

What Do Icons Teach?



Born in Kiev, Maximilian Voloshin (1877-1932) was a Symbolist poet and painter who lived between Paris and Moscow, 1901 to 1914, belonging to the avant-garde milieu of artists in both cities. A large exhibition of icons was held in Moscow in March 1913 on the occasion of the celebration of 300 years of the Romanov Dynasty, many from the museum collection of Stepan Ryabushinsky and Ilya Ostroukhov (which opened in 1909). This review was published in *Apollon*, in May 1914. The reproductions were selected to illustrate Voloshin's discussion. Photograph: Maximilian Voloshin in Paris, 1905.

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In every epoch, the tomb and barbarianism have been the foremost guardians of works of art. The whole of Egypt has come out of tombs, Tanagra and Myrina statuettes were taken out of sepulchres. Mycenaean tombs, Roman catacombs, kurgans of Kertch, buried Pompei, Olympia destroyed by an earthquake.

Such are the chambers of the treasures of antique art. Similarly, the fire at Knossos, the disappearance of Hisarlik [Troy], the covering of the Forum by the Campo Vaccino, war, destruction, fire, oblivion are just such forces that have preserved for us the very precious vestiges of the past. The name of Constantine attributed by mistake to the equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius, the sculptures of the goddess Isis rebaptised as black Virgins in French churches, such are the errors that have made possible the preservation of these works down to our own time.

Death preserves, life destroys. Up to the very beginning of the Renaissance, the remains of the antique world were abandoned in the state in which the barbarians had left them. In its love for Antiquity, in a century the Renaissance destroyed even more works than the barbarians had done in a thousand years. In retouching the Venus of Arles, Girardon is not an exception in the history of art. All the antique statues suffered the same fate. One need only compare the Vatican museum to the museum of the Baths or that of Athens. The love of art is more dangerous than oblivion.

The barbarism of the Russians saved us from the divine discovery of our natural artistic heritage. Every year, pious

savages who understood nothing of the beauty of colour covered the icons with an oily varnish called *olifa*. In drying this *olifa* formed a thick, transparent shell like glass that barely allows the outline of the face to show through. But it is under this layer that the original egg-based colours have been preserved that now appear before our eyes in all their brightness. *Olifa* has been this sealed tomb which protected and brought this ancient art to us. Icon restorers had to work like archaeologists, successively taking off two, three, and sometimes even four layers of paint before coming to the oldest layer and the authentic work. A little like Schliemann who had to remove five strata of dark ruins before revealing those of Homeric Troy.

Who knows, in fact, if this cleaning of the icons will not lead in turn to their disappearance? For the moment, in any case, ancient Russian art is revealed to our eyes in all its fulness and all its splendour just as in the same manner the ancient world revealed itself to the men of the Renaissance. Today this art seems so bright, so modern, it proposes such obvious and immediate solutions to the problems of modern art that not only does it allow but it requires us to consider it not just from the archaeological point of view but also from an aesthetic one.

The newness of this discovery depends first and foremost on the tone and the colouring of icons. One would never have imagined that the brownish varnish of *olifa* could conceal such clear, luminous and earthy tones. Red and green dominate: everything is built on their opposition, on the harmonies of



1 • *The Saviour Sitting on the Throne*, Novgorod, 15th century
Tempera on wood, 152.5 x 108 cm. Novgorod Museum Collection

cinnabar or of vermilion, and of green or of olive green, in the total absence of blues and violets. (1 •) What significance can this have?

