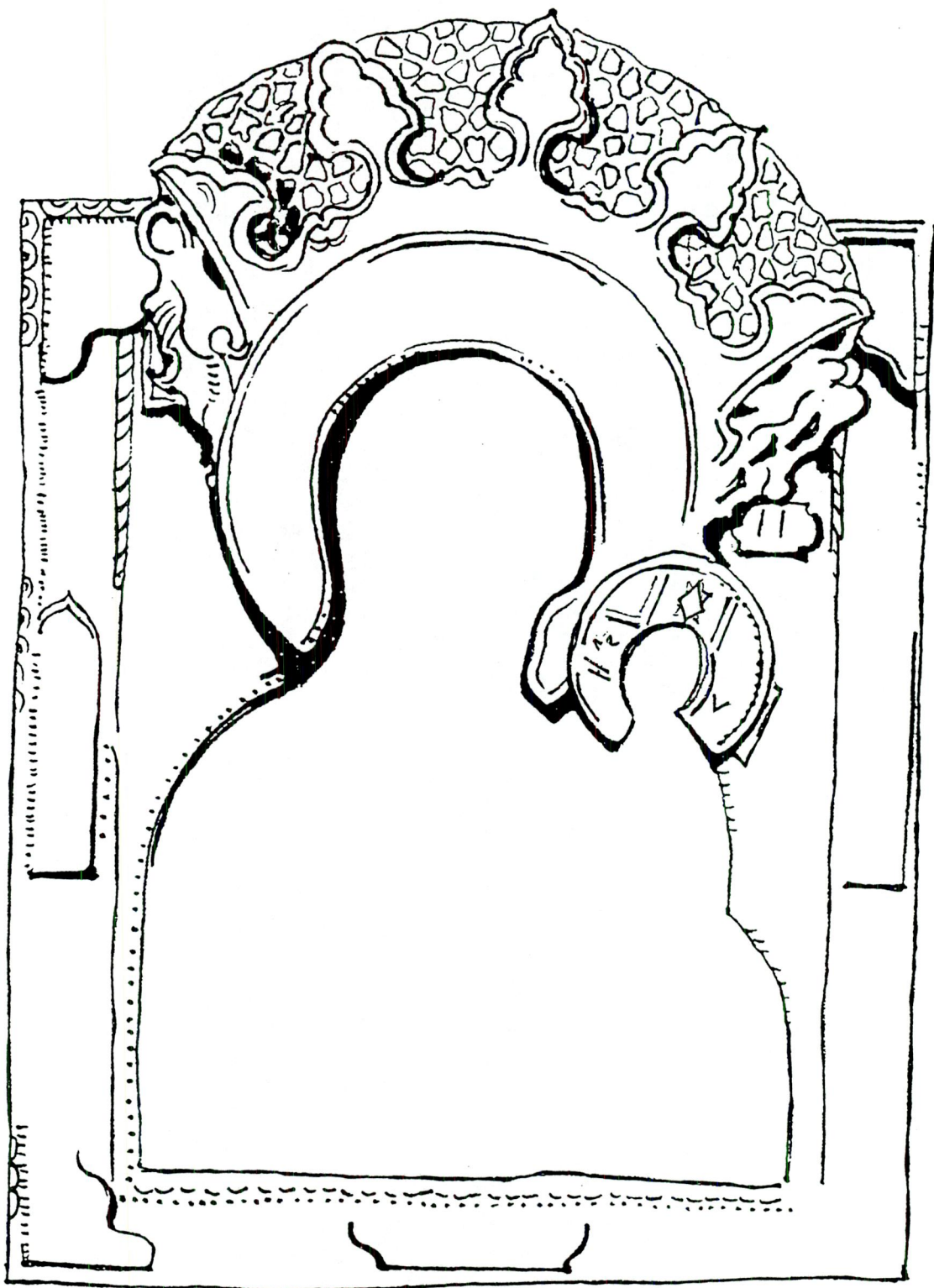


PLATE 5:

Example of Risa. Icon of the Virgin of Tikhvin from the Valamo Monastery.

5.4 Oklad

The third type of riza is the Oklad which is different to its predecessor by its even more expanded surface area. The Oklad covers up everything in a painting, even the clothing of the figure, leaving only the bare skin parts to be seen (Plate 6, p. 31). The concealing Oklad is often slightly raised from the actual painting, making an interesting shadow between the riza and the icon panel. It has been a common type of riza from the 16th century to the present day.

