The Russian Icon at Hill-Stead Museum

Russian icon framed in red velvet originally from the Hermitage, purchased in the 1930s from the Armand Hammer sale at Lord and Taylor in New York City. (HSM)

The icon is paint on wood panel, with velvet framing, about 3 ¼” h. x 3 1/8” w.

The accompanying tag reads: Icon of the 16th century, Novgorod School. Childhood incident in the life of St. Nicholas the Wonder Worker. He was the patron saint of Nicholas II. From his collection in the Winter Palace.
Research into the story presented in the icon

According to Archpriest Dimitri Jakimowicz, Rector, St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church, Stratford, CT, the icon is done in the folk style of iconography and was perhaps painted for a family. Fr. Dimitri reached out to Fr. Paul Drozdowski who is an iconographer, and then sent me the following information:

Fr. Dimitri: Can you enlighten us about this icon?

Fr. Paul: How interesting …

Yes, this is a very rare scene that appears in the “life” icons of St. Nicholas only beginning in the 14th century. This episode is from the “alternate” Life of St. Nicholas: “the healing of the woman with the withered hand”.

It’s self-explanatory; on his way to his studies one day, he came across a woman with a withered hand. He laid his hands upon her and prayed, and then made the sign of the cross over her, and her hand became whole. Unknown how old he was when this happened, supposedly. There’s always a man with him, intended to be his father.

The fact that the tiny icon is only this scene, is because it was once part of a large icon with the whole life of St. Nicholas. Either the Bolsheviks, or simply an unscrupulous antiquities dealer, sawed it up into “separate icons”, in order to make more money with selling them.

Fr. Dimitri: I looked but I could not find that scene in any “Life of” Icon.

Fr. Paul: I read one source online which claimed this was a confusion with the life of his uncle, the other St. Nicholas. I’m willing to believe that, because you’re right; it’s not in any official Lives of the Saints that I’m aware of -- it’s possible that the Lives were mixed up to some extent. That makes more sense than someone making up another miracle and attributing it to St. Nicholas.

Fr. Dimitri: This life from the internet mentions his Uncle….

Saint Nicholas was born in AD 280 in Patara a city of Lycia in Asia Minor
He was the only son of his noble and wealthy parents, Theophanes and Nona. Nicholas’s parents had been childless their whole married life. Many times, they prayed with tears that God would grant them a son. They even distributed large amounts of their money and possessions to the poor in order to keep their hearts from growing hard.
When Nicholas was finally born, Theophanes and Nona immediately dedicated their only son to God. His uncle Nicholas, Bishop of Patara and founder of the New Zion Monastery in that town, instructed the young Nicholas in the spiritual life. When the boy grew to manhood, Bishop Nicholas ordained him to be a priest in the Church.
The Novgorod School

Located 260 miles east of Moscow at the convergence of the Volga and Olea rivers is one of Russia's oldest cities, Novgorod. Here, the Novgorod School of icon and mural painters was active from the 12th to 16th centuries. The artists used the Byzantine traditions that formed the basis of Russian art. However, over time, they evolved from the complicated Byzantine traditions and introduced lighter, more vivid colors, flatter forms, and a softening of facial types. They did not favor complicated, intricate subjects, but rather chose to portray the saints who were most important to daily life, to establish a closeness between the people and the saints.

City plan of Novgorod in the first half of the 18th century
Techniques of Icon Painting

“Icons are religious images painted on wooden panels, typically made of linden or pine wood. Their production is a long and complex process. A layer of linen cloth soaked in sturgeon glue is put on the panel. The ground is made of chalk mixed with fish glue. This is gesso. Up to ten layers of the gesso are applied over the cloth, or pavoloka. An outline of the composition is incised on the gesso with the point of a needle, often based on an icon-painting manual.

To prepare tempera paints, mineral pigments are mixed with water and egg yolk. The common minerals are cinnabar for reds, ochre (iron oxide) for yellows and lapis-lazuli for blues. Natural minerals give transparency to colors. Transparency is key in creating the effect of luminosity in icons. Light and dark tones of different thickness are brought one on top of the other, layer after layer. The white ground reflects light falling on its surface back through the semi-transparent tempera. The effect is that of inner light radiating from the image.

