A detailed census has yet to be made of the many Russian icons acquired by American citizens in the first two decades of Soviet rule. The bulk of such an inventory would comprise icons picked up in the street markets and provincial cities of Soviet Russia, bought at state run stores, or from émigré antique dealers in the European capitals. Varying widely in age, quality, and condition, they were part of the detritus left by the Bolshevik revolution, dislodged from their natural habitat in churches, monasteries, institutions and private homes, and transposed to a land where their original liturgical or devotional function had little relevance.

Not all of the icons that came to the United States between the wars were acquired in this haphazard fashion, however. Beginning in 1929 the Soviet trade organ charged with exporting art and antiques from the Old Regime (Antikvariat) actively channeled onto the American market icons that might attract a stereotypical American consumer by pandering to his fantasies and exploiting his naiveté. Seen in this light, the formation of America’s most distinctive icon collections between the wars was not a simple case of one nation plundering another in times of revolutionary upheaval. As a cartoon in an émigré newspaper suggests, a more complex exchange based on national and class stereotypes was at work, as the young Soviet state made room for its own new culture by offloading its unwanted detritus on a nation sensitive to its own cultural lack (Fig. 1).

Stimulating a desire for commodities was the central challenge facing the capitalist system during the Depression years and “consumer engineering,” with its emphasis on understanding the needs and desires of the target audience, was the key strategy for achieving it.  

1. The closest to such a census is John R. Barns, Icon Collections in the United States (Torrance, CA: Oakwood Publications, 1991). Only collections in public museums are listed, however.

2. “The newest business tool to receive a definite name has come to be named consumer engineering. Briefly it is shaping a product to fit more exactly consumers’ needs or tastes, but in its widest sense it includes any plan which stimulates the consumption of goods.” Earnest Elmo Calkins, “What Consumer Engineering Really Is,” in Roy Sheldon and Egmont Arens, Con-
market for Russian art, the Antikvariat leadership had its own notions of consumer engineering. It was a truism of Soviet ideology that Americans had a fondness for sensationalism – a fascination with royalty, celebrity, and status – bordering on the pathological. With the Depression came a new kind of American collector, unsure of his taste and susceptible to persuasive marketing. It was not coincidental, then, that American matrons were offered icons suffused with tragic memories of the murdered imperial family or that American businessman George Hann acquired a collection with a showy museum pedigree. For this first generation of American icon collectors the provenance of the pieces they bought constituted a large part of their value and attraction, a fact that the Soviet trade organs exploited to good effect. It is these questions of marketing tactics and consumer expectations that I want to explore in this article.

I

Of the cultural commodities displaced by the revolution, icons were the most abundant and the most diverse in appraised value. Since its introduction to Russia from Byzantium in the tenth century, icon painting had undergone a complex stylistic evolution before degenerating into a largely assembly-line production in the last years of the empire. This descending scale of value was already clearly articulated in March 1922, when the Soviet of People’s Commissars (Sovnarkom) decreed that no icons could be taken out of Soviet Russia that

... have traces of age, are repainted as part of a renewal (vozobnovlenie), or have signs of darkening prior to the exposure of their original painting. No icons are to be released from before the mid 16th century; no icons made between 1550 and 1700 of high artistic quality or with a composition of historic or ethnographic [bytovoi] significance; from the 18th century, icons with a particularly strong tendency towards realism and scenes of daily life; from the 19th century, icons from before 1850