The sense of mystical distance between the painting and the Oklad is consistent with the idea of the unattainability of icon status; distance is an inherent part of icon philosophy. The remoteness of the icon is further emphasised by its position in the church where it is kept at the far end of the church hall, attached onto an iconostasis, where the ordinary church goer rarely approaches. Some icons are locked up in a Kiota (icon cabinet), where they are difficult to see because of the protective glass of the Kiota. In private homes, these holy pictures are often positioned either high up on the walls, or in a dark corner which is lit only by a weak light from the icon lamp. The placing of an icon is thus intended to increase the mystery and importance of the icon, just as the Oklad is intended to.



PLATE 6.

Example of Oklad.
Icon of the Virgin of Tikhvin from Konevitsa Monastery.

In the Oklad type of riza, the painting which is hidden under the cover is copied onto the metal sheet by engraving and embossing. This relief picture "continues" the concealed images on an Oklad three-dimensionally. The clothes of the figures, including the smallest details, were given plastic form. (Solodkoff, 1981, p. 124). The space behind the figures were decorated by text and symbols although the background was very often left quite smooth without much decoration. The border parts of the Oklad were usually very richly decorated; flower and leaf-like ornaments, or shell types of images were very common. These border parts were either part of the Oklad or, in some cases, they were comprised of a separate metal frame.

The Oklad served not only to adorn but also to protect the sacred picture and in the 17th and 18th centuries was made subsequently to the icon itself. Thus the date of an icon-painting and that of its oklad are not necessarily the same and the two arts do not have the same chronology. Not until the second half of the 19th century, when icons were mass produced, did it become customary to sell the icon complete with oklad". (A.Solodkoff, 1981, p.124)

Unfortunately as icons became mass-produced, use of the riza and especially the Oklad type of riza helped facilitate the production of poor quality icons. As the riza covered so much of the icon, many icon makers now did not bother to properly prime the wood panels and only painted the visible parts of the figures such as the face

and hands. The riza covering this type of an icon was usually not hand embossed, but made by stamping from less valuable metals like copper and brass, then gilded or silver plated. (Stuart, 1975, p.143)

Conclusion

By outlining the different types of rizas, this chapter demonstrated how icons developed considerably over time. From a basic metal Halo, icons went on to have Oklads which covered almost the whole surface of the icon. Thus it can be argued that in-depth research on rizas would be particularly relevant with regard to emphasising the development of icons over time.

Chapter VI

MAKING A RIZA

Even though rizas had been made for icons for centuries, the use of rizas became remarkably more prevalent from the 17th century onwards. Studios started to manufacture rizas for their own beauty value as they became admired as "independent" work of arts. As craftsmanship developed, rizas became ever more decorative and extravagant with rich patterns, strong colours and lots of jewels. Indeed they soon became so ornamental and decorated that it was difficult to see what the reliefs represented.

In the 17th century, the orthodox churches were, therefore, glittering and brightly coloured with impressive treasures like decorated pillars, gilded crosses, fine textiles and shining lamps from which the light was reflected onto gold and silver rizas decorated with shining jewels. (Kotkavaara, 1987, p.23). By this time the value of the icon came to be measured more by the quality of the silver work than the painting.

The manufacturing of rizas was not as tied to regulations as icon painting; the designer of rizas could use more of

his own creativity and ideas than the painter was permitted. Only a few factors had to be taken compulsorily into consideration. The symbols or monograms were required to be near the figures in a riza as well as in a painting. In Christ's halo which is marked with lines to represent a 9 fold cross the monogram $\overline{\text{W}} \overline{\text{S}} \text{H}$, which means "I am who I am", had to be seen. Also the three stars of Mary's maphorion had to be visible on the riza if it covered the painted maphorion. The highest star in her head-dress signifies her virginity before childbirth. The right shoulder star indicates that she was a virgin during childbirth, and the left hand shoulder shows that even after childbirth she remained a virgin.

In cases where the riza hid the actual painting, these symbols had to be transferred to the metal cover by embossing, engraving, setting stones and other decorative devices. If the riza concealed the painted haloes of the figures, the haloes had to be made to be clearly seen on the riza instead, by making them separate from the main riza or strongly embossing them. Haloes had to be always lifted higher than the main riza surface. There are additional regulations concerning the openings of the rizas which specify that bare skin parts like the face, hands and feet have to be always visible. (Lonka, 1991, p.15) In addition to following such regulations,

the goldsmith would be expected to be very familiar with the history and the philosophy of icons and to use old icons as models for his work.

