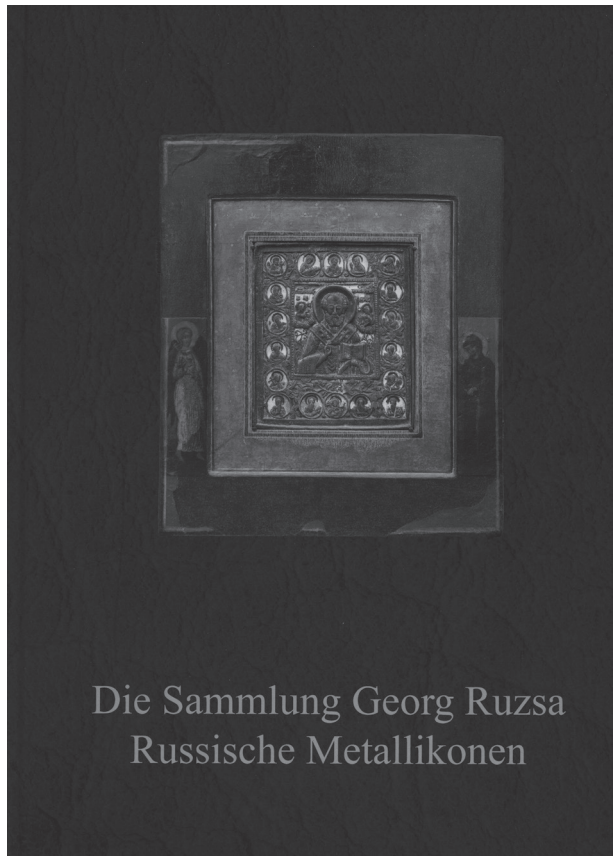
Ruzsa, Georg: *Die Sammlung Georg Ruzsa: Russische Metallikonen*,
Sztarstudio, Gödöllő, 2016. 568 pages, Ill. ISBN 978-963-12-5289-7

Professor of the Eötvös Loránd University of Budapest, György Ruzsa, who has deservedly earned a reputation both as an expert in Byzantine studies and as an art historian, is also known as a prominent art collector. In 2014, offering a part of his own collection, he founded a museum of icons affiliated to the pilgrims's church of the Pauline order. As for myself, I worked as co-curator in installing the exhibition. There were (and still are) 370 invaluable and rare works of art on a permanent display. The exhibition was accompanied by a bilingual (Hungarian and German) and a sizable catalogue with a detailed description and a photo of each work of art.[1] What is also to be found among the publications of the museum is a book by György Ruzsa, entitled *Ikon* és *zománc* (Icons and Enamel, 2015), which presents some technical aspects of icons made of metal.[2] What can be seen in the museum is metal icons first of all, i.e. several medieval works worthy of attention. Later items are of interest for researchers of medieval art as masterpieces keeping up old traditions.

The book under review is written in German and presents a lot more works of art – 2092 altogether – than those on display at the museum. More than half of them are reproduced in colour.

In the foreword, the author reflects on the peculiarities of icons. What he finds a common view held by many even today is that icons of the Byzantine type are all uniform and over-conservative, observing too many rules and, therefore, representing little artistic value. For example Adolphe Napoléon Didron, an archeologist and historian of the nineteenth century made a statement along these lines when he said: "In Greece the artist is the slave of the theologian." It is fascinating how Ruzsa rejects this accusation by quoting a thought from an article, entitled Чему учат иконы? (What icons teach us?) and published in 1914, by Maximilian Alexandrovich Voloshin, a Russian poet and painter. Voloshin compared the icon painter's traditionalism and respect for canons with the natural attraction of poets to certain forms of versification, stating that poets are likewise governed by rules if they are to apply a strictly defined metrical structure such as a sonnet and their lyrical moods are placed in these ready-made rhythmical and logical patterns. These rules, however, do not hinder the expression of a poet's emotions; on the contrary, they strengthen it. Similarly, the icon painter's religious feelings and their pictorial realization are deepened and promoted by the observance of traditions.

Making these remarks, the author has pointed to some essential aspects of the art of icon painting, which, strongly adhering to traditions, regards copies as important, because, according to tradition, the artist who created the prototype could have seen either the saint himself or witnessed the saintly scene. While painting the icon, the artist is being given to thoughts or praying in order to create a pure and elevated work. This means that an icon is also a prayer, not an oral one but, rather, one having obtained pictorial expression. Icons are also considered to be places where man meets God.



Cover illustration: Saint Nicholas, c. 1800;
copper alloy, casting, enamel (photo: Fruzsina Spitzer)

Fig. 1. The Savior of the Blessed Silence with Deesis and Selected Saints, eighteenth century; copper alloy, casting, enamel; Collection Ruzsa (photo: Fruzsina Spitzer)

In the foreword to the book, the author gives a detailed description of the role of Old Ritualists (старообрядцы), or, to use another term, of Old Believers (староверы) and of Schismatics (раскольники) in the art of metal icons and their relation to them, bringing them closer to readers who are familiar with Western European art only, by highlighting their aesthetic values.

