The Soul of the Leningrad Blockade: Leonid Chupiatov’s

Bogomater of the Protective Veil

Leslie O’Bell
lobell@utexas.edu

Recommended Citation:

https://doi.org/10.36391/JIS2/002

Available at https://www.museumofrussianicons.org/chupiatovs/
Published by Museum of Russian Icons: https://www.museumofrussianicons.org/

Notes: This PDF is provided for reference purposes only and may not contain all the functionality or features of the original, online publication.

ISSN: 2473-7275
Leslie O’Bell

The Soul of the Leningrad Blockade: Leonid Chupiatov’s *Bogomater of the Protective Veil*

**Abstract**

The present essay is the first article devoted to the religious paintings of the Soviet artist Leonid Chupiatov (1890–1941), with special attention to his *Veil of the Mother of God over the Dying City*, created during the desolate Leningrad siege-winter of 1941-42. Dmitry Likhachev memorably called this work the “soul of the siege.” The article analyzes what it offers the viewer directly, as a modern version of the traditional image. It goes on to place the painting in the context of Chupiatov’s religious production, both during the siege and previous to it, and to explore the circumstances which ensured its preservation against all odds. An apocalyptic context which challenges even divine compassion and saving grace, one which recapitulates the forty days of Christ in the desert—such is the immediate context of Chupiatov’s icon of the Protecting Veil in his artistic work from the winter of 1941–42. In the end, the survival of this powerful image becomes comprehensible through the connections of a fragmented religious-philosophical confraternity. The article thus represents a step towards finally acknowledging the presence of the religious image in the artistic response to the Leningrad siege.

**Key words:** Leonid Chupiatov, *Veil of the Mother of God over the Dying City*, *Bogomater* (1941), *The Wrathful Angel, Temptation, or Forty Days in the Desert*, *Angels*, Dmitry Likhachev, Igor Anichkov, Saint Seraphim of Sarov.

The author dedicates this essay to the memory of Nina Perlina (1939–2019), survivor of the Leningrad siege and distinguished scholar.

“Hail, Thou who providest the bread of life against hunger of body and spirit, / Hail, Thou who turnest aside the thunder and lightning, / Hail, Thou who savest us from the invasion of foreign nations and treacherous murderers . . . Protect us from every evil by thy holy veil.”

©JOURNAL OF ICON STUDIES
There exist only a few brief discussions of Leonid Chupiatov’s icon of the Pokrov, or Protecting Veil (fig. 1). They rightly quote from the following passage in Dmitry Likhachev’s memoirs, dealing with the desperate winter of 1941-42 during the Leningrad blockade. In apartments without heat, light, or telephone the city’s trapped inhabitants suffered bombardment and starvation.

The artist Chupiatov and his wife died of hunger. As he was dying, he sketched and painted. When he ran out of canvas he painted on plywood and cardboard. He was an artist with “left” leanings, from an old aristocratic family; the Anichkovs knew him. The Anichkovs handed on to us two sketches that he painted before he died: an apocalyptic angel with red countenance, full of quiet wrath at the depravity of the evil-doers, and a Savior—with something of the look of the starving Leningraders in the form of his head with outsized forehead. His best painting the Anichkovs kept: a dark Leningrad courtyard like a well, dark windows falling away downward, without a single light in them. Death has triumphed over life there, though life may still be present, but just too weak to kindle a smoky siege-lamp. Over this courtyard, against the background of a dark night-sky is the veil of the Mother of God. She has bent her head, looking down in horror as if seeing everything that is happening in those dark Leningrad apartments, and she has spread out her raiment. On it is represented an Old Russian church (perhaps the Church of the Protecting Veil on the Nerl—the first Church of the Protecting Veil). The heavens have parted and the dying have seen God. This painting must not be lost. The soul of the blockade is reflected in it more than anywhere else.²
This is a stirring tribute from a siege survivor and eminent scholar of Old Russian culture. It was written in 1957, coinciding with the post-Stalinist Thaw and the 250th anniversary of the founding of St. Petersburg (celebrated four years late). That year, exhibits covering the siege reopened in the city history museum, after being suppressed and dispersed when the original siege museum was closed in 1949. A black-and-white reproduction of the icon was published in the posthumous edition of Likhachev’s memoirs, and, miraculously, the painting itself did survive, as discussed later in this essay. However, Chupiatov (1890–1941/2) remains a little-known artist. The corpus of his work was not brought to light and rediscovered until the 1970s, and a retrospective exhibition of his paintings took place only in 2013. But the icon of the Protecting Veil has been seen as one of his most notable creations. It deserves a more developed interpretation than Likhachev could give it, first for what it offers the viewer directly, and second for its artistic and historical context, treated in that order below.

Chupiatov’s intentions in creating the Protecting Veil are unknown, so it may equally well be called an icon or a religious painting. To some it will read as a modern icon, since it is certainly informed by iconographical typology. Others will prefer to see it as a religious painting conceived outside the practice of image veneration. Chupiatov’s active interest in iconography went back at least to his participation in the 1918 expedition which his teacher, the painter Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin, organized for his students to Novgorod, where they took measurements of ancient churches and sketched from frescoes and icons. Chupiatov spent other periods in Novgorod and also several years working in Kiev during the 1920s. No doubt he was familiar with those of Petrov-Vodkin’s works situated on the fluid boundary between icon-creation and easel painting, works sometimes termed “icon-paintings,” such as the well-known Petrograd Madonna (1920). Chupiatov was by no means a specialist in religious themes, however, and often found work not only in painting, but in the theater arts and in film. He buttressed his artistic endeavors with scientific pursuits, studying physics and optics. When Chupiatov turned to religious subjects, he brought his own experimental approach to bear, “both following the iconography and diverging from it, treating canonical subjects in a modernistic way […] intensely feeling and experiencing his times.” Thus Chupiatov’s icon of the Protecting Veil stands at the intersection of the old and the new.

