

The Enameling of Eastern Icons

The “Compagnoni Enamels” collection has recently acquired an icon. The initial interest lied in the Champlevé enameled halo which gave a polychrome tone of preciousness and celestial nobility. Later, I noticed the noteworthy and complex reliefs of silvered copper “riza”, who follow the underlying figures, probably painted. Finally, I understood that the painted area of its surface is very restricted with respect to the rest of the work and I wanted to know something more. Why is the painting on wood rather than canvas? What do those inscriptions mean and in which language are they? So, I began to acquire information and I discovered some interesting things. In the following text, a young lover and expert of Eastern history and literature describes its main artistic, religious and historical characteristics. I'm sure that many people will find some interest in this information. Attilio M. Compagnoni

An Introduction to the world of icons and a brief overview on their enameling

“Icon” derives from the Greek word *eikon*, meaning “picture”. The word designates a special form of figurative art typically used by Eastern Christians (both Orthodox and Catholics) and featuring some peculiar characteristics. Despite the explicit condemnation of the artistic portrayal of living beings in the Old Testament, we know for sure that the early Christians (and even the Jews!) didn't consider this prohibition to be rigidly applied, but rather as a prohibition of idol worship¹. The **most ancient holy images**, both Christian and Jewish, have been found in the [Catacomb of Priscilla](#) (Rome, 2nd-3rd centuries) and in [Dura-Europos](#) (Syria, 220-230 AD); on many respects, their portrayal of Biblical scenes is remarkably similar to modern icons, being characterized by simple figures, no research for perspective and proportions and a strong symbolic nature of colors. Of course, the homeland of Christian iconography is **Constantinople** (Byzantium), but all Eastern Churches make a large use of it, in particular the Russian Church. The most famous production site for icons is **Mount Athos**, in Greece, whose monasteries commit themselves to this form of art and prayer. Icons are very important in the Orthodox Church: they even use to separate the presbytery from the nave with an icon-filled wall named [iconostasis](#). Traditionally, an icon is painted with mineral-based pigments, diluted in an emulsion of egg yolk, white wine and lavender essence; these colors are brushed on a wooden board covered in flax and seven layers of gypsum. This way, the three *reigns of creation* (mineral, animal and vegetal) become instruments to praise the Lord through the skilled hands of the iconographer, whom the Orthodox believe to be a holy writer and witness of the faith, rather than an artist (indeed, icons are written rather than painted in Eastern jargon). The backgrounds and haloes are then finished with gold leaves, but since the 12th century we can find a new tradition of covering the icons with a metal plate of gold, silver etc, the so-called *riza*. This tradition was mainly introduced to protect the pictures from the action of time (incense and candle smoke tend to darken the icons over time), but also work as votive gifts to embellish the holy image. The *riza* generally covers the whole icon, except for the faces and hands of the characters.

Enamel began to be progressively used in iconography at a later stage. In the beginning, enamel was applied to the *riza* alone, in order to decorate, embellish and break the monotony of naked metal. Even the atelier of **Carl Fabergé** committed to the decoration of icons at the turn of the 19th century. It was just in the 17th century that the iconographers of **Rostov Veliki** began to adapt the French miniature technique to the production of Russian-styled icons – that was the origin of **Finift**, which made it possible to enamel the icon in its entirety ([figure below](#)).



Icon of the Theotókos Hodigíttria, unknown author (19th century), private collection

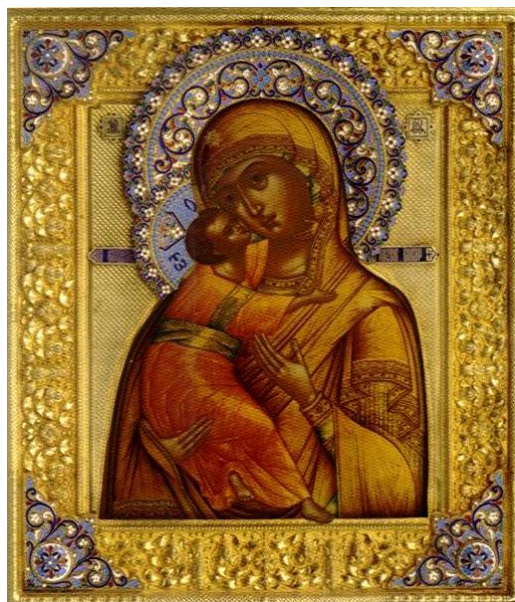
¹ *Thou shalt not make to thyself a graven thing, nor the likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or in the earth beneath, nor of those things that are in the waters under the earth. Thou shalt not adore them, nor serve them (Exodus 204-5). [Solomon] made also in the house of the holy of holies two cherubims of image work: and he overlaid them with gold (2 Chronicles 3,10).*

