

For Immediate Release

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FIVE HUNDRED YEARS OF ICON HISTORY AT CHRISTIE'S

Icons and Artefacts from the Orthodox World

Christie's King Street ~ 9 June 2008

London – Christie's has a long tradition of selling Icons and Works of Art from the Orthodox World. As early as 1886, Christie's sold to the Victoria and Albert Museum the celebrated *Beresford Hope Cross*, one of the most important objects produced during the Byzantine Iconoclasm. More recently, in June 07 a Russian icon of St. Nicholas, property of the last Tsar, Nicholas II, was sold for the world-record price of £484,400. In 2007 the results of the Icon sales, which realised in excess of £7 million, have underscored Christie's position as leader in this field.

Building on the strength of 2007, Christie's 9 June sale of *Icons and Artefacts from the Orthodox World* will offer 230 lots spanning the 15th to the 20th century. This is the most valuable Icon sale ever organised in the international market and is expected to fetch in the region of £5 million. It will include significant Russian and Greek icons as well as valuable Orthodox artefacts such as a Book of Gospels, once belonging to the Grand Duke Aleksander Mikhailovitch Romanov.

Russian Icons

Russian icon production drew almost exclusively on Byzantine principles from its beginning and through its first six centuries. However, the reforms imposed, first by Peter the Great (reign 1682-1725) and subsequently by his Western-oriented successors, encouraged European trends to break through the traditional style of icon painting. Alongside the process of 'Westernisation', the painting of icons in the traditional style persisted, and the two trends basically co-existed in the following centuries.

Both types of icons described above are well represented in the sale and allow the viewer to follow the development of icon painting in Russia between the 16th to the early 20th century. Examples of the Old Style, rooted in the intellectual and meditative models of Byzantium, are exemplified by the 16th century icon of the *Mother of God Tenderness*, where

the two figures are embracing intimately, while the Mother of God leaning forward to receive her Son's kiss. Their faces are painted with muted colours and their garments are highlighted with intense gold striations (lot 81, estimate: £20,000-25,000).



A sub-group which stands out is that of the narrative icons. These panels depict via a sequence of episodes a Biblical story or life of a saint. A truly outstanding example from this category to be offered in June is the late 15th century icon that narrates *The Infancy of Christ*, circa 1500 (lot 48, estimate: £80,000-120,000). A second lot is the monumental icon of *The Story of the Annunciation*, painted in the area of Vologda in the 17th century (lot 47, estimate £100,000-120,000).

The modern trends were not only reflected on icons executed in the 17th century onwards, but frequently, older, traditional icons were applied with certain features in order to be adapted to the new fashions. Such a case is encountered on the 16th century, Muscovite icon of *St. Dmitriy*, painted in the post-Byzantine manner (lot 31, 60,000-80,000 GBP). Approximately a hundred years later this beautiful panel was covered by a gilt oklad which emulated the representation beneath, and was further complemented by heavily embossed Baroque ornaments all imported from the contemporary art of the West.



The Adoration of the Mother of God by Patron saints of the Stroganov Family is another superb example of 17th century icon painting (lot 28, estimate: £40,000-60,000). The Stroganov family played a crucial role over many centuries in the development of Russian art and culture. In the 16th century they established in Solvychevodsk, in the Deep Russian North the celebrated school of painting and the decorative arts - the Stroganov School. The panel offered in the June sale was commissioned by Maksim Stroganov. The icon was directly inherited in the family and the line can be traced through to the 1940's when Maria Vladimirovna, Princess Shcherbatov was blessed on her wedding day by her grandmother Countess Maria Stroganov with this icon.

The sale includes a large selection of icons with silver, gilt and enamelled oklads. The oklads, which reached the height of their popularity between the second half of the 19th century until the Revolution in 1917, signified a feature which became fundamental to

the tradition of icon production in Imperial Russia and differentiated it from icons produced elsewhere in the Orthodox World. Icons portraying holy figures, usually patrons of specific families, were used for private devotion or were presented as gifts. Splendid examples of enamelled decoration by major makers with the Imperial Warrant, like Sazikov, Khlebnikov and Postnikov adorn the icons of this sale. The work of Pavel Ovchinnikov, the main competitor of Karl Fabergé, is featured in the sale by a number of lots, including a rare and highly elaborate pair of wedding icons, depicting *The Mother of God of Kazan* and *Christ Pantokrator* (lot 93, estimate: £40,000-60,000).

Greek Icons



The sale will also offer important Greek icons from two distinguished Private European Collections. Leading this category is a 15th century private travelling triptych, painted in Venetian occupied Crete (lot 130, estimate: £40,000-60,000). This piece is a testament to the artistic amalgamation which took place on the island at that time. Although the form of the object, techniques and style employed are typically Byzantine, the portrayed subjects are purely Catholic, thus suggesting its commission by a Western European patron to a local icon painter. A seal on the reverse of the panel is evidence that at some point it was owned by a professed Knight of the Order of Malta.



Another outstanding example is the icon of the *Supplication to the Mother of God* by Sts. Nicholas, John the Baptist, Andrew and George, *circa* 1500 (lot 22, estimate: £80,000-100,000). The panel, which was a private commission as suggested by the selection of the portrayed saints, was surely venerated by Orthodox people. The delicate white highlights that define the structure of the faces, the elegant proportions of the figures and the angular modelling of the garment folds are all features typical of 16th century Cretan icon painting. During this period the painting of Icons on Crete reached its height and it was in this milieu that artists like Michael Damaskenos and the young El Greco were active on the island.

After the siege of Crete by the Ottomans in 1669 the major centres of Icon production were located on the Ionian Islands and mainly on Mount Athos. The production of the two locations is well represented in the sale with typical examples. Large panels of *Christ, the Enthroned Mother of God*, a *Deisis* and *Archangel Michael* all reveal the lasting influence of the Byzantine tradition.

A unique lot in the sale is the monumental topographical representation of the Holy City of Jerusalem and other *Loca Sancta*, dated 1765 (lot 26, estimate: £25,000-35,000). Such large canvases were painted for the wealthy pilgrims to the Holy Land. They usually bear a dedication, which acts as a testimony of the pilgrim. In this case the painting was owned by a Greek (or Greek-speaking) pilgrim who in 1765 visited the locations where Christ lived.

Orthodox Artefacts



Amongst this wide variety of icons offered, the June sale will also feature a selection of Orthodox artefacts. A number of these are Ecclesiastical used during the liturgy and others were employed for private devotion. Truly noteworthy are a splendid gold and painted enamel Christening Cross crafted in Moscow between 1880-1896 (lot 217, Estimate £4,000-6,000), and a Gospel Book with a remarkable cover painted on Russian Birchwood, depicting the Resurrection of Christ on the front and the

crowned monogram of the Grand Duke Alexander Mikhailovich Romanov, son-in-law of the Tsar Aleksander III in a wreath on the back (lot 5, estimate: £35,000-45,000).

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Images available on request

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Notes to Editors:

Facts & Figures for historic Icons sales at Christie's:

2000	£33,000	2004	£93,000
2001	£15,000	2005	£77,000
2002	£29,000	2006	£971,000
2003	£105,000	2007	£7,030,420

2006: increase of 1,261 % in comparison to 2005

2007: increase of 724% in comparison to 2006