The present article, though not comprehensive, is the first essay devoted specifically to Chupiatov’s religious works. It also represents a step towards finally acknowledging the presence of the religious image in the artistic response to the Leningrad siege. As Vera Shevzov has written, icons in Russia could serve as “carriers of collective memories,” becoming “deeper cultural resources,” and helping the population to “make sense of their fate.”

Chupiatov’s Icon of the Protecting Veil: Tradition and Transformation

To gauge what makes Chupiatov’s modern and personal treatment of his theme unique, it is useful to establish its original context and customary pictorial handling. The traditional icon of the
Pokrov of the Mother of God has no surviving Byzantine prototypes and is usually considered particular to Russia. It has its own Russian feast day—October 14 (October 1 Old Style)—and its own founding legend, recounted in the tenth-century life of Saint Andrew the Holy Fool and anchoring it in the Byzantine past. As the story goes, the population of Constantinople gathered for the all-night vigil in the Church of Saint Mary of Blachernae, home to the holy relic of the Virgin’s robe. There they were said to have been vouchsafed a vision of the Mother of God. She knelt at the altar, praying fervently, shedding tears and supplicating God on their behalf. Then she spread her luminous veil over them, assuring them of her divine protection. The “pokrov” or covering is the symbol of her intercession. Thus the Pokrov icon becomes a palladium or safeguarding image.

There are two common types of icons of the Bogomater of the Protecting Veil. In one type the Mother of God stands on a cloud amidst the church while the veil is held aloft above her head and stretched over the scene by two flanking angels. In the other she herself stands and proffers the veil, draped over her arms, which are outstretched above the waist as if in the orans style of prayer. The veil generally describes an arc falling across her body, visually balancing her head and its nimbus. In the second type of image, the Bogomater may appear alone, in an architectural setting or against a plain ground, but is often accompanied by many other figures, who enact the historical legend or receive her protection. Saint Andrew the Holy Fool is sometimes pointing to the vision above to alert bystanders. The veil held aloft by angels is usually red (fig. 2), while the one held by the Bogomater is generally white and may display a central cross or crosses (fig. 3). In either case, her figure typically faces the viewer to offer protection and invite prayer.
It is immediately evident that Chupiatov’s image transmits the essential of the iconic tradition: the figure of the Mother of God with her veil. With its representation of a devastated city in the background, it also references the time-honored situation of a military siege warded off by the intervention of the Theotokos. However, Chupiatov’s version uses neither accepted position of the veil. Instead, the Bogomater is shown as if in the process of removing the veil from her head, or perhaps holding it there aloft in an undulating wave, like a banner. Her hands are poised above her head in a gesture which expresses fervent prayer, but also might be interpreted as lamentation. Similar gestures of both arms uplifted are found in icons of the Entombment, depicting the intense grief of Mary Magdalene (fig. 4).

The Old Russian and folkloric lament unhappily proved its vitality during World War II when so many cities in Russia were destroyed. Likhachev records how refugees returning to a devastated Novgorod fell to the ground, crying out, “O our lovely Novgorod, what have they done to thee? What then is left of thee?” (Novgorod ty nash prekrasnyi, chto zhe s toboi sdelali? Chto zhe ot tebia ostalosia?)

In addition to presenting an action in medias res rather than its result, Chupiatov’s Bogomater also renounces the calm security of the traditional icon of the Pokrov. One of the comforts offered by the usual iconic image is the peace and composure of the Bogomater as she offers her protecting veil in a time of turmoil. In Chupiatov’s version, even the Holy Mother seems to have been shaken from her serenity during the blockade. Looking down and away, she appears troubled. She participates in the drama: her bent head and fixed downward gaze shift the focus to the invisible population of the suffering city. Though Likhachev remembered the background only as a dark night-sky, in fact its ruddy color suggests clouds reflecting a fiery glow, that is, the city
under bombardment. The hope offered to the viewer is mainly concentrated in the colors of the painting, where the traditional red-and-blue combination of Mary’s robes is replaced by a luminous palette of white and gold. Slavonic versions of the vision of Saint Andrew the Holy Fool relate that the Theotokos solemnly removed her great and fearsome veil, which flashed “like lightning,” or shone “like the sun,” or like “precious gold and silver” (iliktr). In Chupiatov’s painting the shining figure of the Bogomater looms large over the dark cityscape, in simple, monumental drapery. The drapery’s outside edges, of vaguely Byzantine form, echo the broken, angular shapes of the buildings, which have rectangular voids instead of windows, inscribing the Bogomater into the city which she protects. These voids may well represent the emptiness of the blockade apartments where no living tenants remain, known as the “vymorochnye kvartiry.” Yet the generous curves of Mary’s mantle and the circle of her nimbus, gold like the sun, rejoice the eye.

The blockade was often described as an encirclement or a “ring” constricting the city (blokadnoe koltso). In the late months of 1941, evacuation was virtually impossible. But in his description of Chupiatov’s painting Likhachev writes of another deliverance, accessible to the faithful: “The heavens have parted and the dying have seen God.” Chupiatov’s image contrasts the brightly-lit divine figure of Mary reaching high into the sky with the inert framing wings of the dark buildings. Likhachev identifies the setting as a Leningrad courtyard, but it is also possible to see the cityscape below as a ring curving around behind the Marian figure. Chupiatov’s treatment of the background makes the usually unstated siege situation specific and concrete. The Bogomater is foregrounded against the city, abiding with the unseen inhabitants and embodying her traditional function of protectress in war. Her immense figure towers over the miniaturized cityscape, rising to solitary heights without any visible footing, in an image of transcendence. She inhabits a space bigger than the “real” world but just next to it. The Mother of God here embodies the attributes of the Slavonic Marian Akathist hymn which hails her as a stolp and stена, a pillar and defensive wall: “unshakeable pillar of the Church,” and “impregnable wall of the Kingdom.”

