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***Embroidery in the Circle of the Last Romanovs***

This article essay examines the liturgical embroideries associated with the Empress Alexandra Fedorovna and her sister Grand Duchess Elizaveta Fedorovna. It suggests that the sisters' needlework for sacred purposes was invested with a significance not seen in elite Russian society since the late seventeenth century. At a time when the arts of Orthodoxy were undergoing a state-sponsored renaissance, who was better suited to lead the resurgence of liturgical embroidery than the wife and sister-in-law of the Emperor, the last in a long line of royal women seeking to assert their piety and their power through traditional women's work? In the closing years of the empire, to make and to donate sacred textiles was a way to emulate ancestral women, while providing modern women with examples of piety, industriousness, and patriotism.

**Key words:** *svetlitsa*, *litsevoe shit'e*, Viktor Vasnetsov, Alexandra Fedorovna, Grand Duchess Elizaveta Fedorovna, Elena Prakhova, School of Folk Art, art embroidery,

Among the many hundreds of photographs chronicling the private lives of Nicholas II and his family, a surprising number show the Empress Alexandra Fedorovna embroidering. Taken on the deck of the yacht *Shtandart*, in her private apartments in the Alexander Palace, and in the park at Tsarskoe Selo, these domestic scenes confirm what contemporaries often remarked upon: the Empress's disapproval of idle hands (whether her own, her daughters', or those of the ladies of the court), and her belief in the moral value of needlework in all its forms. These photos also show how unremarkable the projects that occupied the leisure hours of Nicholas II's womenfolk were. As the granddaughters of Queen Victoria, raised with the middle-class values of the English court, Alix of Hesse-Darmstadt (1872-1918) and her sister Ella (1864-1918) (respectively, the future Empress of Russia and the wife of the Governor General of Moscow) possessed the conventional taste and skills of any well-bred lady of the period. A photograph of the two sisters taken in the late 1880s shows them embroidering a cloth

with a design in coarse cross-stitch (**Fig. 1**). In later snapshots we see the Empress at work on a needlepoint runner featuring her favorite lilies, tablecloths adorned with garlands and floral sprays, and various pieces of white work (**Fig. 2**).<sup>1</sup>

There is evidence, however, that needlework played another, more meaningful role in the lives of the Empress and her sister. From the time of their conversion to Orthodoxy (Ella in 1891, Alix in 1894) until their deaths in 1918, both took an active interest in creating and commissioning liturgical textiles to furnish the new churches of Nicholas II's reign, as well as to honor the new saints of a revitalized Holy Rus. If embroidering tablecloths and runners answered the practical Englishwoman's need to keep busy, the creation of banners, shrouds, and altar cloths spoke to the spiritual needs of the "mystical Russian" that both women increasingly felt themselves to be.<sup>2</sup> My goal in this essay is to make a preliminary survey of the liturgical embroideries associated with the Empress and her sister. The list is not long, but it suggests that the sisters' needlework for sacred purposes was invested with a significance not seen in elite Russian society since the late seventeenth century. At a time when the arts of Orthodoxy were undergoing a state-sponsored renaissance, who was better suited to lead the resurgence of liturgical embroidery than the wife and sister-in-law of the Emperor, the last in a long line of royal women seeking to assert their piety and their power through traditional women's work? In the closing years of the empire, to make and to donate sacred textiles was a way to emulate ancestral women, while providing modern women with examples of piety, industriousness, and patriotism.

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of her embroidery, see <http://forum.alexanderpalace.org/index.php?topic=16678.0;wap2>.

<sup>2</sup> The observation that Alexandra was "a practical Englishwoman on the surface and a mystical Russian underneath" belonged to General Aleksandr Kireev. It is cited in Mark D. Steinberg and Vladimir M. Khrustalev, *The Fall of the Romanovs* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1995), p. 29.

In 1888, Princess Ella of Hesse-Darmstadt accompanied her husband Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich (1857-1905), the brother of Alexander III, on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Though a devout Lutheran, the young princess honored her husband's fervent Orthodox faith by donating a needlepoint carpet runner she had embroidered to the recently completed Church of Mary Magdalene in Jerusalem (**Fig. 3**).<sup>3</sup> By the conventional standards of the day, this was an admirable gift of time and devotion. The geometric pattern, reminiscent of A.W.N. Pugin's "Gothic" ecclesiastical designs, was worked in wool on canvas, the simple tent stitches transcribed from a chart. The runner's muted color palette was a tasteful alternative to the garish Berlin wool work that filled the leisure hours of many women of her background. Yet with its mechanical obedience to a printed pattern, Ella's pious donation stood on the wrong side of a revolution in taste. For design reformers like the English architect George Street, needlepoint belonged to "that contemptible system of cross-stitch work, which requires no sense, no thought, hardly any manual dexterity on the part of the worker; and which, be the worker good, bad, or indifferent, produces the same hard formal absence of good results."<sup>4</sup> William Morris's crusade to revive the stitches and patterns of medieval textiles established a great divide between all such unthinking labor and "art embroidery" – the creative interpretation of an artist's design that would become a foundation stone of the Arts and Crafts movement.

