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# The Art of the Oklad

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# The Art of the Oklad

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In 1904 a team of restorers embarked on preserving the celebrated icon of the Old Testament Trinity, which had been painted by Andrei Rublev between 1422 and 1427.<sup>1</sup> The project, initiated by the noted collector Ilya Ostroukhov, involved removing layers of dirt and *olifa* (linseed oil), and the

A similar story could be told of countless other oklads that once adorned Russian icons but were removed in the 20th century in response to a modern aesthetic that saw the painted icon as a work of art, the metal oklad as merely a vulgar display of wealth. Today, it requires an act of

## Hillwood Studies

### THE ART OF THE OKLAD

by Dr. Wendy R. Salmond, Visiting Curator

areas of repainting that had accrued over the centuries. Before work could begin, however, the icon had to be separated from its *oklad*,<sup>2</sup> a covering of beautifully chased solid gold through which only the faces, hands, and feet of the three angels were visible (fig. 1). With its precious burden of jeweled haloes, necklaces, and collars, the Trinity's oklad exemplified a centuries-old tradition of honoring important icons with donations and adornments, a tradition that expanded the icon's role as "a window onto heaven" by building "a kind of fragile bridge which aspired to unite heaven and earth."<sup>3</sup> When the restoration was completed, the oklad was not replaced. Instead, it was permanently retired to the museum of the Troitse-Sergieva Lavra, where it remains as a sumptuous example of the jeweler's craft, its original function and meaning more or less forgotten.



imagination to appreciate the integral role that oklads once played in the meaning of medieval icons such as Rublev's Trinity. To visualize what the majority of early Russian icons must have looked like with their covers intact, we must turn to the private devotional icon of the 18th and 19th centuries, a source that is only now

attracting the notice of scholars and collectors. Usually small images reserved for private use in chapels or bedrooms, lovingly preserved in special cases (*kiots*), and passed down through generations, these devotional icons have miraculously survived with their covers intact, either because they continued to be used for religious purposes until quite recently, or because they ended up in private collections where the oklad was appreciated as highly as the icon. This is particularly true of the icons that Mrs. Post acquired during her

Detail, Oklad from  
Icon of St. Nicholas  
of Velikoretsk, see fig. 6.





*Fig. 1*  
*Oklad from the Old*  
*Testament Trinity icon,*  
16th-18th centuries.  
Painted by Andrei  
Rublev. Gold, silver  
gilt, pearls, precious  
stones, 140 x 115 cm.  
Sergiev Posad Art  
and History Museum

more than thirty years as a collector of Russian art and now form a significant part of the Hillwood collection. Over half of these are personal icons that retain the metal covers with which their former owners sought to express their religious piety and, frequently, their awareness of changing artistic fashions, particularly the western European styles introduced into Russian art in the 18th and 19th centuries.<sup>4</sup>

The history of the oklad in

Russian culture is almost as old as that of the icon itself. The first painted icons were brought from Constantinople to the city of Kiev around 988, the year in which Grand Duke Vladimir of Kiev converted to Eastern Orthodoxy, the religion of the Byzantine empire. As physical embodiments of the central Christian mystery—that Christ was both divine and mortal, spirit and flesh—icons acted as intermediaries between the earthly and the heavenly

worlds. Their painted images of Christ, the Mother of God, and the saints provided a visible presence through which the faithful could gain access to the invisible realm of the spirit. A clear distinction was drawn, however, between the *worship* of icons (i.e., idolatry) and their *veneration*, since all honor directed towards the painted image was actually intended for the holy personage represented. In the words of St. Basil the Great, "The homage paid to the image is transmitted to the original."<sup>5</sup>

The custom of honoring icons with covers made of precious materials (gold and silver, pearls, and precious stones) was introduced to Russia as early as the 11th century.<sup>6</sup> Initially, such costly embellishments were reserved for only the most venerated icons, such as those that performed miraculous cures or protected the Russian people from their enemies. Thus, the icon of the Vladimir Mother of God (so called because of its role as protector of the city of Vladimir) was covered with a gold and jewel-encrusted oklad soon after it was brought to Kiev from Constantinople in 1136. After this initial cover was stolen by the Mongols in 1237, three more were made for the icon in the course of the next four centuries, thereby emphasizing the central role that the Vladimir Mother of God played in the political and religious life of medieval Russia.<sup>7</sup>