The center of the veil resting on the Bogomater’s forehead displays a gold cross. This would be traditional for one way of representing the Pokrov veil, though not always for the maphorion of Mary, which is commonly marked by a star in that position. Chupiatov painted it with the star in other renditions of the Theotokos (Bogomater, 1941) (see fig. 7). To a modern viewer, the central cross might evoke the image of the “sisters of mercy,” as Russian nurses were originally called, whose visual image would have been familiar to Chupiatov (fig. 5, fig. 6). During the blockade he worked as an artist for the Institute of Blood Transfusion, which served the state’s need for patriotic donors. The Red Cross sent 1,800 of its members to the Institute in the first months of the war. Large sums were regularly allocated by the few remaining Leningrad churches specifically to the Red Cross. In fact, the uniform of Soviet nurses in WWII could still include the cross, not only in the pectoral position but also on the headdress. Thus the divine-mother figure in Chupiatov’s icon also suggests a compassionate sister of mercy.
Russian nursing had religious roots before being professionalized, and one prominent religious nursing community in St. Petersburg had been the Pokrovskaia obshchina or Sisterhood of the Protecting Veil. Nurses there took vows similar to lay-sisters. Their garb was blessed before investiture and included a pectoral cross with an icon of the Protecting Veil on its face. So the nurses wore a bodily image of the Pokrov.\textsuperscript{22} Chupiatov’s Bogomater also wears an image of the Pokrov in the place of a pectoral cross, but one of a different kind, an architectural image.

In fact, one of the most striking aspects of this modern icon is the image of the Church of the Pokrov, superimposed upon the image of the Bogomater of the Protecting Veil, simultaneously reinforcing and complicating the message. There would seem to be no visual precedent for the representation of a church on the garments of the Mother of God.\textsuperscript{23} It is like an inversion of the original story of the icon: instead of a vision of Mary with her veil, as seen in a church, we are shown a vision of a church upon the mantle of Mary. Looking closely, it emerges that this church is not imprinted on the fabric of the mantle, but is visible through and under its folds, as if projected from within. That is, this church, the Church of the Pokrov, is immanent to Mary and rests near her heart. It occupies the actual center of the painting. This makes sense theologically, since Mary’s womb was the house of God, and the Akathist hymn addresses her as an “incarnate temple.”\textsuperscript{24}
The church occupies a position in the painting similar to that of the Christ medallion in the icon of the Sign (Znamenie). By analogy, this church is a sign to the believer; certainly another sign of Mary’s protection. Though Likhachev may be right in seeing the building specifically as the Church of the Pokrov, it is also possible to generalize from the plain, almost archaic form of the structure. There had been a dozen churches of the Intercession in St. Petersburg, many specially dedicated to those needing protection, like orphans. But they all had been destroyed by the militant official atheism of the 1920s and 30s, together with countless other Russian Orthodox churches of every description. The church as an institution and religious collective was itself in a state of permanent siege and apparently dying. The Bogomer of Chupiatov’s icon may reveal to the believer a hidden image—a sign—of “the Church.” The Old Russian church represents the affirmation of the long heritage of the Russian community of belief, from which the Bogomer’s protection stems. This church is still alive: in front of the harmonious white building, whose color is already an eloquent contrast to the bleak cityscape, lies a patch of green grass. Projected on the conventionally flattened image of the Bogomer, the church stands out for its three-dimensionality, inviting the viewer into its reality. The dying artist has painted an icon within an icon. Just as precious as the preservation of the lives of his compatriots is the preservation of their cultural and spiritual heritage. Mary extends her protection over the church itself. It seems appropriate that the “Blockade Church,” erected in today’s St. Petersburg as a memorial on the site of mass burials from the siege, is a simple church of one dome, not unlike the image in Chupiatov’s icon.

Chupiatov’s Icon of the Protecting Veil in its Defining Context

The superimposed ideogram, or pictogram, of the church acts as a visual riddle in the icon of the Pokrov. Chupiatov used a different superimposition of image in another Marian icon painted the same year, this time not on canvas but on cardboard, his Bogomer (fig. 7).

This picture has a static, frontal presentation and an austere character, deriving from hieratic Byzantine icons. But it goes beyond their grave pathos; Chupiatov’s figures seem frozen and transfixed. Here the Mother of God and the Christ Child do not relate to each other by any gesture.
or posture, unlike the holy pair in other Marian icons such as the Eleusa type. Though their pose is frontal, they do not so much engage the viewer as stare at some unfathomable horror, their eyes wide and round, their lips pressed shut. The riddle of this horror is contained in the image projected on the pupils of the Bogomater. The viewer cannot see into her eyes and access the icon for prayer, because the sight of the Divine Mother is blocked by the reflection of the apocalypse visited on Leningrad in the form of a tiny window frame, knocked askew and giving onto a scene of fire and ice. The center of the window frame suggests a broken-off cross. The scene may specifically allude to the immense fire caused by the Nazi bombing of Leningrad’s main food warehouse on September 8, 1941, often understood as a terrible omen of starvation. How does this miniature window frame come to be projected onto the eyes of the Bogomater? Perhaps Mary sits looking into a window placed where the viewer is standing, one which reflects back, showing the city in flames. (Such a reading is not excluded, considering Chupiatov’s interest in what he called the “law of relative beholding.”) More likely, what the Holy Mother sees is a conceptual image made visible, manifesting the idea of the city’s catastrophe. The color of the vivid, red flames there is picked up in the enormous red halo around Mary’s head and the red shirt of the Christ Child. The critic Vladimir Perts interprets the flames in the superimposed window as flashing back from the Bogomater’s eyes. In his view this is a “militant” image. Yet the mother and child look stunned and exhausted, as seen in the prominent dark circles around the eyes of the Mother of God and the almost blank look of the Christ Child. As in the Pokrov icon, the holy ones themselves seem overwhelmed by the tragedy which they witness, and the religious image does not offer the traditional sense of comfort and security. On the other hand, the viewer sees the divine personage of Mary as visibly marked by the suffering of the blockade. The Bogomater, with spiritual sight, now looks through the eyes of a Leningrader. Her attitude might best be described as immovable in the face of horror. It is, of course, possible that Chupiatov modeled his iconographical faces on the visages of the starving Leningraders, whose look of stupor has often been described in the literature about the blockade.