After painting is done an icon is varnished with boiled linseed oil, olifa. Russian artists added amber to their olifa. The linseed-amber varnish protects icons from scratches and gives them a deeper tone. But, after many years in a wood-heated church or in a candle-lit ‘red’ corner of a peasant hut, the varnish becomes very dark and obscures the image. In the early twentieth century, to clean the old varnish off the icon surface, restorers used fire to soften the olifa. They put a little alcohol on the surface of an icon and set it on fire. A restorer then was able to scrape off the olifa varnish and clean the icon.”

The Museum of Russian Art/Techniques of Icon Painting

HSM icon of Saint Nicholas the Wonder Worker
Nicholas II was the eldest son of Tsar (Emperor) Alexander III and Tsarina (Empress) Maria Feodorovna of Russia (née Princess Dagmar of Denmark). He was born on May 18, 1894. He succeeded his father in 1894. In the same year, Nicholas married Princess Alexandra of Hesse-Darmstadt, a granddaughter of Queen Victoria. They had five children, the Grand Duchesses Olga, Tatiana, Maria, and Anastasia, and one son, the Tsarevich Alexi who was a hemophiliac.

When Nicholas came to the throne, he had very little experience of government. Not overly intellectual, he preferred a quiet family life to court life. Due to Alexandra’s overbearance, Nicholas had a great distrust of his ministers and autocratic tendencies. He believed that he derived his authority from God, to whom alone he was responsible, and that it was his sacred duty to preserve his absolute power intact. Unlike most of the European monarchs, Nicholas crowned himself which helped to demonstrate his belief in his Divine Right to rule. He considered all who opposed him as conspirators. Needless to say, his reign as Tsar was not particularly smooth.

During World War I, Nicholas was forced by the Duma (a Russian legislative body) to abdicate on March 15, 1917. He and his family were detained at Tsarskoye Selo. They were eventually moved to Yekaterinburg in the Urals, where they were all assassinated by the Bolsheviks under Vladimir Lenin on July 17, 1918.

In 1981, Nicholas and his family were recognized as martyred saints by the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia. On 14 August 2000, they were recognized by the synod of the Russian Orthodox Church. This time they were not named as martyrs because their deaths did not result immediately from their Christian faith. They were, instead, canonized as passion bearers.
The Winter Palace was the official residence of the Russian Tsars from 1732 to 1917. Today, the palace and its precincts form the Hermitage Museum. The Winter Palace is situated between Palace Embankment and Palace Square, in Saint Petersburg.

In 1895, Nicholas and Alexandra established themselves at the Alexander Palace at Tsarskoe Selo. This was to be their favorite home for the remainder of their reign. However, from December 1895 they did reside for periods during the winter at the Winter Palace.

The final great Imperial gathering at the Winter Palace was a themed fancy dress ball celebrating the reign of Alexei I, which took place on 11 and 13 February 1903. Grand Duke Alexander Mikhailovich recalled the occasion as "the last spectacular ball in the history of the empire". The entire Imperial family, with the Tsar as Alexei I, the Tsarina as Maria Miloslavskaya, all dressed in rich 17th century attire, posed in the Hermitage's theatre, for what was to be their final photograph together.

In 1904, Russia was at war with Japan, and unbeknownst to the public, the newborn Tsarevich suffering from hemophilia; the Tsar and the Tsarina permanently abandoned Saint Petersburg, the Winter Palace, and high society for the greater comfort, security and privacy of Tsarskoe Selo.

Nicholas II of Russia and Alexandra Feodorovna in Russian dress, 1903
Unlike most monarchs, Tsar Nicholas II shared a bedroom with his wife, the Tsarina Alexandra Feodorovna.

There was a kiot* of five panels with icons, eggs and crosses in the bedroom of Nicholas II and Alexandra on the 2nd floor of the Winter Palace.

