

**Saints, Miracles, and Visions
Icons from the Gürtler Donation**

9 April – 11 September 2016

With an extensive donation, in 2013 the Kunstmuseum St. Gallen suddenly gained one of the largest and most important institutional collections of icons in Switzerland. In the exhibition *Saints, Miracles, and Visions*, this singular collection will be presented to the public for the first time in an unusual contemporary presentation designed by the artist Gerwald Rockenschaub.

The donation from Lotti and René Gürtler comprises masterpieces of icon painting from the 16th to the 19th centuries and offers deep insights into art from the Eastern European cultural sphere. The icons are contrasted with Central European sculptures of saints, liturgical religious symbols, and examples of medieval book art (loans from the Abbey Library of Saint Gallen), which make it possible to draw unique connections between East and West. Thanks to the impressive exhibition design by Gerwald Rockenschaub, to whom the Kunstmuseum St. Gallen dedicated a solo exhibition on the upper floor (March 12 – June 19, 2016), traditional icon painting will engage with contemporary art in a further exciting dialogue.

Introduction

Icons—the Greek word *eikon* means image, likeness—play a central role in the Orthodox Church. Based on legends of miracles, they function as mediators between this world and the next. Icons lend the divine a tangible form and make religious teachings easy to remember.

The concept of the icon originated with the form's most sacred examples, the "proto-icons." These likenesses of saints were gifts from God rather than products of human hands. The most important example is the Mandylion, a cloth image said to have appeared when Christ pressed his face into the fabric. Numerous legends explain its origins and effects, such as the tale of the Mandylion of Edessa: Christ sent the fabric bearing the impression of his features to the ailing King Abgar of Edessa, who was subsequently cured by it. Thus, the cloth was ascribed the same healing powers as the Son of God's physical presence. The pictorial type of the Mandylion, which can be verifiably dated to the 6th century, shows the face of Christ without his neck, isolated from the context of his body and thus consistent with its origin legend. Christ is depicted at an intermediate age with center-parted, shoulder-length brown hair and a long full beard. A cloth is draped behind him, held up by angels.

From early on, Christian theology considered the issue of images critical. Whereas the Old Testament forbids making a likeness of God, in the New Testament God is rendered visible in the form of his son Jesus Christ. At ecumenical councils, the question of images was fiercely debated time and again. The divergences among the representatives ultimately led to the permanent schism into separate churches. The controversy over the veneration of images continued into the 9th century and ended in 843 at the Synod of Constantinople with a conclusive victory for the iconophiles.

The Mandylion is considered fundamental in justifying the veneration of icons. In the question of whether the incarnated Son of God could be depicted, it serves as a sort of divine confirmation. It claims to be the true portrait of Christ, a proto-image that could be referenced by theologians and

imitated by icon painters. After all, in contrast to the independent fine arts, icon painting relies on the concept of the copy: resemblance to the original is decisive for the image's authenticity.

After the fall of the Eastern Roman Empire (1453), icon painting experienced a diverse continued existence in the countries of the Eastern Church, especially in Russia and Greece. While the *Mandylion* at the entrance to the exhibition presents the core pictorial concept of the icon, the icon *My Soul Glorifies the Lord* exemplifies a new tradition of icons that arose in the 16th century in Russia: symbolic and didactic icons. These are based on the liturgical hymnography, which they typically follow very precisely, sometimes citing its texts in inscriptions. Hymns glorified the Almighty and his creation and celebrated the divine. The inscription along the top edge of this icon, the *Magnificat*, quotes the first sentence of the Song of Mary: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." (Luke 1:46–53)

The Gürtler Collection: Devotional Objects from East and West

The small-format *Deesis* in the first room offers an introduction to the Gürtler Collection. This was the first icon that René Gürtler bought, acquired during a stay in Rome in 1953. This small group of supplicants with John the Baptist and Mary on either side of Christ was the founding spark for the icon collection that René and his wife Lotti Gürtler assembled over the course of six decades and donated in full to the Kunstmuseum St. Gallen. The *Deesis* leads to the icons on the facing wall, which visually represent other cornerstones of the development of their collection. The icons are complemented by four sculptures of saints from Central Europe, likewise part of the Gürtlers' donation and expressions of religious devotion in the Western world. The *Virgin and Child with St. Anne* shows Anne seated with the Christ Child on her lap alongside her daughter Mary as a young girl, who is extending her hand toward Jesus. Perhaps she or the Christ Child was originally holding an apple. With the birth of her son, Mary transcended original sin for all humanity. Hence, the apple, a frequent feature in depictions of Mary after the Gothic period, is transformed into a symbol of grace.

