



**3034. Saint Sergius of Radonezh**

**Russian, circa 1600**

**Egg tempera and gesso on wood**

**Panel: 31 x 24 x 2 cm**

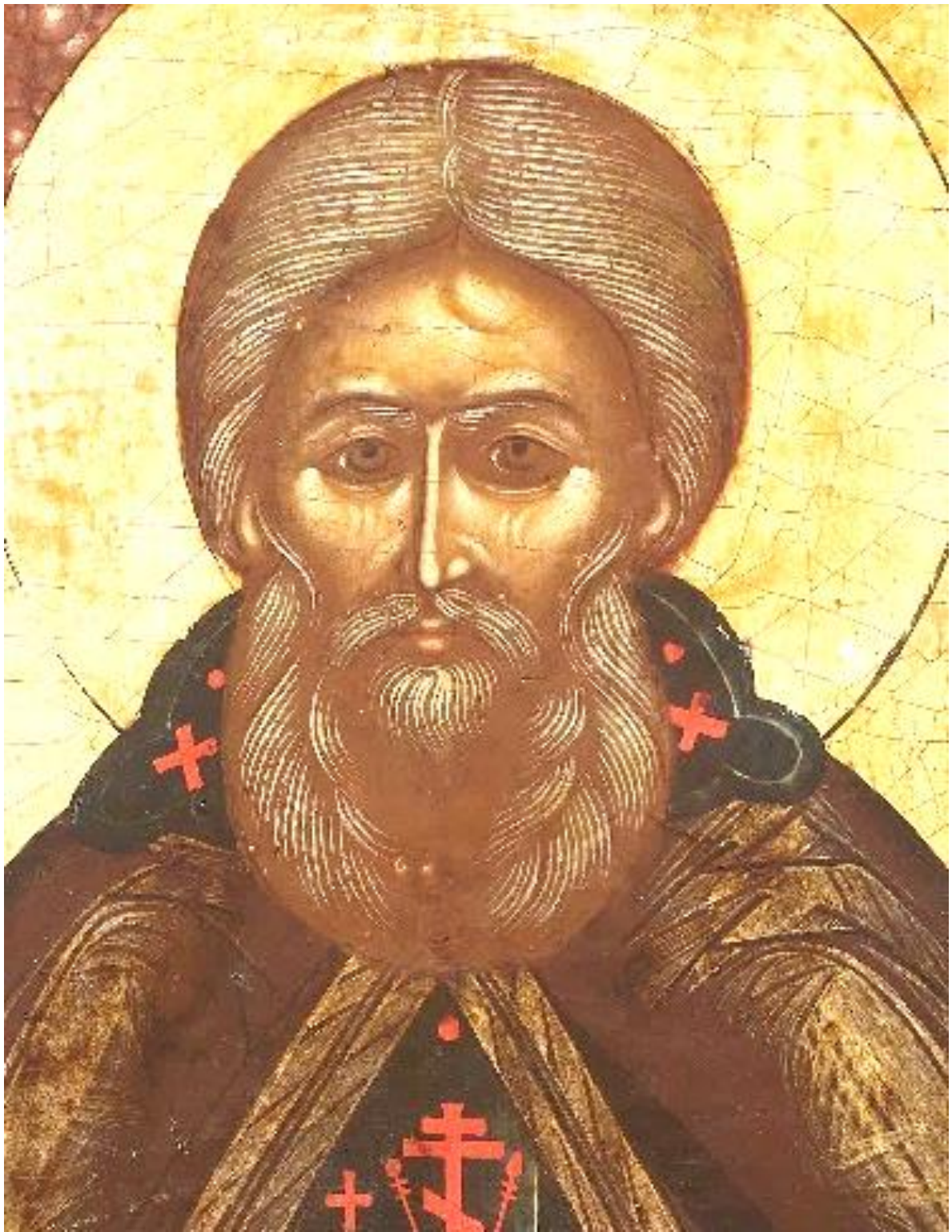
**Inscription in Slavonic: *Prepodobniy Sergiy* (The Venerable Sergius). On the scroll: 'Brothers, above all, have the fear of God.'** (trsl. Yuliya Lennon)

**Condition: good condition. The border may have been covered with a silver frame, now lost**

**Provenance: Acquired by Edmund Bartleet from the Temple Gallery in 1963. Thence by descent to his son, the Rt Revd David Bartleet, Bishop of Tonbridge. Thence by descent to his daughter in 2019 from whom acquired in 2023.**

**Published: The Temple Gallery, *An Exhibition of Icons 9 April – 24 May 1963*. No. 7. Illustrated.**

**Feast Date: Repose, 25th September; Uncovering of Relics, 5<sup>th</sup> July.**





No. 3034, detail

Venerable Sergius the Wonderworker, Abbot of Radonezh (1314-1392) is regarded as the foremost saint of Russia. He was the founder, together with his close disciples, of forty monasteries, many in the remote North. During his lifetime his fame as a man of spiritual power drew many followers, reaching as far as Philotheos Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople under whose charter he founded the Holy Trinity Monastery (Sergeyev Posad) where he later served as abbot. A famous event in his life, taught to Russian schoolchildren in Soviet times, was the blessing he gave to Dimitri Donskoi, Prince of Moscow, on the eve of the battle of Kullikovo in 1380. This was a watershed in Russian history where the Mongols were defeated for the first time and whose hitherto all-powerful grip on Russia henceforth began to decline.

However, Saint Sergius' true significance lies not in politics but in his role in the establishment and spread in Russia of Hesychasm, the inward awakened state of mystical

prayer. Hesychasm had been central to Christianity from the beginning. It was developed by the Desert Fathers in Egypt from the 4<sup>th</sup> century and in Mount Athos in the 10<sup>th</sup>. Its revival by Sergius' near contemporary, Saint Gregory Palamas (†1357), Abbot of Vatopedi on Mount Athos is of great importance, even if not always visibly so, to the Christian mystical tradition. Its passage into Russia, shepherded by Saint Sergius, may be considered a more important event than the Battle of Kullikovo.

