



MUSEUM OF RUSSIAN ICONS

Exploring Russian Icons

Grades 6-8

About the Museum

The Museum of Russian Icons was founded in 2006 as a non-profit educational institution by Massachusetts industrialist Gordon B. Lankton. The collection includes more than 400 Russian icons, the largest collection of its kind in North America, and one of the largest private collections outside Russia. The collection spans six centuries, and includes important historical paintings dating from the earliest periods of icon painting to the present.

The Museum is a fascinating place for teachers and students to explore. It offers discussion-based tours that engage students of all ages. The study of icons and Russian culture yields rich connections to a wide variety of curriculum areas, including history and social studies, art and art history, and English Language Arts. We can customize your classroom visit to meet your instructional goals and curriculum needs.

About This Lesson

This lesson is one of a series developed by graduate students in Tufts University's Museum Studies program as assignments for the course Curriculum Development for K-12/Museum Collaborations. Special thanks to the students who created them: Tricia Augustine, Christina Ashton, Jennifer Cohen, Sarah Fitzpatrick, Jodi Larson, Juan (Klara) Zhang, Katelyn McLaughlin, Victoria Myers, Karen Riley, and Jennifer Zanolli. These lessons are works in progress intended to show educators the scope of educational opportunities that the Museum can create for students.

Some lessons are designed to take place at the Museum, while others were created for teachers to use in the classroom. They can be printed out and used as is, or they can serve as a starting point for other lessons. The Museum looks forward to working with educators to tailor the experience for their students.

If you have written or developed a lesson plan about icons, the Byzantine Empire, Russian history or culture, or any other relevant subject and you'd like us to post it on this website as a community resource, please send it to the email address below and we will be in touch to follow up.

If you have questions or feedback about these lessons, or if you'd like to make arrangements for your students to visit the Museum, please contact Tara Young at tyoung@museumofrussianicons.org or call (978) 598-5000 x 13.

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MUSEUM OF
RUSSIAN ICONS

I. Classroom Pre-visit

Exploring Russian Icons

Target Audience: 6th-8th grade, 12-14 years old

Subjects: Language Arts

Time Required: 50 minutes

Lesson Overview

This pre-visit will introduce students to the history of icons and their uses and importance in the Russian Orthodox Church. It will prepare students for further programs at the museum, including the lesson *Icons as Storytellers: Learning through Looking* (page 5). Students will discuss the nature of icons, their role in worship, and the process of creating an icon.

This pre-visit lesson is designed to occur outside the museum. It works best in a classroom or other large space.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this lesson, students should be able to:

- Understand the use of icons in the Russian Orthodox Church, including veneration.
- Be familiar with the concept that icons tell stories and play an important role in religious worship.
- Understand the parts of a story and how this relates to Russian icons.

Materials & Preparation

- Icon of Saint George and the Dragon
- Icon of Saint Nicholas

These can be an actual object on display at the Museum, or a large reproduction for use in the classroom. Images for educational use may be obtained on the Museum website.

Educational Instruction

This lesson will introduce students to the museum and allow them to understand the narrative element of icons. They will learn that stories can be told in a variety of ways: writing, acting, or drawing. Students will get a chance to act out the story being told in an icon.

Steps for the Educator

1. Begin by giving a brief history of the museum itself and why it was founded. See the introductory page of this lesson or visit <http://www.museumofrussianicons.org>.
2. Discuss icons (**5 minutes**)
 - a. Ask: What is an icon? Explain the root of the word and what icons are → explain that they can be secular, such as pop culture or political icons, or that they can be religious, such as the Russian icons they will see in the museum
 - b. Discuss the fact that icons are not painted to be art (**3 minutes**)
 - c. Explain that at the Museum students will see many paintings of the same figure; these figures will all look extremely similar.
3. Discuss the idea that icons tell stories (**5 minutes**)
 - a. Ask the students: What is a story? What makes up a story? What are the parts?
Go over the elements of a story. These should directly relate to frameworks and should include characters, plot, theme, conflict, etc.
 - b. Ask: How can you tell a story?
Act it out. Write a story. Tell a story orally. Create a drawing/illustration.

- c. Show students an icon of Saint George and the Dragon **(7 minutes)**
Lead an activity in which the students will look at an icon and identify the parts of a story. After they have reviewed this icon, ask them some questions: How effective do you think this is at telling a story? Why? What would make it easier for you to understand the story in this icon?
- d. After they have been introduced to parts of a story and how the icons tell stories, ask students to act out a story from an icon of Saint Nicholas. **(15 minutes)**

Divide students into two groups.