Ella's marriage in 1884 brought her to Russia just as that country, too, was awakening to needlework's rich medieval and vernacular legacy. In 1872, Vladimir

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<sup>3</sup> The runner is now owned by the Monastery of Mary Magdalene in Jerusalem.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Linda Parry, *William Morris Textiles* (New York, Avenel NJ: Crescent Books, 1994), 10.

Stasov had published his epochal *Russian Folk Ornament*, in which he presented folk embroidery and lace as a ready-made grammar of ornament for a revival of national art in all its forms. Women at the highest social level were beginning to support efforts to rescue the traditional needlework of peasant women from extinction by opening schools, workshops, and sales outlets.<sup>5</sup> In 1883, Empress Maria Fedorovna (Ella's sister-in-law) lent her patronage to a school for lacemaking, which actively fostered new patterns based on patterns from medieval manuscripts and other ancient sources. Costumes and textiles of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries became widely known through historical paintings and prints, and the rapid growth of museums, private collections, and scholarly societies dedicated to the study of historical artifacts brought the world of Muscovite Rus out from the shadows to which the Petrine reforms had banished it.

The art of figurative embroidery (*litsevoe shit'e*) was one of the great medieval traditions rediscovered in the closing decades of the century, as part of a growing interest in the world of the *terem* - the segregated quarters where medieval elite women spent their lives. Russians of the late nineteenth century gleaned much of their knowledge of this mysterious world from Ivan Zabelin's popular book *Domashnii byt russkikh tsarist* [The Daily Life of the Russian Tsaritsas] (1869), a social history pieced together from archives, inventories, and artifacts. Zabelin painted a vivid picture of the circumscribed orbit of women's lives under the rule of the *Domostroi*, the sixteenth-century manual on household management.<sup>6</sup> He especially stressed the importance of the *svetlitsa* (the workroom in an elite Muscovite household where women produced handwork and

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<sup>5</sup> See Wendy Salmond, *Arts and Crafts in Late Imperial Russia, 1870-1917* (London: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> See *The "Domostroi": Rules for Russian households in the time of Ivan the Terrible*. Edited and translated by Carolyn Johnston Pouncy (Cornell: Cornell Univ. Press, 1995).

embroidery) as the center of women's creative lives. Here was "an entire forgotten world of artistic activity in which the artist was the Russian woman, bringing, alongside the man, her fervent and equally remarkable work to enhance the beauty and magnificence of God's temple."<sup>7</sup> For the wives, daughters, and sisters of Ivan the Terrible, Boris Godunov, and the first Romanov tsars, the execution of a pall for a saint's tomb, a veil to hang beneath a venerated icon, or a set of altar cloths for use during the liturgy was both an act of womanly piety and an indirect assertion of agency. The textiles royal women wrought were made of the finest imported fabrics and precious materials. They required years of skilled work and employed the services of the same artists (*znamenshchiki*) who drew the outlines of the icons painted in the tsar's Armory workshops. The iconographic themes chosen "spoke of the questions that concerned them in a language of allegories and metaphors comprehensible to the medieval person."<sup>8</sup> Lengthy gold-work inscriptions often included the name of the woman in whose workshop the piece was made, so that, paradoxically, anonymous was not always a woman in Muscovite Rus.

Grand Duke Sergei, like his brother Alexander III, was a great enthusiast of this patriarchal, pre-Petrine world, and it was through him that Ella developed a love of the Orthodox faith and its traditions. At her husband's urging, in 1891, she converted to Orthodoxy, taking the name Elizaveta Fedorovna. That same year, Sergei was appointed Governor General of Moscow and the couple moved from St. Petersburg to the old capital, the symbolic heartland of Old Russian values and faith. Sergei became an active supporter of the Moscow Historical Museum, bringing icons, manuscripts, and

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<sup>7</sup> Ivan Zabelin, *Domashnii byt russkikh tsarits v XVI – XVII stoletiiakh* (Moscow: Institut russkoi tsivilizatsii, 2014), p. 667.

<sup>8</sup> N.A. Maiasova, *Drevnerusskoe shit'e/ La broderie russe ancienne* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1971), p. 8.

embroidered textiles to Ivan Zabelin, the museum's director, for his expertise.<sup>9</sup> Yet for both husband and wife, the line between antiquity (*starina*) and sanctity (*sviatynia*) was never fixed, and they valued church antiquities as much for their sacred power and ancestral associations as for historical or aesthetic reasons. A case in point was the mantle of the revered monk, Serafim of Sarov, which Sergei had inherited from his mother and which was venerated for its ability to work cures.<sup>10</sup> Collecting antique textiles, no less than endowing a church with new ones, was part of a living tradition rooted in faith.