The window reflected in Mary’s eyes is askew, as if life has been knocked off its foundations. Earlier in his career Chupiatov had experimented with rendering architectural elements, like windows or staircases, on eccentric axes, expressing dynamic points of view and emotional intensity. In her well-known blockade memoir, Lidiia Ginzburg describes how the siege changed the Leningraders’ perception of the components of their houses. “There was a new relationship to houses. Every building was now both a defense and a threat. People counted the floors—two ways—how many floors might defend them and how many might fall down on them. We learned the volumes, the proportions and the materials of the buildings.” “It turned out that staircases really did hang in the air […] Throwing back his head, a person measured the length of the staircase rearing up, a staircase up which, by his own will, with his own body, he would have to carry the water that crushed him with its weight like a stone.” For Chupiatov as well, a window that is askew acquires a new, existential meaning during the blockade.

As we have begun to appreciate, Chupiatov’s icon of the Protecting Veil arose as part of a group
of religious paintings which he created during the terrible blockade winter of 1941-42. This group included the Bogomater just discussed and at least two other subjects: The Wrathful Angel, in the iconic vein, and a biblical theme, Temptation, or Forty Days in the Desert. It is uncertain if Chupiatov himself titled these paintings or if they have been named by others. For example, Likhachev refers to The Bogomater of the Protecting Veil as The Pokrov of the Bogomater over the Dying City (nad umiraiushchim gorodom), but the 2013 exhibition catalog labels the painting more neutrally as The Pokrov of the Bogomater over the Besieged City (nad osazhdennym gorodom).

The red countenance of Chupiatov’s Wrathful Angel is indeed very expressive, filling most of the picture space in a close-up (fig. 8). The painting is quite small, however—about half the size of the Marian subjects. Strong white highlights are essential to the dramatic effect, and the red and white scheme harks back to the tradition of frescoes by Theophanes the Greek, most memorably in the Church of the Transfiguration on Ilin Street in Novgorod (Spas na Il’ine), which Chupiatov must have known from his stays in that city (fig. 9).

Chupiatov’s youthful angel has a noble aspect, despite the wrath ascribed to him, and a powerful energy radiates from his nimbus. If Likhachev is right that this is an angel of the Apocalypse, such angels have many roles there. An angel stands behind the inspiration for the entire book of Revelation, since God sends one to Saint John to reveal everything that will soon come to pass (Revelation 1:1). “And I fell down to worship before the feet of the angel which shewed me these things” (22:8). “I, Jesus have sent mine angel to testify unto you these things in the churches” (22:16). Early on in Revelation we read, “The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches …” (Revelation 1:20). John writes, for example, a message for the angel of the Church of Smyrña,
“Be thou faithful unto death” (2:10). “As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous, therefore and repent” (3:19). So the message of Chupiatov’s angel remains open for interpretation. Though the Day of Wrath is certainly announced in Revelation, the book also prophesies the coming of a new earth.

The large, uncompleted painting, *Temptation, or Forty Days in the Desert* is supposed to have been on Chupiatov’s easel when he died (fig. 10). In its unfinished state the picture has a blurry, almost hallucinatory quality. It demonstrates Chupiatov’s familiarity not only with iconographic tradition, but also with works like Aleksandr Ivanov’s biblical sketches.

![Fig. 10 Leonid Chupiatov, *Temptation, or Forty Days in the Desert* (unfinished), 1941, oil on plywood, 110.5 x 110.5 cm. Collection of Oleg Loginov (image from *Rokurs Chupiatova*, ed. Tat’iana Leont’eva [St. Petersburg: Petronii, 2013])](image)

No doubt the painting was inspired by the circumstances of the blockade—the trials of the Leningraders in their desolate city over many long months. The Gospels tell how for forty days Christ wandered through the desert, fasting, and was tempted three times by Satan (Matthew 4:1-11). First the devil challenges Jesus to still his hunger by turning stones into bread, but Christ replies, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.’” Surely this passage spoke to the starving religious artist, suffering together with his city, and gave rise to an image which attested to the overcoming of the temptations of Christ through divine power. Next, the devil suggests that Christ should presumptuously cast himself down from the heights to be saved by angels, and finally that he should fall down and worship Satan in exchange for the kingdoms of this world. Upon which Christ replies, “Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God,” and then “Get thee hence, Satan.” No one particular temptation is referenced in the painting, which shows the cunning Satan as a sprawling, golden dragon at the feet of Christ. Christ stands as if conversation with him. His resistance to temptation is expressed in a blue aura streaming down from on high through his nimbus, which also shoots flames upward, in answer to the demon. Christ’s hands, too, seem to speak: his left
hand is extended palm up, in a gesture of prayer or appeal to God, while his right hand is raised
to ward off Satan ("Get thee hence"). Yet the right hand could be seen, paradoxically, as blessing
Satan. It brings to mind the enigmatic moment in Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* when Christ
does not answer the Grand Inquisitor—who boasts of the church's misplaced power to seduce
the benighted world with bread, power, and riches—but instead silently kisses him. Much of
Chupiatov’s painting is done in tones of brown, rendering desert colors. Rows of dark, menacing
figures loom out of the background, with abstract, totemic heads, perhaps idols or psychological
monsters. They point up the humanity of the graceful Christ figure, who seems to have walked
past them and eluded their grasp, making his way out of the picture space. The place where he
once paused his step shows traces of the divine light, shed against the dark backdrop of the
monsters.