Judging from the mesh of tiny nail holes that scar the surface of many Russian icons from the "Golden Age" (roughly the 13th to the early 16th centuries), a surprisingly high number of icons were at one time covered, either by thin metal strips stamped with ornamental patterns (*bas'ma*) and nailed to the borders and

the background of the icon, or, less frequently, by complete metal covers that revealed only the faces, hands, and feet of the holy personages depicted. Certainly, by the 16th century the practice of adorning icons with a multitude of gifts had become firmly established as an essential component of icon veneration (*ikonopochitanie*). On a daily basis the veneration of holy images took the form of lighting candles and icon lamps before the icons, purifying them with incense, bowing and prostrating before them, and especially kissing them (*lobzanie*). The donation of an oklad or other adornment to a particular icon was considered an act of special piety, one that brought favor to the donor and honor to the holy image. In addition to commissioning an oklad for a previously unadorned icon, a pious donor could refurbish or add to an icon's existing oklad in many ways. In the case of Rublev's icon of the Old Testament Trinity, for example, by the mid-18th century the icon's adornments included haloes donated in the 16th century by Boris Godunov, a panagia (a bishop's pendant with an image of Christ or the Mother of God) given by Fedor Godunov, and crescent collars (*tsatas*) given by Tsar Mikhail Romanov in 1626, all embellishing a gold cover given by the monks of the Troitse Lavra in 1754.<sup>8</sup> Although including the donor's own image on either icon or oklad apparently was frowned upon (unlike in the religious art of Italy and Byzantium), oblique personal references to the donor were permitted with the inclusion of personal saints on the icon's borders (see fig. 6).

The oklad also protected the holy image beneath in both a literal and a symbolic sense. On





a purely physical level, it helped to mitigate the inevitable side effects of daily veneration, such as oils and abrasion from the constant kissing of the icon's surface, and soot and grime from the candles, lamp oil and incense. Equally important, it helped to define the boundaries between this world and the one beyond, serving as "an intermediary between God or the Saints installed in their paradisiacal sojourn, and the faithful offering up his prayers to them."<sup>9</sup>

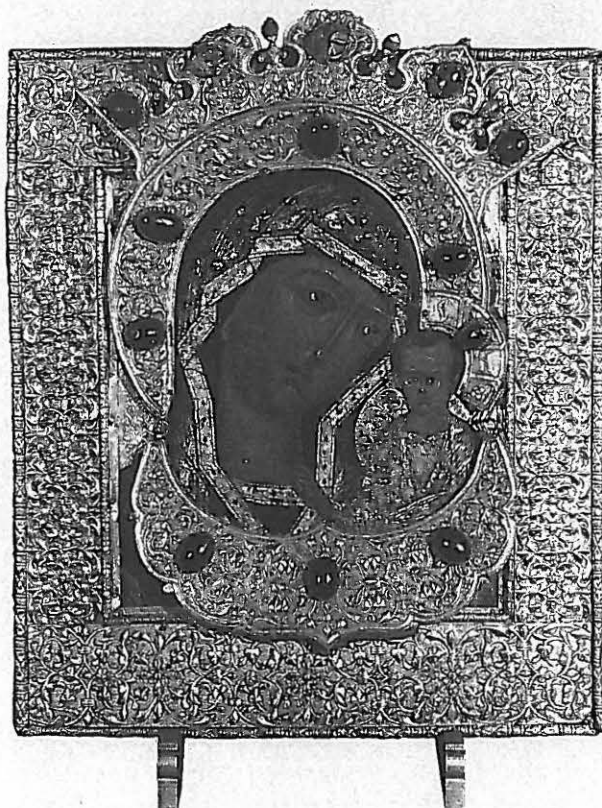
At its peak in the 16th and 17th centuries, the art of the oklad—and of icon adornment in the broadest sense—had expanded to include the elements of an entire "wardrobe" (*ubor* or *kuzn'*). In addition to a fixed oklad (often lavishly jeweled and fitted with special chambers to hold relics), an especially revered icon might receive haloes (*venets*), diadems (*korona*), and crescent collars (*tsata*) as gifts. These three types of ornament appear on the oklad of one of the earliest covered icons at Hillwood, a

17th-century image of the Kazan Mother of God (fig. 2).<sup>10</sup> Here, the symmetrical scrolls of foliate ornament on the *bas'ma* border carry over onto the attached haloes, diadem, and collar, all of which are studded with cabochon paste stones set in toothed cages. The ground of the icon (the *svet*, literally, the "light") is also covered with metal *bas'ma* strips, leaving free only the bust-length figures of the Mother of God and the Christ Child. Evidently, this icon was covered as a single commission, and its rather modest "off the shelf" adornments remained undisturbed over the intervening centuries.