The colours have their own symbology but are nevertheless based on very real foundations. Let us take the three primary colours: yellow, red and blue. They make up everything that we see. Red corresponds to the earth, blue to the air, and yellow to the light of the sun. Let us now translate these colours into symbols. Red would refer to the clay of which the body of man is made, it designates flesh, blood, passion. Blue, associated with the air, would translate the mind, thought, the infinite, the unknown. Yellow, linked to the sun and to light, would signify will, consciousness of self, royalty. The symbolism would also follow the law of complementary colours. The complementary of red – which is the mixture of yellow and blue, in other words, light and air – is green, colour of the plant kingdom, opposed to the animal world, colour of rest, of physical joy and of balance, colour of hope. Violet is obtained by mixing red and blue. Carnal nature, penetrated by a feeling of mystery, gives rise to prayer. Violet, colour of gathering, is opposed to yellow, colour of consciousness of the higher self and affirmation of the self. Orange, complementary of blue, is a mixture of yellow and red. In other words, full consciousness of the self united with passion produce pride. And pride is symbolically opposed

to pure thought and to the sense of mystery. If, equipped with these elements, we now consider the pictorial heritage of different peoples, then we will see that fundamental colours which make up their palette also characterise their aspirations. Thus, violet and yellow define medieval Europe as is shown by the stained glass windows of cathedrals. Orange and blue dominate in oriental fabrics and carpets. Violet and blue appear at every period where religiosity and mysticism develop. Now, in fact, the almost total absence of these two colours in Russian icon painting merits being emphasised. It reveals to us that we are here dealing with a very simple, earthly art where mysticism and asceticism are unknown.

Regarding this Gladstone could be called to mind because he asserted that the Greeks in the time of Homer did not recognise blue and did not even have a word in their language by which to designate this colour. The same is true for Greek painting at the time of Polynote where the colour scale was limited to black, white, yellow and red. Blue, long known to the Egyptians and which the Greeks used for their funerary statues, was not used in their painting. Apelles is the first to have used it. On the other hand, green was known in Greek painting but only as a mixture of black and yellow, in other words it was a muted grey-green. Symbolically, this scale red-yellow-black speaks to us of an earthly art, realistic, which corresponds well to what we know of Greek art, but it also denotes a deep pessimism. If we had more elements we could attempt to follow the evolution of religious feeling among the Greeks through the colours. In Byzantine painting we have noticed that, in fact, yellow is replaced by gold, in other words that one comes even closer to the glorious solar majesty, while red tends to become purple, a colour that is not far from the violet of prayer.

In yellow and red the Slavic chromatic scale coincides with that of the Greeks, but nevertheless replaces black with green. A green that appears everywhere in the place of blue. Russian icon painting sees air as the colour green; it renders day light reflections by areas of green mixed with white (2 •). Thus, rather than the deep-seated pessimism of the Greeks it inspires the colour of hope and the joy of life. Nor does it have a relationship with the Byzantine chromatic scale.

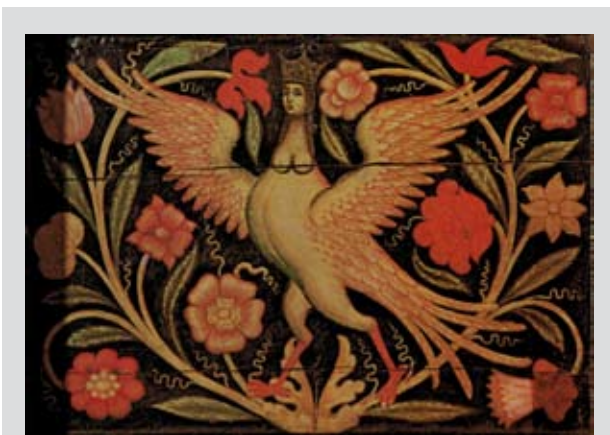
Now these characteristics contradict everything that we are in the habit of seeing in the old icons and also everything that the drawing and the composition of icons tell us.

For these icons speak to us clearly and resolutely of fasting, asceticism, of the mortification of the flesh, of the waiting for the last Judgement, of fanatical prayers and contrition, of anguish and mystical terrors. When one looks at them from a distance they appear to us like patches of colours affirming joy, abundance, the taste for life. But when we come up close everything speaks to us of death and the last Judgement.