An apocalyptic context, a context which challenges even divine compassion and saving grace,
one which recapitulates the forty days of Christ in the desert—such is the immediate context of
Chupiatov’s icon of the Protecting Veil, as we see it in his artistic work from the winter of 1941–
42. But the ownership history of the painting of the Pokrov yields additional clues to its wider
religious-philosophical and sociological context. Likhachev wrote in his memoirs, “the Anichkovs
knew him [Chupiatov]” and mentioned receiving some of Chupiatov’s sketches from them. The
Anichkovs are said to have kept the icon of the Pokrov, whose fate troubles Likhachev. These
statements require to be analyzed, because they lead into the milieu which valued and transmit-
ted the icon, and one in which the artist was a known quantity.  

Chupiatov was understandably worried about the fate of his work as he began to realize that he
would not survive. Appealing for help from a fellow artist in early December 1941 he wrote, “You
know the situation of our native land and all of us now. I will die here, my family, too; that is our
decision . . . I am perishing as an artist, and all my paintings along with me, created sincerely, with
no thought of commercial gain (chestno, beskorystno) . . . .”  

Accounts differ about what occurred
after the artist’s death. Perhaps his apartment was bombed and many paintings burned, though
some were found at a neighbor’s after the war. Perhaps his brother went to the apartment and
took some canvases. Perhaps some of them were given to the Hermitage and the Russian Muse-
um but then handed over to the brother in 1947 and stored, rolled up in his barn until the late
1960s. In the early 1970s the intrepid cultural detective Leonid N. Chertkov helped locate and
collect Chupiatov’s work, introducing it to the art critic Vladimir Perts.  

But what of the Anichkovs, who became the guardians of some of Chupiatov’s paintings? Who
were they, what was their place in the cultural life of Leningrad, and what was the basis of their
relationship to Likhachev? Likhachev is referring to Igor Evgenievich Anichkov, a major linguist
and unpublished religious-philosophical writer, who considered the latter profession to be his real
calling in life. Likhachev was picked up by the secret police in 1928 and given a five-year term
at the Solovki labor camp in part for belonging to a religious circle, the Brotherhood of Saint
Seraphim of Sarov. Another strike against him was his half-jesting defense of the pre-revolution-
ary old orthography at another Leningrad group, the “Cosmic Academy of Sciences.” In it the young Likhachev argued against the Soviet alphabet reform by “the powers of the Antichrist,” who also decreed that the name of God shall not be capitalized. Anichkov, who had given a talk at the Brotherhood of Saint Seraphim entitled, “Russia and the Antichrist,” also received a five-year term. While at Solovki, Anichkov and Likhachev did not fraternize extensively, since they were placed in different brigades. But both of them were Josephites. That is, they rejected the officially sanctioned Sergian branch of Russian Orthodoxy, which had recognized the legitimacy of the Soviet state, and adhered instead to the dissenting Josephite movement, which in their eyes represented the true church. Informal services were held at the camp by priests who themselves had been exiled for their non-conformist beliefs. In heady discussions, Likhachev sometimes found himself transported back to the “atmosphere of the ‘Resurrection’ circle or the Volfla” (Free Philosophical Association, 1919–1924), from the Russian religious-philosophical renaissance of the turn of the twentieth century. It was at the camp that Likhachev also received a deeper appreciation for Old Russian art and iconography while working with figures like the famous restorer and critic A. I. Anisimov in the Solovki Museum and cathedrals, where Likhachev inventoried ancient icons.

Igor Anichkov was released at the end of his original term but immediately sentenced to another. He returned to Leningrad in 1938, in time for the purges, the war, and the blockade. He was sent out of the city in September of 1941, while his wife remained behind. This explains the references to “the Anichkovs,” plural, as owning paintings by Chupiatov. Anichkov and his wife were sincere Orthodox believers and observed many domestic religious rituals, like grace before meals. So it is obvious that Chupiatov’s accomplished religious paintings would have found an audience in their house, as well as with Likhachev, who had shared so many experiences with Anichkov. Iconographical innovations and departures from tradition would also have been accepted in a milieu with ties back to the unorthodox religious currents of the Russian Symbolist era. After all, in his memoirs, Likhachev mentions hearing kindred religious-philosophical debates at the Solovki labor camp, while the paper for which Anichkov was arrested, “Russia and the Antichrist,” expressed the following sentiments:

I am awaiting a new religion which will include communism among its components but which will be the fulfillment of Christianity and not its abolition, as Christianity represented the fulfillment and not the abolition of the religion of the Old Testament. It will be a third force coming as a synthesis after the thesis of Christianity and the antithesis of Leninism. That is what Aleksandr Blok thought, who often visited my father’s house and whom I knew personally.

After the 1930s, Orthodox believers of the Josephite persuasion remained targets of repression by both church and state and tended to merge with the underground “catacomb” church.

Though the Anichkovs were likely responsible for saving Chupiatov’s Bogomater of the Protecting
Veil after the siege of Leningrad, Anichkov’s appreciation for Chupiatov’s work was not limited to his icons. When in need of funds in the 1960s, Anichkov sold the artist’s important White Still Life to the Russian Museum, turning down a much higher offer from a private collector.\(^{49}\) Anichkov had returned to Leningrad in 1953, after the death of Stalin. In the meantime, his wife had moved into a cramped communal apartment, leaving some of their things in the old place. So it is unclear whether the Chupiatov icon was still in their possession by the 1960s, when Anichkov devoted himself to his unpublished theological and religious-philosophical works. Igor Anichkov died in 1978, his wife in 1974, just as Chupiatov was beginning to be rediscovered. According to the 2013 catalog of the retrospective exhibition, the icon of the Protecting Veil is currently in an unspecified private collection (144).

