



The Deesis

Russian, Moscow School, 15th or 16th century with 19th century Old Believer restoration.

Each panel: 40 x 32.5 cm

Provenance: (1) Probably Russian gift to refugee Athonite Monks in the 19th century. (2) Temple Gallery, 1990. (3) Collection Dr Shand.

The centre panel shows Christ and the accompanying panels the Mother of God and Saint John the Baptist. This is the traditional Deesis by which the Virgin and Saint John intercede at the Throne of Judgement on behalf of humanity. A 13th century version of the composition can be seen in the well-known mosaic in the Cathedral of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople (Fig. 1). The Greek word 'Deesis' means prayer or 'entreaty' and is usually rendered in English as Intercession. The composition later grew into the so-called Extended Deesis or Great Deesis where many further intercessors were added. The main row of fifteenth century iconostases in Russian churches included altogether fourteen saints ranked either side of Christ, facing inwards towards him. The present icon follows the older tradition, examples of which are known from the 9th century, where the meaning was not so much that of intercession but rather that of honouring Mary and John as the first witnesses of Christ's divinity¹.



Fig. 1. Deesis. Mosaic, 13th century, Hagia Sophia, Constantinople

¹ Alexander Kazhdan, *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, OUP, 1991; Vol. 1, p. 600

The high quality of the three icons is a testament to the great spiritual renewal in Russia in the 19th century. This was due to the translation into Russian of the *Philokalia*, a five-volume anthology of ascetic and mystical texts dating from the fourth to the fifteenth centuries. The *Philokalia* is an anthology of Greek mystical writings devoted to the theory and practice of inner prayer and in particular the Jesus Prayer and other ancient spiritual practices derived from the Desert Fathers of the fourth and fifth centuries known as Hesychasm. The publication of the Slavonic translation in Moscow in 1793 brought the *Philokalia* to the forefront of Christian spirituality in Russia together with a revival of Hesychasm as a monastic practice.²

The highest achievements of icon painting have always been interlinked with the Hesychast Schools within Orthodox monastic tradition. One of the greatest of these schools, under Saint Gregory Palamas (1269 – 1359), a monk of Mount Athos and Archbishop of Thessaloniki, inspired the ecstatic highly refined art associated with the Palaeologan Renaissance that spread throughout the Byzantine and Russian lands in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

After the Fall of Constantinople in 1453 Hesychasm and its expression in art struggled to survive under Ottoman rule until the intense revival in the eighteenth century on Mount Athos. Its final and greatest restatement would be in Russia in the 19th.

