

**PRESERVATION OF ICON-PAINTING HERITAGE IN RUSSIA
(based on Yaroslavl regional materials)**

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Abstract. The interaction of government bodies and the Russian Orthodox Church on the question of returning some buildings and other property to the Church became part of state cultural policy in the post-Soviet period. This article investigates the process of returning religious artifacts to the Yaroslavl eparchy in the 1990s–2000s. During this period one of the biggest problems connected with the transfer of property to the Church was the ambivalent stance of regional state officials, which provoked conflict between museums and the Church over the ownership of icons. In Yaroslavl region, only toward the end of the 2000s did a relatively quiet and peaceful relationship between representatives of the Yaroslavl eparchy and regional museums begin. Mutual recognition of the necessity for a competent approach to preservation remains an ongoing process.

Keywords: icons, objects of cultural heritage, regional policy, museums, Yaroslavl region, Russian Orthodox Church, state.

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**СОХРАНЕНИЕ ИКОНОПИСНОГО НАСЛЕДИЯ В РОССИИ
(на материалах Ярославской области)**

Аннотация. Одним из направлений культурной политики государства в постсоветский период становится взаимодействие государственных органов и представителей РПЦ по вопросу возвращения церкви зданий и иного культового имущества. В статье исследуются особенности процесса возвращения культовых художественных памятников Ярославской епархии в 1990–2000-е гг.

Одной из ключевых проблем в процессе передачи церкви некогда принадлежавших ей святынь становится неоднозначность позиции региональных властей в отношении памятников иконописи, которая провоцирует конфликт музея и церкви за право обладания произведением. В Ярославской области лишь ближе к концу 2000-х гг. наступил период относительно спокойных и мирных взаимоотношений представителей Ярославской епархии с областными музеями. Постепенно приходит обоюдное понимание необходимости грамотного подхода к сохранению оставшегося нам в наследство от прошлого образов культового назначения.

Ключевые слова: памятники иконописи, объекты культурного наследия, региональная политика, музей, Ярославская область, РПЦ, государство.

Much of Yaroslavl region's cultural heritage consists of church art and artifacts (icons, architectural monuments, religious objects, vestments). From the beginning of the new relationship between church and state in modern Russia, active government cooperation with the church has been a distinctive feature of this process. Today one of the key facets of this relationship is the search for compromise in the transfer of religious artifacts to the Church.

Since the early 1990s the return of artifacts to the Russian Orthodox Church has been one of the key issues in protecting objects of cultural heritage in Yaroslavl region. An analysis of regional policy in the 1990s and 2000s is both necessary and timely for the development of measures and programs to return religious artifacts to the Church without any harm either to these items or to museums and society in general.

Despite the prominence of property transfer negotiations to the Church in this period, this issue has been insufficiently investigated thus far. The earliest study of this problem was by A. M. Kulemzin (2009). N. V. Mikhailova's research in the late 2000s paid much attention to legal questions (2009), while A. B. Shukhobodskii later emphasized that "thoughtless transfer of historical and cultural property to the Church can create tension in society" (2013, 209). A. E. Musin (2010) conducted a unique investigation into the contested position of religious artifacts in modern Russia and its transfer to the church and analyzed the conflict between the Church and state cultural institutions. Scholarly attention to the problem of icon transfer from museums to the Church speaks to the state and public importance of these events. It testifies not only to a new relationship between church and state, but also to the "loyalty" of the government to the Church, in which icons became a symbol of friendship and state understanding of the need for

spiritual renewal in society through religious iconography. This research is the first attempt at complex study of state measures for the preservation of cultural heritage and of the problems in their transfer to the Russian Orthodox Church in the 1900s–2000s on the Yaroslavl regional materials.

The main legislative materials regarding the issue of property transfer to the church in general, and in Yaroslavl in particular, in the post-Soviet period are published in the *Collection of the Legislation of the Russian Federation*, *Bulletin of Regulations of Federal Executive Authorities*, and *Vedomosti* of the State Duma and of the administration of Yaroslavl region. Major sources also include archival materials documenting the activities of federal and local authorities, which are deposited in federal and local state archives: The State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), The Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (RGALI), and the State Archive of the Yaroslavl Region (GAYO).

One of the first official documents on the process of transfer of material objects to the Church is Resolution 1372 of the Council of Ministers of the USSR on December 29, 1990, “On the procedure for transfer to religious organizations of cult buildings, materials and other religious property owned by the state.”¹ In February 1991 at the meeting of the Council for Religious Affairs under the Council of Ministers, a decision “On the procedure for transfer of cult (prayer) buildings, materials, and other property and land plots to religious organizations” was made.²

The key legislative acts in the course of property transfer to the Church include the order of the President of the Russian Federation on April 23, 1993 (no. 281-rp), “On the transfer of cult buildings and other property to religious organizations.”³ Resolution 248 of the Government of the Russian Federation on March 14, 1995, “On the order of transfer to religious organizations of the religious property related to federal property” (a first version of the Resolution appeared in 1994) specified that “especially valuable objects of cultural heritage of the peoples of the Russian Federation are not subject to transfer to religious associations.”⁴ Other laws should be noted, particularly Federal Law 125-FL “On

¹ Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii [The State Archive of the Russian Federation] (GARF). Fond R-6991. Opis' 6. Delo 4631. List 7.

