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Authenticity and Dissimulation in the Joseph Davies Icon Collection

Abstract

The Chazen Museum of Art in Madison, Wisconsin, houses a unique set of Russian feast icons. This study proposes that the Chazen feast icons offer a glimpse into a wider phenomenon of collecting, namely, the desire to create patterns and unity amidst disorder and difference. This set includes authentic Muscovite-era painting but also dissimulations common to Old Believer restorers and workshops dependent on pattern books. Old Believers, who rejected Westernizing trends in icon painting, promoted the publication of pattern books, and they came to play an important role in twentieth-century icon painting. The author suggests that we should embrace the heterogeneity of such groups. Often scholars are trained to see similarity, which allows them to generalize about stylistic and iconographic developments and the function of images in a world distant from the present. However, the search for similarity and coherence runs aground on such a highly synthetic group as the Chazen feast icons. Studying the differences between the individual panels allows one to see how a composite whole may have come into existence with restoration campaigns or for the art market, catering to the desire to see unity amidst multiplicity.

Keywords: Chazen Museum of Art, Joseph Davies, Authenticity, Russian Icons, Muscovite Art.

The Chazen Museum of Art in Madison, Wisconsin, houses a set of Russian feast icons that is unique in North American collections (Figs 1–5). Small in size, the panels measure 34 x 29 centimeters. They are suited for display in the templon, a beam stretching across the altar space in Orthodox churches. Complete sets of feast icons are rare, and of the twelve depictions of the major annual feasts, the Chazen houses five: the Pokrov, Baptism, Crucifixion, Pentecost, and Anastasis, the last of which is slightly smaller than the others, measuring only 12 ½ x 11 ½ inches. The original set may have included a sixth panel depicting the Annunciation; painted in a slightly different style, it is now kept at the Menil Collection in Houston (Fig. 6).¹ Measuring the same size as the first four panels, it is stylistically closest to the Pokrov icon at the Chazen.



Fig. 1 Pokrov, tempera transfer onto new wood panel, 16th century, with modern repainting. 34 x 29 cm. Madison, WI, Chazen Museum of Art, inv. no. 37.1.8.



Fig. 2 Anastasis, tempera on wood, late 19th or early 20th century. 34 x 29 cm. Madison, WI, Chazen Museum of Art, inv. no. 37.1.10.

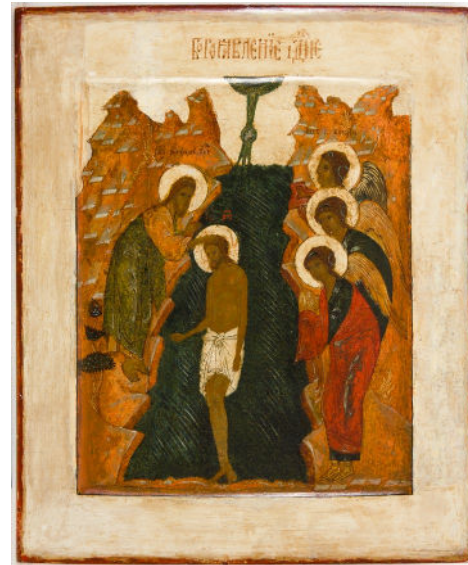


Fig. 3 Baptism of Christ, fragmentary tempera transfer onto new wood panel, 16th century, with modern repainting. 34 x 29 cm. Madison, WI, Chazen Museum of Art, inv. no. 37.1.9.

In the present study I propose that the Chazen feast icons offer a glimpse into American collecting practices in the early twentieth century. This set of icons includes authentic Muscovite-era painting but also dissimulations that betray an artist's knowledge of late nineteenth-century pattern books. Russian workshops which rejected Westernizing

trends in icon painting promoted the publication of pattern books, and they came to play an important role in twentieth-century icon painting. In my discussion I suggest that we should embrace the heterogeneity of such groups. Often scholars are trained to see similarity, which allows them to generalize about such phenomena as stylistic development and the function of images in a world distant, if not utterly inaccessible, from the present. However, the search for similarity runs aground on such a highly synthetic group as the Chazen feast icons. Looking closely at the differences between each of the individual panels allows one to see how a composite whole came into existence for the art market, catering to the desire to see unity amidst multiplicity.



Fig. 4 Crucifixion, fragmentary tempera transfer onto new wood panel, 16th century, with modern repainting. 34 x 29 cm. Madison, WI, Chazen Museum of Art, inv. no. 37.1.11.



Fig. 5 Pentecost, tempera on wood, late 19th or early 20th century. 34 x 29 cm. Madison, WI, Chazen Museum of Art, inv. no. 37.1.12.

