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An Imperial Collection: Exploring the Hammers' Icons

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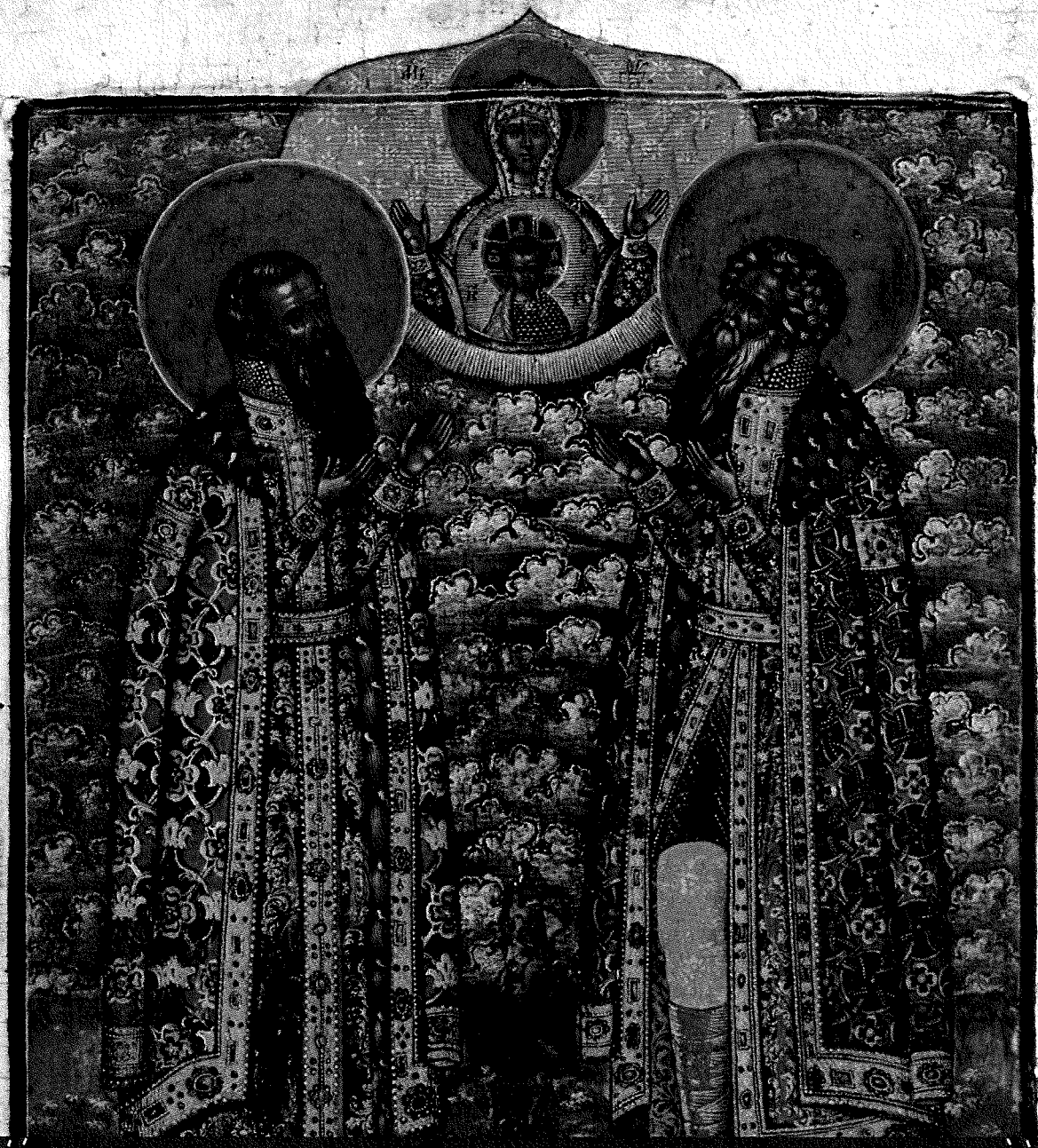


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RUBLEV *to* FABERGÉ

The Journey of Russian Art and Culture to America

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AN IMPERIAL COLLECTION: EXPLORING THE HAMMERS' ICONS



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MANY RUSSIAN ICONS PASSED through the hands of the entrepreneurial brothers Armand and Victor Hammer in the 1930s and 1940s, entering America's museums and private collections at a time when the icon's artistic value was by no means universally acknowledged. These "Hammer icons" had an aura and mystique all their own. Whether attributed to the legendary Andrei Rublev or bathed in the glamorous