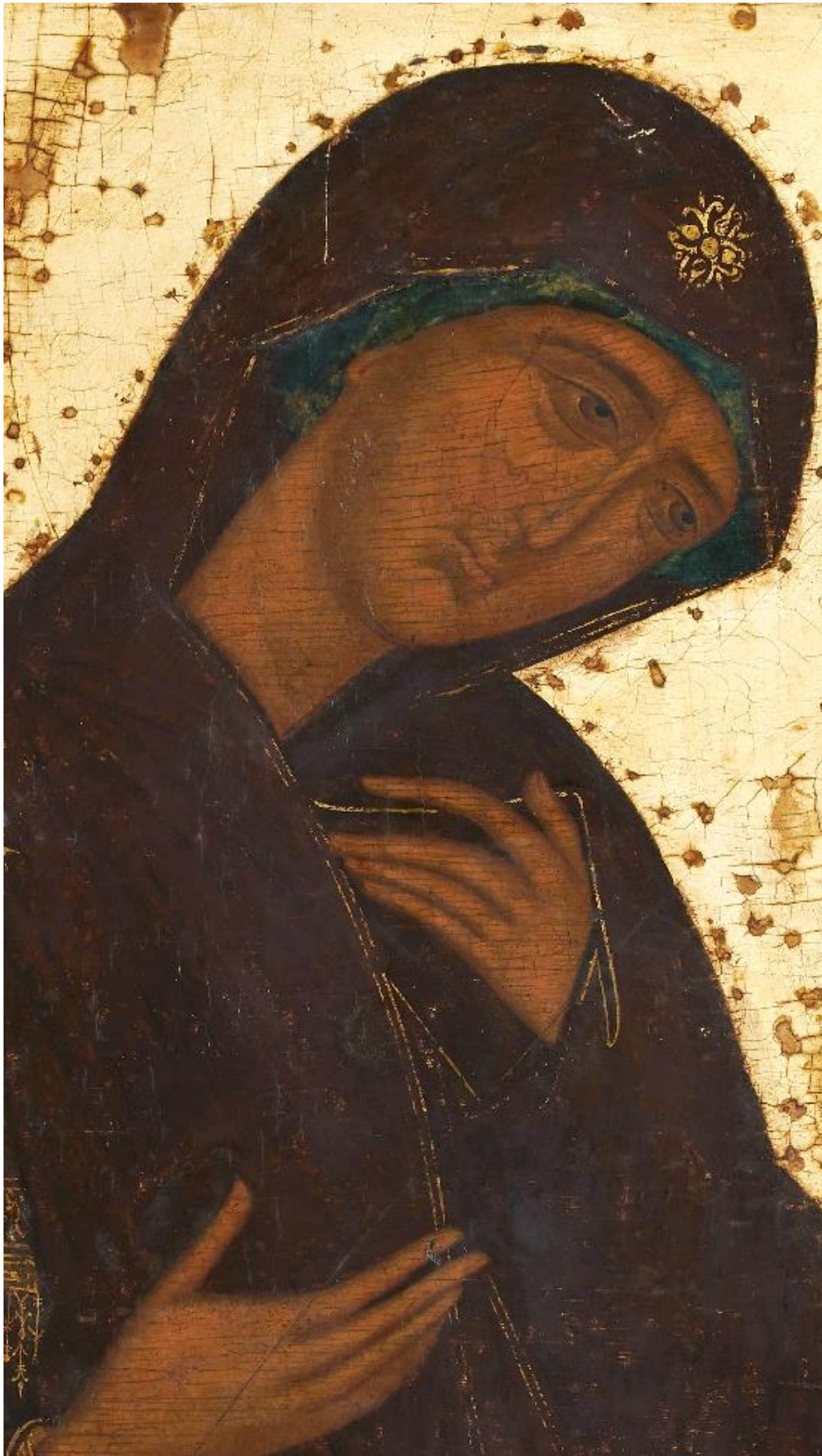


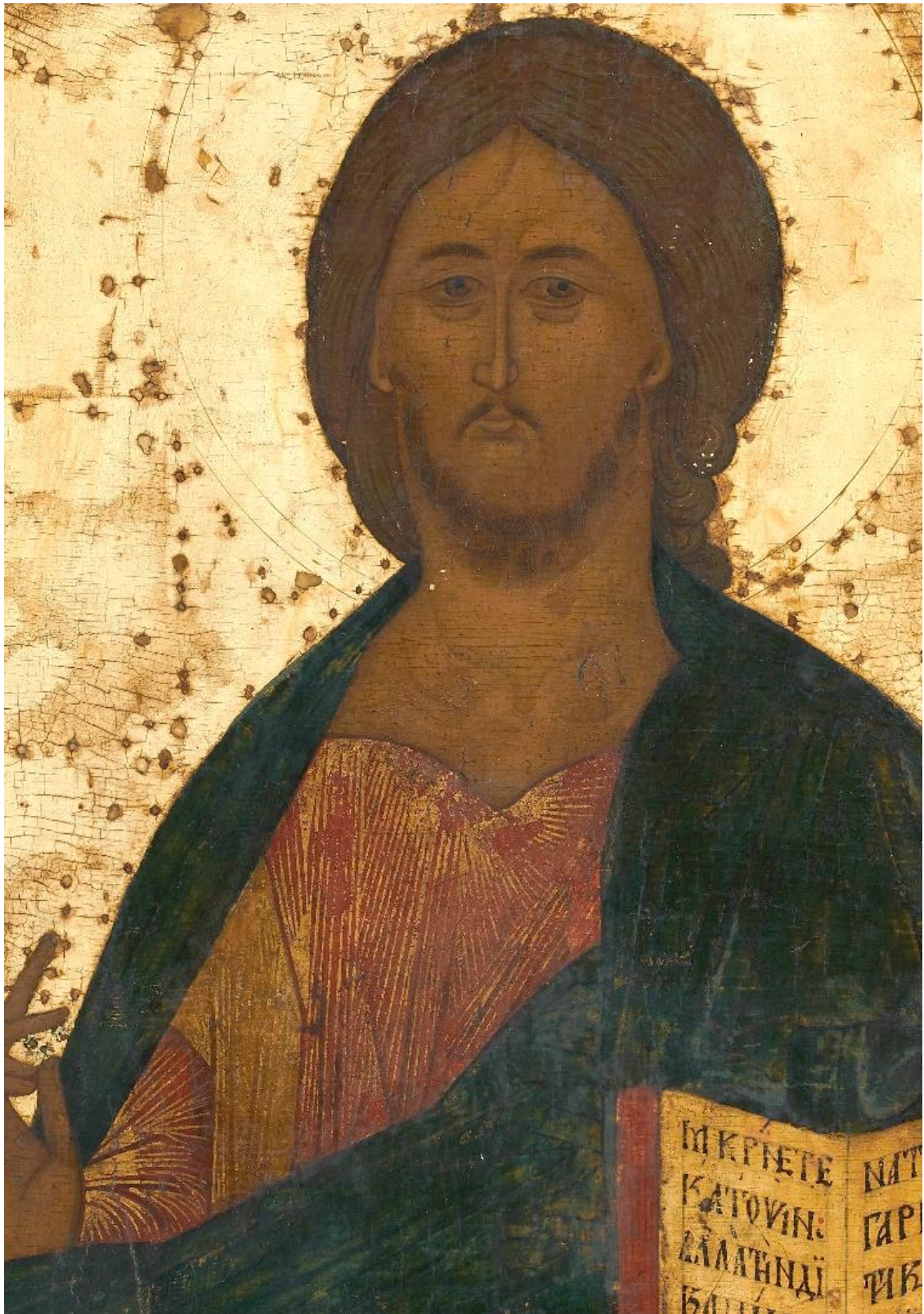
² Hesychasm was also practiced by lay people as the well known classic, *The Way of the Pilgrim*, attests. The book published in 1884 in Russian and in 1930 in English is one of the most widely circulated prayer manuals in the Western world