When fastening the riza onto the icon, the approach was not to nail it onto the actual surface of the painting, but rather to the outer edge of the panel, or onto the reverse side. The best option was to use hinges, so that the Riza could be easily taken off and put back on the icon. (Huovinen, 1980, p.19).

On most of the rizas made of either silver or gold, the following stamps should be found: the year the riza was made, the place where it was manufactured, the name of the inspector and the name of the goldsmith. Sometimes the goldsmith stamps only his initials and therefore remains unidentified, but each country should have a list of different stamps and initials so that the maker can be identified. These hallmarks are important for icon researchers when trying to identify and date old icons.

From the time of Peter all silver was required to be fully marked. Thus, ikoncovers bear the hallmark of the town where they were produced, the date and, as often as not, the work-masters initials. They are also stamped with the figure '88', or an equivalent number, to denote the quality of the silver (the number of zolotniks). Often of the finest quality, these casings should be appraised in the same way as valuable snuff-boxes and other objects in silver. They reflect the successive fashionable tastes prevalent in Europe at that time, from Rococo to the neo/Classic of Alexander I, which rank amongst the finest. (Stuart, 1975, 134)

It is important to remember that the particular riza was not necessarily made simultaneously with the painting. It could have been added much later, and even changed so that it might not be the original, but a second or later version. What can usually be said with certainty is that at the time of hallmarking the riza, the icon had already been painted, and so this is a useful starting point in the dating process.

The craftsmen who made the rizas had to be very skilled in a variety of metal-work techniques, such as embossing, engraving and stone setting. Though a number of metal-workers might have been involved in producing any one riza.

Chasing was one of the most common techniques used in the decoration of rizas. With chasing a linear decoration is impressed onto a silver sheet from the front with a punch and a hammer. This type of decorating could be used alone, but it was often used in association with embossing, also called the repousse technique. In contrast to chasing, with embossing the image is punched from the inner side of the metal. The embossing is usually done using pitch base where the riza is fastened. A sketch of an image is transferred onto the surface and then carefully embossed into the metal.

The metal used in embossing was usually silver because of its stretching quality and ability to endure the pressures of hammering. Copper was always mixed into silver to harden it, from the assay marks stamped into a silver object, the mixture of silver and copper can be seen. (Sterling silver, for example, would be marked 925/1000.)

Due to its softness, gold was not often used in embossing work, it was also too expensive to be used in such big objects as rizas. Occasionally, smaller parts, like haloes and pendant collars were made of gold and added to a silver riza, but even smaller parts were usually made of silver or brass and gilded or silver plated.

Rizas can also be manufactured by a mechanical technique called stamping. In stamping technique the metal sheet is mechanically pressed against a shaped wooden or metal pit. The pit is designed in a way, that the patterns will transfer as a mirror image into the metal. Rizas made by stamping technique were quick and cheap to make. A stamped riza was most often made of copper or brass.

Engraving was another way of decorating Rizas. Engraving is quite different to chasing and embossing in that engraving involves cutting chips off the metal, not just stretching it. The metal surrounding the pattern is cut

away so that the line of a decoration stands off the surface.

A particularly ancient way of decorating fine metal objects is Niello technique. This technique was known for centuries in the Far East, the ancient Greeks, Romans and Egyptians knew the technique as well. At the end of the last century Niello became popular as a way of decorating folk objects in Russia. It was also occasionally used as a technique for decorating icons there. Niello is used primarily for silver and gold work, but could be adapted to copper and brass as well. In Niello technique, a black substance is poured onto the engraved metal surface and the end result is a black line drawing in a silver base.

Enamel technique is very old as well, the earliest discoveries are from 1300 BC. This technique was also used by icon makers. There are many different types of enamel techniques, the most common of them are cloisonne, surface enamel and enamel painting. Cloisonne enamel (cubicle enamel) is a technique where metal thread or thin metal strips are soldered into the metal base to represent the outlines of the designs. The small cubicles formed will then be filled with enamel mass. Cloisonne enamel was very popular in Byzantium.

In the surface enamel technique holes or hollows are engraved in the metal. The colourful enamel is then melted into these holes. This is a rather similar technique to Niello technique. With enamel painting the design is painted onto the surface with a brush, after which the object is fired. This technique resembles glass and porcelain painting.

