Forgery of Icons

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Preface

This article explains how to recognize if an Icon is genuine or a forgery. In doing so, the terms Icon and Icon-copy will be defined by taking the religious significance as well as the historical development into consideration. The described phenomena are exemplary and discussed only briefly. A fundamental definition of – genuine or forgery – will here not be given.

Icon

The Icon is the image of the archetype (Greek, arkhe = first, original; typos = model, type) in which the spiritual power of the archetype is transferred on to the image. The iconodulist¹ Theodor Studites says, that a person in its own shadow is just as present as what is present and effective in the Icon². The painter of Icons understands himself as being God’s tool and his mission is to let the divine light, falling onto the earth, become visible by means of colour³.

The painter of Icons is responsible for the artistic realization, that is his personal craft, but it never is his individual piece or art⁴. The painter of Icons does not interpret a religious theme based on his own subjective experiences, but he reproduces the divine archetype by following strictly the rules laid down in specially designed handbooks for icon paintings⁵. For the latin West this is a kind of art-form which illustrates the divine world, whereas for the orthodox East this divine world is actually present in the genuine Icon⁶.

The religious motivated painting of Icons shows clearly, that, for the Orthodox Church a true Icon is only defined through the religious intent and the following of a strict set of painting-rules by the pious painter of Icons which then is consecrated in the final act (which now permits the Icon to be used as a sanctified cult-object⁷). Yet it is of no
relevance at what point of time an Icon has been painted, as not only old Icons are genuine Icons in the religious sense.

**Icon-copy**

The repeatedly painting of an image is compared to the copying of the holy bible. The divine power of the original is transferred onto each one of the copies, which can be seen as a multiplication into many languages. It can be assumed that painters of Icons painted a certain theme in multiple variations. Copies were made from highly regarded Icons, which again were copied or replicated. Whereby slight modifications can not be excluded.

Since the 17th century copies are made known by adding corresponding inscriptions. This proves that copies have a long and accepted history and that they were not automatically produced with devious intention. It is presumed that only one percent of the old stock of Icons has been preserved into the present. Therefore, copies give an impression of what is lost forever.

**Falsification**

Up to the 2nd third of the 19th century religiously influenced treatments were applied to Icons which go fully conform with the orthodox belief, and such to be seen as entirely correct within the Icon entity. These measures change the already existing art-object „Icon“ in its original artistic-aesthetic impression, defined here as falsification.

Embellishments: Later additions of, for example precious stones or metallic cover are meant to enhance the religious value of particularly worshiped Icons. Supposedly every generation has contributed to the embellishments. Regarded from today’s point of view the primary original substance is expanded to an authentic substance by such measures.

Over-painting: Into the second third of the 19th century all treatments (conservation, restoration) on the Icon are aimed at the function of the Icon. Cult-images with multiple losses within the paint layer and/or voids within the painting structure or a strongly darkened Olifa (a kind of oil varnish in Russia) have been over painted with economic and religious aspects taken into consideration. This kind of treatment is closely tied up with the symbolic content of the Icon. An intact iconographic condition guaranties the symbolic completeness and thus also the liturgical function of conveyance (which would be refuted by multiple sections of voids). The over painting with the identical underneath lying present picture is already considered a sacred act. While over painting the present picture with its same image, the original outlines of the figures or the exact architectural elements are never copied exactly, also there are some minor improvements to be found in respect of the painting skill or a „modernisation“ of older stylistic elements can be demonstrated. B.A. Uspenskij compares this with the translating of mediaeval texts into contemporary colloquial language.

Vrezka: (Russian, vrezok = to cut in.) After the reformation of the church in the 17th century the group of „Old-Believers“ still prefers the pre-reformed way of painting. They place an older fragment of an Icon of pre-reformed days into a newly painted Icon (onto a spot especially kept free for that purpose), where the joining sections are then over-painted to complete the table. This method is religiously explained. Proceeding in this manner shows the ease with varying images. Iconographically and religiously seen...
these Icons are considered unproblematic, nevertheless the former relationship of the
fragments with each other is now changed. Furthermore, a condition is feigned which,
strictly taken, from the art-historical and historical point of view, no longer exists.

Icon forgery – 19th century

To begin with, the quality of painting has worsened on the grounds of social and political
innovations before forgeries were produced. The demand for low-priced Icons and
therefore simply painted Icons rose rapidly. Generally the most important was to own an
Icon, no matter if masterly painted or not. At what exact point in time the change from
mass-production to the deliberate, deceitful producing of forgeries took place is not
known. Generally, the first forgeries are dated in accordance with the time of the rising of
the Russian art-market, dated towards the end of the 19th century.

Work-sharing: For the purpose of a more rapid production model, inferior work-material
and/or a reduced working-technique are practiced or used. This manner of working
stands on principle in opposition to the demands of the orthodox doctrine for masterly
painting-ability and religious piety. Thus the Icon loses its cult-value by being produced
in mass production.

Icons with Oklad, but without any painting underneath: Underneath the metal cover is
not as expected an intact painting found, solely the parts which had been spared from the
metal covering were painted. By removing the Oklad „flying hands and heads“ become
visible, which have not any iconographic connection. Strictly seen, this is religious fraud
in favour of economical advantage. Now one could say that the motives of the Oklad
complete the missing painting iconographically, yet, the risk for the metal cover to get
lost is high. The purchaser is deceived about the real condition of the object as he will
expect a complete painting underneath the metal cover.

