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The exhibition “Holy Images. The Greek Icons from the Velimezis Collection”
through a visitor’s eyes.

The exhibition became a continuation of the dialog with visitors that started at the turn of the 3rd millennium during the temporary exhibition “Sinai. Byzantine. Rus: Orthodox Art from the Sixth to the Twentieth Century.” And in 2000, the Hermitage offered three exhibitions on Christian art and Islamic art at the same time.¹ It is interesting to note certain parallels: in fall of 2009, the visitors were able to see the exhibition of the rarest jewelry collection “World Treasures. Jewelry Art of India during the era of the Great Moguls,” and going one floor up they could step into the unique atmosphere of the exhibition “Holy Images. The Greek Icons from the Velimezis Collection.”

From a socio-demographic point of view, the public who came to the exhibition “The Greek Icons from the Velimezis Collection” was similar to one that comes today to see numerous temporary Hermitage exhibitions, e.g. the percentage of citizens of Saint Petersburg was higher (83% of surveyed) compared to the citizens from other cities (17%); among the large number of young visitors the citizens of Saint Petersburg reached 59%, while 36% were tourists.

Meanwhile, the exhibition had specific features as well. Firstly, a common motive for seeing the exhibition by Peterburgians was the vivid interest in the exhibition of the Greek Icons; mentioned by over half of the visitors in the young and elderly groups, and by $\frac{2}{3}$ visitors in the middle-aged group. This was followed by, “A special interest to exhibitions connected to Orthodox culture and art”, and many surveyed had added “and Byzantium.”

Thus, the prevailing number of visitors from Saint Petersburg came to the exhibition purposely, according their interest and needs, when they learned about it from mass media (television and radio programs) or through personal contacts (information received in academic or church circles, from family members, colleagues, or friends).

¹ Exhibitions: “Earthy Art – Heavenly Beauty. Art of Islam”, “Sinai. Byzantine. Rus: Orthodox Art from the Sixth to the Twentieth Century”, “The Treasures of the Armenian Church from the collection of Holy Etchmiadzin”.

Doing this research, we had the goal of revealing the impressions left by the exhibition as a whole and by the individual works; to learn the visitors' opinion about having the icons in a private collection in general, and in the Velimezis collection particularly. We were also interested in the opinion of the surveyed about the keeping the icons in the museum, e.g. in the exposition of the Hermitage.

The visitors provided their answers, extremely rich in the impressions, feelings, and emotions, to these and a number of other meaningful for us questions. These answers depended on personality of a respondent and the depth of the perception, which mirrored, among others, previous experience in communication with art as well.

We should note that an important component in the process of perception of such objects as icons, that is a way the icons are presented to the public, their arrangement in the museum exposition.

At the exhibition "The Greek Icons," a special atmosphere was created by the thorough planning of distribution and arrangement of the exhibited items, with a special way of their presentation to the public by the dimmed lighting that underscored a private, a kind of chamber intimacy in communication with icons; there was an opportunity to concentrate and indulge themselves into the spiritual word of Cretan icons receiving esthetic pleasure from their contemplation, and to be involved in a dialog with them.

According the visitors' opinion, a valuable part was a designing at the exhibition an information area with catalogues, visual materials (video), and a visitors' book where the viewers could leave their comments.

In this way, the triad "the museum curator – exposition – visitor" was formed, where each component had its significance, and their connections became an important form of the visitor's involvement into the world of the Greek icons of the 15th-19th centuries.

What sort of impression left the exhibition "Holy Images. The Greek Icons from the Velimezis Collection" on its spectators?

The exhibition definitely received a positive assessment from the large number of the public (over 80% of the surveyed), as from the citizens of Saint Petersburg, as well as from tourists; 14% of the respondents did not provide their answer for various reasons.

Below, we offer an analysis of the comments left by the visitors of different age groups.

The young Petersburgians, who represented the largest part of the visitors, and who expressed the interest to come and see the exhibition,² gave the whole specter of the comments. Most of the young respondents evaluated the exhibition positively; they noted the “good design and visual presentation of the objects”; they stressed that “the exhibition makes them to think about an importance of keeping in the museum and private collections of such works as icons;” that they “were thankful to the Velimezis family for an opportunity to see and compare the icons spiritually close to the Russian soul”; that “the exhibition is not simply well designed but it also creates a specific spiritual atmosphere, whose spells you do not want to break”; that “the exhibition gave the feeling of joy and harmony,” *etc.*

These are just few responses left by the young Petersburgians. However, 6% of the respondents from this age group, still expressing the positive attitude to the organization of such an exhibition, pointed to the “ambivalence”, “discrepancy,” and some other features, explaining it with their personal motivations.

