



THE JOURNAL OF ICON STUDIES

VOLUME 3 | 2020

Book Review

Framing Mary: The Mother of God in Modern, Revolutionary, and Post-Soviet Russian Culture

Amy Singleton Adams and Vera Shevzov, eds.
(DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2018), xii + 344 pp., illus.

Recommended Citation:

Jefferson Gatrall, review of *Framing Mary: The Mother of God in Modern, Revolutionary, and Post-Soviet Russian Culture*, by Amy Singleton Adams and Vera Shevzov, eds., *Journal of Icon Studies* 3, 2020

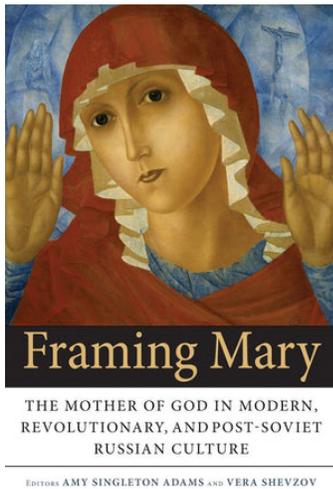
<https://doi.org/10.36391/JIS006BR>

Available at <https://www.museumofrussianicons.org/framing-mary/>

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



Framing Mary: The Mother of God in Modern, Revolutionary, and Post-Soviet Russian Culture

Amy Singleton Adams and Vera Shevzov, eds. (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2018), xii + 344 pp., illus.

In *Framing Mary: The Mother of God in Modern, Revolutionary, and Post-Soviet Russian Culture*, Amy Singleton Adams, Vera Shevzov, and their collaborators contribute fresh perspectives and substan-

tial new scholarship on the diverse religious, cultural, and artistic meanings of the Marian figure in Russia. The Mother of God's "frames"—the volume's master metaphor—extend from the rituals, narratives, and topographies of icon veneration to problems of theology, gender, aesthetics, and national identity. The volume includes an introduction and twelve chapters as well as an afterward and a helpful glossary of Mary icons and narratives. The chapters are arranged chronologically, from the seventeenth century to the present, yet the volume as a whole does not conform to conventional periodization. As Adams and Shevzov observe, the lived history of Mary in Russia—with her miraculous appearances and forced hidings, popular revivals and conceptual reframings—necessitates its own temporal demarcations. The turbulent "revolutionary" years (ca. 1910–30) are well represented in *Framing Mary*, as contributors examine how such major modernist writers and artists as Gorky, Tsvetaeva, Goncharova, and Petrov-Vodkin engage Mary in her myriad forms as Virgin, Madonna, Birth Giver, Intercessor, and Jewish Maiden. The volume further explores a range of Orthodox perspectives on the Mother of God (Bogomater), from priests, nuns, pilgrims, and parishioners to such twentieth-century religious thinkers and icon-painters as Elizaveta Skobtsova, Pimen Sofronov, and Tatiana Goricheva.

Several contributors examine the relations between icons, origin narratives, and sacred geography.

Elena N. Boeck (chapter 1) analyses a fascinating early-eighteenth-century compendium of East Slavic texts about the Mother of God that was discovered near Briansk in the early 1970s. The compendium includes thirty-one texts and dozens of hand-painted illustrations that chronicle, in an encyclopedic fashion, Mary's known miracles, including at sites in Constantinople and Ukraine as well as across Catholic Europe and the Spanish New World. At the same time, as Boeck argues, the compendium privileges Russia's own "geographies of the sacred" and implicitly delineates its expanding borders. Christine D. Worobec (chapter 2) analyzes tensions between lay image cults and clerical authority in the case of the Akhtyrka Mother of God, an icon that—according to its origin narrative—appeared to a local priest in 1739 and later cured his daughter's fever. While Holy Synod authorities initially viewed the icon's alleged healing powers and Italian painterly style with suspicion, they eventually relented to the popular demands of parishioners and pilgrims and approved the Akhtyrka as "a radical new prototype" for Russian Mother of God icons. In the context of contemporary Russia, Stella Rock (chapter 11) demonstrates the continuing sway of Marian icons and their miraculous apparition narratives for the faithful. She explores mass pilgrimages to two sacred sites with special claims to the grace of the Mother of God's presence. The first—a remote and long-abandoned shrine in Gorokhovo, Tver Oblast—houses a copy of the Kazan Mother of God icon that, like its prototype, appeared by seeming miracle. In the second case, Rock analyses what she terms a "contact relic," namely, Mary's purported footsteps, which pilgrims can retrace along the walls of the Holy Trinity-Saint Seraphim Diveevo Convent.