The Prophet Elias Ascending in a Chariot of Fire is imposingly large. The Old Testament prophet Elijah, also known as Elias, is seen as a precursor of the Messiah and is one of the most venerated prophets in Russia. Icons commonly portray his ascent into heaven in a chariot of fire, witnessed by his disciple Elisha. The chariot, drawn by three winged horses, is shown within a red mandorla (a radiant aureola).

Another prophet, Isaiah, is the source of this prediction: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel," meaning "God with us" (Isaiah 7:14). The prophecy is invoked in Christian art and icon painting, which developed it into a separate pictorial type, the *Christ Emmanuel*. The iconographic attributes of *Emmanuel* are his youth, his beardless face, short hair, and sloping forehead. However, rather than Jesus as a child or adolescent, this image presents a preexistent Christ as a depiction of the prophesied vision representing the promise of redemption.

The expressive icon *Do Not Weep for Me, Mother* likewise portrays a prophecy, this time one by Jesus himself. He knows of his death, but also of its purpose, the redemption of humanity. The title is taken from the liturgy sung during Holy Saturday services. This iconic type developed in the 12th century out of the Lamentation and Entombment of Christ. Mary embraces her lifeless son, shown in a sarcophagus at three-quarters length with crossed arms, and cradles his face to her own. The icon's final detail, on the top, is the cross from which Christ has been removed.

The Christian doctrine of the Trinity was developed over a number of Church assemblies (the synods of Toledo) between 325 and 675. In the 12th century, the pictorial type of the *New Testament Trinity* emerged. It combines God the Father as an aged Christ, sitting on a throne in a white robe, with the youthful Christ on his knees in a gesture of blessing. A dove represents the Holy Spirit. The golden circle and the two squares, forming an octagonal star, symbolize the heavenly cosmos, while the four symbols in the corners stand for the Four Evangelists. The New Testament pictorial type of the Holy Trinity is based on a passage from the Gospel of John: “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9).

These smaller icons have the typical dimensions of home icons: From the 16th century on, icons were traditionally kept in a place of honor in Orthodox Christian homes, usually in the front right corner of the living room, in a spot called the “beautiful corner” (Russian: *krásnyj úgol*). The Gürtlers also lived with their icons as well as sculptures of saints from Central Europe, which they exhibited in their home alongside the Eastern religious images.

Images of Christ, Prophets, and Saints

The long hall presents icons and saints in thematic groups: The first of these consists of images of Christ. On the shorter, red wall are images of divine beings and angels. There are also various images of Mary, who, after Christ, is the most venerated saint in the East as well as the West. The following, pink section of the wall is dedicated to the forefathers and an Old Testament prophet, while the last section features saints of the New Testament. These are depicted individually or in groups.

Christ sits enthroned at the entrance to the hall in the important pictorial type of the *Pantocrator* in a half-length frontal view. This type emerged in the 4th century, when the Emperor, the ruler of this world, recognized Christ as the true Ruler of All. The golden background, representing his divinity, is framed by gilded carvings.

Saint Sergius of Radonezh (1314–1392) is among the most popular saints in Russia. The icon shows the saint in a gesture of astonishment and adoration. In the upper left corner, the Old Testament Trinity is shown as a vision of the saint. This portrayal can be traced back to the famous icon of the monk Andrei Rublev (ca. 1360–1430), which the Eastern Church declared the model for portrayals of the Trinity in 1551. It typically shows all three angels touching a chalice symbolizing the Eucharist.