*An icon case or kiot is a decorated case (usually foldable) or glass shelf for keeping and displaying religious icons.

Imperial Bedroom The bedroom of Nicholas II and Alexandra Feodorovna photographed in 1900.
The Sale

COLLECTING ART IN MOSCOW

Armand Hammer published Quest for the Romanoff Treasure in 1932. Illustrated with photographs of imperial jewels (but devoted almost entirely to Dr. Hammer’s mining and manufacturing activities), the book supplies this account of treasure-hunting in the Soviet Union at a time when priceless religious and imperial art objects were being “disbursed among the people” or melted down for gold and silver:

The collecting of these art treasures and intimate household articles of the Romanoff family had been the principal hobby of my brother [Victor] and myself. . . . Some articles [had] found their way to little shops where their acquisition was relatively simple, while others were in the hands of individuals who would part with them only after considerable negotiating. . . .

One day my brother Victor and I were eating at a small hotel in Moscow. He looked at one of the plates and called my attention to it. The plate had been turned out at the Imperial Porcelain Factory. It bore on its back the words “Nicholas I, 1825.” It was more than a hundred years old and of exquisite workmanship. We asked the manager of the hotel where he had gotten the plate. He said it was from the palace, but he didn’t like the plates because they broke too easily. We bought his supply, giving him some thicker plates which would stand harder usage by the dishwashers in the hotel. . . .

Our fellow collectors were very few. The most important were the French Ambassador, Ebert, and the German Ambassador, Count Brockdorff von Rantzau, who, on account of their diplomatic privileges, had no difficulty in sending their possessions out of Russia.

Whenever something of value would turn up in Moscow, we would be sure to meet the French Ambassador or his wife, who would appear on the scene, magnifying glass in hand. The German Ambassador rarely appeared in person. He apparently depended more on his agents.

Our home in Moscow became a virtual museum, filled with relics of the bygone splendour of the Romanoff Dynasty.

© 1932 by Armand Hammer. Reprinted by permission.

Armand Hammer was born in New York City on May 21, 1898, the son of Jewish parents who had immigrated from the Russian Empire. His father, Julius, who ran a medical practice and five drug stores, was one of the founding members of the Communist Party USA.

Armand Hammer had many business ventures in post-revolutionary Russia, that continued well past the formation of the Soviet Union. Hammer, who died on December 10, 1990, was known for his close ties to the Soviet Union.

In the 1920s in a bid to gain cash, the new Soviet government began to sell of art and artifacts from the Imperial collections at the Hermitage, other royal palaces, libraries, and monasteries.

I was curious as to how Armand Hammer came to be a seller of these goods. I found that there has been a great deal of controversy relating to if Hammer actually acquired the goods, or, if, in reality, he was working as an agent of the Soviet government.

Hammer had owned several factories and businesses within Russia, and in 1930 the Soviet government shut down his concessions. Hammer’s story is that he had been collecting treasures from the “Romanov Dynasty”, storing them in his Moscow home, and, as recompense for shutting down his businesses, the Soviet government allowed him to take his collections back to the United States to sell. According to Armand’s brother Victor, many of the items belonged to the Soviets and were placed in their home to impress Western visitors. Armand was able to talk the government into allowing them to take the art out of Russia to sell in exchange for their concessions. He also agreed to sell objects on consignment for the Soviet government until 1935. The provenance of many of the items (as Imperial objects) that were sold by Armand Hammer have been called into question. “There can be no doubt, however,
that the personal icons of the imperial family formed a ' highly visible part of the stock offered to American customers.”

