Keeping the Faith – Russian Old Believer Icons



The Russian Orthodox Church uses a three barred cross, shown here in this painted wood icon
Item #P020718-029

By Misaki Imagawa

The year is 1666 and it's a cold fall day in a rural Russian village. The fields are barely harvested even though harvest time is half over. Something is clearly wrong. Although a few farmers can be seen bringing in crops as the last rays of light fade, there simply is not enough manpower. Where has everyone gone?

As night falls, many of the villagers gather at the local cemetery. Men and women alike are adorned in burial robes. Then something very curious happens. They all sit in individual wooden coffins neatly laid out in rows and begin singing hymns, and when the singing ends they patiently wait, until on cue they begin singing again.



Old Believer icon depicting the Russian Orthodox cross

Item #A1400-359

Sometime later, a man hurries through the gates of the cemetery, and settles into a coffin next to his friend.

“You’re late, Igor” his friend Gavriil whispers.

“*Someone* has to harvest the crops,” Igor replies. They lean across their respective coffins and speak in hushed tones.

“The crops don’t matter,” Gavriil insists. “The Antichrist is coming. The world is ending.”

“You know,” Igor rebuts, “I don’t buy any of this. Just because we have to cross ourselves with three fingers instead of two or sing Alleluia three times doesn’t mean…”

“It’s heresy! It’s blasphemy!” says Gavril raising his voice. A chorus of *shhh!* from the others gathered makes Gavriil lower his voice again. “Have you looked at the old icons?” he asks rhetorically. “*They’re* crossing themselves with *two* fingers not three. These reforms are wrong. The Tsar has gone mad; he’s been poisoned. The world is coming to an end!”

“Well what if it comes to an end later?” asks Igor. “Do we neglect our fields and sit starving in these coffins? The cold will kill us first.” Igor pauses, and then asks with a snicker, “If that happens, can we at least bring the vodka to keep us warm?”



Above: Old Believer icon depicting Christ giving a 'proper' blessing – with two fingers straightened and the other three folded; with detail

Item #A1400-355



3 Leaf Icon Depicting Mother of God · Jesus the Teacher, John the Evangelist · Russia · C. 1780 · Bronze with enamel · 15.25 W x 5.5 H inches

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Vodka aside, the belief that the Antichrist had arrived was widely held between 1666 and 1668 in Russia. In fact, many farmers did neglect their fields while waiting for the world to end. It was a time of great turmoil for the Russian Orthodox Church. It began when high authorities of the church noticed discrepancies between their liturgical texts and practices and those of the original Greeks. Patriarch Nikon – the leader of the Church at the time – insisted that the Russians had deviated from rightful Orthodox practice and began to

implement rapid reforms and revisions to the books and rites. Although these revisions seemed inconsequential – for example, adding an additional letter in the spelling of Jesus, singing Alleluia three times instead of two, using three fingers instead of two to cross oneself, and walking around the alter in a counterclockwise as opposed to clockwise direction – they were fiercely rejected by a portion of the Russian population who came to be known as the *Old Believers*.



18th C. Russian cross depicting the life of Christ

Item #A1400-360

The irony is the Greek texts had undergone several revisions in recent times and were close to the original Russian version Nikon wanted to reform. Ignorant of this knowledge, Nikon, backed by the Tsar, oppressed and persecuted the Old Believers who protested and refused to change. This was a terribly violent time in Russian history. Many people were exiled, flogged, starved or burned at the stake. Some, believing the Antichrist had come, waited in cemeteries for the world to end. Others gathered in churches, set fire to the buildings and burned inside to join Christ before Judgment Day. Tens of thousands perished. Finally the Old Believers, stripped of their rights, their beliefs declared illegal, were banished.

For centuries the Old Believers persevered, living in remote and desolate regions of the country. In small communities they upheld what they believed to be the old, original Orthodox teachings, steadfastly refusing to conform to the new Church developing in Russia. One of the changes the new Church promoted took place in iconic art. Looking at art in Western Europe, the reform Russian Church recognized that their icons were highly stylized

and lacking in realism. They soon began incorporating baroque and classical influences of Western Europe into their iconic art, deviating from their traditional styles. If not for the Old Believers, the iconic art of the original Russian Orthodox Church would have vanished into history. Instead, the Old Believers clung to styles that had roots as far back as Constantinople, when Christianity was first introduced into Russia.



Russian beaded necklace with plaque icon depicting The Crowning of Christ

Item #J0700-309

In the 18th century, the Russian government forbade the creation of metal icons and confiscated existing ones. Many historians believe it was an effort to divert metal for military and minting processes. Inevitably, the Old Believers became the main target of this prohibition because they were the primary manufacturers and users of metal icons, which held great value and importance in their homes. The ban on metal icons lasted well into the 19th century. A tremendous amount of artwork was seized and lost during this time, ultimately making metal icons rarer and more valued in today's art market.

The turbulent history, persecution, and oppression of the Old Believers have contributed to the value of metal icons today. The icons not only showcase a high level of unique craftsmanship, but represent a steadfast connection to early Christian customs. The configuration of the cross, for example, with three horizontal bars is considered the most ancient and authentic tradition in Christian art in the East or the West. Far from the world ending, the Old Believers kept their world – and with it, a precious piece of history – alive.



The Old Believers kept precious pieces of history alive by creating beatiful icons like this 4 Leaf bronze and enamel depiction of the 'Church Feasts of the New Testement'

Item #A1400-352