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Book Review

### *Nebesnaia golubizna angel'skikh odezhd. Sud'ba proizvedenii drevnerusskoi zhivopisi. 1920–1930-e gody.*

Elena Osokina

(Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2018), 664 pp., illus.

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*Nebesnaia golubizna angel'skikh odezhd.  
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From 1918 to 1938, the Soviet Union exported artworks, antiques, tapestries, furniture, libraries, icons, liturgical objects, and jewelry by the ton. Outside the USSR, this disputed export caused much publicity: It received wide media coverage, was repeatedly litigated in courts, and the legitimacy of whether to participate in the sales was debated by Western governmental institutions. In a satirical comedy on Bolshevik Russia, even Hollywood dealt with the theme (*Ninotchka*). With the outbreak of World War II, however, the sales completely faded from public memory.

In the 1980s, interest was revived by American research, selectively at first. With the demise of Communism, the subject reached Eastern Europe. In post-Soviet Russia, the first revelations unleashed strong patrimonial emotions; in particular, the early publications during *glasnost* aroused widespread public outrage and disbelief over the scope and quality of the unprecedented loss.

Since then, scholars have unearthed a flood of sources and data previously not accessible, resulting in a steady stream of conference proceedings, of archival editions, of films, of memoir and article publications which has enriched our understanding greatly. The bulk of the tedious, continuous task lay with the institutions that suffered the greatest losses—primarily with the Hermitage, the palace museums, the nationalized collections of the high nobility in and around St. Petersburg, and the Kremlin Museums in Moscow.

As for the globally dispersed public and private collections that had acquired the exported art, American museums and libraries took the lead and—unlike their European counterparts—published their records and findings, often in cooperation with their Russian colleagues. Among them are the New York Public Library, Hillwood Estate, Museum, and Gardens, and the National Gallery of Art, the latter two both in Washington, D.C.

The most recent publication on the topic, *Nebesnaia golubizna angel'skikh odezhd* (The Heavenly Blue of Angels' Robes) is devoted to the fate of nationalized icons under Stalin. The Russian historian Elena A. Osokina, a specialist on socio-economic and institutional-administrative history of the interwar period, has done extensive archival research on the export and industrialization policy under Stalin in Russia and abroad. Her previous study on the Soviet Torgsin stores that allowed trade with foreigners—*Gold for Industrialization: Torgsin* (2009)—serves as a solid basis which allows her to cover the sales within a broad chronological framework.

The results of her painstaking research have been released in Russian with the Moscow-based publisher NLO. Advertized as an “intellectual thriller,” both in style and structure the work addresses a larger educated Russian audience; the rich, detailed scholarly apparatus, bibliography, and—not least—the comprehensive appendix of source material (pp. 513–643), however, attend to the needs of specialists and museum professionals.

In line with the publisher's “thriller” advertisement, the book starts out with the legendary scandal of the George R. Hann collection, auctioned off at Christie's in five separate sections in 1980. The Pittsburgh philanthropist Hann had purchased icons, ecclesiastical works of art, embroidery, and silver of Soviet provenance in the interwar years. An émigré Russian restorer, Vladimir Teteriatnikov, an engineer and chemist by training, criticized the sale; his book *Icons and Fakes* (1981) branded as forgeries almost all the icons offered. Despite a lawsuit filed by Christie's, despite rebuttals, and the consternation of experts, the publication long challenged the authenticity of the renowned collection and generally impacted icon auctions, even museums in the years to come.

Decades after this uproar, Osokina chronicles the fate of the icons from the Hann collection, tracing their origins back to their respective private and institutional owners in late imperial Russia and the early USSR, thus refuting Teteriatnikov's untenable claims. In the process, the study covers a wide range of aspects pertaining to Stalin's sale of icons abroad. From the artistic appreciation of icons, which for centuries were revered for their religious character, and their transformation into collector's items in late imperial Russia, the focus then shifts to the massive nationalization in the wake of the revolution, carried out in the name of Socialist ideals and the creation of a new, proletarian culture; art collections once belonging to the court, the nobility, the bourgeoisie, and the church were confiscated and added to the state museum funds. The “loot” was categorized, researched, and then redistributed—to the art institutions established in the Tsarist era, to the short-lived ‘proletarian’ museums, and to the newly founded Soviet art museums. The first post-revolutionary decade, despite much destruction and loss and thanks to the efforts by the intelligentsia,

witnessed a rise in professional restoration, research, collecting, and public display of icons. With the late 1920s, the Kremlin—allegedly in need of financing the country’s industrialization program—began to sell cultural patrimony abroad, both at public auctions and through middlemen, in some cases in great secrecy. Icons, deprived of their protected artistic status, were downgraded to commodities and transferred from the museum to the export fund; hundreds of icons chosen for sale were popularized through travelling icon exhibitions held in Europe and the USA. The study ends with an overview of Russian icons entering international museums.

In a final assessment, the sheer scope of the volume is the focus of any review. This major opus presents a variety of interdisciplinary summaries of much of the available literature and sources in Russian and, to a much lesser degree, in English. It constitutes a reference work, facilitating further research—albeit impaired by lengthy, rambling, reiterating text passages. The author presents a detailed documentation of the respective provenances pertaining to the Hann collection as well as other foreign icon funds formed as a result of the Soviet icon sales, based on rare archival material specifically compiled and published as an appendix for the first time. This source material (e. g. from the State Museum Fund, the Moscow History Museum, and the State Tretyakov Gallery) allows for authentication both of former private, nationalized, state museum funds and of later purchases by a foreign clientele.

Among the desiderata, the author’s disregard of European research figures prominently; theoretical approaches as elaborated in the field of enlarged museum studies, notably regarding the assessment of forced translocations of cultural patrimony in the global context, are ignored. Contextualizing the extensive data and archival section within an appropriate methodological comparative framework would have strengthened the study, contributing to greater balance. Given its overall relevance, the publication would also have benefitted from academic content editing and proofreading (e.g. numerous foreign sources and names are misspelled).

Beyond its scholarly impact, the merit of this timely publication lies in its political value. After years of academic research and intense public debate, on the centenary of the revolution Russia is in need of changing cultural narratives: Reconciliation assumes high priority, as Russia’s leaders restore continuity with a past that their Bolshevik predecessors attempted to eradicate. In an attempt to bridge the gap between tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union, a selective approach to its blurred past is pursued. Russia today seems in a state of forgetfulness of its own revolutionary origins, in a process of negation. Against this background, the need to arrive at a final, transparent assessment of the interwar art sales is no longer felt. Institutional silence is preferred at home. The art sales, deeply regretted since perestroika, thus remain an emotionally charged, multi-layered issue for post-Soviet Russia.

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