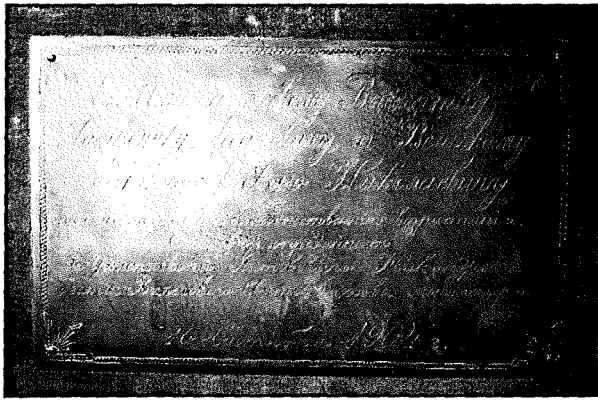


fig. 3a: Detail of the presentation plaque on the back of *The Martyrs St. Anthony, St. John, and St. Eustace of Vilna*, 1904 (cat. no. 45).

aura of Fabergé and Co., virtually all shared the same unique provenance. In their catalogs and promotional materials, supplemented by elegant labels and parchment testimonials, Hammer Galleries assured its American clientele that these devotional images came directly from the “Imperial Collection” of the murdered Nicholas II and his family.¹

By the time of their arrest in 1917 Russia’s imperial family possessed great quantities of icons of every conceivable age, style, and material

value. Icons were a central presence in the lives of Nicholas II and his wife Alexandra, their children, and the Dowager Empress. Yet the icons that once filled their personal apartments in the Alexander Palace, Gatchina, and the Anichkov Palace seem to come from quite a different world than those that attracted famous pre-Revolutionary collectors such as Ilia Ostroukhov, Aleksei Morozov, or Stepan Riabushinskii. In an age when the growing ranks of icon collectors set great store by values associated with secular time (dating, authenticity, the styles of individual masters, the belief that older was always superior to newer), in Nicholas’s inner circle the idealized past and the troubled present were subsumed within the idea of a timeless Holy Russia. What moved the imperial couple to collect icons was not any aesthetic, scholarly, or antiquarian impulse, but an ideal of piety and patriotism modeled on Nicholas II’s favorite forebear, the “gentle tsar” Alexei Mikhailovich (r. 1645–76), who reportedly accumulated some eight thousand icons in the course of his reign.²

Like their ancestors before them—and most of their subjects—Nicholas II and his family were first and foremost collectors of contemporary icons. Throughout their lives they received innumerable icons from individuals, regiments, convents, noble and merchant assemblies, even cities, presented to mark the important events of both family (births, marriages, anniversaries) and national life (ceremonial visits, coronations, jubilees). Commissioned from the most fashionable jewelers and workshops in the capitals, or purchased from more modest sources (monastery kiosks, for instance, or local shops), *en masse* they would have conveyed an astonishingly varied picture of the state of the art of icon painting and adornment at the end of the empire, a reflection of not just the imperial family’s taste, but that of Russian elite society as a whole.

Typically these imperial presentation icons bore engraved plaques and inscriptions that anchored them in a specific historic moment—the birth of the

heir in 1904 (cat. no. 45) (**fig. 3a**) or a visit by the Commander-in-Chief to Staff Headquarters during World War I (cat. no. 51). Just as the Empire's churches and monasteries housed the most diverse assortment of icons accumulated by multiple generations of clergy and donors, so in the imperial residences icons from earlier reigns formed a record of changing aesthetic fashions (cat. no. 53). Hung in icon corners, in close-packed rows above the bed, in special cupboards or on screens, they must have had an almost talismanic power for protection and intercession within the intimate circle of family life.

When the Hammer brothers received permission from the Soviet government to bring Romanov family icons to the United States for sale in the late 1920s, the bulk were just this sort of modern presentation icon, their romantic provenance undoubtedly intended to compensate for what at that time was widely perceived as their lack of real aesthetic value.³ But what of the other icons that they imported under the guise of imperial treasures? The catalog to the Hammer Galleries' 1937 exhibition *Seven Centuries of Russian Icon Painting* is a mine of information on this subject, listing

around 160 icons with dates ranging from the thirteenth to the eighteenth centuries. Most were described as coming from the "Winter Palace Collection" in St. Petersburg, a curiously opaque designation that perhaps refers to the sacristies of the Winter Palace's Large and Small Churches, whose rich holdings were confiscated in the 1920s. A handful more came from the Fedorov Cathedral at Tsarskoe Selo, a building project begun in 1909 on which Nicholas and Alexandra lavished much love and attention.