- **Group 1** will be shown another icon and will be asked to act out the story. They will be given 10 or so minutes to prepare and then will be asked to present their short “play” for Group 2.
- **Group 2** will be presented only the text of a story associated with an icon, but not the icon itself. They will read the story and then will be asked to act out the written story for the other group.

After students perform, ask each group to identify the parts of a story that were previously discussed. Summarize the material that has been discussed and ask if students have any questions or comments. **(2 minutes)**

- e. This activity will encourage the students to think about how stories can be told and specifically how icons tell stories. Students will explore this idea further in the related lesson.

Massachusetts Standards Addressed

English Language Arts

Topic: Fiction

Grade: 5, 6

12.3: Identify and analyze the elements of setting, characterization, and plot (including conflict).

Grade: 7

12s.6: Analyze the connections among setting, characterization, conflict, plot, and/or theme.

Grade: 7, 8

12.4: Locate and analyze elements of plot and characterization and then use an understanding of these elements to determine how qualities of the central characters influence the resolution of the conflict.

Topic: Nonfiction

Grade: 5, 6

13.15: Identify and use knowledge of common organizational structures (chronological order, logical order, cause and effect, classification schemes).

Grade: 7

13s.13: Identify common organizational structures (for example, logical order, comparison and contrast, cause and effect relationships).

Topic: Dramatic Reading and Performance

Grade: 5, 6

18.3: Develop characters through the use of basic acting skills (memorization, sensory recall, concentration, diction, body alignment, expressive detail) and self-assess using teacher-developed criteria before performing.

Grade: 7, 8

18.4: Develop and present characters through the use of basic acting skills (memorization, sensory recall, concentration, diction, body alignment, expressive detail), explain the artistic choices made, and use a scoring guide with teacher-developed categories (content, presentation style) to create scoring criteria for assessment.

Topic: Critical Response

Grade: 6, 7, 8

5.6: Demonstrate the ability to describe the kinds of imagery used to represent subject matter and ideas, for example, literal representation, simplification, abstraction, or symbolism.

Topic: Consideration of Audience and Purpose

Grade: 7, 8

20.4: Select and use appropriate rhetorical techniques for a variety of purposes, such as to convince or entertain the reader.

Student Assessment

This lesson connects with the *Icons as Storytellers* lesson and will therefore be assessed after the completion of that lesson.

Further Information and Citation:

1. *The Museum of Russian Icons*. 12 Apr 2010. Web. <http://www.museumofrussianicons.org>
2. Nes, Solrunn. *The Mystical Language of Icons*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004.
3. Saint Nicholas Center. <http://www.stnicholascenter.org>



II. In-Gallery Lesson

Icons as Storytellers: Learning through Looking

Target Audience: 6th-8th grade, 12-14 years old

Subjects: Visual Arts, Language Arts

Time Required: 65 minutes

Lesson Overview

This lesson will explore the use of Russian icons as storytelling tools throughout the last several centuries. Through group work and a docent-led gallery tour, students will understand the narrative nature of icons and their importance in Eastern Orthodox religious practices. Students will create their own illustrated interpretations of select icons and will then discuss how these icons tell stories.

For this activity to work best, it may be necessary to block panels and text adjacent to icons beforehand. Students should not be able to read an explanation of what is occurring in the icon.

Learning Objectives and Criteria

By the end of this lesson, students should be able to:

- Demonstrate a greater understanding of the narrative elements of icons.
- Students should be able to express the stories that icons portray and the importance of this in relation to worship.
- Demonstrate the ability to view icons critically and construct a creative response to what they have seen.

Materials & Preparation

- Clipboards
- Storyboard handout (see *Supplemental Materials*)
- Pencils

Educational Instruction

This is a lesson that examines the storytelling aspect of Russian icons. It should be preceded by the pre-visit lesson, *Exploring Russian Icons*. During this lesson, students will be assigned an icon to interpret through the creation of a storyboard. Students will be provided with a handout for the storyboard. After they are finished, the educator will lead a dynamic discussion about the narrative nature of icons.