The overwhelming majority of Petersburgians from the 30-49 year old age group³ expressed positive emotions, as for example: “the exhibition is very interesting and rich in content”; “the exhibition is one of the most interesting exhibitions in the Hermitage”; “it provoked a lot of thoughts and evaluations”; “viewing the exhibition, we received an enormous pleasure,” *etc.*

Few respondents from this group admitted that after seeing the exhibition they had a “mixed reaction”, “difficulties in its valuation”, “some doubts,” *etc.*

² Young visitors (up to 30 y.o.) represented 50% of all Petersburgians. The education level: Master degree – 43%, University students – 35%

University students (listed in the descending order): Saint Petersburg University, Polytechnic University, Herzen State Pedagogical University, Higher School of Folk Arts, University of Culture, Repin Institute of Fine Arts, etc.

In addition: teachers, cultural workers, artists, technical professionals, clerics, PhD students. Males- 22%, females – 78%.

³ Visitors in 30-49 age group comprised 14% among Petersburgians: Master Degree – 64%, Bachelor degree – 36%. Professional composition: engineers, teachers, restorers, medical workers, icon artists, social workers, house wives. Males – 30%, females – 70%.



Ill. 1. Opening of the exhibition “Holy Images. The Greek Icons from the Velimezis Collection”

The oldest Peterburgians (50-65 years and over), who were represented by the significant number,⁴ gave a high mark to the exhibition and its organization, but moreover, they noted that the exhibition interestingly showed the fine line dividing the icon painting from school of Western European art. The responses of people from this group are expressed mostly in the superlative degree: “the impression is super-positive”, “very strong”, “the wonderful exhibition”, “the Velimezis collection is splendid + design of its organizers”, “well-thought and showed different styles of icons”, “plenty of information for thinking”, “would like to see a series of similar exhibitions.”

The survey included a number of “hot,” presently debatable topics, such as the presence of icons in private collections and their keeping in the museums. A request to

⁴ Respondents of the oldest age group constitute 36% of all Petersburgians: Master Degree – 87%, Bachelor Degree – 13%, Advanced degree – 10%. Occupations of employed respondents: university professors, scholars, journalists, editors of periodical publications, cultural workers, sociologists, programmers, and financial workers. Males – 41%, females – 59%.

provide an opinion on this problem was preceded with the following question/answers, “Did make the exhibition an emotional impression on you?”

- Yes.
- No.
- Not really.

This question, through emotional and artistic sensitivity, revealed the visitors’ perceptions of the exhibited works – the Greek icons; the question was included in the survey for a reason that the works were originals, and that is a necessary condition for the high quality, full-grown perception, because only in this case is it possible to talk about the successful dialogue between an artist painted an icon and a person looking at this icon.

The analysis of the responses was made according to each age group that gave us the more complete understanding on the process changes regarding the issue in different layers of the society.

Citizens of Saint Petersburg up to 30 year old: “emotional influence of the exhibition” was mentioned by 89% of the surveyed; in this group, the “positive attitude” to the idea of a private collection was expressed by 38%; “negative attitude” – 11%; “not sure” – 48%.

Those who positively think about the idea of a private collection, also positively valued the keeping the icons in the museum collection:

“assures their safekeeping”, “it is a normal way”, “exclusively positive”, “it is wonderful that they are in the museum”;

“it is a good opportunity to view those that, for sure, would not be possible to see in churches” (female, 22 year old, student of Herzen State Pedagogical University).

The respondents from this age group who expressed the negative or some doubts (“not sure”) attitude to the private icon collecting nevertheless considered the keeping the icons in the museum exposition as a fact, saying:

“it allows to observe the icons”;

“the icon is not only an object of a cult but a specific cultural phenomena; it bears esthetic and historical value” (female; 22 year old, university student);

“To treat the icons as the expositied objects? It is not a negative reference; perhaps, only some sacral feeling can disappear” (female, 21 y. o., student of Saint Petersburg University).

A group of young respondents who expressed the “complex”, “discrepant”, and “ambivalent” attitude toward the keeping icons in the museum exposition, constituted a small part of the surveyed.