It was in fact to furnish the Fedorov Cathedral that the tsar made his first foray into the murky waters of the contemporary icon market in 1913, when a special commission chaired by Prince Aleksei Shirinskii-Shikhmatov arranged for the purchase of over three hundred old icons. Like anyone wishing to purchase old icons of any quality in the pre-revolutionary years, the tsar was at the mercy of a network of dealers and icon painters, who controlled both the supply of icons and their preparation for sale. In the case of the Fedorov Cathedral purchase, the supplier was the Mstera icon painter Mikhail Tiulin, who was also one of the painters producing new icons for the cathedral. The town of Mstera was known nation-wide, not only for the production of new icons in a range of traditional styles, but also for the artful

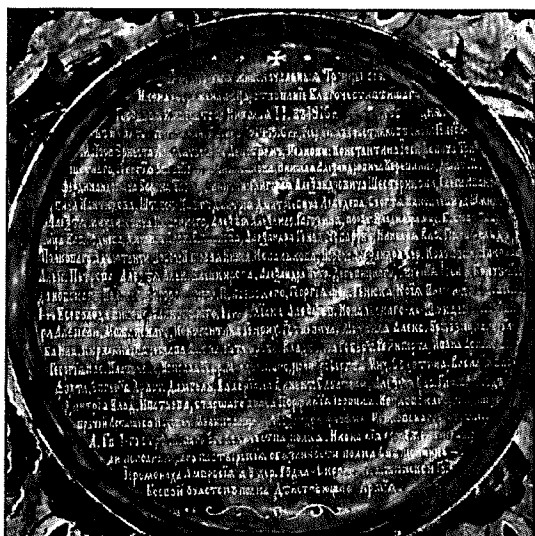


fig. 3b: Detail of inscription on the back of *Commemorative Triptych*, 1916 (cat. no. 52).

restoration of old ones. Mstera icon painters thus stood at the very crossroads of past and present. Able to detect a true "old icon" beneath layers of dirt and over-paint, they could restore it according to the customer's taste and in a variety of styles. They could also paint a new icon "from early models so skillfully that specialists were often at a loss to determine the age of an icon that had just been painted."⁴ The line between black and white categories of original and fake was a blurry one, and to jaundiced eyes workshops like that of the distinguished Mstera painter Grigorii Chirikov functioned as outright "factories of imitation."⁵

At the Fedorov Cathedral these skills found rich ground in which to flourish, for the imperial couple's vision was to resurrect there a lost Golden Age of piety and national cohesion, surrounded by icons old and new, joined together in "an exact duplicate of an old Russian chamber from the time of the first Romanov tsars" that could transport contemporaries back to the "old Russian pious days of yore."⁶ A number of the Hammers' seventeenth-century icons came from the various chapels of the cathedral when it was closed in 1932. Though none could be included in the present catalog, many Hammer icons epitomize the pious aesthetic of an idealized seventeenth century that the imperial couple valued so highly: *The Fiery Ascent of Elijah* in its basma frame (cat. no. 8), the little icon of the Yaroslavl saints Basil and Constantine (cat. no. 26) with their beautifully rendered garments, the somber olive green and gold of the Resurrection (cat. no. 7). In the chapels and iconostases of the cathedral, authentic old icons stood shoulder to shoulder with brand new icons painted in a sympathetic style. One such icon was the *Commemorative Triptych*, commissioned in 1916 by the officers of the tsar's personal guard, His Majesty's First Rifle Regiment (cat. no. 52). With its horseshoe-shaped gables, brightly patterned back, and quaintly archaizing inscription in imitation of Stroganov icons (**fig. 3b**), the triptych is a work steeped in the traditions of the seventeenth century, yet tempered by an early twentieth-century sensibility.