In addition to these basic adornments, the central figures might be covered with separate dresses (*riza*) of velvet or brocade embroidered with pearls and gold thread. Icons of the Mother of God also received gifts of earrings and long strings of pearls known as *riasy* (*riasy*)—ornaments that were originally used to decorate women's clothing and that were an important part of a Russian noblewoman's wardrobe.<sup>11</sup> Especially large numbers of richly adorned icons were found in convents where women from noble families were often forcibly confined, or where they chose to end their days as nuns, having left all their worldly possessions to the convent.

By the mid-17th century, when the practice of icon adornment seems to have subsided in other Orthodox countries, the lavish decoration of icons, both those for private use at home and for public worship in churches and monasteries, was still in vogue in Russia. When Paul of Aleppo accompanied Metropolitan Macarius of Antioch to Russia in 1655, he described how, in Moscow's Novodevichii convent, "around the columns are

Fig. 2  
Icon of the Kazan Mother  
of God with *bas'ma*  
oklad, halo, diadem,  
and crescent collar,  
late 17th century.  
Tempera on wood,  
metal, paste stones,  
31.40 x 26.35 cm.  
Hillwood collection  
54.7





placed small silver gilt icons in two rows, one above the other, many of them adorned in pure gold and stones without price," while "around the church and surrounding the four columns were placed very large icons on which nothing was visible but the hands and faces, and perhaps with great difficulty one could see a bit of the clothing, but all the rest was thick, chased silver with niello."<sup>12</sup>

This public practice of icon adornment was profoundly altered in Russia by the sweeping reforms of Peter the Great in the early 18th century. The

heaping of separate adornments on an icon was summarily stopped in 1722, when Peter issued an *ukaz* (decree) to the recently formed Holy Synod, ordering the removal of all superfluous trappings from church icons and their transfer to the Treasury "for safe keeping."<sup>13</sup> Pearl edgings, diadems, riasny, tsatas, and earrings were removed from icons, and pounds of pearls were stripped off and stockpiled in church sacristies. Henceforth, the icon's more medieval trappings, with their sometimes pagan associations, were relegated to

Fig. 3

*Icon of the Three Handed Mother of God with oklad, 1743-90.*

Tempera on wood, silver, painted enamel, 31.91 x 27.30 cm.

Hillwood collection

54.16





the past, and icon adornment was almost entirely confined to the fixed cover and the halo.

A more gradual transformation of the icon's appearance took place in the course of the 18th century, as western tastes for the baroque, rococo, and neoclassical styles permeated all aspects of worship, from church architecture to the painting and adornment of icons. For the 18th-century Russian seeking to express his piety in the new language of imported forms, a revered family icon could comfortably accommodate quite an eclectic range of western styles. An icon of the Three Handed Mother of God (*Troeruchitsa*) at Hillwood shows the fluctuation of artistic fashion in the 18th century (fig. 3). Painted in 1743 at the beginning of Empress Elizabeth's reign (the painter, R. V. Vasilevskii, added his signature and the date on the lower right border), the icon itself reflects the preference for northern Baroque painting, in the full-faced Mother of God, with her pink complexion and protuberant, sparsely lashed eyes, and in the tow-headed Christ Child. Fifty years later, in 1790, a silver oklad was commissioned for the icon, perhaps by a grandchild of the original owner. Its leafy scrolls, floral sprigs, and robust cherubs display a florid rococo taste that faintly tinged with baroque elements, must have seemed already out of date in the last years of Catherine the Great's reign, when neoclassicism predominated. The narrow haloes of 17th-century oklads have given way to sunburst radiances, while the flat, five-pointed diadem with its medieval overtones is supplanted by a small split crown reminiscent of the new Imperial regalia introduced into Russia during the 18th century.