Yet liturgical embroideries were notably absent from the display of contemporary Russian needlework sent to the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago. This is especially telling, given that the organizer of the Women's Work section was Grand Duchess Elizaveta Fedorovna. The list of exhibitors represented the entire spectrum of needlework in the Russian Empire, from convent workshops and girls' gymnasia to privately run workshops promoting *kustar* crafts.<sup>11</sup> The overarching theme was the revival of national patterns and traditions and their application to new uses. Notable examples were two chair covers, one embroidered with patterns taken from Stasov's *Russian Folk Ornament*, the other with designs from a fifteenth century quiver in the Moscow Armory; and an opera cloak that combined a pattern from Patriarch Nikon's cope with a trimming from the costume of Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich.<sup>12</sup> With the

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<sup>9</sup> Zabelin mentions a number of such interactions with the Grand Duke throughout the 1890s in his diary. See "I. E. Zabelin. Dnevnik (1894-1908)," in *Moskva v nachale XX veka*, (Moscow: Mosgorarkhiv, 1997), pp. 172-97.

<sup>10</sup> E. Iu. Koval'skaia, "Prepodobnyi Serafim Sarovskii v zhizni prepodobnomuchennitsy vl. kn. Elisavety Fedorovny," in *U istokov rossiiskoi gosudarstvennosti. Rol' zhenshchin v istorii dinastii Romanovykh. Issledovaniia. Materialy. Sbornik No. 2* (Kaluga: KGU im. K.E. Tsiolkovskogo, 2012), pp. 80-86.

<sup>11</sup> *World's Columbian Exposition 1893, Chicago: Catalogue of the Russian Section* (St. Petersburg: Imperial Russian Commission, Ministry of Finances, 1893), pp. 289-348.

<sup>12</sup> *World's Columbian Exposition 1893*, p. 269.



exception of some embroidered icons, however, there was no evidence that the elite women interested in reviving secular needlework traditions had turned their attention to the needs of the church. Convent workshops where traditional gold embroidery was still practiced sent, not vestments, shrouds, or altar cloths, but examples of secular dress. The Khotkovo convent, for example, exhibited “embroidery for a costume in gold and pearls,” its pattern taken from “an ancient vestment (of the XVII century) belonging to a convent in the province of Novgorod.”<sup>13</sup> Had examples of contemporary liturgical embroidery been sent to Chicago, visitors would have seen a shiny sea of galloon, spangles, sequins, and bugle beads. Where sacred figures had once been “painted by the needle,” now painted cardboard was the norm.

A new era in the arts of Orthodoxy began with the ascension of Nicholas II to the throne in 1896. By a happy coincidence, the coronation year also marked the consecration of one of the most influential churches built in the late imperial period: the Cathedral of St. Vladimir in Kiev (1885-96). St. Vladimir’s was a landmark in the history of Russian religious painting by virtue of the murals and icons painted by Viktor Vasnetsov (1848-1926). Vasnetsov’s “icon-paintings” inspired an entire generation of religious artists seeking to harmonize the canons of icon painting with the aesthetic habits and emotional sensibility of modern people. Now almost entirely forgotten, however, are the embroideries his religious vision inspired, harbingers of a short-lived movement to retrieve the lofty status that *litsevoe shit’e* had enjoyed in the churches of Nicholas II’s ancestors. At the heart of that revival was Elena Prakhova (1871-1948), the daughter of the Kiev art historian charged with overseeing the decoration of St. Vladimir’s and a gifted embroidress.

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<sup>13</sup> *World’s Columbian Exposition 1893*, p. 293.

In 1894, Prakhova asked Vasnetsov to design a shroud that she could embroider for the cathedral. Vasnetsov took as his inspiration a magnificent shroud made in the *svetlitsa* of Efrosinia Staritsa, aunt of Ivan the Terrible, in 1561: an Entombment with multiple figures and seraphim worked in a rich array of stitches, framed by an inscription in gold thread.<sup>14</sup> In a letter written to Prakhova as she started work on the project, Vasnetsov revealed a surprising knowledge of traditional embroidery techniques. He recommended using thick silks rather than the modern manufactured chenille Prakhova was considering. He suggested she work the faces “as in olden times, smoothly, not placing the stitches to follow the contours of the face,” and mute the gold thread’s brightness by pairing it with a strand of silk (“This is what they did in the past and the effect was very refined and artistic.”)<sup>15</sup> He wanted neither shiny gold, nor pearls and precious stones. The success of the entire project would depend on Prakhova’s innate sense of color and her sensitivity to Vasnetsov’s interpretation of Efrosinia Staritsa’s work.<sup>16</sup>

Prakhova worked on the shroud for a year and a half, completing it in July 1897. The result was a tour de force (Fig. 4).<sup>17</sup> The fluctuations of the silk stitches brought an entirely new element of texture to Vasnetsov’s painterly vision, without losing any of its expressive power. Cleaving closely to the traditions of *litsevoe shit’e*, Prakhova’s shroud also conveyed the “tapestry effect” that would haunt Symbolist artists like Viktor Borisov-Musatov and the Blue Rose painters. The same vibrant decorative surface

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<sup>14</sup> In Vasnetsov’s day, the shroud was housed in Moscow’s Uspenskii Cathedral, the first of four that Efrosinia created. It is now in the Uspenskii Cathedral, Smolensk.