Old Ritualists, who appeared in the mid-seventeenth century in Russia, showed strict adherence to traditions and opposed Patriarch Nikon's reforms. To mention a few examples: the Old Ritualists continued to make the sign of the cross with two fingers instead of three and sing "Hallelujah," according to old traditions, only twice, instead of the new custom of singing it three times. Old Ritualists also insisted on holding processions clockwise instead of holding them anticlockwise as well as on seven Prosphora (pieces of bread) instead of five during Proscomodia. Old Ritualists (Old Believers) also opposed Nikon's having the liturgical books that had already been translated from Greek into Old Church Slavic retranslated. Old Ritualits often sacrificed their lives for their convictions. One of the first martyrs was bishop Pavel of Kolomna, who had either been drowned or devoured by wild beasts. The famous painting, *Boyarynya Morozova* by Vasily Surikov (1881–1887), exhibited in the Tretyakov Gallery, depicts this controversy. Avvakum, the ascetic and great preacher of Old Believers, was burned at the stake in the main square of Pustozyorsk in 1682.

So tradition became even more important with the appearance of Old Ritualists, and this is one of the reasons why metal icons also grew in number. Besides, metal preserved the prototype more exactly than an individual work of art painted on wood. Of course, here, too, there were characteristic features: the proportion of the materials used for making the alloy affected its colour and surface. Foundries could also have their special technology of the way the casting was treated subsequently and, last but not least, of the icon being decorated with multi-colour enamel.

It is true that metal icons survive from earlier centuries, especially in Kiev and Novgorod, but their large-scale mass production began in the early eighteenth century. At first the Russian Orthodox Church opposed the making of metal icons, but these small objects became so popular among Pravoslav Christians that their use for domestic prayer was allowed.

The author also presents the ways metal icons were used, a topic touched upon by him earlier in a more detailed study.[3] An addition worthy of interest is a document he makes reference to. Metal icons were often carried by Old Believers as a legacy from their parents or grandparents, reminding them not only of the saints but also of their ancestors. A government report of 1846 says the following: "These icons and crosses [...] are in general use all over Russia, a custom established a long time ago among the great masses of simple people including Pravoslavs as well. So icons can be found in nearly every home or in any other dwelling place. With them peasants bless their children before they set out on a long journey or when they are enlisted as soldiers, then they keep these icons for the rest of their lives."[4]

Metal icons were often stroked and kissed during meditation or when prayers were being said. That is why slightly worn surfaces can be seen in several relatively recent icons of this collection, too. It is important to see that believers offering their prayers in difficult moments and critical situations of their lives derive strength

from metal icons. The author makes a really important point in calling the reader's attention to a seemingly tiny detail in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, in which the main character, Rodion Romanovich Raskolnikov – whose name, by the way, is a reference to Old Ritualists – facing the consequences of his deed, makes a repeated mention of the brass cross he had got hold of during the murder and robbery. Thus, the cross becomes a symbol of passion and purification.

In the introduction, the author also elaborates on what place his collection of metal icons occupies among the big collections of metal icons over the world. He touches upon his underlying concept of collecting them, which means that he, as a collector, has striven to represent all important epochs, regions and iconographic types with works of art of outstanding quality.

The overwhelming majority of the discussion is constituted by the catalogue in which the detailed descriptions are given. If the work of art in question has already been published, an exhaustive list of references is attached. Special attention is paid to goldsmiths' hallmarks and their decoding.

More than half of the book contains coloured reproductions of very high quality with several photos of different details, with pictures of the back sides as well as with the enlarged images of the goldsmiths' hallmarks if these aspects are considered essential.

The book ends with a short biography of the author and a selected bibliography of his works. György Ruzsa has been engaged in the research of metal icons for a long time. He is one of the first to have arranged an extensive metal icon exhibition with a detailed catalogue. The exhibition, which enjoyed tremendous popularity, was opened in the Christian Museum of Esztergom in 1996. In 2005, in the Budapest Museum of Applied Arts, he organized the world's largest metal icon exhibition together with Svetlana Gnutova and Jelena Zotova, researchers of the Moscow Rublev Museum. The exhibition featured four hundred metal icons of breath-taking beauty coming from Russian collections and a hundred pieces coming from Hungary.[5] The great metal icon exhibition, organized in Szentendre in 2008, was also an outstanding event, to which the author contributed a catalogue and published a sizable book a year later.[6] György

Fig. 2. The Pantocrator, nineteenth century; copper alloy, casting, enamel; Collection Ruzsa (photo: Fruzsina Spitzer)