Icons of the Virgin Mary

- According to an Eastern tradition, the first iconographer was Saint Luke the Evangelist, who painted three true to life portraits of Our Lady, which are the three following main icon types:
- The **Mother of God “who Shows the Way”** (Theotokos Hodigitria) who holds the Child Jesus in her arms and shows him with her right hand;
- The **Mother of God “of Tenderness”** (Theotokos Eleousa) who keeps the Child Jesus cheek-to-cheek.
- The **Mother of God “in Prayer”** (Theotokos Panagia) where Mary is represented standing with the arms stretched towards the heavens in prayer and the Child Jesus is often shown enclosed in an oval over her womb (“**Mother of God of the Sign**”).
- The icon on the right portrays Mary according to the first type. Above on both sides, you can see two white enameled ovals with the Greek letters **MP ΘΥ** and the symbol \sim , which form the monogram of Mary, i.e. the acronym for the Greek words **Μήτηρ Θεοῦ** (*Méter Theou*) which means “Mother of God”, the main title Mary is named after by the Easterners.

This is a precious example of the application of enamel to Orthodox iconography. The covering plate, i.e. the riza, is made of silvered copper, while the crown-haloes of the Virgin Mary and the Child Jesus are made of gilded copper with matt enamel decorations (Champlevé technique). This is a beautiful example of chisel work with a typical style of the 19th century. Here below, we can see two examples of the other icon types: the *Theotokos Panagia* and the *Theotokos Eleousa*.

On the left: Vladimir Theotokos Elousa by V.Guryanov, Moskow, 1898. Frame and haloes in enameled gold.



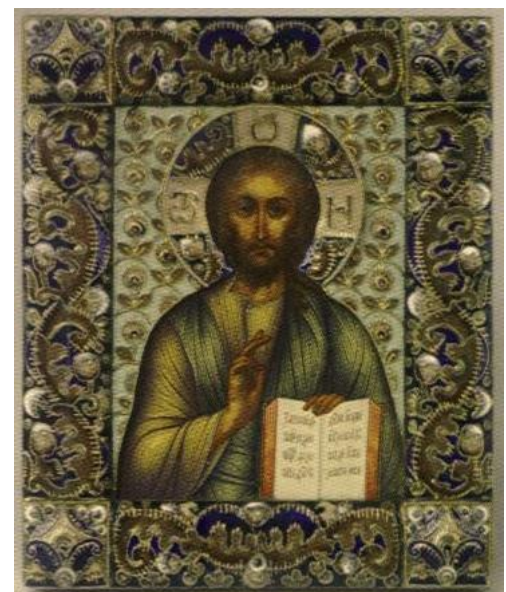
On the right: Theotokos Panagia on a medal given by the US bishops as a present to Pimen, Patriarch of Moscow, 1982. Museum of the Moscow Patriarchate. Enameled Gold.