<sup>15</sup> Letter from Viktor Vasnetsov to Elena Prakhova, 10 January 1895, in Liudmila Korotkina, *Viktor Vasnetsov. Pis’ma. Novye materialy* (St. Petersburg: ARS, 2004), pp. 104-5.

<sup>16</sup> The original painting of the shroud is now in the State Russian Museum (oil on canvas, 171 x 213 cm).

<sup>17</sup> Prakhova’s shroud is now in the National Kievo-Pechorskii Historical and Cultural Reserve.

characterized her other translations of Vasnetsov's religious vision into art embroidery, for example, two matching panels of the Archangels Michael and Gabriel kneeling in prayer.<sup>18</sup> In her rendering of Vasnetsov's *Mother and Child Enthroned* from the iconostasis of St. Vladimir's, the surface came alive with feathery satin stitches that captured every nuance of the original without merely reproducing it.<sup>19</sup> Also wonderfully expressive, in the spirit of *stil modern* (Russia's response to Art Nouveau), was a small shroud Vasnetsov designed for the Church of the Savior at Abramtsevo, the Moscow estate of the Mamontov family.<sup>20</sup>

Just as Vasnetsov's "icon-paintings" introduced a new sensibility to devotional art in Nicholas's reign, so too the St. Vladimir's shroud promised a revival in the practice of liturgical embroidery in Russia. Prakhova's collaboration with Vasnetsov produced a distinctively Russian response to the art embroidery revival that Morris had begun decades earlier. Mikhail Nesterov, Vasnetsov's collaborator at St. Vladimir's, called the shroud a "wondrous thing! There's been nothing like it in Russia since the times of the 'pious princesses'."<sup>21</sup> When the imperial couple made their official inspection of the cathedral's interior on 22 August 1896, they stopped before the shroud and expressed

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<sup>18</sup> The panels are now in the collection of the "Teremok" Historical and Architectural Complex at Flenovo near Smolensk.

<sup>19</sup> This work is now on display at Abramtsevo. I am grateful to Jesco Oser for providing a photograph.

<sup>20</sup> Evidently the shroud was begun by Vera Mamontova, but completed by Prakhova after Vera's premature death. See E. N. Mitrofanova, *Viktor Mikhailovich Vasnetsov. Proizvedeniia V. M. Vasnetsova iz sobraniia Muzeia-zapovednika Abramtsevo i chastnykh kollektsii. Katalog vystavki* (Moscow: Muzei-zapovednik Abramtsevo, 2012), pp.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Efrem Riabov, "Vyshivala devushka plashchanitsu," [http://oldkiev.io.ua/s106936/vyshivala\\_devushka\\_plashchanicu](http://oldkiev.io.ua/s106936/vyshivala_devushka_plashchanicu).

their admiration.<sup>22</sup> It is not surprising, then, that when the Empress first turned her hand to sacred embroidery, it was Vasnetsov who served as her *znamenshchik*.

The new Empress had followed her sister in converting to Orthodoxy, taking the name Alexandra Fedorovna on her marriage in 1894, and she embraced her new faith with a similar fervor. In 1897, the imperial couple commissioned a new church to be built in her native city of Darmstadt. The little chapel was dedicated to St. Mary Magdalene, patron saint of Nicholas's mother, and the entrance was crowned by a large mosaic of the saint designed by Vasnetsov. The artist also designed two banners to flank the iconostasis and it was these that the Empress undertook to embroider. On the front side of each were depicted Christ and the Mother of God, on the verso the patron saints of the imperial couple, St. Nicholas and the Holy Martyr Princess Alexandra. Vasnetsov's drawing for one of the banners has the Pre-Raphaelite charm and striving for psychological realism that made his St. Vladimir's saints and seraphim so popular (**Fig. 5**).<sup>23</sup> The Empress's embroidered rendition of his Mother of God Orans faithfully repeats his softened version of the great Byzantine mosaic in the apse of Kiev's Cathedral of St. Sophia (**Fig. 6**).<sup>24</sup>

For Vasnetsov, the Darmstadt banners marked the start of a whole series of imperial church commissions that required him to endlessly reprise his St. Vladimir's work. But for the women who carried out his designs – first Elena Prakhova, then Alexandra Fedorovna – the experience had its own significance. Prakhova's liturgical art embroidery placed her on a par with Englishwomen like May Morris and Catherine

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<sup>22</sup> Mikhail Nesterov. *O perezhitom. 1862-1917 gg. Vospominaniia* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 2006), p. 265. Vasnetsov sold the original painting to Grand Duke Georgii Mikhailovich, from whose collection it entered the Alexander III Museum (now the Russian Museum) in 1897.