The Madison feast panels came to the University of Wisconsin in 1938. They were the gift of Joseph E. Davies, the husband of Marjorie Merriweather Post—herself a highly successful collector of Russian icons and Romanov-era artworks.² Davies graduated from the University of Wisconsin in 1898, practiced law in the city, and served as chair of the Democratic Party of Wisconsin. In 1913 he moved to Washington, DC where he was in close contact with President Woodrow Wilson. In 1937 Davies received the ambassadorship to the USSR from President Roosevelt, the second such position within the State Department. As ambassador Davies advocated for congenial US-Soviet relations, and he even wrote a bestseller, *Mission to Moscow* (1942), in which he urged wider American support for the Soviet Union.



Fig. 6 Annunciation, tempera transfer onto new wood panel, 16th century, with modern repainting. 32.5 x 28 cm. Houston, TX, The Menil Collection, inv. no. 85-057.23 DJ.

While living abroad Davies gained a high appreciation of Russian visual art, and he acquired nearly two dozen icons and Soviet realist paintings. Upon returning to the United States in 1938, he donated his collection of Russian art to his alma mater. As late as summer 1937 Davies was still in the planning stages of assembling his icon collection, which eventually numbered some twenty-three panels. Yet by November of that same year he had already begun planning an exhibit in Madison—a whirlwind like speed.³ By summer of 1938 the Davies Collection of Russian art would be on display at Memorial Union on the campus of the University of Wisconsin during graduation ceremonies, accompanied by a catalogue issued in New York dating to the same year.⁴

The catalogue of the Davies Collection, published by the Alumni Association of the University of Wisconsin of the City of New York, describes but does not illustrate the five feast icons in question. Lacking detailed accession notes, it is impossible to know in what condition they arrived in Madison. Following their exhibition the panels were placed in storage in the basement of Bascom Hall, then home of the art history department; there they remained until the construction of the Elvehjem Art Center in 1970. Before their transferal, the feast icons underwent cleaning and restoration, but unfortunately no photographs were taken during their conservation. Since no other early reproductions appear to have survived (there are none in the object files at the Chazen), their exact state of preservation at the time of acquisition, during their time in Bascom Hall, and throughout the early years of the Elvehjem remains uncertain.

The icons first received scholarly attention from George Galavaris, a student of Kurt Weitzmann at Princeton University. Galavaris had been apprised of the Davies collection while serving as a visiting professor at the University of Wisconsin in the late 1960s. At that time the Elvehjem was still being built, but its director, Millard Rogers, who later served as director of the Cincinnati Art Museum, took Galavaris to see the icons in the basement of Bascom Hall. In the 1960s, the study of icons was still in its infancy in the United States and Europe, as discussed by Louise Hardiman in her contribution to this volume; the fullest research was then carried out mostly in Greece, Russia, and Eastern Europe. In his 1973 catalogue of the Davies icons, Galavaris, whose

primary area of specialization was Byzantine manuscripts, describes Bascom Hall as if it were a catacomb housing ancient death masks: “The faces in the icons were dim, dark, and tarnished; some had suffered cracks, while others had become a feast for worms. And yet the piercing eyes in these faces were so much alive! I dared not touch these treasures, for I remembered that, once in a monastery in the East, a monk had told me not to touch a holy icon if my hands were not holy.”⁵ Galavaris’s enchanted encounter with the “holy” portraits led him to keep his distance, saturated as the icons were with the spiritual aura of the “East.” The words of a monk, not the demands of connoisseurship, guided his cataloguing of the Davies icons. This fact is important because his study has shaped their reception by the field of art history.



Fig. 7 Rear of Pentecost icon (Fig. 5).

Taking a closer look at the Davies feast icons, the artificiality of their ostensible coherence and collective identity as a “set” becomes clear. For instance, the Pokrov icon stands out from the set for several reasons (Fig. 1). All five of the Chazen icons would, at first glance, appear to be transfers to new wooden panels, as suggested by the marks on the rear of the Pentecost (Fig. 7). Likewise, they all bear painted inventory numbers from the State Tretyakov Gallery, as discussed further below. On the front of the Pokrov, we can see that an artist has glued an older paint layer onto a new wooden board. One can appreciate the even, rectilinear, brittle craquelure, which is extremely difficult to replicate even through sophisticated forgery techniques (such as painting the cracks with a fine-tipped brush), and the meandering edge of the central section of the composition. Typical of Novgorodian icons, the Pokrov exhibits few broken colors. Such architectural ensembles, with onion domes and mottled marble pillars, are widespread in sixteenth-century east Slavic iconography, and the original paint layer probably dates to the middle of that century. That said, portions of the icon have been repainted, perhaps several times. For instance, there is discoloration on the Mother of God’s garments, her hand, Andrew’s pointing hand, and the haloes of certain figures. However, overall, the icon is in relatively good condition with only minor abrasions.