Steps for the Educator

1. Welcome and Introduction: Give a brief history of the museum and why it was founded. Transition to discussing icons. **(10 minutes)**
 - a. *What is an icon?* Can be secular, such as pop culture or political icons, or that they can be religious, such as the Russian icons they will see in the museum
 - b. Icons are not painted to be art—they have a purpose that goes beyond aesthetics
 - c. At the museum students will see many paintings of the same figure; these figures will all look extremely similar—because the process of painting an icon is so rigid
 - d. Discuss the importance of Russian Orthodox icons. How they are used for worship → discuss veneration, thought to perform miracles
2. Transition to discussing the idea that icons tell stories **(5-10 minutes)**
 - a. Ask the students: What is a story? What makes up a story? What are the parts?
 - b. Go over the elements of a story. These should directly relate to frameworks and should include characters, plot, theme, conflict, etc.
 - c. How can you tell a story? Act it out. Write a story. Tell a story orally. Create a drawing/illustration.
 - d. Show the students an icon from the museum collection. Lead an activity in which the students will look at an icon from the museum and identify the parts of a story. After they have reviewed this icon, ask them some

questions: How effective do you think this is at telling a story? Why? What would make it easier for you to understand the story in this icon?

- e. Explain that today, students will be looking at icons having to do with multi-figure narratives works in the galleries to discuss narrative and story.
3. As students enter the gallery; tell them that they will begin with an activity **(15 minutes for instruction and activity)**
 - a. Divide students into small groups. Give each student a some pencils and a clipboard with a handout (Appendix 2) attached. Assign a different icon to each group. The educator or docent should direct them to it.
 - b. Instruct students to work together to create a storyboard that represents their interpretation of the icon.
 - i. This storyboard has six panels; students should be encouraged to use all six.
 - ii. They will be instructed to use illustration and text.
 - iii. Each student should complete some of the work; they can each draw one or two squares or one student can draw, one student can write, and another can present it to the group; the educator should make sure that all students are participating.
 - iv. Unlike many comic strips or illustrated stories with which students may be familiar, this project is *not* designed to be humorous. The storyboard exercise is more about understanding the story, not trying to add humor.
 - v. It should be creative—it doesn't matter if it is right or wrong, the exercise is just to get students thinking about the fact that these icons tell stories using pictures.
 4. Discussion **(25 minutes)**
 - a. When time is up, lead a discussion based on the activity and the icons
 - b. Focus on the icons on which the students based their storyboards; go more in depth and explain what story the icon is telling and why it is important
 - c. At each selected icon, ask the group assigned to that icon to explain what they wrote and show the group the icon
 - d. Ask the students (this is the same format for all icons):
 - i. What story the icon is trying to tell?
 - ii. Why would this have been important?
 - iii. (if applicable) What are some of the differences between the icons you looked at during the pre-visit and the icons you looked at today?
 - iv. Did you find it easier to understand the narrative elements in one more than the other?
 - e. Ask: How do you feel when you look at this icon? Does it evoke certain emotions? Allow the students to explain their ideas before adding more information regarding the icon. Go over what the icon depicts and add any pertinent information that the student may have missed. Students should have a good understanding of the story and why it was important that it be portrayed. Educator should touch on why images were useful in addition/in the place of words.
 5. Storyboard sharing **(5 minutes)**

After each icon has been discussed and each group has had a chance to share their thoughts and storyboard, wrap up the lesson. Ask if there are any final questions or comments and then collect clipboards.

Massachusetts Standards Addressed

Visual Arts

Topic: Observation, Abstraction, Invention, and Expression

Grade: 6, 7, 8

3.6: Create artwork that employs the use of free form symbolic imagery that demonstrates personal invention, and/or conveys ideas and emotions.

Topic: Critical Response

Grade: 6, 7, 8

5.5: Demonstrate the ability to recognize and describe the visual, spatial, and tactile characteristics of their own work and that of others.

5.6: Demonstrate the ability to describe the kinds of imagery used to represent subject matter and ideas, for example, literal representation, simplification, abstraction, or symbolism.

Topic: Purposes and Meanings in the Arts

Grade: 6, 7, 8

6.3: Interpret the meanings of artistic works by explaining how the subject matter and/or form reflect the events, ideas, religions, and customs of people living at a particular time in history

English Language Arts

Topic: Organizing Ideas in Writing

Grade: 5, 6

23.6: Decide on the placement of descriptive details about setting, characters, and events in stories.

23.7: Group related ideas and place them in logical order when writing summaries or reports.

Topic: Writing

19.14: For imaginative/literary writing: Write stories or scripts containing the basic elements of fiction (characters, dialogue, setting, plot with a clear resolution).