<sup>23</sup> A variant is in the Department of Church Archaeology (TsAK) of the Moscow Orthodox Spiritual Academy, Moscow.

<sup>24</sup> The completed banner is reproduced at <http://ubrus.ru/node/7631>. Also attributed to the Empress is a blue silk cover for the icon stand (*analoï*), with a cherubim, cross, and ornament worked in gold and silver.

Holiday, for whom creative needlework was an artistic vocation, even a profession. For the Empress, the switch from needlepoint and broderie anglaise to *litsevoe shit'e* and gold thread work was a tangible symbol of her new faith, a way to participate actively in the life of the church over which her husband presided.

A census of Vasnetsov's liturgical design has yet to be compiled, but it would certainly include a significant number of embroideries commissioned by the imperial family and the nobility. It is hard to imagine any new church erected at the Emperor's behest that did not include needlework designed by the artist - for example, the Cathedral of the Savior on the Waters in St. Petersburg, erected in 1911 to commemorate those killed in Russia's crushing defeat in the naval war with Japan. The list of elite donations included: a white moirée aers and a paten cover with the St. Andrew Cross embroidered on a white silk ground, made by the Empress herself; banners designed by Vasnetsov and embroidered at the Alekseevskii Convent in Arzamas and donated by N. G. Soldatenkova; and a carpet embroidered by "the sailors' womenfolk" with the participation of Grand Duchess Tatiana Konstantinovna.<sup>25</sup>

Given the boom in church building during Nicholas II's reign, the quantity of textiles commissioned for them must have been substantial. Since the vast majority disappeared or were destroyed in the Soviet era, any survivor from this brief Silver Age of Orthodox art is worth our attention. Two surviving Vasnetsov commissions associated with the imperial family remind us what a breath of fresh air he brought to a moribund art. The first is a set of altar cloths made for the church of the Cuirassier Life Guards Regiment in St. Petersburg, of which the Dowager Empress Maria Fedorovna was

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<sup>25</sup> S.N. Smirnov, *Khram-pamiatnik moriakam pogibshim v voinu s Iaponiei v 1904-1905 gg.* (Petrograd: Izd. Vysochaishe uchrezhdennago Komiteta po sooruzheniiu Khrama, 1915).

honorary Chief (**Fig. 7**).<sup>26</sup> On the aer (the cloth that covers the paten and chalice), six cherubim guard the Cross of Golgotha and an elegant pattern of scrolling vines worked in satin stitch is picked out with seed pearls and tiny cabochons on red and cream silk. The whole effect is fresh, restrained, and modern, a silent reproach to the Victorian lushness of most late nineteenth century church embroidery.

The second commission is the white silk pall made for the tomb of Grand Duke Sergei, assassinated by a terrorist bomb in 1905.<sup>27</sup> It was jointly given by Vasnetsov and several other individual donors, together with five of the leading Moscow convents where the embroidery was presumably carried out, perhaps with Elizaveta Fedorovna's participation (**Fig. 8**). Vasnetsov's signature seraphim flank a central image of Christ Not Made by Hands – a copy of an icon that had belonged to the Grand Duke. The sinuous lilies and small flowers at the foot of the cross - allusions to the remains of paradise on earth – also remind us of Vasnetsov's role in the invention of the Neo-Russian Style, with its expressive ornamentation. The overall effect is at once decorative and austere, the white ground echoing the white habit of the order of Mary and Martha that Elizaveta Fedorovna founded in the wake of her husband's murder.

The deep emotional response that Vasnetsov's religious aesthetic aroused in the members of the imperial family is conveyed in an embroidered icon of Christ Not Made by Hands, begun by Alexandra Fedorovna but left unfinished (**Fig. 9**). Today, the icon is a central exhibit in the Mauve Sitting Room in the Alexander Palace, one of Alexandra's favorite retreats from court life. It rests on a small worktable in the middle of the room, with an empty embroidery frame beside it, as if the embroidress had been unexpectedly

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<sup>26</sup> The set is now at Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens, Washington DC.

<sup>27</sup> Now in the State Historical and Cultural Museum–Reserve “The Moscow Kremlin.”

called away. The prototype seems to be a new icon of Christ with the Crown of Thorns, which Vasnetsov presented to the church of the Semenovskii Regiment in St. Petersburg in 1905. The sorrowful, reproachful gaze reflected the artist's shock and outrage at the assassination of General Georgii Min following his brutal suppression of the 1905 uprisings in Moscow.<sup>28</sup> In the lengthy process of *litsevoe shit'e* - laying down stitches to gradually create the image of a suffering Christ –the Empress found a form of active prayer and self-expression that connected her to the world of the *svetlitsa*, as it was imagined in the early twentieth century.