Why might Chupiatov have had connections with the Anichkovs, for his part? Vladimir Perts has introduced a valuable document about Chupiatov’s religious beliefs and artistic interests from the diary of Vsevolod Voinov, a Soviet artist and art historian. Here Voinov paraphrases a conversation with Chupiatov which took place in August of 1923:

> He is attracted to religious painting, to frescoes and mosaics, which he wants to take up seriously. He has been greatly persecuted for his religious compositions. Their basis is his admiration and amazement at icon painting as an artist. As he says, the icon is one of the greatest wonders of art. You feel a deep conviction in his words, even the kind of fanaticism that is willing to be burned at the stake.\(^{50}\)

This conversation took place in Leningrad before Chupiatov’s period in Kiev (1926-28), when a person who knew him there recalled seeing large canvases of his with “some kind of fantastic battles.”\(^{51}\) The allegation of “persecution” might seem too strong, since evidently Chupiatov was never arrested or sent to the camps. However, taken in conjunction with his strong interest in the figure of Saint Seraphim of Sarov, we may understand it as an expression of fierce resistance to the cultural devastation of the Soviet anti-religious campaigns, at the very least.

The holy elder Seraphim of Sarov lived from 1754 to 1833. In 1903 he became one of the last saints canonized by the Russian Orthodox Church before the revolution, a status for which he was actively championed by Tsar Nicholas II. He was widely beloved, and his example proved to the faithful that holiness could survive into modern times. In 1927, the saint’s monastery was closed by the Soviet state, his relics were removed, exposed for anti-religious purposes, and secretly taken to the basement of the Kazan cathedral in Leningrad, which had been transformed into a Museum of Atheism.\(^{52}\) Likhachev describes a secret service for Saint Seraphim in 1927 which inspired a special feeling of devotion.\(^{53}\) The saint’s relics were not restored to holy ground until 1991, this time at the Diveevo convent near Sarov, where the nuns had been his spiritual daughters.\(^{54}\)
Saint Seraphim of Sarov is portrayed in several Chupiatov paintings from the 1920s and 30s which form part of the background for his religious works of 1941. The year 1922 was marked by an aggressive state campaign of confiscation of church valuables, leading to many protests. The cult of relics was also a particular object of official contempt. A study of Chupiatov’s from that year known as Angels may possibly show the deceased saint being taken up to heaven by two winged messengers (fig. 11). But more likely it illustrates a moment from the legend known as “the Great Secret of Diveevo.” This states that Seraphim would die, be resurrected to preach repentance, and find rest at last at the convent.

In this canvas, dynamically elongated fiery angels swoop down on a winter’s night to take up Saint Seraphim, shown as if rising bodily from the grave. The saint grasps the Eastern Orthodox cross, which probably marked his spot in the cemetery and symbolizes his holiness and faithfulness unto death. A substantial Russian church, located in the background outside the cemetery, forms the apex of the composition. Atop its single dome, a tall, steady flame burns in place of the accustomed cross, as if the church stands as a candle of faith in the cold winter night. Candles held a special place in the pious practices of the saint, and were continually burning in his cell. “He used to compare human life to a lighted candle. ‘The wax symbolizes faith, the wick hope and the flame is love which joins all together.’”

The venerable elder is also prominently represented in an image from the 2013 exhibition catalog of Chupiatov’s work (fig. 12). Here he is depicted in one of the typical episodes of his iconography: stooped after a brutal attack by brigands, but undeterred, he makes his way through the Sarov forest towards his hermitage. Chupiatov renders the forest as a warm autumnal landscape and takes an elevated viewpoint, making the length of the road travelled visible, which suggests that the saint’s symbolic path is nearing its end. His faithful figure engages and welcomes the viewer.
It is possible that Chupiatov visited the monastery at Sarov before its despoiling by the state in 1927. It was a popular place of pilgrimage. There he could have seen the chapel erected over the saint’s tomb, where an image showing Serafim walking towards his hermitage was hung directly under an icon of the Pokrov, embodying the special protection of the Bogomater, to whom the holy elder was devoted (fig. 13). This protection also encompassed the Diveevo convent which the saint envisioned would enlarge her cult. Thus, the Pokrov added to the aura surrounding Saint Seraphim and would have been held dear by those, like Chupiatov, who honored his memory, in spite of baneful state policies.

Perts comments that the fantastic battles which Chupiatov is supposed to have painted in the 1920s might have been inspired by the apocalyptic prophecies attributed to Saint Seraphim. The saint told of a time “when Antichrist would come and snatch crosses from churches and destroy monasteries. It will be a time of such distress as never has been seen since the beginning of the world; the angels of God will hardly have time to gather up the souls from the earth.” Needless to say, this prediction fit the Soviet experience of militant state atheism all too well. In 1928, when Likhachev, Anichkov and others were swept up in the arrest of the Leningrad members of the Brotherhood of Saint Seraphim of Sarov, Chupiatov was working at a distance, in Kiev. Perts is surely correct that Chupiatov must have been somehow in the orbit of religious-philosophical seekers akin to the Brotherhood, though not necessarily identical to it. Another apocalyptic prophecy attributed to Saint Seraphim, one of “tribulation followed by triumph,” was preserved in the archive of the theologian Pavel Florensky, for example. As Perts points out, it was in 1928 that Chupiatov painted the *Self-Immolation of the Narodovolka* (fig. 14).

Here a female fighter for the “People’s Freedom” party has set herself on fire to protest harsh tsarist penal conditions. Persecuted for her beliefs, she becomes a martyr of con-
science. Despite its apparent political correctness in glorifying a revolutionary, the theme of radical intransigence here brings to mind the self-immolation of the Russian Old Believers. The analogy to Soviet reality is unmistakable, as is Chupiatov’s anguished response. The dynamic image seems to surge upward together with the flames and skews off center. The striking visual motif of arms flung up in agony and consternation links the painting of the Narodovolka and her jailor with the expressive gesture of arms upraised in Chupiatov’s 1941 \textit{Bogomater of the Protecting Veil}.

