

The Icon of Saint Xenia, the Holy Fool

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Figure 1. Saint Xenia. Museum of Russian Icons. R2011.44

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The Icon



This Museum has acquired an icon of the 18th century Saint Xenia which is very unusual in comparison to most of the icons in the collection. It is a 21st century work and is not painted on wood, cast in metal, embroidered on linen, or carved from wood. Instead, it is constructed entirely of amber affixed to a wood base. It is done in low relief with different shades of amber. It has, therefore, characteristics of mosaic, sculpture and collage. The carving of the various pieces of amber that abut one another (e.g., the jacket and robe, and the headscarf and jacket) is so carefully done that the joining is almost seamless. Most of the colors in the icon appear to be those of naturally occurring amber, though close examination of the face of Saint Xenia seems to indicate that it is the same cream color of her headscarf, but tinted on the surface to match the skin color of her hands. The modeling of its various features is intricate. The warmth of the color palette, set off by the intensely colored frame, gives the icon a luminosity that is visually striking.

Amber is fossilized tree resin. Most amber was formed during the Tertiary Age (30-50 million years ago) and large deposits occur in the Baltic countries (Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia) and Sweden, where there were enormous forests during that period. It has been known and used for a wide range of purposes since antiquity.¹ It can be polished, worked with tools, softened by heating gently, and joined to other pieces to form larger ones by coating the surfaces with linseed oil, warming them and then joining them together.

While amber is predominantly in the yellow-orange range, it is found in a wide range of hues, from cream to dark brown, and almost black (Figure 2).² When examining details of the icon, one can see that the iconographer employed almost the full range of colors (Figure 3): cream for Xenia's head covering, beige for her hands and face, brown for her robe and the roofs of the church behind her, dark brown for her staff, shoes, and for the church windows, orange.

This icon was produced early in 2011 in the amber workshop at Tsarskoe Selo,³ the imperial estate in the city of Pushkin, a suburb approximately 30 miles south of Saint Petersburg, Russia. The icon was not created primarily for devotional purposes, but as one of a collection intended for use in an exhibition.⁴

Figure 3 (bottom). Amber samples in nature (bottom). Wikimedia.²

Figure 2 (top). Detail showing color variations in the Saint Xenia icon. Museum of Russian Icons.

1 <http://www.brost.se/eng/education/facts.html>

2 "Colours of Baltic Amber" by Homik8 Michal Kosior. Licensed under Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons. http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Colours_of_Baltic_Amber.jpg#mediaviewer/File:Colours_of_Baltic_Amber.jpg

3 For a video illustrating some of the works produced in the Amber Workshop, see www.youtube.com/watch?v=VeBqxc96Bxs. Additional information on the history of the Workshop can be found at www.amberroom.ru/eng/100.swf, though the visual quality of the text (very small font, black on gray) makes it rather difficult to read.

4 Information received from Gordon Lankton, March 14, 2012.



Figure 4 (top). The original icon of Saint Xenia in the Church of the Theotokos.

Figure 5 (bottom). A contemporary icon of Saint Xenia.⁶

Features of the Icon

The original icon of Saint Xenia⁵ can be seen in the chapel where she is buried in Smolensk Cemetery. A low-resolution photograph of it is shown (Figure 4) along with a contemporary copy⁶ (Figure 5), for comparison to our icon (Figure 1).

The icon depicts Saint Xenia full-length, as a young woman standing in a cemetery, against the background of the Church of the Theotokos (Figure 6)⁷ which was built in 1786-1790.⁸

The Saint is clad in a chestnut-colored dress that falls to her ankles, covered by a short brown jacket. She also wears a cream-colored headscarf knotted beneath her chin, giving her the appearance of a kindly *babushka*, albeit a young one, and carries a walking stick in her left hand. Her right hand is open, palm upward, in what could be a gesture of prayer, or supplication, or begging. Her face is that of a young woman. The inscription on the icon reads "старица ксения. блаженная мати петербургская" – "Eldress Ksenia, Blessed Mother of Petersburg." The first word, *старица*, is the feminine form of *старец*, an honorific used for elders venerated for their spiritual wisdom gained through ascetic practices.