Born in 1314, Sergius moved to Radonezh to escape the Mongols. Sergius and his brother Stephen became hermits in 1335. In 1392 he retired completely from the world to live as a solitary and in continuous prayer.<sup>1</sup>

The image of the Trinity in the upper left corner refers to Saint Andrei Rublyov (1360-1430) who was a monk at the Andronikov Monastery in Moscow (today the Rublyov Museum). Rublyov's spiritual father was Abbot Nikon of Radonezh who had been a pupil of Saint Sergius. According to 17<sup>th</sup> century Russian documentation, Nikon had instructed Rublyov 'to paint an image of the Most Holy Trinity in praise of his (Nikon's) father, Saint Sergius the Wonderworker'.<sup>2</sup>

Icons of Saint Sergius are surprisingly rare. Only a handful from the 15<sup>th</sup> – 16<sup>th</sup> centuries exist of which perhaps the most striking is the needlework pall preserved in the Trinity Sergius monastery (Fig. 1.) The image is astonishing and, by icon painting standards, unconventional. The artist, probably a nun of high social rank and, we may assume, a follower of his teaching, conveys the force, the intensity, and the compassion of the saint.

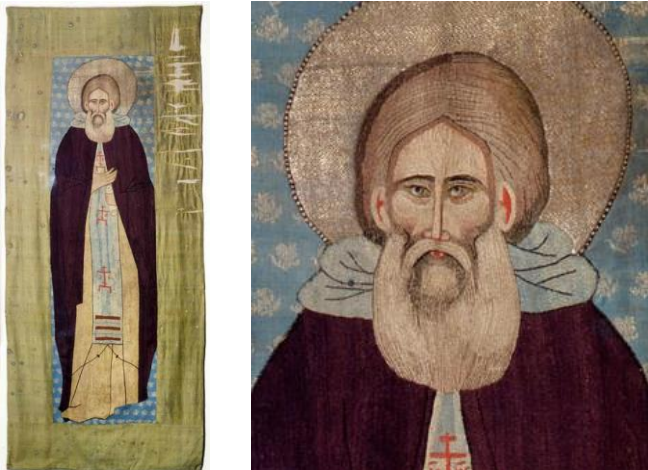


Fig. 1. and detail. Embroidered burial cloth of St Sergius, ca. 1423, Trinity Sergius Monastery, Russia.

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<sup>1</sup> "The Life of St. Sergius of Radonezh" written by Pachomius the Serb (†1485), also known as Pachomius Logothetes.

<sup>2</sup> *Tale of the Holy Icon-painters* 17<sup>th</sup> century Russian Chronicle

Sergius is shown in our icon wearing a dark monastic mantle open to reveal the *analavos* with the insignia of the Great Schema, the highest rank in the monastic order.

Several characteristics in the painting suggest a date in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. I had thought the large spidery capital letters of the inscription by Sergei's shoulders would be a restorer's later addition but almost identical attenuated letters appear on an icon of the Saviour in the Vologda Museum.<sup>3</sup> Stereomicroscopic inspection confirms the originality of the painting.

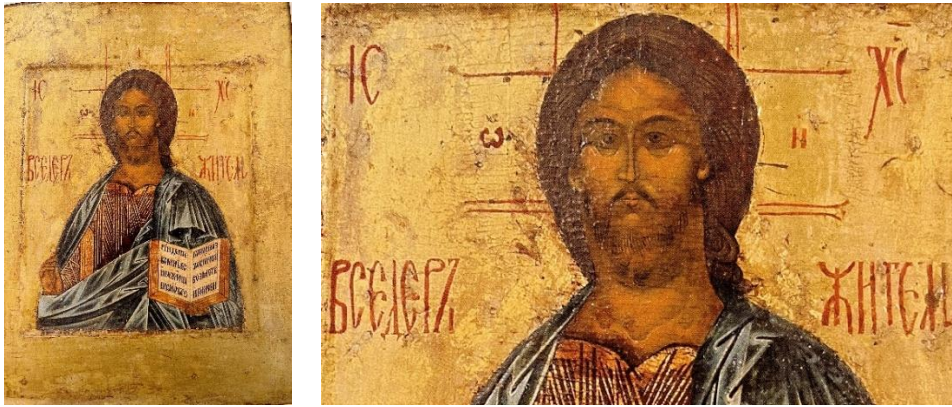
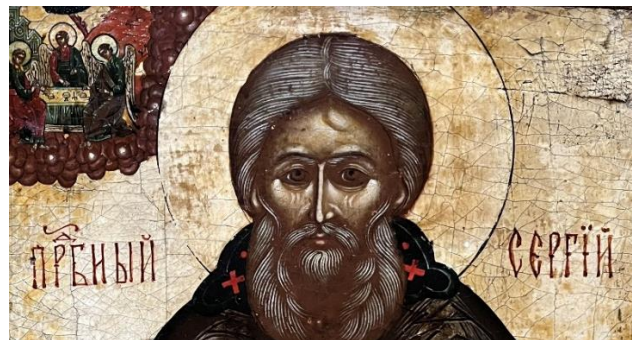


Fig. 2 and detail. Christ the Saviour, 16<sup>th</sup> century. Vologda Museum



No. 3034, detail

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<sup>3</sup> Nersesyan and Obuzh, *Medieval Russian Paintings in Russian Museums, Vologda state Historical and Architectural and Art Preserve. Vologda Icons of 14-16 Centuries*, Moscow, Severny Palomnik, 2007, p. 641.