In the 1930s, Chupiatov privately expressed particular attachment to his “mystical” (i.e. religious) paintings.\textsuperscript{61} Thus, it is no wonder that Chupiatov’s \textit{Bogomater of the Protecting Veil} found a home with the Anichkovs during the siege. The survival of this powerful image becomes comprehensible through the connections of a fragmented religious-philosophical confraternity. It would not be surprising if Chupiatov were buried in Leningrad’s Serafimovskoe cemetery where 100,000 siege victims found rest, presided over by a small church dedicated to Saint Seraphim of Sarov. Fittingly, the church (built in 1906–07) contained a chapel dedicated to the Protecting Veil.\textsuperscript{62}

Many memorable, symbolic images, popularly called “iconic,” were created and invoked during the Leningrad siege in the course of the Great Patriotic War, as World War II is known in Russia. These included secularized images of mother and child which were inevitably engraved upon the psyche of the Leningrad population and undoubtedly known to Chupiatov. “Death to the Child-Killers!” proclaimed the larger-than-life poster seen on Leningrad streets, showing a mother facing the viewer and bearing the body of her lifeless child, like a wartime Pietà (fig. 15). “Red Army fighter, protect us!” cried the woman in another poster photographed in the city, where the mother and her little one shrink melodramatically before a Nazi bayonet, recalling the biblical subject of the slaughter of the innocents (fig. 16).

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.45\textwidth]{fig15}
\caption{Leningrad during the blockade, 1942, with Viktor Ivanov and Olga Burova’s poster, \textit{Death to the Child Killers!} (photo: ITAR-TASS News Agency / Alamy Stock Photo)}
\end{figure}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.45\textwidth]{fig16}
\caption{Leningrad during the blockade, 1942, with Boris Kudoiarov’s poster, \textit{Soviet Soldier, Protect us!} Private archive (photo: https://russiainphoto.ru/photos/70001/)}
\end{figure}
These militant, secularized images were dominant. But there was also a need for true religious images if the blockade were to have a soul. The 1937 census had revealed that a surprising fifty-seven percent of the nation identified as believers, even after the religious repressions of the 1920s and 30s, and the population flocked to the remaining Russian churches during the war. When, at the end of September 1941, German forces were stopped just short of Leningrad the legend sprang up that this was thanks to the intercession of heavenly powers. The recruiting anthem of the military was christened “Holy War.” Nevertheless, despite the concessions which Stalin made to the official church for its support of the war effort, the Supreme Leader was far from calling for the Mother of God to extend her protecting veil over the land. In a now-famous speech, broadcast in November 1941 on the anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution, he invoked another palladium, saying instead, “May the unconquerable banner of the great Lenin o’erspread you! Onward to victory under the banner of Lenin!” Chupiatov’s siege images have none of this militant, warlike tone, though iconographic tradition includes the Bogomater as an invincible general. If, as Likhachev thought, his icon of the Protecting Veil expresses the “soul of the siege,” its spirit is one of suffering, compassion and steadfast faith.

The presence of the religious image in the artistic response to the Leningrad siege remains almost unacknowledged. Though several art exhibitions were mounted in the city during the war, as early as January 2, 1942, their content was exclusively secular and topical. In 1960, when the time came to commemorate the innumerable victims of the siege, a monumental statue of the Motherland was made the centerpiece of the Piskarevskoe memorial cemetery outside of Leningrad (fig. 17).

Facing the beholder from a height, before a wall inscribed with Olga Berggolts’s plangent poetry, with great dignity the Motherland proffers a plaited garland of oak leaves, drooping under its own weight. This garland is a classical reference, deriving from the civic crown of Roman times. Orig-
inally this was a reward due to those who had saved a life in battle, while here it has become a
general kind of solemn tribute. So there is nothing overtly religious in the image. Yet to those
with wider cultural sensibilities, this figure of the Motherland recalls the abiding figure of the
Bogomater holding in her outstretched arms the Protecting Veil.

About the Author

Leslie O’Bell has retired from teaching at the University of Texas at Austin, but remains active in
research. She has published a book and numerous articles on Pushkin as well as essays on Der-
zhavin, Krylov, Turgenev, Chekhov, Annensky, Akhmatova, and the Russian novel. Her work has
appeared in journals like Slavic Review, Russian Review, Slavic and East European Journal, The
Publications of the English Goethe Society and Die Welt der Slaven.

lobell@utexas.edu

The text of this work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0). All images
are reproduced with the permission of the rights holders acknowledged in captions, or are reproduced under license, and are
expressly excluded from the CC BY license covering the rest of this publication. These images may not be reproduced, copied,
transmitted, or manipulated without consent from the owners, who reserve all rights, and outside the terms of any specified license.
Notes

All translations are the author’s.

1  Akafist of the Pokrov: Ikos 9, www.orthlib.info/Akathist/05_Theotokos-Protection_ak_pokr.pdf.


6  Shekhurina, “Khudozhnik-myslitel’,” 158. She calls Chupiatov the “most faithful student” of Petrov-Vodkin’s “science of seeing,” though “not a blind follower.” Chupiatov studied with Petrov-Vodkin in 1916–18 at the Zvantseva School of Drawing and Painting, following him to the Petrograd State Free Art Studios and participating in his group from 1918 to 1921, spending the summer of 1918 in Novgorod. At that time Chupiatov was already beginning to exhibit and teach on his own and “combined elements of Tatlin’s constructivism with Petrov-Vodkin’s ‘spherical perspective’” (ibid.).


9  Shekhurina, “Khudozhnik-myslitel’,” 159.


11 Vera Shevzov, “Scripting the Gaze: Liturgy, Homilies, and the Kazan Icon of the Mother of God in Late Imperial Russia,” in Sacred Stories: Religion and Spirituality in Modern Russia, ed. Mark D. Steinberg and Heather J. Coleman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 73, 80, 83.


