Thirty years ago in the West, Russian art was almost unheard of, not only by cultured individuals, but even by Slavic and Byzantine scholars. A handful of Russian émigrés (N. Kondakov, P. Muratov, and A. Grabar, among others) wrote articles that attracted the attention of a limited circle of specialists, Byzantine scholars for the most part.

In Russia itself, N. Sychev, A. Anisimov, D. Ainalov, I. Grabar', V. Lazarev, M. Alpatov, and a few others wrote a series of fundamental and excellent articles which are now being republished. These early studies dealt essentially with restoration work, church architecture, monumental painting ("frescoes"), and icons, which were then being discovered by art historians. Applied arts, such as religious embroidery (various types of sacerdotal ornaments, epitaphia, and so on), liturgical silverware, small carved icons, encolpia and phylacteries, and so on, rarely attracted any interest.

The past thirty years have been witness to immense progress in the study of Old Russian architecture and painting. Monographs, art collections, more or less scholarly or commercial albums, and tourist guides are constantly being published and made available to the public.

The Istoriia russkogo iskusstva, a monumental opus in thirteen volumes, published by the Academy of Sciences of the USSR under the direction of I. Grabar' and V. Lazarev between 1953 and 1969, remains, for the moment, the best synthesis of this field (vols. 1–5), although a certain number of the ideas presented are now due for revision and completion. In addition, the precious volumes of Drevnerusskoe iskusstvo (twenty-one volumes published between 1964 and 2000 by Nauka) contain a wealth of information in its hundreds of illustrated articles. It is also appropriate here to mention the series Pamiatniki kul'tury. Novye otkrytiia. Ezhegodnik (Nauka), which all have sections on art history and archaeology. One can find a few short but interesting articles on the applied arts in the publications of the Tret'jakov Gallery, the Hermitage, the Russian Museum, and the State Historical Museum, as well as in the series Sovetskoe iskusstvoznanie and Khudozhestvennoe nasledie (VNIIR). And finally, there are the illustrated fascicles Muzei. All of
these publications contain short studies on small carved or cast metallic icons.

In spite of the number of individual publications, books, albums and catalogues, and of the partial attempts at creating a corpus, there exist very few synthetic works or analytical studies devoted to these small icons. Who will rise to the challenge of organizing this rich, fascinating and difficult field of scholarship? Metal objects, it must be remembered, should undergo metallographic analyses in order to distinguish the early encolpia from their later copies.

Every historian of Old Russian art knows that if it is often difficult to identify and date painted icons, a situation dramatically illustrated by the polemics surrounding the Hann collection, sold in 1980, or by the growing number of fake icons which have been reproduced, exhibited and sold during the past few years, what can be said about the cast metal icons which have been imitated and reproduced for centuries and are still being copied at the present time? Certain modern copies are easily identifiable (those made in Chevetogne, Belgium, for example), but the metal icons remade in old molds or by stamping on old models during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries are often very difficult to differentiate from the original items. There does not as yet exist a more or less systematic, scholarly, or pragmatic publication that could serve as an adequate guide on this difficult terrain. The few existing catalogues of old collections are often useful — if and when one can find them in libraries! — but they offer few descriptions, often contain errors and present neither comparisons nor argumentation.

Some progress has been made for carved icons and lit’è by information available in the following books and articles:


1. The Russian term melkaiu plastika is difficult to translate; its best English equivalent is “small carved icons,” but the term also includes what is known in Russian as lit’è, encolpia and phylacteries cast in bronze or brass.