The Story of Saint Xenia

Xenia was born in Russia around 1730 and died around 1805, at the age of 71.⁹ Almost nothing is known of her early life, except for her patronymic, Grigorievna. Nothing is known about her family of origin, other than the inference that they were most likely members of the minor nobility, since she married into court society. "Xenia" likely comes from the Greek word ξένος ("stranger")¹⁰, which seems appropriate, given the character of her life. She was most likely named for Saint Xenia the Righteous of Rome¹¹, a 5th century deaconess honored in the Orthodox Church. But perhaps her parents, as Christians, also meant it as an expression of faith that believers are called to be strangers in this life—in the world, but not of it. Whether or not this was their intention, it became true in Xenia's adult life, when tragedy led her to set herself apart from society, rejecting its security and its comfortable norms of behavior, and marked her as a stranger.

At the age of about 22, Xenia married Andrei Feodorovich Petrov, a colonel in the Imperial Army, who also served as a chanter at the royal court (most likely that of Empress Elizabeth, who ruled from 1741-1762). According to Xenia's biographical sketch in the Synaxarion, "She led a worldly, elegant life among the aristocracy of the capital."¹² However, when she

5 www.firebirdvideos.com/saintslives/lifeofxenia.htm

6 www.johnsanidopoulos.com/2010/01/saint-xenia-fool-for-christ.html

7 Антон Денисенко (Own work) [GFDL (<http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/fdl.html>), CC-BY-SA-3.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>) or FAL], via Wikimedia Commons

8 <http://palomniki.su/countries/ru/g19/s-peterburg/cerkov-smolenskoy-ikony-bm.htm>

9 These dates are very uncertain, and represent an approximate average of those given in various sources. Her age at death, however, seems to be generally agreed upon.

10 Think of the term "xenophobic", denoting the intentional dislike of strangers or foreigners.

11 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Xenia_the_Righteous_of_Rome#cite_ref-0

12 Hieromonk Makarios of Simonos Petra, "The Synaxarion. The Lives of the Saints of the Orthodox Church", Vol. 3. January, February, pp. 281-2.



Figure 5. Church of the Theotokos in Smolensk Cemetery.⁸

was 26, tragedy struck: her husband died suddenly at an officers' drinking party. Devastated by the untimely death of her husband, to whom she was passionately devoted, Xenia was also haunted by worry about the fate of his soul, since he had died without having had access to confession and the Last Rites of the Church. In her grief, she lost all interest in the things of the world and began to exhibit behavior that led friends and family to believe that she had lost her mind. She gave away her money and personal possessions to the poor, and her home to her close friend Paraskeva Antonova, stipulating that it be used as a refuge for the poor. Her family's concern was so great that they went to court, seeking to have her declared incompetent, but the judge, after examining her, ruled that she was in possession of her faculties.

She then vanished from Saint Petersburg for eight years, and when she returned she began wearing her husband's uniform and insisting that she be addressed by his name, Andrei Feodorovich. She wandered the streets of the city and spent her nights out in the open, praying for the salvation of her husband's soul, almost as if he, through her, could pray the prayers and seek the forgiveness for his sins that he had been denied by his untimely death. Xenia had become part of that uniquely orthodox tradition of the *yurodivy* (юродивый), the holy fools.

Holy Fools

The notion of holy fools has its roots in Saint Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, where he writes, referring to the apostles' startling preaching of a divine savior who had risen from the dead,¹³

We have become a spectacle to the world, to angels and human beings alike. We are fools on Christ's account, but you are wise in Christ; we are weak, but you are strong; you are held in honor, but we in disrepute. To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are poorly clad and roughly treated, we wander about homeless and we toil, working with our own hands. When ridiculed, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we respond gently. We have become like the world's rubbish, the scum of all, to this very moment.

Throughout history, particularly in the Orthodox tradition, people have felt called to live out this idea in a radical way, thus giving rise to the charisma of the Holy Fool. Catherine de Hueck Doherty, in her book on Eastern Christian spirituality, *Poustinia*, described them as:¹⁴

people who lived with the poor, totally poor themselves, begging their alms at church doors and street corners. They fasted. ... their vocation and their goal was atoning for one thing and one thing only: for [people] once upon a time having called God a "fool".

Yurodivy often behaved bizarrely, going around half-naked, being intentionally homeless, speaking in riddles, seeming to be clairvoyant, and occasionally even exhibiting disruptive behavior, almost as if they had lost their sanity. So it was with Xenia.

¹³ 1 Corinthians 10: 9-12 (New American Bible)

¹⁴ Catherine de Hueck Doherty, *Poustinia. Christian Spirituality of the East for Western Man*, Ave Maria Press, 1974, p. 35.