Reminders of ancestral women prayerfully absorbed in needlework were especially potent throughout 1913, as the Romanov dynasty celebrated its tercentenary. That May, the imperial family made a pilgrimage from Kostroma to Moscow, retracing the route that Michael Romanov had taken with his mother, the abbess Marfa, on his way to being crowned tsar in 1613. At Kostroma, Marfa was ritually invoked when the same Fedorovskaia Mother of God icon with which she had blessed her son in 1613 was used to bless Nicholas II. After the chaos of the Time of Troubles, Marfa's restoration of needlework production in Moscow's Assumption Convent was a symbol of the order and prosperity her son's reign was to bring. Fittingly, an icon veil embroidered in Marfa's *svetlitsa* was one of the first acquisitions that Nicholas II approved when a new department of medieval art was created in the Alexander III Museum in St. Petersburg in

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<sup>28</sup> An even closer prototype is an icon with the closed eyes of the Shroud of Turin, said to be behind the altar in the Cathedral of St. Vladimir. See [http://www.vlsobor.com/painting\\_42.html](http://www.vlsobor.com/painting_42.html).

1912.<sup>29</sup> Many more ancestral textiles made their appearance at the exhibitions mounted to celebrate the dynasty throughout the tercentenary year.<sup>30</sup>

At their second stop, in Suzdal, the family visited the Protection Convent, where they viewed the tombs of the many royal women who had taken the veil there, often against their will, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the convent's sacristy the Emperor discovered dozens of decommissioned icons that had belonged to these women, and he ordered them to be removed to the Alexander III Museum. Found along with them was a cache of embroidered icon veils, removed together with other donated adornments in the Petrine period.<sup>31</sup> This included the most complete set of icon vestments to have survived from Muscovite Rus: the wardrobe of veils and covers embroidered for an icon of the Tikhvin Mother of God by Anastasia Romanovna (1530-60), the first wife of Ivan the Terrible and the aunt of Michael Romanov (**Fig. 10**). Far from being obstacles to an appreciation of the icon's painterly qualities, as contemporary icon collectors and aesthetes might have considered them, for lovers of *tserkovnaia starina* the icon's wardrobe revealed "the pious zeal of our early forebears [that] moved them to adorn their icons with everything possible."<sup>32</sup> This accumulation of layers created a symbolic barrier between the icon and the profane viewer,<sup>33</sup> even as it narrowed the temporal gap between Nicholas's family and their Romanov forbears. This "semantics of splendor" became an

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<sup>29</sup> See Nadezhda Pivovarova, "Ostroukhov i formirovanie kollektzii otdeleniia khristianskikh drevnostei, russkogo muzeia Aleksandra III," *Russkoe iskusstvo*, 3 (2009), pp. 22-9.

<sup>30</sup> A.I. Rechmenskii, *Sobranie pamiatnikov tserkovnoi stariny* (M: Izd. Tserkovnoi iubileinoi komissii, 1913); *Vystavka drevne-russkogo iskusstva ustroennaia v 1913 godu v oznamenovanie chestvovaniiia 300-letiiia tsarstvovaniia Doma Romanovykh* (Moscow: Imp. Moskovskii arkhelogicheskii institut imeni Imperatora Nikolaia II, 1913).

<sup>31</sup> In 1722, Peter the Great issued an ukaz ordering the removal of valuable adornments from icons. See V. Georgievskii, "Ikony Ioanna Groznogo i ego sem'ia v Suzdale," *Starye gody*, 11 (Nov. 1910), pp. 3-21.

<sup>32</sup> Georgievskii, "Ikony Ioanna Groznogo," p. 13.

<sup>33</sup> On the liturgical role of icon covers generally, see I.A. Sterligova, *Dragotsennye oklady drevnerusskikh ikon XI-XIV vekov* (Moscow, 2000). Also Bissera V. Pentcheva, *The Sensual Icon: Space, Ritual, and the Senses in Byzantium* (University Park: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 2014).



aesthetic ideal for the imperial couple, epitomizing all that had been lost of Holy Rus in the post-Petrine era, as well as what might be regained.<sup>34</sup>

With such examples to hand, every opportunity the women of Nicholas II's household had to create a sacred textile with their own hands became imbued with significance. This was especially clear in the gifts of embroidery that the Empress and her sister gave as part of the canonization of new saints, a highly political aspect of Nicholas II's reign. In 1903, Nicholas and Alexandra made explicit their desire to canonize the monk Serafim of Sarov by ordering a marble coffin for the holy man's remains, while Alexandra donated a brocade cover for the casket and a carpet, both of which she had embroidered herself. Such an act – requiring many hours of prayerful labor – would have played its part in reinforcing her pious belief that Serafim would help her to produce a male heir. Knowingly or not, the Empress's gesture mirrored the actions of royal women since the time of Solomonia Saburova, the barren wife of Vasily III, whose gifts of sacred embroidery also served as prayers that she be granted children.<sup>35</sup>

As part of the canonization of Patriarch Germogen in 1913, both Alexandra and Elizaveta used gifts of embroidery to underscore the dynastic significance of the event. Having actively assisted in the overthrow of the False Dmitrii's Polish regime in 1610, Germogen became a central figure in the patriotic rhetoric of the Tercentenary. Elizaveta Fedorovna successfully spearheaded a campaign to secure his canonization, and Vasnetsov painted a new icon of the saint. When Germogen's remains were discovered in Moscow's Chudov Monastery, a grand ceremony was orchestrated to transfer them to the

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<sup>34</sup> The phrase “semantics of splendor” was coined by Oleg Tarasov.