Such changes in the external appearance of Russian icons did not fundamentally affect the enthusiasm for icon adornment in the post-petrine period. As in preceding centuries, the donation of lavish gifts to the church was still considered an important political gesture made by the ruler. Empress Anna (r. 1730-40) commissioned sumptuous oklads for two of Russia's most revered miracle-working icons, the Gruzinskaia (Georgian) Mother of God in Moscow's Trinity Church and the Kazan Mother of God in St. Petersburg.<sup>15</sup> During the reign of Alexander I (r. 1801-25), yet another oklad was made for the Kazan Mother of God in preparation for its installation in the new Kazan Cathedral in St. Petersburg. The design—for a gold oklad worked in high relief with a radiance tipped with diamonds—was commissioned by a merchant named Konosov, but it was ultimately approved by the emperor himself. In addition to the four pounds of gold and 1,432 diamonds used in its production, the oklad was set with precious stones, over half of them donated by Alexander's wife and by his mother, Maria Fedorovna. The finest ruby was the gift of Grand Duchess Ekaterina Pavlovna.<sup>16</sup>

Among the population at large the periodic updating and refurbishing of oklads continued, as revered family icons were passed from generation to generation. The recovering of an old icon frequently coincided with its "renewal" (i.e., the darkened surface was repainted in keeping with contemporary artistic fashion). In the 19th century, the preference among more educated people for academic and realist painting was echoed by an overwhelming fondness for



more sculptural oklads, from beneath which the painted features of the blessed peered out as if "through slits in dough." Just as icons of the 17th century and earlier were repainted in keeping with the realist spirit of the times, so too their old bas'ma oklads were unceremoniously removed and discarded, all in the name of icon veneration. Some critics blamed the clergy "with their low tastes... for the dressing of icons in heavy sealed covers, with holes cut out for the faces and feet and hands [to allow] for kissing."<sup>17</sup> Others, nostalgically looking back to the time before Peter the Great's reforms, attributed the change to a gen-

eral decline in taste, compared to that of "our ancestors [who] loved to decorate the holy icons, and yet did not presume to cover their revered images with solid metal covers, and covered only the edges of the icon with bas'ma oklads."<sup>18</sup>

A striking example of this shift in taste is an icon of St. Nikita fighting with the Devil. Now in the Hillwood collection, the border of this 17th-century icon had at one time been covered with a narrow bas'ma oklad, as the rows of tiny nails and nail holes in the surface clearly indicate (fig. 4). Around the mid-19th century the icon's owner decided to replace the old-fashioned bas'ma with a

*Fig. 4*  
*Icon of St. Nikita fighting*  
*the Devil, late 17th*  
*century. Tempera*  
*on wood,*  
*32.38 x 27.30 cm.*  
*Hillwood collection*  
*54.41*





Fig. 5  
 Oklad from icon of St.  
 Nikita fighting the Devil,  
 mid-19th century. Gilt  
 metal, 32.38 x 27.30  
 cm. Hillwood collection  
 54.41

new, solid metal cover (fig. 5), rather reminiscent in shape and ornament of the daguerreotypes that were becoming popular in Russia around that time. An attempt was made to convey not only a sense of depth through linear perspective, but also of substance to the saint's body through modeling. This oklad thus represents one way in which 19th century Orthodox Russians attempted to reconcile the aesthetic and intellectual demands of their age with the principles of icon veneration.

Although tastes in icon painting and decoration may have changed by the late 19th century, the sincere desire to honor the holy icons through all available means had in no way waned. In 1851, for exam-

ple, an icon of the Chernigov-Il'inskaia Mother of God was found in a dark storeroom in the Church of the Resurrection at Smolnyi in St. Petersburg, and it soon began to effect miraculous cures. It was then

*permitted to be hung in a prominent part of the church and to be honored with the burning of lamps and candles before it and to have prayers said. Several of the church's regular visitors then expressed a desire to have a gilded wooden frame made for the icon, at their own expense, and then zealous people were soon found to adorn it with a rich silver gilt oklad with diamonds, amethysts, pearls and other stones.*

By the end of the century, the icon's "biographer" recorded, it

was kept in "a large and magnificent gilded kiot made in 1891, thanks to the zeal of the church's parishioners, to commemorate the miraculous escape of Alexander III and his family [from a railroad accident] on 17 October 1888."<sup>19</sup> Although only the most revered icons received such lavish attention, the sheer number of 19th-century icons that have survived with their covers intact, however mass-produced and modest, provides compelling visual evidence of the organic connection that existed in the Orthodox mind between an icon and its "dress."