Russian Icons and American Money, 1928-1938 by Wendy Salmond

A Wedding Gift to Their Imperial Majesties: A Rare and Important Imperial Silver-Gilt and Enamel Triptich Icon of the Feodorovskaya Mother of God, Savelev Brothers, Kostroma, 1894

PROVENANCE
Given by the government of the city of Kostroma to Emperor Nicholas II and Empress Alexandra as a wedding gift in 1894
Presumably purchased by Armand Hammer from the Soviet authorities in the 1920s
With Hammer Galleries, New York
Purchased from the above by the parents of the present owners
Sotheby’s

The Icons

“And in early 1932, just as the official loan exhibition of icons was moving on to the Cleveland Museum of Art, entrepreneur Armand Hammer and his brother Victor launched the first of their celebrated department-store sales of Russian imperial art at Scruggs-Vandoort-Barney in St. Louis. The previous March, the Hammers had begun marketing "Fine Russian Icons and Relics from Royal Russia" out of their L’Ermitage Galleries at 3 East 52nd Street. The new enterprise involved a marketing strategy that Armand Hammer would later recall with cynical relish: "I promoted the hell out of the sale by giving it a healthy dose of snob appeal. I ordered the printing of fancy price tags embossed with the Imperial Romanoff two-headed eagle crest* and prepared an elaborate catalog that paid tribute to the 'skilled artisans devoted to the glory of the czar: ... Our success in St. Louis led to sales in eight other stores, culminating in a huge sale at Lord & Taylor in New York." Repeating his initial success at department stores across the country (three of the cities had also been hosts to the traveling exhibition)," Hammer targeted a particular kind of American collector for the art entrusted to him, including late icons: women (some wealthy, but not always so) who found special significance in owning something that had once belonged to the murdered Romanov family. Aesthetically distinct from earlier icons, whose monumental simplicity had elicited comparisons with the modernist aesthetic, they were part of an inventory that included Faberge objets de vertu, ecclesiastic vestments, and the table linens of the imperial family. Many of the icons that passed through the Hammer brothers' hands, and those of their main American competitor, Alexander Shaffer, in the 1930s,
were accompanied by parchment testimonials asserting that they were from the private apartments at Tsarskoe Selo, the Winter Palace, and Gatchina.* Icons now in the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Rochester Memorial Art Gallery, and many private collections were acquired in this way.

Following the department store sales, the Hammers established Hammer Galleries in New York, which was "fed by a continuing stream of art objects from Moscow ... a collection of Hammer family and Soviet-owned merchandise." The Hammers were under no illusions about the aesthetic value of their stock, marketing them not as works of Russian painting, but as "a collection of memorabilia, freighted with human interest and drawn together by a thread of lasting significance:' As the Hammers' sales brochure for 1935 put it, "To possess even one of these relics is to own a bit of the world's history, to have at hand tangible evidence of the rise and fall of a great Empire .... And too, there is romance in bringing into our homes these various beautiful objects that once delighted the eyes of monarchs, that furnished an imperial background for the young Grand Dukes and Duchesses of faraway mysterious Russia." As for the icons, they were to serve as decorative notes in the domestic interior, helping "to consecrate a quiet corner for a few minutes' rest in the season's busy rush:' In the slick sales patter of the Hammers' Depression-era marketing, these icons came to the end of a long journey of transformation. Stripped of their original liturgical function, they acquired a new identity, joining the assortment of imperial possessions that could be used in the American home, "either for decor, to embellish the cabinets of your own collections, or for actual use in the routine of everyday living." Their appraised value had little to do with their intrinsic properties as paintings, still less with their devotional function, and everything to do with the associations the viewer brought with him or her. The intense gleam of small silver and enamel oklads**, often arranged in symmetrical clusters on the wall, created an aesthetic that is still closely associated with Russian icons in the United States. The "startling modernism" of the great church icons seemed very far away.”

How America Discovered Russian Icons: The Soviet Loan Exhibition of 1930-32 by Wendy Salmond

*Note the Imperial Romanoff two-headed eagle crest, and mention of origin on the box tag of the HSM icon (my highlights)

**A riza or oklad, sometimes called a "revetment" in English, is a metal cover protecting an icon. It is usually made of gilt or silvered metal with repoussé work and is pierced to expose elements of the underlying painting.

Submitted by
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Saint Nicholas Center

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www.hillstead.org
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Winter Palace Research

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Sotheby's RUSSIAN WORKS OF ART, FABERGÉ & ICONS 05 JUNE 2018