14 Often the Pokrov theme in the upper part of the icon is combined with the miracle of Saint Roman the Melodist below: he recovers his lost voice upon singing his famous Christmas hymn to the Theotokos. This amalgamation was based on the fact that the Pokrov was celebrated on October 1 (Old Style), like the feast of Saint Roman the Melodist (The Meaning of Icons, 152).

17 Moldovan, Zhbitie. “Mafor eia, iako molnino vidinie imeia, eze na prechistem eia verse lezhashche, otivvshi ot sebe i prechistyma svoima rukama vzemshii, strashno zhe i veliko sushche, verkhu vsekh liudei prostre, stoiaschikh tu” (399, lines 5032–6, for variants see notes to line 5038).
23 See Architecture as Icon: Perception and Representation of Architecture in Byzantine Art, ed. Slodadan Ćurčić and Evangelia Hadjitryphonos (New Haven: Yale University Press for Princeton University Art Museum, 2010), 3: “Such representations enjoyed a meaning and status equivalent to those of the saints depicted on icons as primary objects of religious veneration.”
24 Akafist, stanza XXIII, “odushevlennyi khram.”
25 On Petersburg churches and their destruction, see V. V. Antonov and A. V. Kobak, Sviatyni Sankt-Peterburga: istoriko-tserkovnata entsiklopediia v trekh tomakh, 2 vols. (Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo Chernysheva, 1994, 1996). Notable examples are Tserkov' Pokrova Presvatiioi Bogoroditsy v Kolomne, closed in 1932 and razed in 1934: see vol. 1, no. 86, 209–11, and Tserkov' Pokrova Presvatiioi Bogoroditsy Eparkhiial'nogo Bratsva Presvatiioi Bogoroditsy (Borovai ulitsa, 50), closed in 1936: see vol. 1, no. 87, 213–4. Both were active centers of faith and charity. Also Tserkov' Pokrova Presvatiioi Bogoroditsy pri Pokrovskoi obshchine sester miloserdiia, closed in the early 1920s: see vol. 2, no. 300, 256–8. All these churches were functioning during Chupiatov's formative years.
28 Ibid., 36: “zakon otnositel'nogo smotreniia.”
29 Perts, “Prilozhenie,” 65n5.
30 I thank one of my anonymous reviewers for this observation.
31 Chupiatov shares these spatial innovations with his teacher Petrov-Vodkin, as Wendy Salmond points out.
33 Ibid., 319.
34 King James version; the Slavonic version does not appreciably vary. Angels multiply in the book of Revelation. There is the “angel ascending from the east” saying “hurt not the earth . . . till we have sealed the servants of our God in their foreheads” (7:3); the famous seven angels with the seven trumpets (8); the angel “crying ‘Babylon the Great is fallen’” (18:2); the angel with the keys to the bottomless pit who chains up Satan (20) etc.
35 Perts, “Prilozhenie,” 65n5. The piece of plywood measures about 43 x 43 inches (110.5 x 110.5 cm).
37 Written to Mikhail Tsekhanovskii, a leading animator at Lenfilm, with whom Chupiatov had worked on “The Tale of the Silly Little Mouse” (Skazka o glupom myshon’ke) in 1940. Tsekhanovskii himself barely survived the siege. Borovskii, “Leonid Chupiatov,” 50. Borovskii quotes the letter only in part. In saying this was their decision Chupiatov probably means that they have rejected evacuation. On Tsekhanovskii see Laura Pontieri, Soviet Animation and the Thaw of the 1960s: Not Only for Children (Herts: John Libby for Indiana University Press, 2012), 22ff.

38 Perts, “Prilozhenie,” 68n2.

39 Ibid., 56, note. In 1942 a commission was sent out into the city to buy art from private persons for the museums, no doubt including artists’ estates. Over eighty artists perished in the blockade. Ocherki istorii Leningrada, vol. 5, 634–5.


47 Ibid., 19n11.


51 Perts, “Prilozhenie,” 66, note.


“It was decreed by the Lord God that I should live for far more than a hundred years. But since by that time the bishops will have become so wicked that in their iniquity they will surpass the Greek bishops at the time of Theodosius the Younger, with the result that they will no longer even believe in the most important doctrine of the Christian faith, it is pleasing to God to take me, the wretched Serafim, for the time being from this transient life and afterwards to raise me up; and my resurrection will be like the resurrection of the seven youths in the cave of Okhlon in the days of Theodosius the Younger. Having revealed to me this great and dread mystery, the great starets informed me [Motovilov] that after his resurrection he will move from Sarov to Diveyevo and there begin preaching worldwide repentance. At this preaching, but still more at the miracle of resurrection, a great multitude of people will gather from all the ends of the earth [ . . .] And when preaching repentance at Diveyevo, Father Serafim will uncover four relics there, and on uncovering them he will himself lie down among them. And then there will shortly come about the end of everything.”


59 Zander, *St. Seraphim of Sarov*, 34.


61 Perts, “Prilozhenie,” 69, reminiscences of Natalia Zavalishina.


63 On the church during the blockade see Bidlack and Lomagin, *The Leningrad Blockade*, 164–183; on the 1937 census, 165; on church attendance, 170.


65 November 7, 1941, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6kkIJ9DuCE4. “Pust’ osenit vas nepobedimoe znamia velikogo Lenina”; “Pod znamenem Lenina vpered k pobede.” Many war posters illustrate this dictum, with Lenin’s face or profile imprinted on an enormous banner.

66 On the Bogomater as general, see Pentcheva, *Icons and Power*, 66, 94. The chief Slavonic Marian Akafist begins, “Vzbrannoi Voevode, pobeditel’naiia” (O most valiant commander, victorious).