The veneration of the Mother of God began in the 5th century, after negotiations at the Council of Ephesus in 431 bestowed upon her the title of Theotokos (“she who gave birth to God”). The pictorial type of the Mother of God is based on the *Hodegetria* (“she who shows the way”), which is considered the most sublime image of Mary. It is said to have been painted by Saint Luke, patron saint of painters. Since it was created by a saint, and not by human hands, it belongs to the proto-images, like the *Mandylion*. After icon venerators emerged triumphant in 843 from the Byzantine iconoclasm in the Eastern Church, the type of the *Hodegetria* spread widely in both icons and monumental paintings. Countless images were created and became widespread, such as *Our Lady of Smolensk*. It combines the essential features of the *Hodegetria*: bust with respectful distance between the mother and child and the observer; strict frontal pose; Christ child sitting on the left arm of his mother, his right hand lifted in a gesture of blessing and his left hand holding a rolled-up scroll; Mary’s right hand pointing reverentially to the child. By contrast, *Our Lady of Glykophilousa* is noteworthy for the intimate

relationship between the Mother of God and the Christ Child. To this end, it does without a strict frontal depiction.

Whereas the icons *King Solomon* and *The Prophet Isaiah* originally hung on an iconostasis (the wall decorated with icons in an Orthodox church), the miniature painted icon *The Life of Abraham* is an example of yet another type: the vita icon. Vita icons bring together scenes and miracle stories from the life of a saint, each recreated in its own section of the icon. The *Family Icon of Tsar Boris Godunov*, for its part, is considered an especially precious example of an icon portraying a family's namesake, or patron saint. (It was under the reign of Boris Godunov [1552–1605] that the Russian Orthodox Church conclusively declared its independence in 1589.)

The final group includes saints who are unknown to the Western Church, such as the physician saints Kosmas, Panteleimon, and Damian. The three are shown on the only signed icon in the exhibition, which is a brilliant example of Cretan icon painting. The depiction of the warrior saints *George and Demetrius* is both compelling and rare: they are seldom shown together. While the Gütler Collection's Greek icon portrays the two horsemen saints as bearers of victory according to the more faithful Byzantine tradition, Russian iconography since the 16th century has mostly focused on St. George's battle with the dragon as an allegory for the triumph over evil.

The objects presented in the display case, some of which date back to the Byzantine era over a thousand years ago, convey the cultural origins of the Eastern Church's ritual. The thousand-year Byzantine Empire, which was born in 395 out of the bisection of the Roman Empire and disintegrated in 1453, is one of the most fascinating empires of old Europe. Christianity substantially expanded during the Byzantine Empire; Emperor Constantine the Great made a major contribution to the religion's rise. In its impressive variety, the Gütler Collection also incorporates objects from Ethiopia, one of the oldest Christian countries. In addition to a diptych, the varied forms of the cross in Ethiopia are presented here: processional crosses carried during processions, hand crosses used by priests to bless believers, and cross pendants. As an emblem of victory and the word of God, the cross is a central symbol of faith.

Feast Day Icons: The Calendar Year of the Eastern Church

The last room is dedicated to the church festivals in the order of the liturgical year of the Eastern Church, which begins on September 1. Like the Russian Orthodox Church, other Orthodox churches (such as the Syrian, Georgian, and Serbian Orthodox Churches) follow the Julian calendar. The dates are the same, but thirteen days later than in the Gregorian calendar. For instance, in Russia Christmas does not take place on December 25, but on January 7 according to the Western calendar. Unlike the portraits, here we find depictions of scenes, stories from the life of Christ, Mary, and other saints. The presentation in this room begins with the *Miracle of the Archangel Michael in Chonae*, which is celebrated on September 6. It is among the most magnificent stories, and is barely known in the West, where Michael is venerated as the patron saint of soldiers. The icon's clear composition places the miracle at the center in an expressive pictorial style. The towering figure of the Archangel Michael strikes his lance into the ground in order to allow the water to drain away from the mountains. He thus averts a disaster and saves the church dedicated to him.

An altar panel that is part of a triptych has the dimensions of a home altar and shows the *Annunciation* on the middle panel. This panel dates from the 16th century and is thus older than the rest of the winged altar, in which it was likely inserted in the 17th century so that it could be venerated even more. The lunette above the middle panel contains the Old Testament Trinity. The side wings show the archangel Gabriel once again on the upper left and Mary on the right, and below them various Russian saints.

The Christmas icon brings together various scenes from the story of the *Birth of Christ* in a unified pictorial space and a cohesive style. All the individual elements, from the birth of Christ to the terrible Massacre of the Innocents in Bethlehem, are "personal and alive" (Simon Morsink) and depicted in great detail. Other feast days include the *Forty Martyrs of Sebaste*, the *Crucifixion of Christ*, and the *Dormition of the Mother of God*, among others.