Ruzsa has written over thirty books. In what follows we shall deal with his works related to the present topic only.[7]

For those engaged in medieval studies, it is the early bronze crosses that are of the greatest interest. A special place among them is occupied by the crosses of the so-called Kiev type. The main formal feature of these crosses is the Greek cross form with the ends characteristically rounded. They could be unlocked and also functioned as reliquaries. Christ was to be seen on the obverse with the Mother of God and John the Baptist on both sides of the patibulum. That also served as a foundation for the deisis composition. The Hungarian National Museum in Budapest also possesses several such crosses or their fragments. (Zsuzsa Lovag made an excellent analysis of these masterpieces at the beginning of the 70s.[8]) The crosses were found during excavations in Hungary and are likely to have been brought here by Kiev people fleeing from the Mongol invasion to the West. Some of the crosses may have come from Kiev to the Carpathian Basin even earlier, since Hungary had entered into close contact not only with the Western states but also with the Byzantine Empire and the Kievan Rus'. It should be recalled that Anastasia, the daughter of Yaroslav the Wise, Grand Prince of Rus' (d. 1054) married King Andrew I (d. 1060) and became Queen

Fig. 3. The Virgin, the Consolation of All the Afflicted, nineteenth century; copper alloy, casting, enamel; Collection Ruzsa (photo: Fruzsina Spitzer)

of Hungary. She could also have brought a lot of works of art from the Kievan Principality. In the Kiev court there were Hungarians doing different services, one of them was Moisei Ugrin, a monk in the famous Kiev Monastery of the Caves, who was subsequently canonized. György Ruzsa has discussed this issue in numerous studies, some of which have been published in the present journal.[9] Several Russian and Ukrainian works of art could have got to Hungary in the centuries following the Middle Ages, when many representatives of the Orthodox nationalities in historical Hungary (Serbs, Roumanians, Greeks, etc.) went to study in Kiev, bringing home liturgical books and objects. In this respect I refer to an interesting eighteenth-century metal icon of Saint Nicholas kept in the Christian Museum of Esztergom. It was discovered in Pilismarót, a settlement not far from Esztergom, when an old house was being pulled down in 1887. This episode exemplifies the old custom of building metal icons into the foundations or walls of houses in order to protect the house itself and those who lived in it.

Those interested in a special aesthetic approach may find it worthy of attention that several metal icons are placed on a painted icon tablet. They reveal a unique aesthetic connection between the cast metal icons, many of which are decorated with coloured enamel, and the painted wood. The different materials and surfaces offer a particular impression. Their peculiar glitter and reflection of light add an aesthetic experience to religious devotion. There is a similarly fascinating icon of Saint Nicholas on the front cover of the book reviewed. (The author has treated this special topic in some of his studies.[10]) It may be surprising that there are quite a few signed icons in the collection, and some of the abbreviations can even be deciphered.[11]

It causes some difficulty to single out particular pieces of the objects on display since several high-quality works dominate the exhibition. As for myself, and, I think, for Church historians and researchers in hagiography, the cross pattée with a reliquary (No 342), which once belonged to Saint Josaphat, represents special interest. This object can now be found in the temporary deposit collection of the Christian Museum of Esztergom. Born as Ioann Kuntsevych in 1580 or 1584, Saint Josaphat entered the Monastery of the Trinity of the Order of Saint Basil the Great in 1604. He was ordained a priest in 1609, to become bishop of Polotsk in 1617. His enemies disapproved of his Western connections and accused him of Latinization and Polonization. On November 12, 1623, he was assassinated in the archbishop's palace in Vitebsk. He was canonized by Pope Leo XIII on June 29, 1867. The body is now in Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome, placed under the altar of Saint Basil the Great.

Experts in medieval studies will appreciate the metal icons of the seventeenth and eighteenth century that are related to ancient iconographic types. Some of these traditions go back to the early Middle Ages and went through minor modifications. Special attention should be paid to portrayals of the God-bearer (Mother of God, Virgin Mary). One of the main iconographic types of the God-bearer is the hodegetria (Ὁδηγήτρια), whose late and most frequently depicted Russian version is the famous Our Lady of Kazan (also called Theotokos of Kazan). The impressive and

Fig. 4. Quadraptych. The Twelve Principal Feasts, nineteenth century; copper alloy, casting, enamel; Collection Ruzsa (photo: Fruzsina Spitzer)

huge Kazan Cathedral, designed by Andrey Nikiforovich Voronikhin at the beginning of the nineteenth century, was erected in St Petersburg in honour of the revelation of the Virgin of Kazan. In Ruzsa's collection the Kazan Theotokos icons are represented, among others, by a nineteenth century icon decorated with blue enamel and cast at a high level of technology (No. 1188). The other main iconographic type of the God-bearer's depictions is the eleusa (Ἐλεούσα). The most well-known version of this type is the famous Our Lady of Vladimir icon. In it, the God-bearer (Theotokos) embraces the infant Jesus with tender love, their faces touch each other, which is a