Given this brief survey of the oklad's enduring importance, we may reasonably wonder why a tradition so widely accepted as an integral part of an icon's meaning for over nine hundred years fell so rapidly from grace in the first three decades of this century. Judging solely by the present-day appearance of most medieval Russian icons that have been restored to their original paint layer, we might well conclude—quite wrongly—that the oklad was a phenomenon confined exclusively to the 18th and 19th centuries, a period long considered one of "decadence" in the history of icon painting. Two explanations for the oklad's demotion can be offered. First, oklads undoubtedly fell victim to the "rediscovery" of icons as powerful works of art in the early 20th century, thanks in large part to the new science of icon restoration, which for the first time revealed the brilliant colors and expressive forms of medieval paintings buried under centuries of dirt and overpainting. The Old Testament Trinity icon by Andrei Rublev and the Vladimir Mother of God (stripped of its oklad and restored in 1919) are

memorable examples of this trend. Henceforth, the museum rather than the church became the icon's habitat, a secure and stable environment where the traditions of icon veneration (so harmful to the icon as a work of art) had no place.

A second, rather more sinister reason for the oklad's general demise can be found in the campaign to confiscate church valuables, which was authorized by the Soviet government in 1922 on the pretext of raising funds for the victims of the catastrophic Volga famine. As a result of this campaign—the first in a series of attacks on church property that lasted well into the 1930s—large quantities of church plate, vestments, and icon covers were melted down for their gold or silver content. The destruction was not entirely indiscriminate, thanks in large part to the efforts of Glavmuzei, the organization in charge of creating museums and protecting works of art during the early Soviet period. Instructions issued to those in charge of the confiscations categorically forbade "a) stripping old bas'ma, tsatas, and haloes from icons, crosses, royal doors, rizas and other such objects as they might decorate, and b) removing stones and pearls from objects made prior to 1725."<sup>20</sup> As a consequence, significant pieces of liturgical art were preserved and added to the nation's museum collections as examples of decorative art. An odd by-product of the confiscation campaign was an exhibition mounted at the Hermitage Museum in 1923, comprising "material that was fairly unusual in museum practice. Most of it consisted of [18th-century] icon oklads, removed from the actual icons, so that in those places where one had been accustomed from child-





hood to see an image there were gaping holes, often of a very unnerving shape."<sup>21</sup>

One of the finest oklads at Hillwood is almost certainly a veteran of the confiscations and lootings of the 1920s and 1930s. This unusually large silver oklad, depicting St. Nicholas of Velikoretsk with scenes from his life, was made in Moscow in 1775 (fig. 6). The quality of the workmanship and the presence of the patron saints depicted on niello plaques on the border

suggest that this was an important commission, made for an icon that was highly revered in the 16th century.<sup>22</sup> The original icon was either destroyed, removed for separate sale, or earmarked for a museum collection. The oklad, however, was clearly too recent in date to qualify as a national treasure, and yet too fine in its workmanship to be melted down for its silver content. Perhaps it was instead set aside for sale to foreigners in the state-run commis-

Fig. 6  
Oklad from an icon of St. Nicholas of Velikoretsk with scenes from his life, 1775. Silver gilt, niello, paste stones, 57.47 x 46.35 cm. Hillwood collection 54.12



sion shops of Moscow and Leningrad. No doubt to increase its salability, the oklad was supplied with its present "icon," which was hastily painted in oil on chipboard. No covered icon in the Hillwood collection more vividly illustrates the artistic and historical value of oklads, as well as their vulnerability to change.

Thanks to the vagaries of Russian art collecting in the 20th century, it is in small western collections such as that of the Hillwood Museum that the identities of many icons of the 18th and 19th centuries have been best preserved, not only as examples of icon veneration but also as accurate reflections of artistic taste at every level of Russian society—from the tsar to the peasant. Unlike medieval icons of the Golden Age, whose full glory became visible only after they were "liberated" from their original covers, later icons are most fully themselves when seen through the thin, highly ornamented layer of their oklads.

# Notes

1. On the icon itself see V. I. Antonova and N. E. Mneva, *Katalog drevnerusskoi zhivopisi. Opyt istoriko-khudozhestvennoi klassifikatsii. Tom I.XI-nachalo XVI veka* (Moscow, 1963), pp. 285-90. On its restoration, first in 1904-1905 and again in 1918, see Iu. G. Malkov, "K izucheniiu 'Troitsy' Andreia Rubleva," *Muzei* 8 (Moscow, 1987), pp. 239-58.