2 • *The Ascension of Our Lord*, Novgorod, 16th century, Tempera on wood, 72.3 x 58.8 cm. Novgorod Museum Collection

There is only one possible explanation for this contradiction. Russian icon painting developed as an art subject to canons. But the canon concerned the drawing and the composition. Those that came from Byzantium and which had evolved slowly over the course of centuries. But this strict canonical form coexisted with the broad and generous stream of popular art. And it is precisely in the colours of icons in which its vitality is affirmed, the exuberant joy of the young Slavic nation such as we know it from the colours of embroideries and crafts (3 •). Austere academic art, prisoner of fixed models which allows only well-tested combinations



3 • *Wedding Chest*, 17th century, Sirin, mythical bird of paradise

of forms, left the field open to individual imagination in its approach to colours. A heavily worked antique chalice has been filled with a young wine, soft, light and sparkling. A combination that is as good as it is original!

It is not in fact what a poet does when he chooses the strict form of the sonnet, for example, and which flows in this predetermined mould to a perfect design in terms of rhythm and logic, the momentous lyrical state of his soul? To take the image of the tree, in the authentic and organic manifestations of art one can always distinguish the solid trunk as representing the canon, with the leaves freely spread over the branches which refer to individual creation.

When one looks more closely at the technique of icon painting one experiences a profound artistic joy before the simplicity and the beauty of the means employed. One is seduced by the logic and method of the work which are so lacking in contemporary painting. One takes pleasure in imagining what the application of the very process of the icon in the handling of the human figure could be to the art of the portrait.

In this is a requirement which contemporary art can never satisfy, and one would really like to see the work of artists of today being as consequential in its development, as perfect at each stage of its progression. The towers of Notre Dame of Paris may have been built up in receding octagonal segments but in the state in which they are they have the appearance of being perfectly finished. Which of course is the case for any unfinished Gothic church.

The method of icon painting itself makes it possible to interrupt the work at any stage. When the icon painter traces the outlines of a figure by filling the interior of the *sankir* [under painting of the face and hands made of a mixture of ochre and green earth (but which varies according to school)], he immediately draws out a particular silhouette that takes on life. Then in drawing the features of the face, he seems to get closer to this distant shadow in a step towards the spectator. It is then that he passes to the phase of the application of white. Egg yolk brings to the white highlights a certain transparency. Putting a touch of white on the darker ground where it catches the light, the painter seems to tone down the flaring up of the interior and the darkness of skin. In these touches of white, which will be superimposed, the figure emerges little by little from the shadow and seems to approach the spectator step by step. It is then that the painter will establish the distance that he chooses. With mathematical precision he can make this figure come up level with the surface of the icon, even give it a sort of relief or, on the contrary, keep it in the ground. It is no longer a question here of finishing or not finishing. Everything comes back to the degree of receding or advancing. From the



4 • Saints Eustratias, Artnias and Polyeuctus Novgorod, late 15th century, Tempera on canvas 24 x 19 cm. Novgorod Museum Collection

beginning of the work, the figure “starts to walk” towards the painter and it is up to him to know just how far he intends to let it “come up” to him (4 •).

Tombs are not discovered by chance. Works of art rise up from the oblivion of historical periods when they show themselves to be necessary. In these days of a terrible collapse of art, of uncertainty and confusion in aspirations and intentions, ancient Russian art reveals itself to us in order to give us a lesson on the harmonious equilibrium between tradition and individualism, method and invention, line and colour.

Translated from the French by Patricia Railing.

In, Maximilian Volochine, *Ecrits sur l'Art*. Textes traduits, annotés et présentés par Marie-Aude Albert, Préface de Jacques Catteau. Paris: Hermann Arts, 2007, 127-133.

Contains reviews of “Odilon Redon”, 1904, “Bilan de l'impressionnisme” 1904, “Maurice Denis”, 1904, “Van Gogh au Salon des Indépendants”, 1905, “Les tendances de la nouvelle peinture française: Cézanne, Van Gogh, Gauguin”, 1908, “Les Cubistes” (Salon d'Automne, 1911), “L'Avant-garde russe: le Valet de Carreau et la Queue de l'âne”, 1912, “Sarian”, 1913, “Sourikov,” 1914, among others.