The situation looks very different with the Anastasis (Fig. 2). To begin with, the color palette is markedly distinct. Here one finds broken blues, limey greens, iridescent greys, and pastel browns. Moreover, the craggy mountains, which are adorned with highlights, glow with a peachy tone, a departure from early Muscovite icons, which tend rather

to exhibit chalky mountains, as seen on the Chazen icon of Christ's Baptism (Fig. 3). Strangely, the painter has placed Christ's resurrected body within a gauzy mandorla through which can be glimpsed a terraced slope—a highly unusual choice which has few parallels in Russian iconography. We can be sure that the conservators did not mistakenly clean away the blue paint layer of the mandorla, accidentally revealing a landscape beneath, because the gold leaf, which has been applied on top of the paint, remains in place. In short, this filmy patina belongs to the uppermost layers of paint.

In his catalogue of the Chazen collection Galavaris takes note of the color discrepancy between the Anastasis and the other four panels at the Chazen; he thus assigns the former to the early seventeenth century, whereas he places the latter in the sixteenth century. Nevertheless, he follows the 1938 catalogue in attributing the entire set to the Kyiv Monastery of the Caves. The basis for this provenance is admittedly slim, perhaps simply reflecting what the Soviet dealers in Moscow told Davies. Similarly, whereas Galavaris identifies the entire set of feast icons as transfers, in fact only the Pokrov, and small sections of the Crucifixion and the Baptism, as well as the Annunciation at the Menil, contain the authentic craquelure and rough-hewn edge of a paint layer lifted from its original support.

These conclusions are supported by the fifth icon in the set—the Pentecost (Fig. 5). Curiously, the paint layers here appear to have worn thin over time even though they are free of craquelure. For instance, looking closely at the halo of the apostle seated at the bottom right, one spots flecks of gold leaf that seem to just barely adhere to the uppermost paint layer. Moreover, many of the apostles' garments have suffered uneven damage. But when one lifts the panel to inspect the surface in raking light, there is in fact no evidence of paint loss, no stratigraphy of applications of tempera. This is surprising because, stepping back from the panel, one would expect to find a surface built up of coats of paint to create a highly complex patina, but that is not the case.

Similar anomalies appear elsewhere on the Pentecost icon—for instance, in the towel lined with twelve scrolls held by the figure of Cosmos at the center bottom. Icon painters in Muscovy often shaded this textile a soft white hue or light tan. Here, presumably, the towel would originally have been an off white or creamy yellow since the scrolls are almost pure white. Over time the towel appears to have browned. On its left side, not one but several paint layers have worn thin, because the ochre underpainting now peeks out. However, this discoloration actually lies in the uppermost coating. Indeed, upon examination, the ochre underneath turns out to be a red streak added to the yellowish upper layer. Standing back, one realizes that this is a modern paint layer that has been antiqued to resemble an abraded sixteenth-century surface.

This conclusion is buttressed by a quick look at another figure: the apostle James,

seated on the lower left second up from the bottom. James's face looks as if it has suffered extensive paint loss; his skin tone blends almost seamlessly into his hairline, and several flecks of white accentuate the modeling of his angular face. His beard appears to be smudged: not an iconographer's error but an unfortunate staining of the sort so often found on panels stripped down to their original paint layer by modern conservators. Over the apostle's right shoulder is an indistinct passage where we seem to be seeing through a lock of hair that has rubbed away, revealing the upper part of James's shoulder and lower neck. Likewise, we see that the halo of the lower left figure, just below James, has also suffered losses. The top of his halo is marked by streaks of red and brown. The halo's dotted line indicates that the painter corrected its curve. However, the ring, which we are meant to see as the etched line of a "sixteenth-century" painter working in gold leaf, is not pressed into the board but is rather a thinly painted line. Thus, we have been made to see overlapping ruts in the trench of a compass and, where the gold has flaked away, to glimpse the ochre underneath (e.g., on the lower right figure's nimbus). However, all of this is an illusion, for there are no visible losses to the image's topography of pigments.

To summarize this analysis of the Chazen feast icons: this is a highly composite group. The Pokrov, as well as the Menil Annunciation, are fully authentic transfers onto new wooden boards. The Crucifixion includes an authentic sixteenth-century transfer in the sections in and around the cross, including especially Christ's body; but the remaining figures and parts of the scene were reconstructed in modern times. In the Baptism Christ's body may include a few small sections of transfer (e.g., in Christ's midriff), but the rest of the composition is, again, a later restoration, including in the landscape, which closely reflects older models. The Pentecost, on the other hand, includes no visible transfer but rather is a fully modern panel, with no section bearing any medieval painting. Finally, the Anastasis is also a modern panel, but its smaller size, composition, and color palette suggest that it may have been added to the group at a later time.