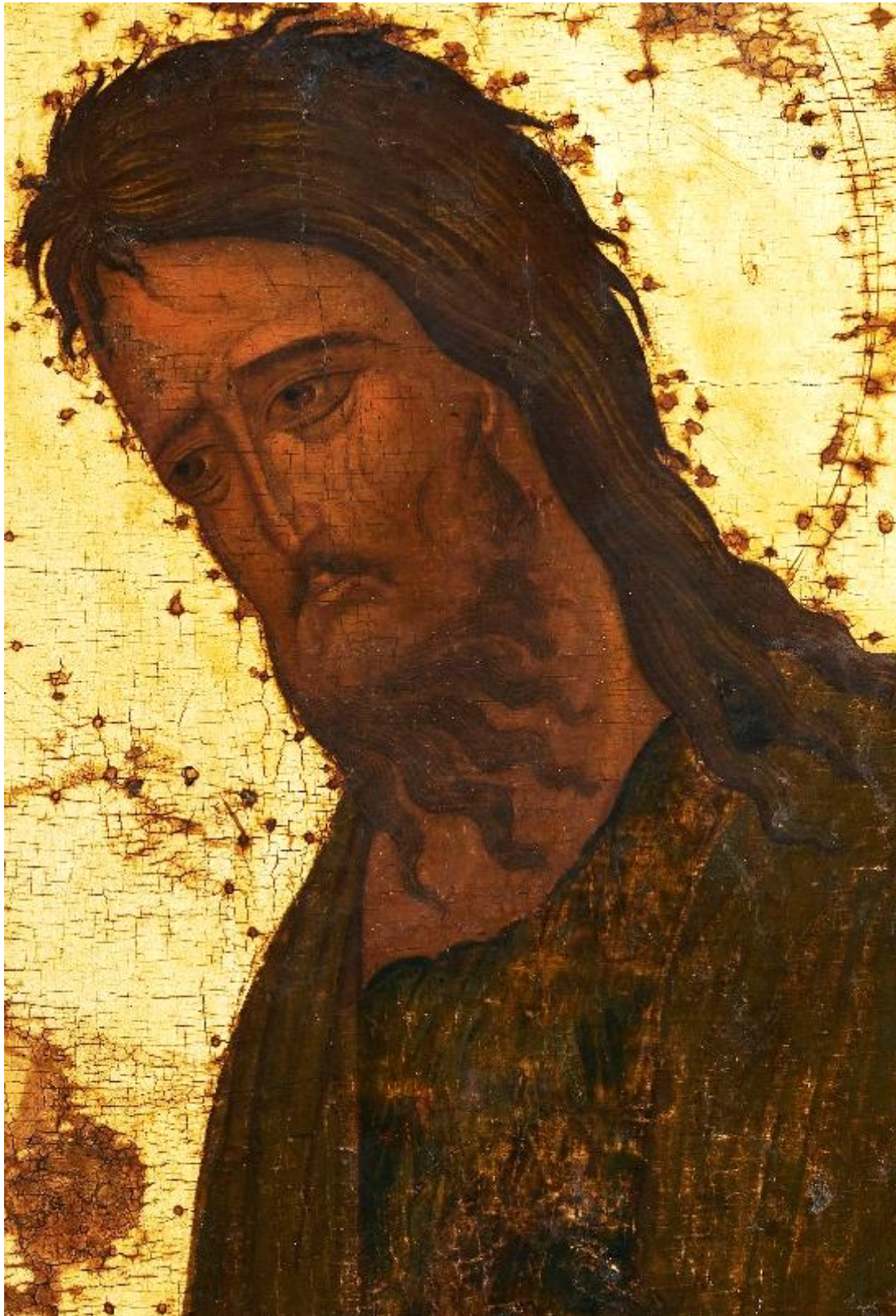


М КРІТЕ ПАТІ ЕНО
КАТОВИ: ГАРКРИ
АЛАНДІ ТИКРИ
БЛАНІК ВРІОНСО
НЗМІКРІ СОВІТОЗ

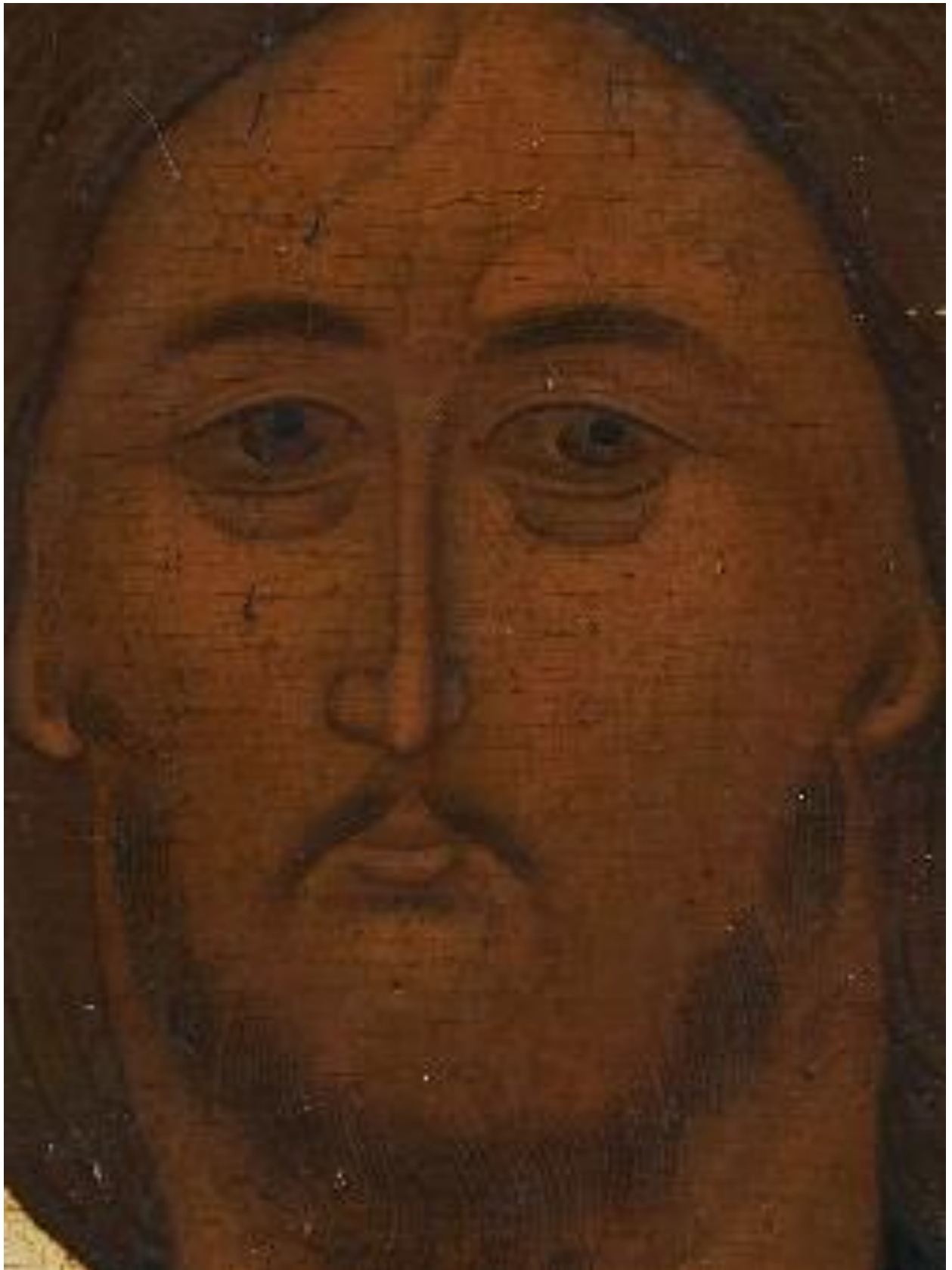














The maintenance of old icons has always been an essential part of the craft of icon painting. Our three Deesis icons were ‘renewed’ for liturgical reasons and not, as in museums today, ‘conserved’. An interesting comparison (Fig. 1.) is an icon in the British Museum catalogued by Yuri Bobrov, senior academician at the Russian Academy of Arts in St Petersburg.³ He describes the icon as follows: ‘Made from a single panel with “kovcheg””; one inserted batten on the reverse; there are some traces of the original 16th- or 17th-century painting. The icon was completely restored by Old Believers in the 19th century and the paint applied then covers the old craquelure and areas of damage”.⁴ Of another icon in the British Museum collection (Fig. 2), Bobrov writes: ‘The Museum’s icon copies the style of the Moscow school of the 15th and 16th century, a form of imitation which was particularly popular with both Old Believers and collectors in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.’⁵