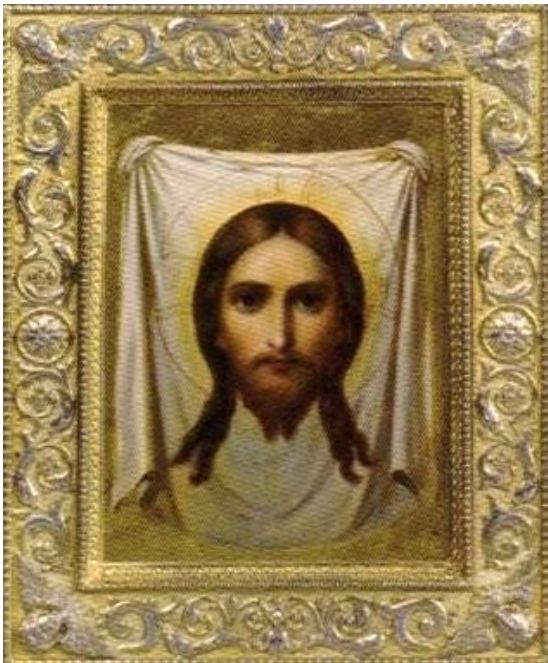
Icons of Christ

Amongst the most renowned icon types of Christ, we remember here the Christ Pantocrator and the Mandylion, which are the most widespread icons of Jesus in Orthodoxy except for the Crucifix. In icons, the monogram of Jesus is **IC XC**, which comes from the initials of Greek expression **Ἰησοῦς Χριστός** (*Iesus Christos*), while the halo is inscribed with the Greek or Cyrillic letters which mean “**HE WHO IS**”, the Biblical name for God.

The **Christ Pantocrator** (*Christos Pantokrator*) is a fundamental icon type which can be found in every Orthodox Church. These icons portray Jesus frontally, blessing with the right hand and holding the Gospel Book in his left. The word “Pantocrator” is of Greek etymology and means both “Almighty” and “Lord of all things”. There are many variants of this icon, such as Christ the Teacher (the book in his hand is open), the Majesty of the Lord (the symbols of the four evangelists are shown at the corners) or Christ the Judge (hands-free as he judges the world).



Christ Pantocratore, Moscow, 1908-1917. Painted Enamel.



On the left: Mandylion, guiloché enamel frame, 1894.

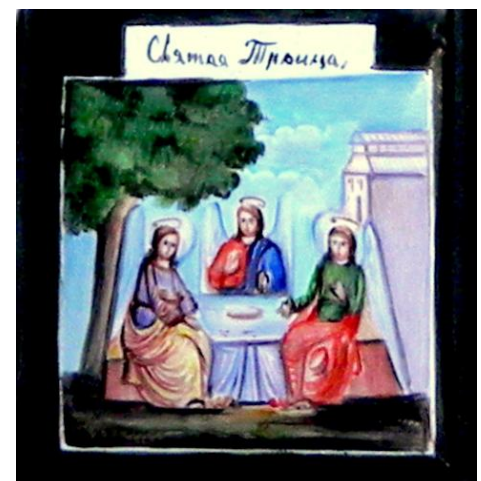
The **Mandylion** is, on the contrary, a claimed true-to-life portrait of Our Lord. According to a legend, in fact, an image of Christ's face was impressed on a miraculous cloth which healed **Abgar, King of Edessa** (present-day **Şanlıurfa** in Turkey). This event is recorded in the legendary hagiography of Saint Jude Thaddeus. According to this tradition, the cloth was folded in eight parts and put into a frame which left only Christ's face visible – that's why the icon of the Mandylion portrays only Christ's face crowned with thorns. The supposed original of the cloth was preserved in Edessa until the fall of the city and was later brought to Constantinople and then it disappeared during the Crusades. The very fact that the Shroud of Turin appeared soon afterwards in the West and that the dimensions of the Mandylion is exactly one eighth of the Shroud, has lent support to the possibility that the two relics are one and the same thing.



Finift Icon from Rostov Veliki (18th century) and details of the Transfiguration and Holy Trinity. Private collection.

See also:

<http://www.cki.altervista.org/miniatura.html>



1. Natività della Madre di Dio (Рождество Пресвятой Богородицы)
2. Ingresso della Madre di Dio al Tempio (Введение во храм Богородицы)
3. Annunciazione della Madre di Dio (Благовещение Пресвятой Богородицы)
4. Natività di Cristo (Рождество Христово)
5. Presentazione del Signore (Срѣтение Господне)
6. Teofania del Signore (Богоявление Господне)
7. Trasfigurazione del Signore (Преображение Господне)
8. Ingresso a Gerusalemme (Вход в Иерусалим)
9. Resurrezione di Cristo (Воскресение Христово)
10. Ascensione del Signore (Вознесение Господне)
11. Dormizione della Madre di Dio (Успение Богородицы)
12. Santissima Trinità (Святая Троица)
13. Esaltazione della Croce (Воздвижение Креста)

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