Further Information and Citations

1. Ivanov, Father Vladamir. *Russian Icons*. New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1988.
2. Kondakov, Nikodim Pavlovich. *Icons*. New York: Parkstone Press International, 2008.
3. Lowden, John. *Early Christian & Byzantine Art*. London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1997.
4. Nes, Solrunn. *The Mystical Language of Icons*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004.
5. Stokstad, Marilyn. *Art History*. 2nd ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc., 2005.
6. Williamson, Beth. *Christian Art: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 2004.

Supplemental Materials

- Student Assessment Sheet (Appendix 1)
- Storyboard Panel Template (Appendix 2)



III. Cross-Curricular Lesson

The Story of Paintings and Paints

Target Audience: 6th-8th grade, 12-14 year olds

Subjects: Visual Arts, Chemistry and Sciences

Time Required: 50 minutes

Lesson Overview

This lesson discusses the history of the pigments used by Russian icon painters. Students will learn where the pigments originated and why they were chosen by painters. Students will also get a chance to make their own tempera paints and try painting with this medium.

Learning Objectives and Criteria

By the end of this lesson, students should be able to:

- Understand the importance of certain pigments in Russian icon painting.
- Become familiar with pigment composition, history, and use.
- Understand the process by which temperas are made.

Materials & Preparations

- Examples of pigments → lapis lazuli, malachite, etc. (non-toxic only)
- Eggs
- Vinegar
- Paper or plastic cups
- Pins
- Paper towels
- Popsicle sticks
- Two watercolor sketchbooks
- Distilled water
- Paintbrushes
- Copy of icon to use as painting template (Saint Paraskeva, #268 circa 1600 available on Museum website)

Steps for the Educator

1. Introduction of theme: Icon paintings evoke ideas and emotions and tell stories; individual pigments of these icons have a rich history **(5 minutes)**
2. “What is a pigment?” **(5 minutes)**
 - a. Define “pigment” and give examples
 - i. Inorganic (mineral, colors from the earth) pigments (charcoal, calcium)
 - ii. Organic (vegetable, animal, synthetic) pigments
 - b. Discuss why icon paintings primarily used inorganic pigments. Why? → They provide richer, stronger colors than organic pigments
3. History of Pigments **(10 minutes)**
 - a. What were some of the pigments used?
 - i. List pigments and source (i.e. yellow ochre is found in the earth, comes from clay and silica)
 - ii. Explain where each originated (i.e. lapis lazuli is a stone found in Persia)
 - iii. Explain the significance of certain pigments in Russian icon paintings, i.e. red signifies the Resurrection
4. Making tempera paints **(20 minutes)**
 - a. Students will get to make their own tempera. Explain the science and history behind the paints. Students will work in pairs; each pair will be assigned one pigment. Discuss pertinent information, as the students will be going through the process of making the tempera

- i. *Temperas are emulsions*: Ask: What is an emulsion? Answer: made from egg yolk, the yolk contains albumin (a gummy substance) and lecithin which acts as a very efficient stabilizer. The egg emulsion combines with the pigments to form the paint
 - ii. When the emulsion is prepared, the students will then add pigments. How do they mix the egg with the pigment? Explain the grinding and mixing of pigments. Students will not be grinding their own pigments, but the process can be discussed as they add the powders to the emulsions.
 - iii. Explain why icon painters used tempera paints and not another type
 - b. After they have made the pigments, allow the students to paint on heavy weight paper to practice the medium. Soon after, present students with a copy of an icon from the Museum to test and paint one of the patterns found in the artwork (a robe, a cross, a tree).
 - c. After a few minutes, clean up and end the activity
5. Conclusion (5-8 minutes)
- a. Would it have been easy to paint with tempera paints?
 - b. What would have made it difficult? Storage, access to pigments, etc.
 - c. Reiterate main ideas and answer any follow-up questions.

Massachusetts Standards Addressed

This lesson addresses the following Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks:

Visual Arts

Topic: Purposes and Meanings in the Arts

Grade: 7, 8

6.3: Interpret the meanings of artistic works by explaining how the subject matter and/or form reflect the events, ideas, religions, and customs of people living at a particular time in history

6.7: Compare examples of works in one arts domain (dance, music, theatre, visual arts, or architecture) from several periods or cultures and explain the extent to which each reflects function, customs, religious beliefs, social philosophies, aesthetic theories, economic conditions, and/or historical or political events

Topic: Inventions, Technologies, and the Arts

Grade: 7, 8

9.2: Identify and describe examples of how the discovery of new inventions and technologies, or the availability of new materials brought about changes in the arts in various time periods and cultures.