<sup>35</sup> In 1525 Saburova was forcibly tonsured in the Protection Convent in Suzdal because of her inability to produce an heir. Maiasova has pointed to the inscriptions and choice of subjects in a cover for the tomb of Kirill Belozersky (1514) and two icon veils as evidence of her intentions. See Maiasova, p. 25.

Kremlin's Dormition Cathedral. Elizaveta embroidered a cover for the coffin, with the image of the saint worked in silks and gold thread, while Vasnetsov oversaw the preparation of a set of new vestments to place atop the coffin.<sup>36</sup> To the Empress fell the symbolic task of embroidering the golden seraphim, outlined in seed pearls, on the white patriarchal cowl - itself modeled on that of Patriarch Filaret, the father of Michael Romanov (**Fig. 11**).

By 1913, the women of the imperial family were quite actively engaged in the revival of national needlework traditions, from sponsoring lace, carpet, and embroidery workshops to lending their patronage to major exhibitions of improved peasant crafts.<sup>37</sup> As President of the Imperial Women's Philanthropic Society, Alexandra Fedorovna also oversaw a network of organizations designed to help women in need by promoting forms of industriousness that often involved needlework.<sup>38</sup> Of these, the School of Folk Art, founded in St. Petersburg in 1911, came closest to replicating the values of the *svetlitsa* as a spiritual community of women, a social order held in place by obedience to God and Tsar. Founded by the artist and ethnographer Varvara Shneider (1860-1941), the school enjoyed the Empress's patronage and lively personal interest. Its mission was to train peasant girls in the dying arts of Russian needlework and take this knowledge back to their villages. The curriculum placed equal emphasis on reviving secular and sacred traditions, and pupils received a thorough grounding in the techniques of *litsevoe shit'e* and gold embroidery. Contemporaries described it as "an artistic convent," "a village in

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<sup>36</sup> E. V. Metal'nikova, "Blagodarnyi trud, kotoryi ia dolzhna ispolnit' . . ." (VI. kn. Elizaveta Fedorovna) in *U istokov rossiiskoi gosudarstvennosti. Rol' zhenshchin v istorii dinastii Romanovykh. Issledovaniia. Materialy. Sbornik No. 6* (St. Petersburg: Izd. Iuridicheskii tsentr Press, 2013), pp. 253-62.

<sup>37</sup> Alexandra was patroness to the Kiev Kustar Society and Elizaveta Fedorovna oversaw a depot run by the Society for the Dissemination and Improvement of Kustar Goods in Moscow. Grand Duchess Maria Pavlovna and the Tsar's sister Olga were also patronesses of kustar workshops for women.

<sup>38</sup> See E.S. Shumigovskii, *Imperatorskoe zhenskoe patrioticheskoe obshchestvo (1812-1912). Istoricheskii ocherk* (St. Petersburg: Gos. Tipografiia, 1912), 170-225.

the city,” and “the tsaritsa’s *svetlitsa*.”<sup>39</sup> A more recent observer has described as “a genuine social Utopia,” preparing the pupils “to become disseminators of a new, higher culture.”<sup>40</sup>

It was as needlewomen in “the tsarita’s *svetlitsa*” that the school’s pupils contributed to a project that embodied the imperial family’s ideal of a sacred space: the Cathedral of the Fedorovskaia Mother of God at Tsarskoe Selo, completed in 1912. The furnishing of the cathedral combined two contradictory principles into a distinctively modern church aesthetic. In a desire for direct contact with objects touched by ancestral hands, the imperial couple brought genuine seventeenth-century works from monasteries and churches to enrich their personal place of worship. Moscow’s Assumption Convent, for instance, sent an altar set embroidered in the *svetlitsa* of Aleksandra Golitsyna in 1643, with new dedicatory inscriptions embroidered into the linings to mark their reactivation for the Fedorovskii Cathedral.<sup>41</sup> At the same time, the best contemporary icon painters, jewelers, and makers of church vestments were employed to create new pieces in the spirit of the seventeenth century. As proof of the School of Folk Art’s successful resuscitation of lost skills, its pupils made an exact copy of an icon veil embroidered by Tsar Alexei’s sister Tatiana Mikhailovna, kept in the Museum of Alexander III.

In the cathedral’s crypt chapel dedicated to St. Serafim of Sarov, the line between past and present, old and new, was dissolved through the saturation of the senses,

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<sup>39</sup> Natal’ia Ponomareva, “Otstoim Shkolu – otstoim Rossiiu,” <http://rusk.ru/st.php?idar=111000>.