In the 31-49 age group, the majority of respondents (92%) mentioned an emotional influence of the exhibition, with 74% positively replied to the presence the icons in the Velimezis collection and in the museum exposition:

“it is wonderful that we have such an opportunity to see these unique works” (female, 38 y. o., Repin Academy of Fine Arts);

“unfortunately, an atmosphere in churches not always allows simply come and look, thoroughly observe the icon. A human can come to God through Beauty as well” (female, 34 y. o., an engineer).

Some people from this age group do not praise the presence of icons as in private collections, as well as in the museum expositions:

“I am incline to say “no”, the icons should serve people and be in churches” (female, 47 y. o., Master degree, hotel employee);

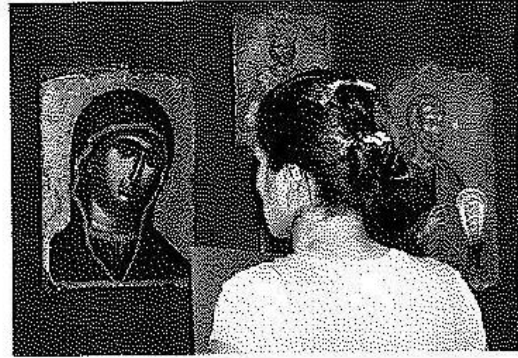
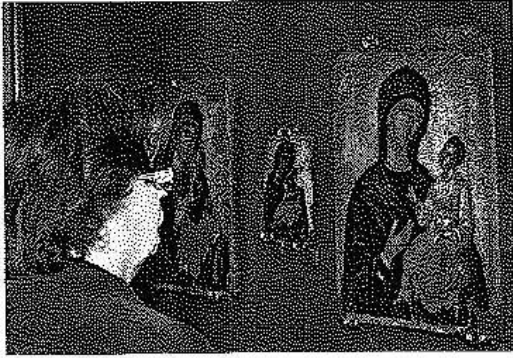
“my position is hard to express but it is close to negative, though this exhibition refutes it” (male, 37 y. o., artist).

89% of the respondents from the elderly group noted an emotional influence of the exhibition.

60% of them positively valued the fact that the exhibited icons are kept in a private collection;

70% of them were pleased that the icons were shown at the exhibition.

Many visitors, besides the numerous short answers like “of course, positive”, “in the museums only”, “it is a norm”, “it should be in this way”



III. 2. Visitors at the exhibition “Holy Images. The Greek Icons from the Velimezis Collection”

etc., provided more detailed reasons underlining the significance of the issue (we give here some of this answers):

“In the museum? Why not? Icons are a part of our history, our spiritual life”
(female, 55 y. o., engineer);

“In the museum, because it gives an opportunity for many people of different faiths to come close or learn Christian art” (male, 52 y. o., publishing editor);

“Today, the icons are kept in the museums and they should stay there. There are still a great number of abandoned churches all over Russia. The struggle should be for the restoration of these churches, and not for the return of icons from the museums (male, 65 y. o., programmer);

“Only in the museums, not in churches, because they will perished from soot and from constant kissing” (female, 63 y. o., PhD in Physics and Mathematics).

However, a number of the respondents had a different opinion:

“An icon to which people prayed becomes filled with feeling to those who appeal to it. The icons in the museums lack this feature” (female, 54 y.o., social worker);

“Everything depends on the situation” (male, 52 y.o., artist)

Summarizing all the above said, it should be definitely noted a positive emotional influence of the exhibition on its viewers, and, as a result, a certain tension of the perception and possible aggressive and fanatic statements were eliminated.

The analysis of the part of the survey related to the position of the visitors to the keeping of icons in the museum revealed polarized opinions, and demonstrated the significance and actuality of this issue today. The majority of the visitors who

participated in the survey expressed a positive attitude to the presence of icons in the museum, as did the Orthodox priests who came to see the exhibition. Though some respondents remarked that the icons were painted for churches, they admitted that only museums can create the most favorable conditions for the icons' preservation; besides, icons in the museums are open for everyone and not only to the believers.

The main thought that prevailed in the opinion of different age groups was the importance of the museum in relation to the whole society. To support the numerous comments left by the visitors, we should remind the reader that the museum (Hermitage) is a complex in its structure organization, which bears various functions, such as the function of keeping the objects and exhibiting them; the function of artistic and aesthetic education; the function of forming a historical consciousness; and a historical function. In short, it is possible to say that the museum exists for everyone, while the Church serves a certain part of the society.