Given the provenance of the Davies feast icons, the group must have come together before the early 1920s. Elena Osokina has meticulously studied the pre-Revolutionary and Soviet archival sources for the Davies panels, including information about the inventory numbers on their backsides. The Pentecost icon bears on its top left the inventory number 1577 from the State Museum Depository (*Gosudarstvennyi Muzeinyi Fond*) (See Fig. 7).⁶ The second appearance of the inventory number just below is preceded by the abbreviation "A. K." which Osokina has persuasively argued was the "English Club" (*Angliiskii Klub*)—a separate division of the Depository which stood apart from the main collection. Before this division was liquidated, the feast icons were transferred to the State Tretyakov Gallery where they received the new inventory number written at the bottom. According to official state records, the feast icons, some of which had been dated to the sixteenth century in Soviet documents, left the

Tretyakov Gallery to be sold by Antikvariat in November 1935—a mere two years before they were acquired by Davies.⁷ As Osokina observes, the official records of the State Museum Depository only tracked icons in its central collection. Since the feast icons were held at the English Club, the registry of icons held at the Depository includes no record of their existence. This absence of information renders it impossible to say for certain where the Depository had acquired the icons—whether from an iconostasis of a small chapel, a private collection, or somewhere else.⁸ In what follows I leave the question of their original gathering open-ended, exploring both the possibility that they were brought together for a liturgical context and to be sold to a private collector.

Ten years after Galavaris catalogued the Davies icon collection, the director of the Elvehjem Art Center, Katherine Mead, sent the panels to the Walters Art Gallery for technical analysis. The specialist conservator Manuel Theodore recounted that he found modern pigments on many of the icons. Along with a report, which he delivered to Mead, Theodore forwarded reproductions of X-rays, infrared, and ultraviolet light 4 x 5 inch negatives, color slides, stratigraphic drawings, and photomicrographs of a variety of paint samples. Theodore's reports are now kept in a binder with the object files for the Davies collection at the Chazen. Theodore recommended that Mead "not release any information about the icons until [she] had sufficient time to develop a museum position regarding them and had published a statement of this position." To this day the Chazen has not taken any "position" on the feast icons per se, and, unfortunately, it would appear that scholarship has overcorrected for Theodore's report. The latest online metadata lists all five panels as "early 20th century (late 16th-century style)."⁹ However, the icon of the Pokrov, not to mention its counterpart at the Menil, is indisputably an original transfer, and the panels of the Crucifixion and Baptism at the Chazen also preserve at least some traces of original painting. This sweeping redating of the group inversely mirrors Galavaris's assertion that all five icons are authentic transfers, even though the antiquing and imitation of degradation can be seen with the naked eye. Neither of these all-or-nothing solutions quite does justice to the piecemeal, historical assemblage of the panels, which travelled very different biographical paths into their union as a festal group.

While it is impossible to know why the Pokrov and Annunciation icons are the sole fully sixteenth-century transfers, one can imagine a few different scenarios for their creation. It is well known that Old Believer workshops in late imperial Russia sought out sixteenth-century icons, regarding them as representatives of the authentic—medieval, or Byzantine—way to paint. The members of this variegated religious community adhered to premodern liturgical customs and an ancient style of icon painting, rejecting the Western reforms of the Russian Church undertaken during the Synodal period. Seen

in this light, the transfers of sixteenth-century images onto a modern support would have been a pious attempt to preserve highly venerated artistic forms. The fact that the master who restored these panels did not simulate a transfer for all the icons could point to an Old Believer workshop, for a patron from this community would have been attuned to the old style, knowing well the difference between a modern copy “in the old style” and a genuine transfer. The goal for this hypothetical commission, in which a coherent “group” was devised out of a medley of approaches to old objects, would have been to fashion a set from one or two salvageable sixteenth-century panels, filling out a cycle for a chapel or shrine. In this case, the modern pigments that Theodore found on the Pokrov would not surprise because Old Believers refurbished deteriorated panels on a wide scale.¹⁰

On the other hand, one might imagine a studio working for a dealer, filling out the set of feast icons for the market. Once they had been kept for a period in a private collection, the panels would have been later acquired by state collections. Here the motive for the assembly of a “set” would be entirely economic. A complete or almost complete cycle of “medieval” panels would fetch a higher price than one or two isolated transfers. However, this scenario presents problems of a rather different sort. For starters, it is hard to explain why the painter—who might in this case be called a “forger”—did not design all the panels to look more or less alike. Inexplicably, they would seem not even to have been concerned with hiding the meandering line of the transfer on the Pokrov and the Annunciation icons. This tell-tale detail immediately jumps out at a knowledgeable viewer, underscoring the stages of the panels’ biography. If the painter were indeed a forger passing the whole set off as sixteenth century, why, then, would they not square off the edges of the transfer and camouflage its line? One might suppose that it was because the intended buyer would have been little versed in the appearance of medieval Russian icon painting. But if that were the case, then why even bother with producing transfers, which is a costly, time-consuming process which carries the added risk of damaging the older paint layer? If the buyer were not able to tell the difference, then the dealer would be wasting time and money. It would make more sense to sell a dozen antiqued panels rather than a mix-and-match of transfers and modern reproductions. To resolve this discrepancy, one might explain the authentic transfers as show pieces displayed to a potential buyer for scrutiny, whereas the others were kept in cases, but there is little evidence to support this idea. If we assume that the panels were perhaps artificially covered in grime and candle smoke, as Galavaris describes them, then we might imagine that their glaring difference in condition was harder to discern. Perhaps then the seller acquired the set from Old Believers, who are known to have had many icons confiscated, then sold them as a medieval set, aware that their degraded state would make it hard to detect their actual age. This scenario would solve the problem of incorporating costly transfers, but its complexity might argue against its likelihood.