<sup>40</sup> *Pis’ma – bol’she, chem vospominaniia. Iz perepiski sem’i Semenovykh-Tian-Shanskikh i sester A.P. i V.P. Shneider* (Moscow: Novyi etnograf, 2012), p. 239.

<sup>41</sup> The set is now in the State Russian Museum. For illustrations and translations of the inscriptions, see *Gates of Mystery. The Arts of Holy Russia*. Edited by Roderick Grierson (Austin TX: Univ. of Texas Press, 1994), pp. 78-81.

reviving a sacred aesthetic that had reached its apogee in the seventeenth century. Here embroidered textiles played an important integrative role, binding all into a densely layered visual field (**Fig. 12**). “Much reverent beauty is imparted to the icons in the Serafim church by the old pious custom of adorning the icons with costly veils sewn with silks, gold, and pearls,” we read in the luxury souvenir album. “All the icons on the walls are placed on colored silk veils, embroidered with gold and silk in dark red, scarlet, and dark brown. In addition, hung under the local icons and those in the middle positions are especially luxurious veils or clothes thickly encrusted with spun gold.”<sup>42</sup> The Ponetaevskaia Mother of God, a relatively recent miracle-working icon of deep significance to the imperial family, was set against a gold-embroidered cloth, emulating the practices of icon adornment practiced by Anastasia Romanovna and other tsaritsas in days of yore. Though some of the decorative cloths that hung beneath the icons were antiques, gifts from well-wishers, others were created from old patterns by pupils at the School of Folk Art. The line between old and new was virtually impossible to discern.

The modest inventory of imperial sacred embroideries I have presented here is certain to expand as more pieces come to light in Russia and abroad. As one observer recalled of the war years alone, “How many aers, covers, and other things were made by the Empress and her daughters and distributed to soldiers, monasteries, and poor churches.”<sup>43</sup> Perhaps those embroideries, made to serve the everyday needs of Orthodox

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<sup>42</sup> *Feodorovskii gosudarev sobor v Tsarskom sele. Vyp. 1. Peshchernyi khram vo imia prepodobnago Serafima Sarovskago Chudotvortsa* (Moskva : T-vo skoropechatni A. A. Levenson, 1915), p. 23.

<sup>43</sup> Inok Serafim (Kuznetsov), *Pravoslavnyi Tsar'-muchenik* (Peking: Russkaia tip. Pri Dukhovnoi missii, 1920). A set of pink satin altar cloths in the collection of the Foundation of Russian History museum in Jordanville, NY is perhaps representative of these gifts.

people, will simply confirm for some long-held assumptions about the imperial family's "bourgeois taste." Consider the apparent incongruity of a tiny print icon of the Tsarskoselskaia Mother of God, set in a frame embroidered by the Empress and sent to the Front in 1916 as a blessing.<sup>44</sup> The icon's "oklad" is a garland of daisies worked in French knots and lazy-daisy stitch, not so very different from the embroidered cushions and cloths seen in the imperial family's photo albums. Here there is no trace of the self-conscious nationalism that made Vasnetsov's designs seem such important symbols of a nation-wide revival of faith. Instead, it brings to mind the humble decoration of family icons with wax flowers, beads, and sequins - the epitome of popular piety in the late imperial period.

As more embroideries made by the Empress and Grand Duchess Elizaveta Fedorovna come to light, categories of secular and sacred have begun to lose their conventional boundaries. In the wake of the sisters' canonization (Elizaveta in 1992, Alexandra in 2000), even the most humble bits of needlework touched by their hands have acquired the value of sacred relics, just as St. Serafim's mantle did in the household of Grand Duke Sergei. A christening coverlet in white drawn-thread and cutwork, made by the Empress for a godchild in 1913, is now venerated for its miracle-working efficacy in family disputes.<sup>45</sup> A handkerchief embroidered by Elizaveta Fedorovna and recovered from the site of her murder at Alapaevsk in 1918 is a cherished relic in the Convent of Mary Magdalene in Jerusalem, along with her needlepoint runner from 1888. As a pilgrim to the Darmstadt church recently reported, standing before an icon-stand cover embroidered by the Empress, "It's as if the holy relic has preserved the warmth of the

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<sup>44</sup> The icon is in the collection of the Central Museum of the Armed Forces.

<sup>45</sup> On the coverlet's appearance at the Alexander Nevsky Lavra in St. Petersburg in 2013, see [http://mitropolia.spb.ru/news/av/?id=27603&phrase\\_id=25682#ad-image-5](http://mitropolia.spb.ru/news/av/?id=27603&phrase_id=25682#ad-image-5)

holy tsaritsa's hands and the prayer of her soul."<sup>46</sup> In ways Alexandra Fedorovna and Elizaveta Fedorovna could scarcely have anticipated, their life-long engagement with embroidery has helped to secure their memory as pious tsaritsas in the best tradition of the *svetlitsa*.

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<sup>46</sup> Quoted in <http://kovceg.ru/node/2538>