Vstavka: (similar to vrezok = to cut in.) Not only to meet the exploding demand for old
Icons, but also for purely lucrative reasons painters of Icons have taken up forgery. Here
the example of the painter of Icons matches who now works with fraudulent intent as a
restorer. The painter’s job is to restore a particular valuable Icon for a collector. To
make a worth-while profit he separates the top layer of 3mm of the picture and adheres it
onto a new wooden tablet. After the restoration the such adhered original is then sold for
a high price. Now the old, sawn off wooden tablet is newly primed and administered with
a copy of the original picture. This copy is then given back as the restored original object
to the employer. A forgery of this kind is considered especially gross, not only because
of having been planned and prepared scrupulously, but also as an immaculate and God-
pleasing way of life is expected of the painter of Icons. Especially as he, like a priest does
with words, speaks the holy word through his colours. This way of proceeding is rather
a forgery in the sense of the law than in the religious sense.

White-washing: To reach an older or seemingly more aesthetic image, layers of colour
with numerous loss sections are removed right down to the white priming layer (washed
off), to make the Icon more attractive for the buyer. This method sprang up around the
circles of the art markets and is known as white-washing. In this way the symbolic
power of the Icon is reduced, because colour is the incarnation of the divine light. Besides, the removal of an area of colour creates an absolutely new impression of the
painting, and the original artistic, iconographic and religious intent is falsified. Thus the collector of art is deceived about the true condition, respectively its origin.

16 Novodely: (Russian, novodel = new produced, new painted.) There are old copies of Icons which have deliberately been painted, with the intention to have them pass as an original. Aiming to reach the impression of an old surface many different ways to achieve this goal of artificial aging are employed. These types are called Novodely.

17 University-trained painters painting Icons: Purely for practice purposes university-trained Russian painters, without any knowledge of the semiotic language, copied solely the surface of the Icon without any deeper religious feelings. Their mistakes also lie in the attempt to correct the so called reversed perspective which is rated to be wrong. Thus, it is a forgery in the religious sense.

Icon forgery – 20th century

18 One example for the 20th century: Art printings were pasted onto pieces of wood, covered with a thick layer of varnish and administered with traces of age. This is a religious fraud with criminal intent! Such objects are without any intellectual content, they are simply like an empty cover.

Conclusion

19 Summing up, it can be said that fundamentally two kinds of Icon forgeries can be differentiated whose boundaries are often diffusely blurred.

20 The criminal fraud: Cesare Brandi defines an object as forgery when it has been produced like a copy, but with the criminal intention to cheat the buyer by misinforming him about the style of painting, the artist, or the materials used. This definition is also valid in regard to Icons.

21 The religious fraud: The cult-object Icon, which exists as such because of its spiritual content, is meant to be recognised only by its outer matter. For example: A: Icons with an Oklad, which (seemingly) show only together with the Oklad spiritual content. B: Icons, which have been painted by non-orthodox painters merely employing the Icon-painting-technique and so, they merely are an empty cover.

22 Finally all forgeries are a mirror for their own political, historical and social generation and because of this they can be dated by visible phenomena, assumed the cultural context is known.
BIBLIOGRAPHIE


NOTES

1. Iconodulist or iconolater or iconophile (Greek): Term was created during the iconoclasm (Greek for “image-breaking”) during the 8/9th century. It describes a person that venerates religious images (icons) as cult-objects. The expression iconoclast describes a person that supports the iconoclasm and refuses religious images. Fischer, 1995, p. 74.
11. Oklad (Russian): It is a kind of metal cover to put on the surface of an icon-painting. The Oklad covers the whole painting except incarnate colours. Riza (Russian): Like the Oklad a kind of metal cover, but it covers only the background, no figures and no incarnate colours. Schmidt-Voigt, 1980, p. 35.
13. primary original, authentic: The authenticity of an art object is the primary original condition right after its production and every single change made by time is included. Schädler-Saub, 2004, N° 5, p. 308.
23. Old-Believer: During the 17th century a group, called the Old-Believers, separated from the Orthodox Church because of political and religious issues. Schmidt-Voigt, 1980, p. 35.
35. Wanner, 1998, p. 84.
41. reversed perspective: It seems that the logical relationship between single picture elements does not exist, they do appear askew and bend to each other (this could be an explanation why the West perceives this kind of perspective as askew and wrong). The vanishing point is not placed in the depth of the picture; it is situated beyond the picture in the viewer body by what this person is pulled into the scenery of the icon. Reason: The icon scenery does not take place in this life, it exists in the afterlife. Fischer, 1995, p. 159.
42. Skalova, 1991, p. 175.
44. Döpfner, 1989, p. 68.

RÉSUMÉS

L’auteur de cet article se fonde sur son mémoire diplômant « La falsification des icônes – Réflexions sur les aspects historiques et éthiques ainsi que sur les matériaux utilisés » où elle définit les critères d’authenticité des icônes. Les termes « icône » et « copie d’icônes » sont définis tout en tenant compte de leur signification religieuse et de leur évolution historique. Le cadre de l’article ne permet l’examen que de quelques cas. Pour une analyse détaillée, se reporter à la thèse elle-même.

This article is based on the thesis „Icon Forgery. A historical, ethical and technological reflection” by the author, which explains, when is an Icon genuine or a forgery. In doing so, the terms Icon and Icon-copy will be defined by taking the aspects of the religious significance as
well as the historical development into consideration. Within the given frame only a few phenomena will be described. Detailed explanations can be found in the complete thesis.

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Mots-clés : contrefaçon, falsification, icône, copie
Keywords : falsification, forgery, Icon, Icon-copy

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Julia Spies studied conservation and restoration of paintings and polychrome painted wooden objects at the HAWK-Hildesheim, completed with the thesis in 2008. From 1992 obligatory practical study-preparatory work in Germany, followed by some years of practical work experience with the restoration of Icons in Greece.