In addition to producing new icons in old styles, Mstera families such as the Tiulins, Chirikovs, Dikarevs, and Gurianovs elevated the practice of antiquarian restoration to a high art, as old icons in varying states of decay were salvaged for sale to a growing community of collectors, including the tsar himself. A common strategy was to transfer what remained of the paint and gesso from an old board to a new one (the so-called *vrezok* or insert). In this method of preserving fragments of old icons, the boundary between the original paint and its new ground was carefully delineated, thus emphasizing the preciousness of what remained of the original. This decoupage-like effect became an aesthetic virtue in its own right and is especially evident in the four festival icons and the icon of Christ Pantocrator in the BJU collection (cat. nos. 14–18). For a client with less tolerance for this "aesthetic of ruins," substantial areas of damage and loss could be concealed beneath over-painting that simulated the style of the original fragments. Extensive additions were disguised with the aid of false craquelure and inscriptions on borders were routinely refreshed.⁷

Customer preference and market trends played a vital role in shaping the treatment of icons by dealers and restorers. In response to the huge demand for Novgorod icons that emerged in the pre-revolutionary decade, many icons were routinely cleaned "in the Novgorod style," so that "a good sixteenth-century Moscow icon would simply leave the restorer's workshop as a fifteenth-century Novgorod icon."⁸ As early icons became prized for their painterly form and color, the metal borders and covers (*basma, oklad*) that adorned them were removed, leaving behind the fugitive trace of nail holes (cat. nos. 23, 24). How to deal with the painted or gilded borders and ground revealed beneath was often a matter of customer taste. Whereas a collector such as Stepan Riabushinskii was "attracted to an abundance of pure gold [leaf]" on the icons he purchased, others, such as Aleksei Morozov, preferred "the gesso ground to be free of gilding or paint, recalling the color of yellowish ivory."⁹ Restorers satisfied this widespread taste for icons with white grounds by the simple expedient of pumicing the background and borders right down to the gesso.

Seen against this backdrop of pre-Revolutionary icon collecting habits, it is not at all surprising that the older icons from imperial repositories that the Hammers sold and exhibited in the United States were textbook examples of the commercial restorer's art and artifice.¹⁰ What is remarkable is the brothers' realization that these rather gritty realities of an icon's physical life were of genuine interest and could be parlayed into a novel selling point. Finding a market for old Russian icons in 1930s America was a tall order, and not merely because of the Great Depression. The sort of aesthetic prejudices the Hammers were up against can be seen in two responses to their 1937 exhibition. "To the non-scholar," one reviewer wrote, "no art seems to have developed less in seven centuries, or to show less emotional variation between the various schools—not counting, of course, the vulgar horrors of the nineteenth century that betray the worst possible characteristics of Western influence."¹¹ Reacting to the icons' apparent impersonality another observed: "The curious fantasy of the artist to whom, on account of the severe restrictions of the church, these icons were the only means of expression, may be seen in the landscape setting of *St. Mary of Egypt* (cat. no. 25) in which the human figures are scattered among a series of natural phenomena partaking of the nature of tree trunks, rocks and mountains alike."¹² Without easily legible individual and historical styles, icons did indeed present a challenge to viewers trained in the appreciation of post-Renaissance painting.

In their catalog entries for the 1937 exhibition the Hammers suggested new ways to look at icons by providing the viewer with a rudimentary vocabulary of icon connoisseurship. When describing the modern icons, they could of course trade on a secure provenance (the presentation plaques), the material value of the jeweled metal "trappings," and the names of their creators (Fabergé, Ovchinnikov, Khlebnikov, Mishukov), adding a token nod to the quality of the painting ("of fine intention," "soft coloring"). But the older icons required a different kind of presentation that acknowledged their greater age and value. Curiously, the

iconographic details and narratives that have become so integral to our appreciation of icons today were treated in a quite cursory way, whereas physical condition was given a remarkable degree of attention. Thirty-seven icons—including the oldest in the Hammers' collection—were described as having been transferred to a new board, a point of information that was also, by implication, a mark of distinction and quality (cat. nos. 12–13, 14–17, 21). On many more the gilding or paint on the borders and ground had been removed, and the viewer was encouraged to admire the “rich and interesting patina” and the tonal range of the resulting ivory background that could be “rich,” “warm,” or “mellow.” Even elusive “flakes of gold leaf” still lingering on the surface deserved a mention (cat. no. 24).

The Hammers also capitalized on the huge success of the first icon exhibition ever held in the United States (1930–32), a historical survey of works from Soviet museums that emphasized the importance of scientific restoration to a proper understanding of the icon's historical evolution and value. Following the example of the Soviet exhibition, which included a number of important early icons still in a state of partial restoration, the Hammers featured an icon of *St. Elijah in the Desert*, on which “fragments of later over-painting [were] left for comparison.” Several jocular mentions were made of the “ingenious simulation of crackleleur [sic],” a nod to pre-revolutionary faking practices that was intended to enhance rather than detract from an icon's value.¹³ Each icon's restoration history was presented as an integral part of its identity, making damage, wear, and tear as interesting and important as provenance, subject matter, and aesthetic quality. The description of *The Descent of the Holy Spirit*, one of their star exhibits (cat. no. 21), reads: “Fine color distinguishes this icon with its lovely ivory-toned background disclosed after removing several later layers of paint. Transferred to later panel.”¹⁴