One scenario that we can safely rule out is that the two full transfers are actually inauthentic. The time-consuming process of faking cracked tempera costs more than the market value of a small panel. In his infamous attack on the George Hann collection, Vladimir Teteriatnikov claimed that numerous Russian icons in American collections display forged craquelure. Teteriatnikov cited the Spanish Forger of medieval miniatures and Han van Meegeren, the forger of Vermeer, both of whom simulated aged layers of pigment by baking parchment pages and wooden boards in the oven at high temperatures.¹¹ However, the Pokrov and Annunciation icons exhibit paint layers that closely match what one finds on authentic medieval Russian icons. The fine, rectilinear lines of the craquelure betray no trace of caking or any of the matted, rounded clumping found on painted surfaces that have been doctored to look aged. Teteriatnikov's conspiratorial scenario thus looks highly unlikely for the Chazen group.

Given the balance of evidence, I would propose that we envision a painter working in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. These were the decades when Old Believers were actively recovering old panels and when Russian icons were being cleaned for the first time, after which they received a warm reception by the avant-garde and were exhibited abroad.¹² Whether the master was working for a pious Old Believer or another collector, after which the icons entered the State Tretyakov Gallery, is in the final analysis difficult to say. Why the painter fell back on authentic transfers in two instances also remains unclear, as does the motivation to antique the paint layers. However, it should be recalled that several hands were involved and that the Pokrov and Annunciation could have been show pieces. The painter of the Pentecost, Crucifixion and Baptism, all of which are executed in an identical style, which imitates the best early sixteenth-century Novgorodian and Muscovite icons, was a highly gifted individual. Whoever ultimately brought these panels together and offered them to Davies as a set no doubt did so for the art market, but whether they themselves knew, or cared to know, the full complexity of their various times of creation remains unclear. The chronological phases of a "set" can vary, with each owner shaping the origin narrative to suit their own needs.

On the Pentecost icon a tell-tale anachronism sheds light on how medieval icons were received in modernity. Indeed, the Davies feast icons specifically show us how the Muscovite period of artistic flourishing was viewed in late imperial Russia and the early Soviet period. The Pentecost icon displays what could be called the *hermeneutic circle of authentication*. Strategies developed in earlier centuries to guard against Muscovite painters adopting Western trends were deployed by contemporary painters to endow reproductions with an air of authenticity.

The Pentecost icon includes an inscription in the black space around the figure of Cosmos (the World) at the bottom. This text is an icon commentary—a uniquely Russian literary genre. Church leaders devised this body of literature over the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries to keep painters from abandoning Byzantine iconography in favor of Western painting. Written typically in the form of question-and-answer (*erotapokrisis*), these texts addressed concerns that viewers had about puzzling aspects of Byzantine and Slavic iconography. Their authors justified particular details with reference to scripture, the church fathers, the liturgy, and other theological texts.¹³

The inscription on the Chazen Pentecost icon reads:

The man is called “the World,” and he appears as an old man because he has been aged by Adam’s fall into sin, and he is in the dark place which represents the whole world being in a state of unbelief. His garment is red because it is stained by the blood of all the sacrifices made to the idols. He has a royal crown on his head to symbolize that sin was ruling in the world until that time. And he is holding a strip of cloth in his hands on which are the twelve scrolls, which represent the twelve apostles who illuminated the whole world with their blessed teaching.¹⁴