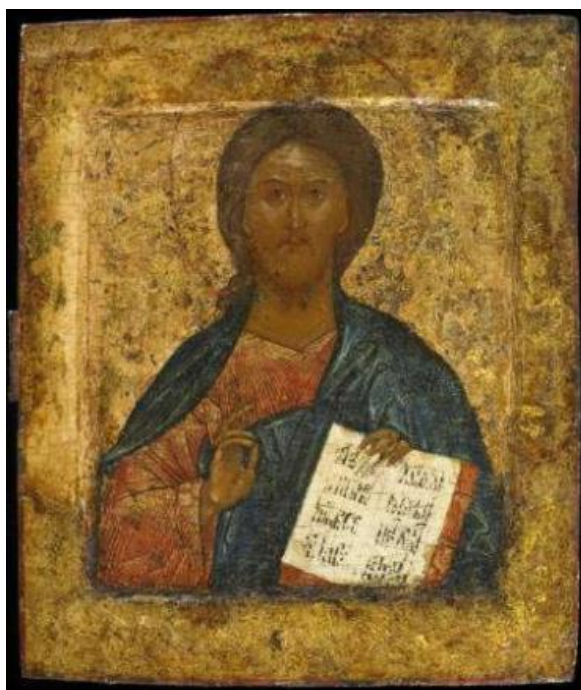


Fig. 1. Christ the Saviour, British Museum



Fig. 2. Christ the Saviour, British Museum

³ Founded in 1757 as the Imperial Academy of Arts and known in Soviet times as the Repin Institute.

⁴ https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1998-0605-17

⁵ https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1986-1201-1

The gesso ground shows the holes left by pins that once held thin silver cladding (*basma* or *revetment*) in place. A large icon, also in the BM, dated by Bobrov to the mid-16th century, has its original silver *basma*. (Fig. 3.) The Deesis icons would have been similarly clad.⁶



Fig. 3. Virgin and Child. 16th c. British Museum

It is notable how close in style and technique is the icon of the Virgin to the work in the Deesis. The best icons of the Old Believers are a testimony to the unwavering and uncompromising adherence to tradition. The strength of their faith, the purity of their technique, all refined in the fire of persecution and hardship, could produce sacred images that defy time.



Centre panel detail with Greek text

⁶ https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/H_1998-1105-27

The open gospel book in Christ's left hand shows the text with Greek letters. In fact two texts from John 7:24 and from Matthew 7:2 are elided: *μὴ κρίνετε κατ' ὄψιν, ἀλλὰ τὴν δικαίαν κρίσιν [s]κρίνετε.* "Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment." And *ἐν ᾧ γὰρ κρίματι κρίνετε κριθήσεσθε, καὶ ἐν ᾧ [μέτρῳ μετρεῖτε μετρηθήσεται ὑμῖν].* "For with what judgment you judge, you shall be judged; and with [what measure you measure, you shall be measured]"⁷

In a Russian icon this use of Greek is highly unusual. Traditionally, all texts are in Old Slavonic with the exception of the identifying inscriptions for Christ and the Mother of God which are always in Greek. The use of Greek for the gospel texts tells us that the icons were not intended for Russians and that they must have been intended for Greeks. A further clue for why the gospel quotations are in Greek may lie in the neatly incised letters finely carved in Cyrillic onto the back of each panel.



К ѿ Б (KYIV)

It is well known that 'In the 18th and 19th centuries large and generous gifts and donations to Mount Athos were made from the Russian Empire, in particular from the tsars'.⁸ During periods of Ottoman persecution this imperial support would have been extended to Athonite monks who fled to Kyiv which was at that time part Catherine the Great's 'Novorossiya'. It seems that these three very Russian icons, apparently intended for Kyiv and furthermore for Greek recipients, were destined for a community of refugee monks from Mount Athos.⁹



Central panel, reverse

⁷ We are grateful to 'David', the provider of the invaluable *Icons and Their Interpretation* at <https://russianicons.wordpress.com/> who kindly provided this translation.

⁸ Elder Alexis, hegumen of the Xenophon monastery. <https://df.news/en/2023/08/02/more-and-more-monasteries-on-mount-athos-starting-to-favor-ocu-father-mykhailo-syvak/>

⁹ I am grateful to Professor Yuri Bobrov for his suggestion regarding this in an email.



Ikonen-Museum Recklinghausen