Feast day icons assemble the twelve main holidays of the year on a single panel. Usually they are divided into a corresponding number of fields. In the feast day icon in the Gütler Collection, a larger field at center top highlights Easter with two scenes: *Christ in Limbo*, and above it the *Resurrection*. The Savior is surrounded in an S-shaped arc by saints and biblical figures, beginning with Adam and Eve, whom he frees from the gates of hell. The rest of the holidays are the *Nativity of Mary*, the *Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, the *Annunciation*, the *Nativity of Christ*, the *Presentation of Jesus at the Temple*, the *Baptism of Christ*, the *Entry into Jerusalem*, the *Feast of the Transfiguration*, *Pentecost*, *Assumption*, and *Exaltation of the Holy Cross*.

Cabinet

A display case in the cabinet presents the Russian composite manuscript from the Gütler Collection along with precious manuscripts from the Abbey Library of St. Gallen, which are examples of European medieval illumination. The Russian manuscript compiles theological texts for the mass in a single volume. Richly illuminated, it focuses on texts on the Last Judgement and the depiction of the agony of sinners. Some five to seven centuries younger than the codices from the Abbey Library, it is from the second half of the 18th century.

While the Cod. Sang. 402 was created in the 14th century for a convent in the diocese of Basel, the two Codices Sang. 338 (ca. 1050/60) and Sang. 341 (ca. 1070) are from the St. Gallen scriptorium. The scriptorium experienced a blossoming from the 9th to the 11th centuries, during which numerous masterpieces of the book arts were created. Many have survived and are now held at the Abbey Library. They are valuable examples of European illumination and calligraphy. The St. Gallen manuscripts illuminate the beginnings of the spoken and sung liturgical texts on the holy days of the year. The two Pentecost scenes shown here include impressive two-dimensional architectural elements. These are also masterfully depicted in the icon *Saints Zosima and Savvatij and the Solovki Monastery*. The latter contains a simultaneous view of the founding of the monastery on the Russian Solovetsky Islands.

The juxtaposition of Eastern and Western pictorial traditions demonstrates further surprising references both within the manuscripts and between the examples of Medieval book art and icon painting. For instance, their evident stylistic traits include the miniature painting style, the marked stylization of the bodies, the dense arrangement of the groups of figures, the flat coloration, and the framing by an edge that is simple in places and richly ornamented in others. The deep colors are also evident, while they show a stronger tendency toward lighter, whitened tones in the St. Gallen manuscripts. The parallel use of text and pictures, which influenced both traditions of illuminated manuscripts and icon painting, is also noteworthy. While in the former the writing is artistic in ambition and in places is decorated with an elaborate initial ornamentation, the inscriptions in the latter appear markedly simpler and more functional. These are obligatory labels that allow the viewer to identify the depicted saints or scenes.

Exhibition Design

Gerwald Rockenschaub, who was born in 1952 in Linz, became one of the leading representatives of Institutional Critique at the latest with his participation in the 45th Venice Biennale in 1993, where he spectacularly deconstructed the Austrian pavilion by the Jugendstil architect Hans Hoffman with a radical intervention. In the following years, his installations and transformations of exhibition spaces have made him a master of staging who fundamentally reflects on the conditions of exhibiting fine art and provokes surprising shifts of perception with often minimal interventions. Thus, his work was positioned in the milieu of Context Art, which has posed fundamental questions about the conditions of the creation and presentation of art since the 1990s. Rockenschaub went on to consistently construct spatial situations that subtly direct viewers' perception. For the exhibition *Saints, Miracles, and Visions* the artist developed an artfully rhythmic chromatic and spatial concept that lends the brilliance of the icons an unexpected power of expression. With this airy and simultaneously colorful presentation, the Kunstmuseum St. Gallen is breaking new ground. The aim is to offer an overview of icon painting as an important genre of art in the Eastern European cultural sphere. As an art museum with a focus on contemporary art and a long tradition of thematic shows that bridge contemporary works and historical genres of art, the institution serves its central educational function when it offers ways to understand history and its interpretation from a modern-day perspective.