The commentary on which this inscription is based first appears in interpretive pattern books in the seventeenth century. One such pattern book was drawn up in 1669 and is now kept at the State History Museum in Moscow.¹⁵ The text is based on a conversation, written down most likely in the second quarter of the sixteenth century, between the Athonite monk and translator Maksim Grek and the German and Latin speaking court official Nicholas Bülow.¹⁶ In their exchange Bülow accuses Russian painters of not knowing why they paint the way they do, claiming: “Our [i.e. Catholic] painters do not depict the Pentecost in this way. However, your painters do, and they reason as you say, ‘Whence has this [iconography] been taken? This gloss [*tolk*’] [i.e. Acts 2:1–4] does not agree with it [i.e. the depiction]!’ Yet, many icon painters depict things that are not in the *podlinniki* [i.e., model books], and one must write and give them an answer!”¹⁷ Maksim did not seek to defend the practices of painters in Muscovy, many of whom he knew firsthand and whom he himself suspected of straying from the Byzantine canons. Indeed, Maksim believed that painters needed to know the scriptural basis of iconography, a conviction shared by other Muscovite church leaders of the period. Sixteenth-century hierarchs, such as Metropolitan Makarii, would disseminate commentaries widely; they invoked these texts not only to defend iconography from the attacks of foreigners such as Bülow, but to provide exegetical explanations to workshops.¹⁸ The commentary found on the Chazen icon was originally developed to provide the sort of “answer” Bülow sought—a written apology for canonical but perhaps

still not self-evident features of Byzantine art. Without an authoritative testimony, Russian painters might abandon them as unnecessary.

The Russian Church's regard for icon commentaries was not unwarranted. Elsewhere in the Orthodox world, authorities questioned the wisdom of Byzantine iconography. In 1727 the Athonite monk and icon painter Dionysios of Fourni wrote to the priest Anastasios Gordios, with whom he consulted about points of iconography. Dionysios's question concerned the figure of Cosmos in the Pentecost iconography—the same figure that was the focus of the Slavic commentary. Intriguingly, Anastasios rejected the type of image displayed on the Chazen icon. Instead of showing Cosmos, Anastasios preferred a composition portraying the Mother of God. Thus, he wrote to Dionysios: "Regarding the depiction of the Pentecost, that which has the Virgin and the apostles kneeling and the tongues of fire upon them seems better to me, and that in which Cosmos is personified as a man and the apostles around him seems less good, even though this representation has equally good meaning. But let whoever wishes, make their own choice."¹⁹ In the end Dionysios did not follow Anastasios's advice. Consequently, his *Hermeneia*, which he compiled a few years later, recommends the Byzantine image with Cosmos.²⁰

In 1903 A. I. Uspenskii published the so-called *Bolshakov Patternbook*, a late seventeenth-century compilation that includes the commentary on the Pentecost icon

as well as other commentaries.²¹ Uspenskii was invested in reforming iconography in line with early Muscovite painting. With the *Bolshakov Patternbook* he sought to put working models, preserved by Old Believers, in front of painters' eyes. In this respect, he was following the spirit of the commentary itself which was intended to guard against Western influences in Russian painting. Ironically, Uspenskii's model book would serve as a sort of guidebook for workshops presenting an idealized version of Russia's religious past in icons which fell into the hands of Western buyers.

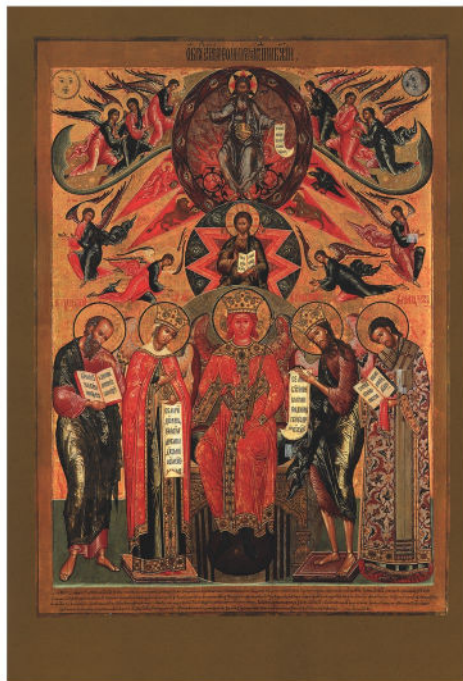


Fig. 8 Sophia with Saints, tempera on wood, 17th century. 180 x 131 cm. Russia, Yaroslavl Museum Reserve, inv. no. 41526 (ik. 405).

By 1903 the function of icon commentaries had shifted—from a defense against Catholic, or Protestant, influences in Muscovite painting, to a critique of Western trends endorsed by the Russian Church itself. Since the seventeenth century, icon commentaries had circulated among Old Believers. These groups formally broke away from the Russian

Church in the 1670s, resisting the academic styles of painting favored by the Synod. For Old Believers it was sixteenth-century icons that represented the authentic Byzantine tradition, a fact that explains the commentary's appearance on the Chazen icon. That said, sixteenth-century painters only infrequently inscribed icons with commentaries, whereas later Old Believers retroactively added them onto older iconography that was singled out as controversial and retrograde after the reforms of Peter the Great. For instance, in 1722, a Russian Synod banned the iconography of Sophia, which thereafter flourished mostly in Old Believer communities. One seventeenth-century icon, now in Yaroslavl, includes the commentary on Sophia's iconography along its lower frame; this question-and-answer text was among the earliest, developed in Novgorod in the late fifteenth century (Fig. 8).²² Among other details, the author explains why Sophia's throne has seven legs, declaring that they symbolize the seven spirits of Wisdom (cf. Isa. 11:2-3). Most likely, an eighteenth-century Old Believer added this commentary to the Yaroslavl panel, after the iconography had gone underground following the Petrine reforms. For Old Believers, the commentary validated an image that the Church had heretically rejected.

