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THE ICON AS OPEN BOOK: REFLECTIONS OF NORTH RUSSIAN CULTURE

The icon has played a multi-faceted role in Russian culture since Christianity spread to the North from Kiev in the eleventh century. The term ikona is used for an image of a sacred person or event that provides a focus for prayer. While icons can take many forms — mosaic, fresco, embroidery, carved wood, metal engraving — the most common medium is egg tempera on wooden panels. Size has varied tremendously, ranging from tiny icons that believers could carry on their persons to panels as large as doors or even walls. From the beginning, however, subject matter and forms of depiction were governed by a strict canon. In the Orthodox world icons are “venerated as a two-way channel of communication with the supernatural world,” and each event or saint thus requires its own recognizable image, “accessible to all classes of a largely illiterate society.” Icon painters did not create individual personal visions but served as the instruments through which a long-established image was “revealed.”

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2. Robin Milner-Gulland, “Editor’s Foreword,” in Oleg Tarasov, Icon and Devotion: Sacred Spaces in Imperial Russia, trans. and ed. Robin Milner-Gulland (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), 11-12; this is a revised and reorganized version of Tarasov’s Ikona i blagochestie: Ocherki ikonnogo dela v imperatorskoi Rossii (Moscow: Progress-Kultur/Traditsiia, 1995).

3. Tarasov, Icon and Devotion, 24-26
mascus, the great defender of images against the eighth-century Byzantine iconoclasts, repeated that “images are the books of the illiterate, the ever-speaking heralds of honoring the saints, teaching those who gaze upon them without words . . . .” To counter his opponents he cited the declaration of the seventh-century Bishop Leontius of Neapolis that images of the saints “are not our gods, but books which lie open and are venerated in church in order to remind of us God . . . .” 4 Over the centuries the connection between the icon and the Word was reinforced by the seemingly endless stream of saints shown holding the Book or holding a scroll inscribed with a passage from Scripture.

The examination of icon-painters’ adaptations of Orthodoxy’s strict iconographical canons within communities opens a window into a fascinating world which has left few written sources. With its conversion to Christianity in 988 Kievan Rus’ received a traditional iconography transmitted through Byzantium and the Balkans. Over time, however, stylistic changes gradually occurred. Russian icon-painting took on characteristics that distinguished it from images produced in other parts of the Orthodox world, and even within the Russian lands regional and local features began to emerge, often in response to the needs and desires of the surrounding community. This case study focuses on icons from the vast area of the Russian North, stretching from Karelia to the western Urals, from the Arctic Circle to the Vologda region about 500 kilometers north of Moscow, with emphasis on icons from the fifteenth century and later.

At present there are more questions than answers in this field of study. In many respects the study of the role of icons in Russian culture, particularly in the centuries after 1500, is just beginning. This “late start” can be attributed to two obstacles. One arose from long-standing barriers blocking accessibility to these images. Russians, unlike other Orthodox believers, not only coated their icons with olifa, a type of varnish that initially brightened the painting but then turned dark and became darker with smoke and soot from candles burned before the image, but they also added layers of over-painting as images became too indistinct to be recognized. Safe methods of removing the later layers developed only in the early twentieth century. The first exhibits of the bright images once buried under “black boards” and over-paintings dazzled audiences and opened new paths of investigation. After the Bolshevik Revolution the nationalization of church, monastic, and private collections removed another barrier for art historians: the church could no longer bar ex-