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Ikon-Painting in Russia.

**An Art Which Has Had a Vast
Influence on Russian Development.**

By Ivan Narodny

According to the classified Russian industrial directory there are over fifty thousand artists within the territory of the former Empire who earn their living through ikons and ecclesiastic panels. Over three hundred thousand people altogether are dependent in one way or another on the sale and marketing of ikons. Thus they form a very important field of artistic occupation and must play a great role in Russian life.

The history of ikon-painting dates from Dmitry Donski, in the middle of the Fourteenth Century. It actually begins as a specialized artistic profession during the rule of Ivan the Third, between 1485 and 1495, when the first conspicuous cathedrals and churches were built in the Kremlin of Moscow. Ivan the Terrible founded the first school of ikon-painters at Moscow in the seventeenth century. He invited well-known masters of Rome, Greece and Russia to teach in the school. Later this school was transferred to the Monastery of Sergeyeva, near Moscow, where it still remains.

Simon Ushakoff is considered the founder of the pure Russian national style of ikons. His masterpieces can be seen in the temples of St. Brazil, Uspensky, Grusinsky and in the Chapel of the Virgin of Iberia. There is a story that the Czar Ivan the Terrible so highly valued his ikons and fresco-paintings that he ordered his aide-de-camp to put out the eyes of the famous painter so that he might not make another masterpiece for another ruler.

Besides Ushakoff there were a number of other great masters about the same time, of whom the best known are Kuri Nikitin, Sila Savine, Mark Nasaroff, Stepan Pavloff, Ivan Ivanoff and Filip Andreanoff. However, Guri Nilitin, the great master of

Yaroslav, and his rival, Dimitri Gregorieff, remain the most powerful founders of the Russian ecclesiastic school of art. Their numerous ikons and frescoes in the cathedrals of Yaroslav and Uhlich give evidence of their genius.

The main tendency of the Russian ikon-painters is decorative rather than realistic. It is not so much the art of painting as it is the art of metaphysical decoration, that this school has emphasized. For that reason the foreign critics are very much baffled by and condemn the Russian ecclesiastic art as the expression of amateurs. I am amused at the utterances of a brilliant English critic, **Mr. Aleister Crowley**, who writes:

"There is no truly original feature in the Russian church art of frescoes, which recall Primitives. It is the superb barbaric indifference to balance, which piles gold on gold. Only the faces, hands and feet in ikons are left uncovered; the robes, carved in gold or silver-gilt, or woven in pearls and every other precious stone, cover the canvas. These faces and hands are indecipherable; would be so even in good light. At first look one dislikes the gap in the gold. At second, one gives up criticism and adores. The whole overpowers; nothing else matters. One is in the presence of a positive force, making a direct appeal. The lumber of culture falls overboard. Fact, elemental facts, reaching beyond all canons, is with one and upon one. . . . Here is a fresco of Jonah with his adventures from the casting overboard to the preaching in Nineveh. There is St. Michael, mighty and terrible, slaying the serpent."

Mr. Crowley's description is interesting, but there is another side to the matter: the Russian ecclesiastic art is arbitrary. It is not made in any image of man's mind; it is the creation of mind loosed from the thrall of even so elemental a yoke as mathematics. . . .