In all, the Chazen feast icons offer a fascinating glimpse into how complex even a single set of Russian panels in American collections can be. Davies' acquisition brings into vivid focus the overlapping worlds of Byzantinists, such as Galavaris, collectors, such as Joseph Davies, and university museums, such as the Chazen. Unfortunately, it remains impossible to specify the exact historical circumstances in which the set of icons was brought together, but given what has been said, it may have been a decision made with an eye to the art market by a museum official working to deaccession icons for Western buyers. In turn, the biographical complexity of this set begs the question of how scholars continue to construct and view sub-groups within North American collections. Often, the scholarly tendency is to look for similarities, leading one to overlook important differences. However, attending to these discrepancies is highly informative. Indeed, iconographic sets or ensembles may frequently be far more hybrid, heterogeneous *mélanges* than curatorial departments and scholars have allowed. Thus, the compilers of the 1938 catalogue uncritically accepted the provenance assigned by the Russian sellers, stating that all of the panels date to late sixteenth- or early seventeenth-century Kyiv. Thirty-five years later Galavaris repeated this provenance, although he noticed the transfer on the Pokrov. To construct a coherent set, he stated that all of the panels were transfers, notwithstanding their stylistic and technical differences. Noting the peculiarity of the color scheme on the icon of the Anastasis, he assigned it a slightly later date, placing it in the early seventeenth century. Finally, on technical grounds, Manuel Theodore hastily implied that the set was composed of late nineteenth- or early twentieth-century forgeries, disregarding the fact that some were authentic transfers

and that icons were routinely repainted and restored by Old Believers in the late imperial epoch, as well as by studios in the early Soviet period.

In short, the solutions of both Galavaris and Theodore are unsatisfying because neither does justice to the complexity of the Chazen group. This complexity is the lasting value of the Davies icon collection. Seen as a set, the feast icons resist easy binaries (authentic/premodern work or artificial/modern forgery), displaying a motley patchwork of periods, styles, and techniques. In so doing, they challenge scholars to look closer and to question simple answers, forcing one to imagine multi-phased scenarios in which motives become fuzzy, and religious and economic, sectarian and Orthodox intentions potentially all have their say. Perhaps unhelpfully, the strategies of dissimulation and authentication sometimes even converge, as in the case of the Pentecost icon. Its inscription belongs to a literary genre originally designed to defend the Byzantine tradition from Catholic "outsiders." But in a double twist of fate, the Church, amidst so many other Westernizing cultural trends in Russia, moved far beyond its Byzantine roots, which over the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries would be preserved by Old Believers. In the nineteenth century, scholars looking to reform icon painting idealized the sixteenth century as a pure era of spiritual expression and unalloyed belief. In this world, icon commentaries came to be seen as a distillation of the true way to design and defend religious imagery. An icon with a commentary could help a studio pass off a modern reproduction as an ancient panel. Such an image was ostensibly self-explanatory. Its hermeneutic closure exuded the aura of a pristine time and place before the tradition of icon painting had purportedly been corrupted.

About the Author

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Notes

1 The icon is catalogued by Annmarie Weyl Carr in *Imprinting the Divine: Byzantine and Russian Icons from the Menil Collection*, ed. Carr (Houston, TX: The Menil Collection, 2011), cat. no. 47 (pp. 136–37).

2 For the icons owned by Post, see Wendy Salmond, *Russian Icons at Hillwood* (Washington, DC: Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens, 1998).

3 For the archival documents for the Davies collection, see Elena Osokina, *Nebesnaia golubizna angel'skikh odezhd: sud'ba proizvedenii drevnerusskoi zhivopisi 1920–1930-e gody* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2018), 461. For an overview of the collecting of Joseph Davies and Marjorie Merriweather Post in Moscow, see Anne Odom, “American Collectors of Russian Decorative Art,” in *Treasures into Tractors: The Selling of Russia's Cultural Heritage, 1918–1938*, ed. Anne Odom and Wendy R. Salmond (Washington, DC: Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens, 2009), 264–95, at 267–75.

4 *The Joseph E. Davies Collection of Russian Paintings and Icons* (New York, 1938).

