

Russian Icons at the Benaki Museum in Athens

Exhibition review by Clemena Antonova

The Benaki Museum in Athens, well-known to lovers of icons, is hosting an exhibition of Russian icons from 14 December 2017 to 11 February 2018. The exhibition, “Religious Art from Russia to Greece,” looks at an interesting and rather unusual topic. The images on display are meant to illustrate the main distribution channels of icons, which were produced in Russia and ended up in the Greek lands in their dozens in the period between the sixteenth to the end of the nineteenth centuries. The time frame refers, of course, to the Ottoman occupation of Greece. This fact is significant for understanding the larger political and cultural context within which the movement of these objects took place.

Thus, we see an ivory cross, which was a gift from Tsar Nicholas II to a Greek bishop. The cross had been produced in the royal workshop by the renowned Russian goldsmith Kosmas Konov. Nearby are examples of *krasnushki*, cheap, low-quality icons, produced particularly in Vladimir and Suzdal, which were very common in Russia, but were also exported to the Balkans. The name – *krasnushki* – refers to the red color of the frame. There are several images of the beloved Orthodox saint St. Nicholas. There is a particularly Russian dimension to the popularity of the saint, as he was especially venerated among the Old Believers. And, of course, the great majority of the icons are depictions of the Mother of God. A number of these are Byzantine iconographical types, which became popular in medieval Russia and, in part via Russia, were revived in Greece. For example, there are several images of the Kazan Mother of God, one of the holiest Russian icons (the original disappeared in 1904), which is a variant of the Byzantine Hodegetria. There are also several icons of the Vladimir Mother of God (Fig.1), a twelfth century Byzantine icon based on the Eleusa type (now in the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow), which became one of the most copied images in Russia. At the same time, some of the icons of the Mother of God follow a typically Russian iconography, as the interesting late nineteenth-century *Mother of God Joy to All Who Suffer* (Fig. 2). To the same category belongs *The Vision of St. Sergius of Radonezh*, Russia’s patron saint. Images depicting this subject are among the most common to be found in Greece.

In other words, the exhibition illustrates a phenomenon, which is important for appreciating the role that Russia religious art played in occupied Greece and in the Balkans in general. Russian images were circulating among all social classes. They came in the form of

diplomatic gifts, including from the Russian Emperor, but also from Russian monasteries such as the Lavra of St. Sergius of Radonezh near Moscow. Sometimes these rather expensive objects were sent in response to petitions for financial support by Greek monasteries. Other images, largely varying in quality, were sent to Greece by Greeks living in Russia or were carried by merchants, who donated or sold them. The distribution channels were clearly diverse. There is, however, a common thread that runs through the Greek reception of these objects. Russian religious art came from the only Orthodox Empire at the time, an Empire that was founded on Orthodoxy and was able and prepared to defend Orthodox Christianity. For the Greeks under foreign occupation this must have been an idea that was a significant factor in forming the fashion for Russian religious art.