

Research of Technique and Technology of False Icons Produced in the Late 19th – Early 20th Century

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In the second half of the 19th century, collecting of ancient icons started to become extremely popular in Russia. Both individual counterfeiter and major restoration icon-painting workshops responded to this demand by flooding the antiquary market with fake icons. They offered the buyers cunningly aged icons in the style of various schools of icon painting, often with wonderful legends about their origin and circumstances of finding. It was the time when the term “novodel” came into use to mean a newly-made object. After the nationalization in the early 20th century, many “novodel” icons settled in state museums and had their early datings acknowledged by the research community.



1. John the Baptist.

When examined through a binocular, “novodels” reveal unusually large amounts of medium in the paint layer, pigments are like in dredge. Pieces of cinnabar in the microsection of “The Exaltation of the Cross” icon appear to float in the medium, whereas pigments in the microsection of the authentic 17th century icon “The Canopy” lie close to each other in dried layers of paint. Chemical analysis of the medium revealed fair quantities of oil. The gesso ground of the “novodel” also contains excess amounts of medium. M.Kapustina (The Grabar Art Conservation Center), describes the results of her analysis of a sample of the icon “The Exaltation of the Cross” as follows: “Chalk is used as the filler of the ground. Very large amount of

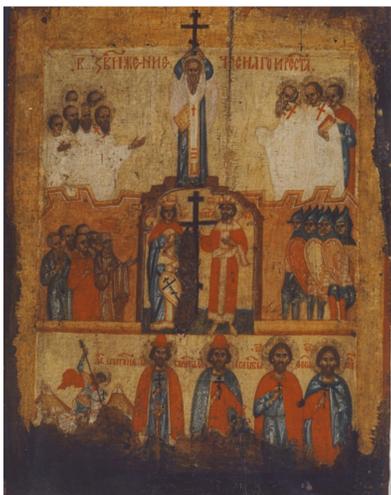
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medium. After the removal of chalk, a semitransparent piece remains with the shape and size close to those of the sample before processing. The composition: protein glue, oil, trace amounts of polysaccharides”.

Almost without exception the microsections of “novodels” contain a film of the medium between the paint layer and gesso ground, like, e.g., on the icon “John the Baptist” from the Iconostasis. This icon bears a dense paint layer with well-developed craquelure. M.Kapustina took a thin sample section of this icon, where films can be seen both on the gesso ground and between the paint layers. It is arguable that these strata were used to produce well-defined craquelures on the icon.

On “The Eucharist” icon the paint layer with plastic medium did not crack entirely and covers partially the already blackened ground craquelure. To hide his fault, the author picked in the imperfect craquelures on top with a brush and drew additional ones. “Novodel” painters used to paint on a craquelured ground. To produce the paint craquelure, they not only used the film on gesso ground, but also mixed quick-drying additives, such as glue, to the medium. They applied a single thick layer of whites with large amounts of medium, and whites easily cracked in the process of drying. Icon painters often used this feature and painted the entire icon on a layer of whites.



2. The Exaltation of the Cross.

Some painters produced craquelures by mechanically breaking the painting on canvas and then glued it to a board. Braking the painting in two directions produced wide-mesh craquelure. Painters often broke the painting in one direction and the resulting craquelures usually had horizontal configuration.. Canvas with a painting so prepared could be glued into the central picture of the new board to imitate a fragment of an inserted ancient icon.

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I found not a single trace of artificial pigments throughout the entire history of the examination of “novodels” of the turn of the 19-20th centuries, I only pointed out the too homogeneous, perhaps factory-made, grade and poor palette of colours.

The board planks of such icons were usually artificially damaged: chips, sawed-off areas, bungs, restoring interventions. The favorite fastenings of the 19th century – profiled bungs and oak “swallow”-type planks – made fresh boards to warp and crack and thereby acquire convincing ancient appearance. The edges of loozga were made hard, in accordance with the tradition of the 19th century, or deliberately amorphous.

The painting was usually covered with tinted boiled oil with charcoal and pigments added to it.

The authors of these paintings tried to maintain the style of ancient icons, however, they could not avoid errors. The excessively decorative appearance and styling of the works of art considered points to the time of their creation – late 19th–early 20th century, the epoch of modernist style when the icon painters lived and worked..

In the 19th century icon-painting workshops practiced strict division of labour: each worker performed a certain operation – applied gesso ground, gilded, painted landscape and robes. The best master completed the work by painting the faces and open parts of body in the places left. Such a technique gives the impression of applique when one views the icon.

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Thus the excess of the medium in the gesso ground and painting layer, illogical craquelure pattern, poor choice of pigments in colours, unusually excellent state of preservation not typical for ancient Russian icons, treatment of the support according to the traditions of the 19th century, the applicative appearance of face painting, excess decorative appearance and styling – all these are characteristic features of “novodel” paintings of the late 19th –early 20th century.

By taking part in the examination of problem icons, conservation experts would help to identify the elements of the technique and technology that are incompatible with ancient icon painting and refine the dating of the works of art considered.

Sections made by V.Barsukova, The Grabar Art Conservation Center