

# Windows Into Heaven:

Religious Icons from the Permanent Collection

April 23 - August 9, 2014



*Icon of the Virgin Hodegetria, 18th - 19th century*



University  
of Victoria

Legacy Art Galleries and Department of History in Art

# Windows Into Heaven

In the Christian world an icon is a representation of sacred figures that may be painted on the walls of churches or on wooden panels found in both churches and homes. The subjects of icons draw upon biblical stories, especially the life of Jesus Christ and possibly more frequently the Virgin Mary. In Orthodox and Eastern Christianity (today represented by populations in the Balkans, Greece, Russia, Ukraine, Armenia, Georgia, Ethiopia, and the Middle East) the Virgin Mary is called the 'Mother of God.' Slightly varied postures of the Virgin and Christ Child have been repeated over the centuries, each with special names. One of the most common types is the Hodegetria or 'she who leads the way,' included in this exhibition.

The objects featured in this exhibition originate in pre-revolutionary Russia and include icons of varied forms as well as crosses—important liturgical instruments and quintessential Christian symbols. Imperial Russia cultivated artistic and religious traditions that can be traced back to the Byzantine Empire, which ended in 1453. The items of the exhibition are relatively recent iterations of a deeply-rooted religious aesthetic. Through the 18th and 19th centuries many icons and crucifixes were produced en masse, and still resonate with Orthodox and Eastern Christian populations. Hodegetria icons, as most other types of images shown here, are still produced and venerated throughout the Orthodox world. The various Christian Orthodox communities of Victoria, including Russian, Greek, and Ukrainian groups, are also familiar with the special significance attached to these items, as the interiors of churches such as St. Sophia (Fairfield), the Ypapanti (Saanich), St. George (Esquimalt), and All Saints of Alaska (Saanich) suggest. The present collection was formed through the efforts of local collectors Dr. Bruce L. and Mrs. Dorothy E. Brown.

## Co-curators:

Dr. Evanthia Baboula (Assistant Professor, Department of History in Art) and Regan Shrumm (graduate student, Department History in Art)



## The Holy Spirit of Icons

The icon is an integral part of the Christian Orthodox liturgy. The static and often repetitive imagery of icons aid the communication between the viewer and the divine during prayer. They also create a connection with earlier times, in the case of the Hodegetria (U003.7.2) going back to the time of Christ. According to legend, the first ever Hodegetria was painted by Saint Luke in the presence of the Virgin who blessed the resulting icon. Later icons of this image were and are believed to carry over some of its essential identity. The task of icon painters is to transform the viewer through contact with a higher, spiritual world. Icons thus provide a metaphorical "window into heaven". For these painters, our changing perceptions of beauty are not relevant to the image's ability to aid religious experience. Some of the Hodegetria icons have been famous for being able to perform miracles, from healing disease to saving cities from attacking armies.



*U003.7.2: Virgin Hodegetria,  
18th - 19th Century*

Several other icons were seen as miraculous in pre-revolutionary Russia, and still are seen as such. The folding, four-part brass icon (U003.7.5) presents scenes of the life of Christ that relate to the major religious feasts through the year, such as the Annunciation to the Virgin Mary, the Nativity of Christ, Christ's Entry into Jerusalem, the Crucifixion, and the Dormition (literally sleep, but referring to the death) of the Virgin. The far right leaf of the icon depicts some of the miraculous icons of the Virgin, among them the famous Hodegetria and Vladimir icons.



*U003.7.5: Four Fold Icon,  
19th Century*

## How Icons Were Made

The process of painting an icon involves the painstaking preparation of a wooden panel. Glue and cloth are applied on seasoned wood, with layers of a plaster or chalk mixture (gesso) added on top. A first drawing is made and gold leaf is laid before several layers of pigment are applied.

While some icons in this exhibit are made of copper alloy, probably brass (copper with zinc and small quantities of other metals), one incorporates three brass icons in a larger wooden panel (U003.7.6). In 1723 the casting and selling of holy images from copper alloy was banned as part of larger efforts for ecclesiastical reform in Russia. Nevertheless, a group of people who came to be known as the Old Believers refused to conform and continued to produce cast icons and crucifixes, making these into a specialty product. At least one of the metal crosses (U003.7.12) in the exhibit was probably made in an Old Believers community. Their crosses lack inscriptions such as 'Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews' that place Christ in a hierarchy.



U003.7.6: Composite Icon,  
18th Century



Although icon workshops can be found both inside and outside the church environment, tradition and religious propriety demanded that in the past icons should be made by the extremely faithful, such as monks and nuns. The objects would have to be blessed before being sold. Even an artist's tools, such as brushes, were customarily blessed before the start of work on an icon.

U003.7.12: Crucifix,  
18th Century

## How Icons Were Used

In the space of the church, icons were and are often concentrated at the iconostasis, a special screen that separates the nave from the altar. Symbolically the iconostasis divides the spiritual world of the heavens (altar) from the physical world (nave). The icons offer a tangible link between these two worlds. In church services the priest swings the censer, a vessel for burning incense, first in the direction of the iconostasis, and then at the congregation, thus uniting the heavenly saints represented in the icons with the faithful. The layout of the processional cross with the seraphim and rows of religious scenes (U003.7.10) is reminiscent of similar arrangements on an iconostasis. The extended vertical bar of this cross would be attached to a pole and held by a member of the church during services.



