



Simon Morsink

Simon Morsink is a Dutch art historian and icon expert. Most recently director of the Morsink Icon Gallery in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, he has been appointed the new executive director of the Museum of Russian Icons in Clinton, Mass. He began his new role on July 1, replacing founding director Kent dur Russell, who announced his retirement after 16 years at the museum. We sat down with Morsink, the leading specialist in Russian icons, Greek icons and Ethiopian and Byzantine art, to ask him about his 30 years running the Amsterdam gallery and what's in store for visitors to the Museum of Russian Icons.



Private collectors and museum curators around the world no doubt are familiar with your Amsterdam gallery. Can you tell us a bit about how it came to be and how you developed your specialty?

My father, Jan Morsink, started the business in 1977. He was totally fascinated by Byzantine art and Russian and Greek icons. When I was a young child, my father had a habit of discussing every new purchase with us at the kitchen table. He encouraged me to look very closely at the painting, at the wood of the panel at the backside, and to scrutinize the paint layers in order to see if there would be any paint layers underneath. In this way he ignited my interest for the world of orthodox art. After studying art history and Slavonic languages at university in The Netherlands and Belgium, I took over the family business in 1994, together with my brother Hugo. In the same year I exhibited at the famous art fair TEFAF Maastricht for the first time, a flying start, so to say. I was 27 years old and had my most successful art fair ever.

What would you say is the “Golden Age” of Russian icons?

That is without any doubt the Fifteenth Century. It is the era of the Russian icon painters Andrey Rublev (circa 1360-1430) and Dionisy (circa 1440-1502), who are considered to be the greatest of all times. The first one painted the archetypal Trinity icon (now in the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow) in the early Fifteenth Century, one of the most famous icons in the world. Dionisy is known for his brilliant frescoes and icons, which he painted in collaboration with his sons for the Ferapontov monastery in the north of Russia. His son Feodosy was involved in the execution of the frescoes of the Annunciation Cathedral in the Moscow Kremlin in 1508.

What is the current market for Russian icons like?

The market for Russian icons is not in very good shape, I am afraid. After Russia started the all-destroying war in Ukraine, doing business has become more and more complicated. In addition, over the past few years the administrative and regulatory burden in the international art trade has grown considerably. Having said that, the market for high-quality, and especially exceptional icons still is remarkably strong. The thing is, however, that it is extremely difficult to find such pieces.

Can you point us to some of your publications on this subject?

Sure, I believe my two most elaborate publications on the incredibly rich world of orthodox icons are: *The Power of Icons, Russian and Greek Icons 15th-19th Century*, from 2006, and *Collecting Old Icons*, from 2011. During the past few years, we have published our catalogs online only.

Knowledge, business acumen, entrepreneurial spirit and professional network are all important qualities in museum leadership. Which, if any, are the easiest for you draw upon?

All four are very important qualities indeed, and I cannot choose. But being the executive director of a specialized museum, I believe that in my case it all starts with knowledge of icons. This is a complicated and at the same time highly interesting world. You need profound knowledge in order to understand how to navigate this world.

How is the museum rebuilding after the pandemic, passing of its founder Gordon Lankton and retirement of longtime director Kent dur Russell?

Being the only specialized icon museum in the United States, icons and orthodox art are the truly unique selling point of the museum. A solid foundation has been laid during the past 16 years by its founder Gordon Lankton and our founding director Kent dur Russel. However, to stay relevant in today's highly competitive museum world, I am convinced that in this stage it is imperative for the Museum of Russian Icons to set new strategic goals. The pandemic and the war in Ukraine have

turned our world upside down. I am motivated by the challenges, and I am looking forward to working on our relevance not only for the current audience but also for our future generations.

You pointed out that your professional career is shared with some family members. Can you tell us about that?

My brother Hugo has been my business partner for more than 30 years. We have done so many exhibitions in the gallery in Amsterdam and art fairs in Europe together. He has a great sense of humor, and I am sure that I am going to miss him dearly in my new position in the United States.

In your experience as an art dealer, what has been your most important acquisition? Your most rewarding contribution to a private collection?

Some years ago, I discovered a small triptych with the Virgin, covered with darkened varnish and dirt at an auction in Paris. I was lucky enough to be the highest bidder at the sale, and after I had it cleaned, I was struck by the refinement of the painting and the bright color palette reminiscent of the work of the famous Cretan painter Nikolaos Tzafouris (1447-1501). I sold it to one of my best private clients in Belgium and every time I visit his home, I cannot but stop and admire it. But without doubt the most important icons I ever sold are the four Byzantine icons purchased by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2013. They are absolutely fabulous. It is a great privilege to have handled such treasures.

Is the museum doing anything to support the Ukrainian people?

Immediately after the war had started, we included a strong statement on our website condemning the military aggression on the sovereign country of Ukraine and expressing our support for the Ukrainian and Russian people who oppose this senseless act of war. A large Ukrainian flag near the entrance of the museum underscores this support. There is also a list on the website with reputable organizations that are working to help the people in Ukraine. Furthermore, on July 9, Oleksandra Kovalchuk, acting director of the Odesa Fine Arts Museum, Ukraine, and volunteer leader and fundraiser of the NGO Museum for Change, will give a lecture on how Ukrainian museums adjust to the war and what we can do to help protect Ukrainian heritage and history. —W.A. Demers



Triptych with the Madre della Consolazione, Crete, attributed to Nikolaos Tzafouris, late Fifteenth Century, tempera and gold on wood.