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What should Russian Sacred Art look like? The Committee for Care of Russian Icon Painting in Search of the „National Style” in Icon Painting

The Committee for Care of Russian Icon Painting founded by Tsar Nicholas II in 1901 adopted as one of its goals the creation of a New style in Russian sacred art. The Committee members, first of all Nikodim Kondakov and Nikolai Pokrovsky, in their textbook for icon painters, the so-called „podlinnik”, endeavoured to create a specific pattern of Russian sacred art that corresponded with the visual ideal formulated in their consciousness as to what such art should look like. This style should be based on Byzantine and Old Russian patterns and thus be a kind of equivalent according to the Byzantine-Ruthenian style codified a little earlier – in Alexander III’s days – only a different field of art – not in architecture, but in icon painting.

This desire was completely in line with some general tendencies of that time. In the Western European countries in the second half of the nineteenth century and in the beginnings of the twentieth century in architecture, painting and artistic craft the search for the so-called „national style” proceeded. That style should be based on country-specific forms and should be a carrier of national and political ideas. In order to create this style the Committee was extremely eager to use forms derived from folk art or from the so-called „historical styles”. The attempts to develop a „national style” certainly resulted from arising national consciousness (after all, the concept of the nation in its modern understanding was formed only in the nineteenth century). The use of processed historical forms was certainly caused by an increase in interest in the native history and culture of different countries. However, for recognizing a given style as a „national style” it should necessarily include a political factor. „National styles” served as tools to consolidate the political dominance and to emphasize the unity of the country. They attempted to mark the own separateness to emphasize importance in the international area.

It is not surprising that this eagerness of developing their own „national style” did not pass by the Russian Empire, which covered one sixth of the Earth’s surface and wanted to emphasize its role in world politics. In addition, it was a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional state that needed unifying elements. If we combine the pan-European tendency to create „national styles” with the reformistic aspirations of Tsar Nicholas II in the religious sphere and with the growing interest of scientists in icon art, it is easy to understand why this „national style” should be formed in the sphere of icon painting. After all, the icon was then perceived both as a symbol of Orthodoxy and as a kind of quintessence of „Russianness”, as Slavophiles have already noticed. It is absolutely not surprising that

the new iconic style was wanted to be – like the Byzantine-Ruthenian architectural style – a harmonious combination of Byzantine and Old Russian patterns, where Byzantine patterns were intended to be an element of propaganda of Power and Old Russian patterns to bring a native Russian accent into art.

The program of creating a Russian „national style“ in icon painting based on Byzantine and Old Russian patterns developer in the circle of the Committee for Care of Russian Icon Painting failed. The historian Oleg Tarasov believed that it was too ambitious and breakneckly tried to Combine the traditional, messianic concept of „Saint Ruthenia“ with the basic principles of the modernism and with the theory of „Moscow as the Third Rome“. That theory assumes that Russia is the direct heir to the spirituals traditon of Rome and of the „Second Rome“, that means Byzantium.

It is difficult to disagree with the Russian researcher at this point – the Committee for Care of Russian Icon Painting did not succeed in developing a single „national style“ combining the features of the Byzantine and the Old Russian styles. Byzantine patterns, whose significance was so strongly emphasize Turing the work on the podlinnik, were practically not reflected in either the ready patternbook or the subsequent practise of the Committee’s iconographic schools. Furhermore, the appearance of the icons kept in the Committee’s iconic store in St. Petersburg allows the conclusion, that the leading style taught in iconographic schools was not the Byzantine style, but that used in the seventeenth century in Moscow, the so-called „fraz“.