2. The word *oklad* derives from the verb *okladyvat'* (to edge or border). It is frequently used interchangeably with the term *riza* (literally, a chasuble), although the *riza* is more accurately that part of the oklad that represents the clothing of the figures depicted, often a piece of fabric embroidered with pearls, gold thread, or stones.

3. André Grabar, *Les Revêtements en or et en argent des icônes byzantines du moyen âge* (Venice, 1975), p. 6.

4. Of the 86 icons in the Hillwood collection, 41 have silver or metal covers. The nail holes in some of the oldest painted icons show that they too were at one time covered.

5. The liturgical meaning of these words is explained in Leonid Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons*, trans. G. E. H. Palmer and E. Kadloubovsky (Crestwood, NY, 1982), p. 32.

6. The earliest examples appear to be the large icon of St. Peter and St. Paul from the iconostasis in the Cathedral of St. Sophia in Novgorod (ca. 1050) and the Korsun Mother of God from the same church. See Grabar, p. 23, figs. 3-4 and E. A. Gordienko and A. N. Trifonova, "Katalog serebrianykh okladov novgorodskogo muzeia-zapovednika," *Muzei* 6 (Moscow, 1986), pp. 209-24.

7. Two of the covers are now in the Armory Museum in the Moscow Kremlin. They are discussed in Grabar, pp. 68-72, and illustrated in *Gosudarstvennaia Oruzheinaia Palata* (Moscow, 1988), figs. 24 and 26.

8. These donations superseded an earlier donation by Tsar Ivan the Terrible of "a pearl-embroidered icon-cloth made in the workshop of Anastasia Romanovna, his first wife, and also a new gold mounting together with diadems, haloes and crescent collars decorated with chasing, multi-colored enamel and sapphires, rubies and chrysolites." T. V. Nikolaevna, *Sobranie drevne-russkogo iskusstva v zagorskom muzee* (Leningrad, 1968), pp. 11, 226.

9. Grabar, p. 4. On the liturgical meaning of oklads see also I. A. Sterligova, "O liturgich-





eskom smysle dragotsennogo ubora russkoi ikony," in *Vostochnokhristianskii khram. Liturgiia i iskusstvo* (St. Petersburg, 1994), pp. 219-26.

10. On the Kazan Mother of God, one of the most widespread icons in Russia, see Ouspensky and Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons*, p. 88.

11. On these components of 16th-century icon coverings see V. T. Georgievskii, "Ikony Ioanna Groznogo i ego sem'i v Suzdale," *Starye gody* (November, 1910), pp. 13-17.

12. Quoted in N. Kondakov, *Ruskaia ikona*, vol. 3, part 1 (Prague, 1929), pp. 33 and 35.

13. Georgievskii, p. 19.

14. Kondakov, *Ruskaia ikona*, p. 37.

15. E. Poselianin, ed., *Bogomater. Polnoe illiustrirovannoe opisanie ee zemnoi zhizni i posviashchennykh ee imeni chudotvornykh ikon* (St. Petersburg, 1909?), p. 545; Viacheslav Mukhin, *Tserkovnaia kul'tura Sankt-Peterburga*, (St. Petersburg, 1994), p. 133.

16. Mukhin, p. 135.

17. Kondakov, p. 48.

18. D.K. Trenev, "Sokhranenie pamiatnikov drevne-russkoi ikonopisi," *Ikonopisnyi sbornik* 1 (1907), p. 5.

19. The history of this icon is related in Poselianin, pp. 245-48.

20. The relevant decrees and instructions are published in *Kazanskii muzeinyi vestnik* 1 (1922), pp. 225-30.

21. L. Matsulevich, "Vystavka tserkovnoi stariny v Ermitazhe," *Sredi kollektsionerov* 1-2 (1923), p. 46.

22. On the origins of this type of icon see S. P. Belov, "Ikona 'Nikola Velikoretskii' 1558 g. iz Sol'vychevskoi," *Pamiatniki kul'tury. Novye otkrytiia. Ezhegodnik* 1987 (Moscow, 1988), pp. 202-6.



### Suggested Readings

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