The use of enamel technique to decorate rizas proved particularly effective. Lots of different colours and tones are possible in enamel techniques so the results were often clear, shiny and translucent like an icon painting done by wax technique.

A technique widely used in making craft objects by different cultures all over the world and also sometimes used on rizas is filigree. Filigree is usually done using gold and silver. The gold or silver thread used in filigree is angular in shape. The metal thread is often braided using two threads. These threads can then be shaped and soldered on a suitable metal base. The threads can also be used without a base to give a lighter, transparent, lace-like effect. Small gold or silver granules can also be melted into the "metal lace" to increase the decorative effect.

Chiselled and repousse work in slightly higher relief and delicate filigree work in twisted gold

wire (skan), replaced the older manually stamped patterns. There developed a taste for rich polychrome, many coloured enamels, and the interplay of variegated jewels.
(J.Stuart, 1975, p.121)

As mentioned earlier, Orthodox believers traditionally made donations towards the decoration of icons to show gratitude and respect. Most often these donations were jewels and pearls. Jewels were set into the riza using different types of setting methods. The two most common ones were a 'complete' setting and a 'nail' setting.

In a 'complete' setting a fitting frame was made into which the stone was inserted. With 'nail' setting stones were set using metallic thread or small strips of silver to hold the jewels in place. A goldsmith would use the method most suitable for the particular stone, taking account of the material available, the type of riza and his own skills.

Pearls were usually fastened to studs which were soldered into the riza. Also, as mentioned earlier in the context of the haloes and the pendant collars, parts like Mary's head-dress or parts of clothing were often made of fabric such as velvet and here the pearls were sown on. Most often the jewels and the pearls were used to decorate the

haloes, pendant collar and the frame. Usually the background of the riza was left without any extra decorations to balance the other richly decorated parts.

In addition to the riza, a further decorative and protective feature of some icons is the Kiota cabinet or case. The Kiota is a carved wooden cabinet that resembles a hut or a cabin. It is usually 5-20cm deep with a glass lid or door. The door is opened by hinges. The Kiota is bigger than the icon so that the icon, with riza, is placed in the middle of the back wall of the cabinet. The Kiota is often a rectangular shape although the upper edge can be arched or otherwise decorated. The most adorned cabinets can be made to resemble the onion-shaped tower of an Orthodox church. The decorations and the beauty of the Kiotas, like rizas, express the veneration of the believers for icons.

The first Kiotas were, as far as we know, made as early as the 16th century. At first they were made to protect the most valuable icons of the Tsars, the court and the nobles. Also in the course of time the most venerated icons of the big churches got this kind of wooden cabinet to protect them. The frame of Kiotas are frequently adorned with carved decorations, often coated with goldleaf. Grapes, leaves and flowers were popular patterns for decorating the sides of the cabinet. In more

resent times smooth gold leaf covered Kiotas became popular. In the late 19th century, when carpentry became more industrialized, Kiotas became more common and the use of an icon cabinet to protect cheap unelaborate icons was not uncommon. (Willamo, 1989, p.95)

Conclusion

By explaining the many different techniques used in making and decorating rizas, this chapter further demonstrated the great variety in techniques and styles that existed in icon production over time and space. It also demonstrated the great skills required of the artists and crafts people involved.

Chapter VII

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this thesis the reader has been given an introduction to the icon as a work of art. The thesis begins by introducing the reader in Chapter 2 to the deep and rich history and philosophy behind the production of icons. The important technical skills needed to produce an icon were outlined in Chapter 3 which also emphasised the restrictive Orthodox Church guide-lines concerning the production of an icon. These two chapters outlined how icons were not just sacred Church images but also works of great technical skill.

The case was argued in this thesis that while icons are generally perceived to have varied little in their production techniques and styles over centuries, closer examination shows that this is only true to a point. The thesis argued that in one element of icons in particular, the rizas, change and development is particularly evident. Chapters 4 to 7 outlined the great skill, craftsmanship and creativity that went into the production of many rizas. Chapter 5 on 'Types of Rizas' especially demonstrated the significant development that occurred over time, and argued that in-depth research into this element of icons would thus be particularly relevant and worthwhile.

The sheer beauty of many icons and the great technical skills that went into their production ensures that icons will always have a place in the history of art. However, the significant development of icon production over time and the great variety of techniques and styles used, are likely to continue to go unnoticed by the casual observer. For many the icon will continue to be a bland piece of religious painting which remained static over centuries.

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