Other contributors focus on the normative models of womanhood that the Marian image exemplified in different historical contexts and across varying social strata. William G. Wagner (chapter 4) reconstructs the ways in which the Mother of God permeated the lives of women at the Convent of the Exaltation of the Cross near Nizhny-Novgorod in late Imperial Russia. From public icons and personal devotional images to liturgical music and icon processions, the convent's nuns were not only surrounded on all sides by the Mother of God's presence; as Wagner meticulously documents, the Mother of God would have been virtually the only female image on display within the convent. In a chapter on the Russian émigré community in Paris, Natalia Ermolaev (chapter 8) examines the Silver Age revival of Orthodox Mariology in the writings of theologian Sergei Bulgakov, religious philosopher Nikolai Berdiaev, and nun and activist Elizaveta (Maria) Skobtsova. While Bulgakov and Berdiaev articulate the relationship between Mary and the Divine Sophia in theological and anthropological terms, respectively, Skobtsova, who was later glorified as a saint, departs from their gendered assumptions on motherhood and sexuality through her notion of "Godmotherhood." For Skobtsova, as Ermolaev shows, the whole Orthodox Church, both women and men, are called to imitate the Mother of God through radical compassion and active social work. Finally, Elizabeth Skomp (chapter 10) explores the writings of Tatiana Goricheva, the cofounder of an independent woman's religious club Mariia and an associated journal in the 1980s. Goricheva and other members from her circle propagated Mary as an ideal for a New Soviet Woman based on spirituality, humility, creativity, and motherhood. Provocatively, Skomp argues that Goricheva's Marian ideal, despite its traditional gendering, constituted an important oppositional feminism within the context of the late Soviet Union, where

the equality of the sexes, like atheism, was an official, top-down state ideology.

Sarah Pratt (chapter 3), Adams (chapter 5), and Alexandra Smith (chapter 6) examine the ekphrastic means and heterodox meanings through which secular writers appropriated the Marian image in their poetry and prose. In a playful chapter on Pushkin's Mary, Sarah Pratt provides a fresh reading of his notoriously blasphemous *Gavriliada* (1821), a long-suppressed narrative poem in which Mary—a young Jewish woman—is seduced by Satan, Gabriel, and God in turn. Pratt also explores the Italian Renaissance roots of Pushkin's more reverent Marian tropes in the poems he addresses to women. Gorky, by contrast, often compares female characters to Orthodox icons of the Mother of God. As Adams argues, Gorky portrays mother figures standing at windows in such early works as "Twenty-Six and One" (1899) and *Mother* (1906). Within this visual framing, female characters may appear constrained by the domestic sphere of church and tradition; or they may look outward in the guise of Revolutionary Madonna for the sons of the proletariat. In her chapter, Smith examines Marina Tsvetaeva's poetic self-identification as a Mother of God figure—a compelling counterpoint to the masculine appropriations of Mary found in Pushkin and Gorky. In the cycle "Poems of Moscow," Tsvetaeva contemplates the city as both a sacred and aesthetic object, one that is as open and dynamic as a medieval icon. She further stylizes her own persona as the city's visionary and truth-seeking voice.

Wendy Salmond (chapter 7) and Roy R. Robson (chapter 9) explore the meaning and iconography of Mary in the paintings of Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin and Pimen Sofronov, respectively. Salmond interprets *1918 in Petrograd*, better known as the "Petrograd Madonna," as a new form of icon-painting that embodied Petrov-Vodkin's "science of seeing." It also offered his audiences potential hope during the time of troubles that followed the 1917 Revolution. The painter's nuanced balance between the sacred and secular nevertheless soon became untenable in the new Soviet State. As Salmond poignantly observes, the Petrograd Madonna was among the last paintings of Mary "to be created in Soviet Russia for other than anti-religious purposes." The craft of icon-painting did endure and even flourish in exile, however, as Robson demonstrates in his article on Sofronov, an icon-painter whose supporters in Western Europe and the United States honored him as "the Madonna painter." Employing the methods and materials of Old Believer icon traditions, Sofronov, a collector of *prorisi* (loosely akin to patterns or stencils) transferred the outlines of Marian images onto boards as negative imprints. At the same time, he incorporated Catholic elements and modernist styles, bringing the modern and ancient and East and West together in creative tension.

Taken together, the volume's contributors offer an extraordinarily diverse range of perspectives, including Orthodox clergy, laity, freethinkers, Communists, artists, and theologians. The volume does, however, tend to privilege voices sympathetic to Mary over those for whom her image proved alienating. Prior to 1917, the Mother of God represented a near-ubiquitous emblem of the state church of a major colonial power, one that helped consign the religious images of *inovertsy* (adherents of other faiths) to the political and cultural margins. In the volume's final

chapter, Vera Shevzov provides a welcome, tour-de-force analysis of the politics of the Marian image. In a process that she aptly terms the “Marianization of post-Soviet Russia,” Shevzov examines the ways in which the Russian Orthodox Church promotes the Marian image in public media and political discourse. Tatar Muslims, for example, have objected to the Church’s pronouncements connecting Russian’s newly established Unity Day on November 4 with the feast day of the Kazan Mother of God, an icon whose origin narrative coincides with the conquest of Kazan. As Shevzov argues, the Marian image is deeply entangled in cultural politics, from the “memory wars” over Soviet legacies to Pussy Riot’s punk anthem in the Cathedral of the Christ the Savior.

As Shevzov, Adams, and their contributors demonstrate, the field of Mariology remains highly relevant for understanding Russian modernity and contemporary Russia. In the volume’s introduction, the editors provide rich and readable background on the Mother of God in medieval Russia and succinctly outline the kinds of cultural, political, and artistic “frames” that surround modern Marian images. In their respective chapters, the volume’s contributors not only support the volume’s overarching narratives but also offer valuable scholarship for specialists on individual artists, writers, and thinkers. *Framing Mary* should serve as an authoritative resource for scholars of modern Russian and East European religion, visual art, literature, and gender studies.

Jefferson Gatrall
Montclair State University



The text of this work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0).