In laying their imperial icons before the public as the gold standard for American collectors, Armand and Victor Hammer also had a trump card up their sleeve: the expertise of the foremost émigré authority on icons, Pavel Muratov (Mouratoff). Before the 1917 Revolution Muratov had been a pioneer in the study of icons, writing the volume on icons for the *History of Russian Art* edited by Igor Grabar (1914), as well as the catalog of the celebrated Ostroukhov collection.¹⁵ Before emigrating Muratov had witnessed the early Soviet successes at conserving icons, but he was essentially a



fig. 3c: The caption reads: “Epoch and style of Andrew Rublev. Early 15th century.”

connoisseur who worked by aesthetic "feel," stylistic analogy, and formal, rather than scientific, analysis. Moving to Paris, he was commissioned in 1931 to write an appreciation of thirty-five icons from the collection of Jacques Zolotnitzky, head of the Paris antique firm A La Vieille Russie.¹⁶ Muratov's comparative method was to situate a work according to its stylistic and aesthetic proximity to the "great names" of medieval icon painting: Andrei Rublev, Theophanes the Greek, and Dionysius. This process of plotting works on an art historical map still in process of being drawn required great precision of language, as his description of the jewel in the collection, a small *Mother of God Umilenie* (fig. 3c) shows: "If there is no foundation for attributing this icon to this famous Russian artist, it may in any case be said that this small and precious icon, by its spiritual restraint, its obvious tenderness and harmony of execution stands very near to his manner. It is therefore permissible to suppose that we have before us an icon painted under Andrew Rublev's direct influence early in the 15th century. . . ."¹⁷ With similar care he singled out the figure of a prophet that recalled "the icons executed in the region of Moscow under the influence of Andrei Rublev" as well as a *Presentation in the Temple* that "recalled" Dionysius.¹⁸

Invited in 1935 to examine the Hammer collection, Muratov offered the same sort of carefully phrased attributions, though the brothers' claim that he "pronounced them [the Hammer icons] . . . to be among the rarest examples in existence" and the collection "the finest outside of Russia" was surely an exaggeration. In the wake of Muratov's visit, the 1937 catalogue listed: a *Head of Christ* that "shows strong influence of Andrei Rublev in coloring and treatment," an *Old Testament Trinity* "painted in manner of Andrei Rublev," three icons "attributed to Dionysius circa 1480," four festival icons attributed to Theophanes Greek circa 1380" (cat. nos. 14–17) and the "*Rublev Savior*" (cat. no. 18), the only icon that Muratov conceded might have been by Rublev himself. In this small *vrezok* icon, Christ's full-length figure floats suspended in sharp silhouette against the white gesso ground, "mellowed with age" as the catalog put it, and pockmarked with repairs.¹⁹

Soviet scholars were dismissive of Muratov's weakness for this sort of attribution, branding it as a sign of bourgeois individualism. In a review of the Zolotnitzky catalog, Mikhail Alpatov sniffed: "He seeks in icon painting congenial artistic pleasures and thinks that in this art, suffused with the idea of collectivism, the individual plays the same role as in the West. He is obsessed by the idea of 'the history of artists'."²⁰ But the search for Rublev obsessed the Soviet scholarly establishment too. An article in *Apollo* in 1929 reported that "altogether forty-two ikons by Andre Roubloff, the authenticity of which has been proved, besides six others generally ascribed to him, have been found."²¹ In more recent years the corpus of Rublev's works has been greatly reduced.²²

It was this elite group of “signature icons” that Armand and Victor Hammer guarded most jealously and promoted most assiduously, perhaps considering them too important to sell, or perhaps just failing to find a buyer. They were exhibited widely in the United States in the 1940s and, as John Nolan writes in his essay, they were still in the Hammers’ “private collection” when Dr. Jones acquired them.