9.7: Identify and describe the examples of the persistence of traditional historical materials and technologies in contemporary artworks.

Chemistry Physical Sciences

Learning standard 8: Differentiate between mixtures and pure substances.

Further Information and Citations

1. Curtin, Maria. Class Notes. CH 195: The Science of Art. Stonehill College. Spring 2009.
2. Martin, Linette. *Sacred Doorways: A Beginner's Guide to Icons*. Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2002.
3. O'Hanlon, George. "Color in Old Russian Painting: Symbolism and Technique of Painting in Medieval Rus." *Natural Pigments*, 2002. Web. 07 Apr 2010. <<http://naturalpigments.com/education/article.asp?ArticleID=7>>.
4. "Russian! The Age of the Icon: 13th – 17th Centuries." *Guggenheim Museum*. 12 Mar 2010. Print.
5. Finlay, Victoria. *Color: A Natural History of the Palette*. New York: Random House, Inc., 2004.

Supplemental Materials

- Student Assessment Sheet (Appendix 3)

Background Information for the Teacher

Base

Icons are typically painted on wooden panels. Most icons were painted on a linden tree base plate. The wood was chopped out of a log from the strongest inner layer of the wooden trunk. This process was labor intensive, and took a long time and attention to detail to complete.

Pigments

Greens → represent living things and nature

- **Malachite:** comes from the mineral of the same name; the intensity of the color depends on how finely the mineral is ground; large amounts of malachite found in Russia; greens are usually used to paint the cloak of John the Baptist; this is because he preached about baptism and people believe that just as water gives (green) plants life, baptism gives people eternal life. Malachite could have been found in Russia, Africa, or Australia
- **Verdigris:** often made by hanging copper plates over hot vinegar; not a stable pigment, susceptible to color changes; does not react well with orpiment or lead white

Blues → represent the divine world

- **Lapis lazuli:** also known as ultramarine, originated in Persia; it was very expensive and difficult to get; sometimes artists had to substitute green for blue because they could not obtain lapis lazuli; blues are often used to paint the mandorla, the almond-shaped form that surrounds the figures of Jesus and the Mother of God in an icon.
- **Azurite:** from the mineral azurite; it can lose color if ground too finely; originated in Hungary, became less common after Turks invaded Hungary

Yellows/Gold → represent the divine nature of God

- **Yellow ochre:** made from silica and clay; from the earth; color comes from iron oxides
- **Orpiment:** a toxic pigment that contains arsenic; also known as arsenic trisulfide; usually found in places with volcanic activity; often used to paint the skin of icons, it has a glowing element so it seemed to illuminate icons from within
- **Gold:** Often times gold leaf would be used on icons. A goldsmith would be needed to pound the gold thin enough to be used.

Reds → represent blood and the Resurrection

- **Realgar:** toxic, known as arsenic sulfide; often found in areas with volcanic activity/hot springs, often with orpiment nearby
- **Cinnabar:** toxic, formed the color vermillion; originated in places with recent volcanic activity/hot springs; used to be panned in Spanish rivers, then it could be manufactured and was used more often; often used to paint clothing
- **Carmine:** color comes from cochineal beetles; often found in cosmetics and foods such as yogurt today
- **Hematite:** this stone appears grayish silver but turns red when ground up; it is an iron oxide; often used to paint clothing of the Mother of God; the word hematite comes from the word "blood" in Greek

Whites → represent things that are divine, pure, and simple

- **Lead white:** very toxic; sometimes mixed with other pigments, pure lead white was mostly used to make lines on clothing and faces

How Temperas Are Made

1. Separate yolk from white of egg
2. Puncture the yolk and let it drain into distilled water at a ratio of one part yolk to two parts water
3. Add 1-2 drops of vinegar to yolk mixture and stir vigorously to create the emulsion
4. Add the ground pigments

Importance of Process (quoted from George O'Hanlon)

“When an iconographer prepares an egg emulsion for painting, he remembers that the Church uses water to sanctify mundane objects for use in the liturgy and other sacred purposes. Vinegar reminds one of the Son of Man’s sufferings on the cross in behalf of all mankind. Yolk is also a symbol of the dove that ‘is characterized by cleanliness, gentleness and will not be opposed by its enemies’ — the prototype of the innocent victim of Jesus Christ.”

Appendix 2. Storyboard Template. Create a storyboard that represents your interpretation of the icon.

1	2
3	4
5	6



