



Philip Zweig

Icons



For the Eastern Slavs, as for all Christian peoples, the cult of the icon was synonymous with Byzantium, the mighty medieval empire with Constantinople — “The New Rome” — as its capital. From the 4th century on, Byzantium exerted a political and religious influence on the whole of Christian Europe. In the Byzantine Empire, the veneration of icons became an integral part of the Holy Liturgy, though the practice only won official approval after the dramatic events of the years of iconoclasm (8th–9th centuries). The struggle between the iconoclasts and the supporters of icons led to the formulation of a doctrinal justification for the icon’s role in religious ceremonies, and created an aesthetic of decorative art that has come to be known as the “Byzantine” style. It changed markedly through the centuries, but the religious painting of every Orthodox country preserved the “Byzantine tradition” for centuries to come.

The Eastern Slavs were introduced to Byzantine culture in the 10th century. Their conversion to Christianity coincided with the most brilliant epoch of Byzantine art, which was reflected in the artistic culture of the young feudal state of Kievan Rus, in the physical appearance of Kiev, and in the country’s first stone church, the Tithe Church (989–96), so called because one tenth of the principality’s revenue went to its upkeep.

1. *The Virgin of Vladimir*. 11th–early 12th century.
Egg tempera on panel. 78 x 55 cm.
Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.



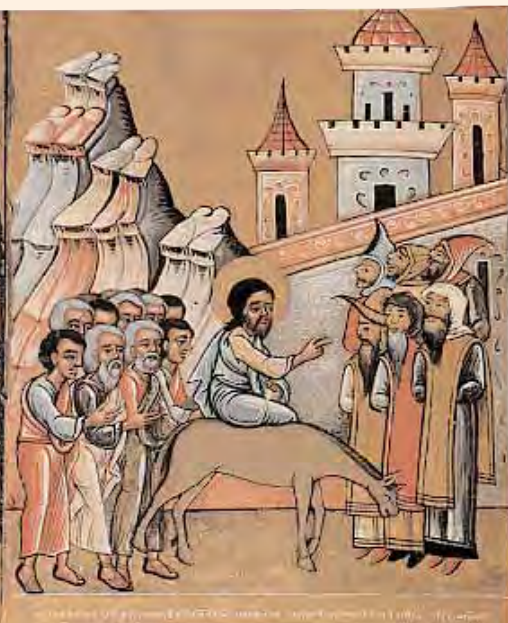
3. *St Luke the Evangelist.*
Miniature from the Ostromir Gospel. 1056-57.
National Library of Russia, St Petersburg.



4. *The Synaxis of the Saint Bishops.*

Miniature from the Sviatoslav Anthology (Izbornik). 1073.

Historical Museum, Moscow.





26. *The Annunciation*. Master Fedusko of Sambor. 1579.
Egg tempera on panel. 199 x 105 cm. Art Museum, Kharkhov.

Because this generously financed iconostasis has not survived in its original form, it is rather difficult to imagine how it originally looked. Nevertheless, we know that the carved iconostasis followed a precise architectural plan: the Deësis Row was composed of columned arcades entwined with carved vines, whilst the Feast-day Row took the form of a frieze, the iconostasis was the ceremonial centrepiece of the church. The Brothers had obviously discussed with the artists the composition of its icons and the ideological framework of the ensemble, and they placed as much importance on the overall theological meaning as on the artists' skill. It can be assumed that individual icons, particularly those in the Passion Row, served a polemical function: to strengthen the position of Orthodoxy in its struggle with Catholicism in the Ukraine. The church's iconostasis therefore played a role similar to that of Ukrainian polemical literature of the time.

Theodore Syenkovich was an artist of the transitional period. He had a strong feeling for the tastes and requirements of his age.

But the icon-painter, though armed with a knowledge of secular painting, was extremely circumspect in his exploitation of the new opportunities at his disposal. The Ukrainian school had its own rules, which demanded adherence to the symbols and imagery that gave it its Orthodox, national character.

27. *The Virgin of the Acatistos Hymn*. Detail.
Fiodor from Lvov. 1599. Egg tempera on panel.
Overall dimensions of the icon: 160 x 85 cm.
Olesky Castle (a branch of the Lvov Picture Gallery).