5 Galavaris, *Icons from the Elvehjem Art Center*, p. xi.

6 Osokina, *Nebesnaia golubizna*, 619–20, 621–22.

7 Osokina, *Nebesnaia golubizna*, 463–64, 475–76.

8 Osokina, *Nebesnaia golubizna*, 463–64, 475–76.

9 See the entry for the Pokrov: <https://chazen.wisc.edu/collection/16929/our-lady-of-the-mantle-pokrov/> Accessed December 18, 2024. While I agree with Osokina (*Nebesnaia golubizna*, 475), that the Chazen has overcorrected based on Theodore's study of paint samples, the problem lies less with the conservator's method than with the conclusions drawn from the study. Osokina asserts: “Where precisely he [i.e., Theodore] took the examples of pigment, whether from the original layer or the repainting, is not known.” However, Theodore's report on two of the most significant icons in the Davies collection, a large Nativity and Our Lady of the Sign, include multiple stratigraphic drawings of the samples, exact coordinates of their location on the panels, and notes discussing the paint layers. Indeed, Theodore himself expresses caution about the conclusions that one might draw from his study. Hence, at one point in his report, speaking about the Our Lady of the Sign, he writes below the heading “Description of area sampled”: “Flesh in Christ's neck. Top layer of paint only?” Thus, perhaps unknowingly, he highlights the key issue that must be considered when drawing

conclusions from a study dependent on paint samples: icons were often refurbished out of honor to the saints. Thus, the paint layer must be perfectly clarified before conclusive statements can be made about the authenticity of the original stratum.

10 On Old Believer restorations, see especially Oleg Tarasov, *Icon and Devotion: Sacred Spaces in Imperial Russia*, trans. Robin Milner-Gulland (London: Reaktion Books, 2002).

11 Vladimir Teteriatnikov, *Icons and Fakes: Notes on the George R. Hann Collection*, 3 vols. (New York: [No publisher given], 1981), 2:131.

12 See Maria Taroutina, *The Icon and the Square: Russian Modernism and the Russo-Byzantine Revival* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018).

13 On this genre, see Ágnes Kriza, *Depicting Orthodoxy in the Russian Middle Ages: The Novgorod Icon of Sophia, the Divine Wisdom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

14 See Gregory Melnik, *An Icon Painter's Notebook: The Bolshakov Edition (An Anthology of Source Materials)* (Torrance, CA: Oakwood Publications, 1995), 34–35 (translation revised to accord with the inscription).

15 See a podlinnik with a handful of iconophile texts: Moscow, State History Museum, Uvar. 495, fols. 121r–22v, 161v–63r. Catalogued in Arkh. Leonid, *Sistematicheskoe opisanie slaviano-rossiiskikh rukopisei sobraniia Grafa A. S. Uvarova*, 2 vols. (Moscow: Tvorishchestvo Tipografii A. I. Mamontova, 1893–94), 2:516–18 (cat. no. 1281).

16 See, for background and the manuscript, A. A. Zimin, "Doktor Nikolai Bulev: publitsist i uchenyi medik," in *Issledovaniia i materialy po drevnerusskoi literature*, ed. V. D. Kuz'mina (Moscow: Institut mirovoi literatury imeni A.M. Gorkogo, 1961), 78–86, at 83.

17 See A. I. Sobolevskii, "Materialy i zametki po drevne-russkoi literature 7: iz istorii ikonopisi," *Izvestiia otdeleniia russkogo iazyka i slovesnosti* 20, no. 2 (1915): 261–90, at 275–76; and L. S. Kovtun, "Simvolika v azbukovnikakh," *Trudy otdela drevnerusskoi literatury* 38 (1985): 215–30, at 228–30.

18 For another commentary, justifying the depiction of Christ as a crucified seraph, see Karl Christian Felmy, "Die Ikone 'Eingeborener Sohn'," in *'Die Weisheit baute ihr Haus: Untersuchungen zu hymnischen und didaktischen Ikonen*, ed. Felmy and Eva Hausteinh-Bartsch (Munich: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 1999), 93–111, at 106. See also Ágnes Kriza, "The Russian *Gnadenstuhl*," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 79 (2016):

79–130.

19 K. Th. Demaras, "Theophanous tou ex Agraphōn: Bios Dionysiou tou ek Phourna," *Hellēnika* 10 (1938): 213–72, at 259. Discussed in George Kakavas, *Dionysios of Fournā: Artistic Creation and Literary Description* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 52.

20 Paul Hetherington, *The Painter's Manual of Dionysius of Fournā* (Torrance, CA: Oakwood Publications, 1989), 40.

21 A. I. Uspenskii, *Podlinnik ikonopisnyi, izdanie S. T. Bol'shakova* (Moscow: A. I. Snegirevoi, 1903), 15–16.

22 L. V. Nersesian, ed., *Ikony Iaroslavlia XIII–serediny XVII veka: shdevry drevnerusskoi zhivopisi v muzeiakh Iaroslavlia*, 2 vols. (Moscow: Severnyi Palomnik, 2009), vol. 2, cat. no. 142 (pp. 186–93). On the Sophia commentary, see Kriza, *Depicting Orthodoxy*.