Fig. 5. Wood Icon with Copper Alloy Cross, eighteenth–nineteenth centuries; wood, gesso, tempera, copper alloy, casting; Collection Ruzsa (photo: Fruzsina Spitzer)

Fig. 6. Wood Icon with Copper Alloy Icons, nineteenth century; wood, gesso, tempera, copper alloy, casting; Collection Ruzsa (photo: Fruzsina Spitzer)

moving manifestation of maternal love as well as a symbol of incarnation and of the union of the celestial and earthly worlds. (The emergence and formation of this type has been discussed by the author of the catalogue in studies published in the present journal.[12]) A precious example of this type in the collection is a metal icon decorated with white and dark blue enamel (No 1588).

As in classical Byzantine art, the twelve great feasts (δωδεκάορτον) of Eastern Christianity found their expression in Russian metal icons, too. As a rule, such icons were tetraptychs and also served as small domestic altars. There were, however, slight differences in the selection and arrangement of the feasts. There are beautiful samples of this object type in the Hungarian National Museum, in the Museum of Applied Arts and, last but not least, in the collection and its catalogue reviewed here.

The importance of the collection and the catalogue becomes even more emphatic if one considers the very high artistic quality of the objects on display, many of which have not even been published before. To my knowledge, this is the largest catalogue of metal icons in the world with meticulous descriptions of the works of art. Their definitions represent one of the most outstanding achievements of Hungarian museology, which also lays solid foundations for further research.

Mária Prokopp

NOTES

[1] Ruzsa, György: *A Pálos Sziklakolostor Ruzsa György Ikonmúzeuma. Orosz fémikonok / Ikonenmuseum Georg Ruzsa des Pauliner* Höhlenklosters. Russische Metall-Ikonen, Gödöllő: Sztarstudio, 2013.

[2] Ruzsa, György: *Ikon és zománc* [Icons and Enamel], Gödöllő: Pálos Fogadóközpont (Visitors Centre of the Pauline Order), 2015.

[3] Ruzsa, György: Die Bedeutung gegossener Metallikonen im religiösen Leben, *Slavica Gandensia* 23. 1996. 43–52.

[4] Einleitung, 4.

[5] Gnutova, Svetlana – Ruzsa, György – Zotova, Elena: *Prayers Locked in Bronze. Russian Metal Icons*, Budapest: Museum of Applied Arts, 2005.

[6] Ruzsa, György: *Bronzba zárt áhitat. Orosz fémikonok művészete és teológiája* [Prayers Locked in Bronze. The Art and Theology of Russian Metal Icons], Szentendre: Pest Megyei Múzeumok Igazgatósága, 2008. (Kiállítási katalógusok 23.)

[7] Ruzsa, György: *Nowgorod, Pleskau und der russische Norden*, Hanau: Verlag Werner Dausien, 1981; Ruzsa, György: *Ikonen in ungarischen Sammlungen*, Berlin: Union Verlag, 1986; Ruzsa, György: *Icons*, Budapest: Kossuth Press, 1987; Ruzsa, György: *Meditations Born in Fire: Russian metal icons selected from the temporary deposit collection of the Christian Musuem of Esztergom*, Budapest: Poligon, 2009; Ruzsa, György: *Holzgefasste Metall-Ikonen in ungarischen Sammlungen*, Gödöllő: Sztarstudio, 2011; Ruzsa, György: *Russiche Metallikonen in ungarischen Sammlungen*, Gödöllő: Sztarstudio, 2014; Ruzsa, György: *Icon and Sermon. Russian Metal Icons*, Budapest: Pálos Fogadóközpont, 2015.

[8] Lovag, Zsuzsa: Byzantine Type Reliquary Pectoral Crosses in the Hungarian National Museum, *Folia Archaeoligica* XXII. 1971. 143–163.

[9] Ruzsa, György: Neue Daten zur Ikonographie des Moses aus Ungarn, *Acta Historiae Artium* XXIV. 1978. 297–304.

[10] Ruzsa, György: Bronzba zárt imák. Fémikonok – a festett fatábla és a zománcos domborművek kapcsolata [Prayers Locked in Bronze. Relations between the painted panel and the enamelled embossment], *Magyar Iparművészet* 2005/3. 6–9; Ruzsa, György: The Use and Role of Metals in Art of Russian Icons, *Slavica* 44. 2015. 87–111.

[11] Cf. Ruzsa, György: Two Unknown Icons Signed by Rodion Sem'onovič Chrustal'ov, *Slavica* 34. 2005. 207–210.

[12] Ruzsa, György: Remarques sur l'icone de la Vièrge de Vladimir, *Acta Historiae Artium* XXXVII. 1994. 105–112.