Changing hands one last time, in the 1950s, for many years the icons at BJU lived as it were incognito, the details of their glamorous origins largely forgotten. Reuniting this core group—the cream of the Hammers’ imperial icons—with others that passed into American museums in the 1930s allows us to appreciate the full significance of Armand and Victor Hammer’s foray into marketing icons to Americans. Viewed in isolation, most of their “imperial icons” are perhaps no more than a poignant reminder of the vast destruction and dislocation of Orthodox culture during the Soviet Cultural Revolution. Taken together, however, they paint a vivid picture of an historical moment in which Russian icons underwent the tortuous transformation from devotional object to collectible work of art.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ On the fate of the imperial residences from which these items were taken, see “Introduction. From Preservation to the Export of Russia’s Cultural Patrimony,” in *Treasures into Tractors: The Selling of Russia’s Cultural Heritage, 1918-1938*, ed. Anne Odom and Wendy R. Salmond (Washington, DC: Hillwood Museum and Gardens, 2009), pp. 3-30.
- ² See Robert Nichols, “Nicholas II and the Russian Icon,” in *Alter Icons: The Russian Icon and Modernity*, ed. Jefferson J. A. Gatrall and Douglas Greenfield (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), pp. 74-88.
- ³ On the official Soviet rationale for selecting America as the best market for the personal belongings of the imperial family see Wendy R. Salmond, “Russian Icons and American Money, 1928-1938,” in *Treasures into Tractors*, pp. 244-45.
- ⁴ Iu. G. Bobrov, *Istoriia restavratsii drevnerusskoi zhivopisi* (Leningrad: Khudozhnik RSFSR, 1987), p. 44.
- ⁵ D. M. Semenovskii, *Mstera* (Moscow, 1939), p. 137.
- ⁶ *Feodorovskii gosudarev sobor v Tsarskom sele. Vyp. 1. Peshchernyi khran vo imia prepodobnago Serafima Sarovskago Chudotvortsia* (Moskva : T-vo skoropechatni A. A. Levenson, 1915), p. 23.
- ⁷ On the practices of commercial or “antiquarian” restoration see Bobrov, *Istoriia restavratsii drevnerusskoi zhivopisi*, pp. 36-51.
- ⁸ Bobrov, *Istoriia restavratsii drevnerusskoi zhivopisi*.
- ⁹ V. I. Antonova and N. E. Mneva, *Katalog drevnerusskoi zhivopisi v dvukh tomakh* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1963), pp. 23-24.
- ¹⁰ The widely divergent dates offered for almost all the older icons acquired by Dr. Jones reflect the havoc which such extensive and cunning restoration continues to create among students of icons. For instance, *St. Nicholas, the Wonderworker* (cat. no. 19) has been given dates ranging from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries.
- ¹¹ *Parnassus*, 9, no. 20 (October, 1937), n.p. The “vulgar horrors” were evidently the twenty-seven imperial presentation icons included in the exhibition.

¹²“Five Centuries of Russian Icons,” *Art News*, 35 (August 1937), 18, 25.

¹³*Seven Centuries of Russian Icon Painting*, Ex. cat. New York: Hammer Galleries, p.12.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁵Pavel Muratov, “Russkaia zhivopis’ do serediny 17-ogo veka,” in *Istoriia russkogo iskusstva*, vol. 6 (Moscow: Knebel, 1914); Pavel Muratov, *Drevnerusskaia zhivopis’ v sobranii I. S. Ostroukhova* (Moscow, 1914).

¹⁶Paul Muratoff, *Trente-cinq primitives russes. Collection Jacques Zolotnitzky*, preface by Henri Focillon (Paris: A La Vieille Russie, 1931); also in English, *Thirty-Five Russian Primitives: Jacques Zolotnitzky’s Collection*. Zolotnitzky subsequently emigrated with his nephew Leon Grinberg to the United States, where his icons were featured alongside those of the Hammers at a number of exhibits before being dispersed on his death.

¹⁷*Thirty-Five Russian Primitives*, pp. 59–60.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁹When photographed for the 1937 exhibition catalogue, the entire lower half of the icon was still intact. At some later date a horizontal section of paint was removed, and this is the state in which it appears in the present catalogue.

²⁰Mikhail Alpatov, review in *Izvestiia na Belgarskiiia arkeologicheski institut* (Sofia), 3 (1925), 351.

²¹B. Héroys, “André Roubloff: The Russian Ikon Painter,” *Apollo*, 9 (February 1929), 107. Igor Grabar, head of the State Central Restoration Workshops until 1930, was especially committed to expanding the Rublev repertoire. See I. Grabar’, “Andrei Rublev,” *Voprosy restavratsii*, 1 (1926), pp. 5–113.

²²For a comprehensive reappraisal of the Rublev corpus, see B. N. Dudochkin, *Andrei Rublev. Biografiia. Proizvedeniia. Istochniki. Literatura* (2000). http://www.icon-art.info/book_contents.php?lng=ru&book_id=114.