U003.7.10: Processional Cross,  
19th Century

All of the icons and crucifixes in the exhibit could be used in the church or at home; however, many items were aimed at personal devotion. At home a small iconostasis (an icon stand that could be as simple as a table, shelf, or a cupboard) would hold icons, crosses, and incense. Additional icons could also hang on the wall with little space between images. The family would pray daily in this domain, often touching and kissing the icons at the beginning or end of a prayer. The folding icons (U003.7.5 and U003.7.4), including those incorporated in the composite icon (U003.7.6), show how portability was in the minds of the manufacturers. Such items could easily be folded and carried during travels.



U003.7.4: Folding Triptych Icon,  
19th Century

## How Did These Icons Arrive In Victoria?



*Dr. Bruce L. Brown*



*Mrs. Dorothy E. Brown*

Dr. Bruce L. and Mrs. Dorothy E. Brown donated their collection of icons to the University of Victoria in 1993 after decades of collecting, mainly from Victoria antique dealers.

Several objects may originally have found their way to Canada with people fleeing the Soviet Revolution in 1917. The Pacific Northwest Coast was home to significant communities of Old Believers who emigrated to this area to escape persecution and excommunication in their homeland. They may have brought with them to Vancouver Island some of the cast objects made by Old Believers in their homeland. Furthermore, the icon of Christ Pantokrator ("All powerful", "Lord of all Creation", U003.7.1-1) is believed to have been owned originally by Princess Olga Alexandrovna, sister of Tsar Nicholas II and the last Grand Duchess of Imperial Russia. She moved to Ontario with her family in 1948 to escape pressure from Stalin's regime and was an accomplished painter herself.



*U003.7.1-1: Christ Pantokrator,  
18th Century*

Icons and crosses very similar to those of the University of Victoria Legacy Art Galleries are featured in major galleries and museums, including the Metropolitan Museum, New York; the British Museum, London; and the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. Through the generosity of the donors, these icons and crosses are today used for teaching university students, providing an engagement with the historical dimension of artifacts and the experience of objects invested with a rich symbolic and physical identity.

# Enamel Pendants

Enamelling is the application of molten glass to a metal surface. The two pendants (U003.7.8 and U003.7.9) could be mementos of a pilgrimage to an important religious site.

On the back of U003.7.8 is an inscription: "An image of Antonii and Feodosii, Pechersk miracle workers." These two saints were founders of the Kiev Monastery of the Caves, which has a thousand year-old history. Pictured on it is a realistic image of a building belonging to the Kiev Monastery of the Caves. This can be identified with the Church of the Saviour at Berestove. The monastery includes a series of underground passages that intersect various living quarters and chapels. It has been visited by religious pilgrims for centuries and its monks were known for their production of icons and books. A small enamel pendant like this could remind pilgrims of the spiritual journey they undertook and act as a prompt to others to visit the monastery, thus also contributing to its material prosperity and fame.



*U003.7.8: Pendant Icon with Virgin and Child, 19th Century*



*U003.7.9: Pendant Icon with Virgin and Saints, 19th Century*

The second pendant (U003.7.9) includes the following inscription: "A vision to Saint Sergius, miracle worker." Saint Sergius of Radonez was a monastic reformer who lived in the 14th century. He is believed to have founded several dozens of monasteries, including the famous Trinity – Saint Sergius Lavra, which is located 70 kilometres to the northeast of Moscow.

## List of Works

U003.7.1-1

Icon of Christ Pantokrator  
19th Century, 18 x 14.5 x 3 cm  
Egg tempera and gold leaf on wood

U003.7.1-2

Icon of Saint Nicholas  
19th Century, 18 x 14.5 x 3 cm  
Egg tempera on wood

U003.7.2

Virgin Hodegetria  
18th - 19th Century, 27.5 x 22 cm  
Egg tempera and copper alloy on wood

U003.7.3

Icon with Three Male Saints and Christ  
19th Century, 22 x 18 x 3 cm  
Egg tempera on wood

U003.7.4

Folding Triptych Icon  
19th Century, 14 x 13.5 x 1.5 cm  
Enamel and copper alloy

U003.7.5

Four-fold Icon with Festival Scenes and Icons  
of the Mother of God  
19th Century, 18 x 11 x 2 cm  
Enamel and copper alloy

U003.7.6

Russian Composite Icon  
19th Century, 31 x 26.5 x 3.5 cm  
Egg tempera, gold leaf and copper alloy on wood

U003.7.7

Icon of Virgin and Child  
19th Century, 8.5 x 7.5 cm  
Enamel and copper alloy

U003.7.8

Oval Pendant with the Virgin Enthroned  
and Saints Antonii and Feodosii, from Cave  
Monastery  
Kiev, Ukraine  
19th Century, 4 x 3 cm  
Enamel and copper alloy

U003.7.9

Rectangular Pendant of the Virgin  
19th Century, 4 x 3 cm  
Enamel and copper alloy

U003.7.10

Processional Cross with Crucifixion of Christ,  
Saints, Festival Scenes and Seraphim  
19th Century, 40 x 25 cm  
Enamel and copper alloy

U003.7.11

Crucifix with Seraphim  
19th Century, 16.5 x 10 cm  
Enamel and copper alloy

U003.7.12

Crucifix  
19th Century, 27 x 14.5 cm  
Enamel and copper alloy

U003.7.13

Crucifix  
19th Century, 35 x 18 cm  
Enamel and copper alloy

U003.2.103

Crucifix  
19th Century, 30.6 x 18.2 cm  
Silver

All works in this exhibition are from the University of Victoria,  
Legacy Art Galleries permanent collection  
and were a gift of Dr. Bruce L. and Mrs. Dorothy E. Brown.



University  
of Victoria

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