At first, people thought that Xenia was a simple-minded beggar, and street urchins would sometimes harass her, but she bore it with patience. Eventually her gentleness and her holiness and wisdom earned her the love and respect of the people, who recognized in her a great soul, and who considered it a blessing if she entered their homes. It was said that when she accepted a small bit of food from a seller in a bazaar, his goods would soon all be bought up. Mothers considered it a sign of favor if she kissed their children.

One example of Xenia's speaking in riddles, and also exhibiting the gift of clairvoyance, is the following story:¹⁵

Among the friends of Blessed Xenia there was a widow, Mrs. Golubev, and her 17-year-old daughter who was noted for her beauty. Xenia liked this girl very much because of her meek, quiet character and her kind heart. Once Xenia came to visit them and the girl began to make coffee. 'My beauty,—said Xenia, turning to the girl,—here you are making coffee and your husband is burying his wife in Okhta. Run there quickly!'

The girl was shocked. 'My what?! I don't have a husband... and burying his wife!' 'Go!'—Xenia answered sternly, not liking any kind of objection. The Golubevs, knowing well that the Blessed One never said anything without a reason, immediately obeyed her command and set out for Okhta. Here they saw that a funeral procession was headed for the cemetery and they joined in with the crowd of mourners. A young woman, the wife of a doctor, had died in childbirth and was being buried.

The Liturgy was celebrated, then the funeral service, after which the Golubevs followed as the coffin was carried to the grave. The funeral had ended and the people began to leave; however, they chanced upon the sobbing young widower who, at the sight of the grave mound over the remains of his beloved wife, lost consciousness and fell to the ground near the Golubevs. Both mother and daughter strove to bring him back to consciousness and to comfort him. They became acquainted and, eventually, the young Golubeva became the wife of the doctor.

As another example of clairvoyance, Xenia foretold the death of the Empress Elizabeth by two days in 1761.

There was another group of Russian holy people, the *poustiniki*, who left all their possessions to live in simple huts (their *poustinia*, or desert) on the edge of a town or village, in lives of prayer and fasting analogous to monks, but whose charisma was always to be ready to leave what they were doing to be of service to others in need, Xenia likewise was always prepared to go wherever she felt called. Often when visiting a friend, she would suddenly jump up and leave quickly, brandishing her walking stick and saying, "I am needed there."

Toward the end of her life, Xenia was in Smolensk, where a church was being built in the cemetery. Each night, in secret, Xenia would carry bricks to the top of the church, where they would be found the next day by the surprised construction workers. When Xenia's journey through life was finally finished, and she fell asleep in Christ, she was buried in Smolensk Cemetery, near the church that she had helped bring bricks to build, in a small chapel erected there in her honor.

The edge of the chapel is just visible on the left side of our icon (the rest is obscured by the border), but fully visible in the original icon.

Many aspects of Saint Xenia's story are symbolized in the icon: her youthful face revealing the deep sadness over her husband's death that she carried through her life, and at the same time her compassion for those around her, the walking stick that identifies her as a wanderer and pilgrim who dwells in the world, but is not conformed to it,¹⁶ her right hand, open both in supplication to God, and ready to be of use to others who might need her assistance, the cemetery symbolizing the open spaces where she spent so much time in prayer, and the two churches, one that she helped to build, and the one in which she lies.

Erratic or strange behavior is, of course, no guarantee of holiness. The ultimate test is the discernment of the community over time. The memory of many people who have exhibited idiosyncratic or bizarre behavior eventually dies away, but the testimony of some gains strength with time, and they are recognized as people authentically

¹⁵ <http://www.stxenia.org/stxenia.html>

¹⁶ Letter to the Romans 12:1-2 (New American Bible): I urge you therefore, brothers [and sisters], by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship. Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect.

touched by God. So it was with Xenia, whose memory the people of Russia venerated after her death, and continue to venerate even to the present. Xenia was recognized as blessed by the Russian Church Abroad in 1978 and by the Patriarchate of Moscow in 1988. Her feast day is February 4 (January 28 in the old calendar).

Above Xenia's grave appears the inscription:

In The Name Of The Father, Son And Holy Spirit. Here Rests The Body Of The Servant Of God, Xenia Grigorievna, Wife Of The Imperial Chorister, Colonel Andrei Theodorovich Petrov. Widowed At The Age Of 26, A Pilgrim For 45 Years, She Lived A Total Of 71 Years. She Was Known By The Name Andrei Theodorovich. May Whoever Knew Me Pray For My Soul That His Own May Be Saved. Amen.

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