Before we will talk about the immediate perception of the exhibited works, let us discuss the answers to the question, "What is the icon?" which revealed the visitor's understanding of the specificity of the works. The largest number of the respondents (50%) in the group of the youths marked the column "Others," and offered their own understanding of the icon. Below are several typical answers:

"an image", "a painting of prayer", "a window to God", "a historical source", "a face of the holiness", "an image raising to the highest spirituality", "a historical and artistic object."

By the number of replies, there were the following answers:

"A painting on a religious theme" (25%).

Besides that:

"A subject of worship" (15%);

"A subject of worship and painting on a religious theme" (5%);

"Church utensil" (5%);

The majority of respondents from the middle-aged group marked:

"A subject of worship" (40%);

“Others” (36%) – “symbol of faith”, “a cult object”, “a window in a different world”, “a sacred object”, “the images of the Christ, the Virgin, and saints”, “a connection of the human being with Good”...

“A painting on a religious theme” (24%).

Among the answers of the eldest group prevailed the notion:

“An object of worship” (61%).

Besides that:

“A painting on the religious theme” (20%);

“Others” (15%) – “an opportunity of conversation with Good”, “soul of a human being”, “a God’s image reflected on the board”;

“Church utensil” (4%).

The impression from the viewing the exhibition was not limited to the general reaction of the viewers. In their answers, the respondents mentioned those icons that attracted their attention at most, and explained the nature of their interest; they tried to emphasize the particular point connected to their appraisal, with their emotional attitude to the icons:

“The 24 Stanzas of the Akathistos” – “a rare, unusual type of the icon” (25 y.o., Master degree);

“The Virgin of Kykkos” (1861) – “while made within the canons, one can clearly feel the human warmth of relationships and the author’s feeling to it” (female, 59 y.o.);

“The Passion of Christ” by Domenikos Theotokopoulos (El Greco) – “faces of angels, Christ’s body, the color gamma: I have not seen anything like this. The icons is canonic for its time period” (male, 74 y.o.);

“The Descent from the Cross” (middle of the 18th c., workshop of Konstantinis Kontarinis) – “with excessive artistry and sensitivity that are not characteristics of canonic Orthodox icons (priest, 30 y.o.);

“The Beheading of St. John the Baptist”, “The Descent from the Cross” (18th c.) – “the icons with the most notable influence of Western art; they differ very much from Russian icons” (female, 22 y.o.);

“The Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple”, “The Virgin of Kykkos” – “ the richness of shades with a quite soft gamma, smooth color changes; lightly, fine worked faces” (female, 18 y.o., student);

“Triptych: The Virgin the “Unwithering Rose” and Sts George and Demetrios” – “with symbolism of the unwithering flower and refined, heavenly royal images” (female, 21 y.o.).

Many other icons were mentioned as well.

“The exhibition is also a good opportunity to understand the fine verge dividing the icon painting itself from the rising school of Western European art (female, 62 y.o., Master degree, professor).

The theme of sociological research of religious art and culture at the Hermitage exhibition was also described in the other works of the author of this article.⁵

⁵ Galich T.I. Exhibitions in the Hermitage at the turn of the millennia and the public // *The Hermitage Readings in Memory of B. Piotrovsky*. Summarized reports. SP, 2001. P. 10-14 ; *Idem*. Exhibitions “Earthy Art – Heavenly Beauty. Art of Islam”, “Sinai. Byzantine. Rus: Orthodox Art from the Sixth to the Twentieth Century”, “The Treasures of the Armenian Church from the collection of Holy Etchmiadzin” // *State Hermitage Museum Annual Report*. SP, 2001. P. 44-47 ; *Idem*. Culture and art of Byzantium, 4th-15th cc. and the spectators // *State Hermitage Museum Annual Report*. SP, 2004. P. 99 ; *Idem*. On the contemporary perception of Byzantine art of the 12th-14th centuries. From an aesthetic and sociological perspective // *The Byzantine Idea. Byzantium during the Comnenian and Paleologos dynasties : papers for the 21st International Congress of Byzantine Studies*. London 21-26 August, 2006. SP, 2006. P. 200-204 ; *Idem*. Bizantium. Through the ages // *Tsarskoe Selo Readings*. International scientific conference. 25-26 April. 2006, SP., 2006. V. 4. P. 154-156 ; *Idem*. The interaction of Christian and Muslim cultures in the eyes of the Hermitage visitor // *XIII Tsarskoe Selo Readings*. International scientific conference. 21-22 April. 2009. SP, 2009. V. 4. P. 225-229.