² GARF. F. R-6991. Op. 6. D. 4630. L. 6.

³ *Sobranie aktov Prezidenta i Pravitel'stva Rossiiskoi Federatsii* [Collection of Acts of the President and Government of the Russian Federation] 1993, 17, 1686.

⁴ *Sobranie zakonodatel'stva Rossiiskoi Federatsii* [Collection of the Legislation of the Russian Federation] 1994, 4, 504-521.

freedom of conscience and religious associations;”⁵ and Federal Law 327-FL of November 30, 2010, “On the transfer of religious property from state or municipal ownership to religious organizations.”⁶

In the early 1990s the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation issued a number of orders directly regulating the process of property transfer to the Church. One of the first documents, Order 15 from January 1, 1991, “On the approval of the expert commission on review and selection of religious cult objects and antiques,” was created to allow for further transfer of relics to the Church⁷. Of equal importance is the declaration of the Soviet Ministry of Culture in June 1991, which established the necessity of the transfer of buildings to the Church, the conditions of their return, and Church guarantees of their maintenance⁸. In 1993 the Ministry of Culture sent all museums, including those in Yaroslavl region, a request “On providing information,” requiring museums to examine their religious collections to identify the objects that could be transferred to religious organizations.⁹

In Yaroslavl region as of early 1994, there were eighty-eight icons listed among museum property to be transferred to religious organizations. In total from 1995 to 1997, special orders from the Ministry of Culture resulted in the transfer of twenty urban and rural churches and monasteries, with all objects in their possession including icons, to the Church in Yaroslavl region.¹⁰

One of the most important documents of the Ministry of Culture in the late 1990s is a letter sent to the executive authorities of territorial subjects of the Russian Federation that obligated them to assume responsibility for the transfer of newly identified religious objects of historical and cultural heritage that were not within federal property¹¹. This meant that the fate of such objects would be decided by the officials in dialogue with their electorate, including those who had newly returned to the Church.

⁵ *Sobranie zakonodatel'stva Rossiiskoi Federatsii* [Collection of the Legislation of the Russian Federation] 1997, 39, 7666-7678.

⁶ *Sobranie zakonodatel'stva Rossiiskoi Federatsii* [Collection of the Legislation of the Russian Federation] 2010, 49, 13689-13697.

⁷ Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv literatury i iskusstva [The Russian State Archive of Literature and Art] (RGALI). Fond 2329. Opis' 33. Delo 176. List 3.

⁸ RGALI. F. 2329. Op. 49. D. 121. L. 83-90.

⁹ Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Iaroslavskoi oblasti [The State Archive of Yaroslavl Region] (GAYO). Fond R-993. Opis' 1. Delo 2434. List 94.

¹⁰ GAYO. F. R-700. Op. 1. D. 62. L. 1, L. 18, L. 29-31, L. 102.

¹¹ GAYO. F. R-700. Op. 1. D. 562. L. 40.

The question of property transfer to the Yaroslavl eparchy was substantially discussed in regional periodicals. A 2004 interview with Kirill, the Archbishop of Yaroslavl and Rostov, “Sacred objects must belong to the Church,” deserves special attention. In the early 2000s this was a pressing topic in the region. Like other members of the clergy, the archbishop insisted that Yaroslavl museum storerooms contained many icons of no artistic value. Speaking about the necessity for transfer of these icons to the churches that had previously owned them, the archbishop referred to the problem of lack of proper security in rural churches and resultant frequent thefts. The archbishop also noted that in the 1990s “many issues were resolved much easier,” while today “we have no irresolvable conflicts with the regional administration,”¹²

The regional press was one of the first to call attention to changes in church-state relations. Since the early 1990s the press covered visits by officials with the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church and eparchies to discuss collaboration between church and state.¹³ A new stage in church-state relations demanded more than friendly meetings. It also required “material” updating, in particular the return of church property that had been nationalized after the revolution.

In regard to the regional practice of transferring sacred objects of cultural heritage to the Yaroslavl eparchy, the early 1990s saw a range of problems primarily related to the perceived threat to the integrity of museum collections, the possible loss of objects, and the unwillingness of regional administration to consider expert opinions. From 1991 to 1996 alone, 13 monasteries, 170 Churches, and 1 chapel were transferred to the Yaroslavl diocese by the regional administration.¹⁴

In 1993 an intense situation between the Yaroslavl museums and the regional Church arose after the Archbishop of Yaroslavl and Rostov requested that the head of administration of the Yaroslavl region A. I. Lisitsyn transfer certain icons from the museums to the eparchy.¹⁵ At the time, the Yaroslavl eparchy owned 16,000 icons. In the 1990s, the regional administration, as a rule, took the side of the Church in

¹² Nikolaev, V. 2004. “Sviatyni dolzhny byt' v tserkvi. Interv'iu s Arkhiepiskopom Iaroslavskim i Rostovskim Kirillom [Shrines Must be in the Church. Interview with the Archbishop of Yaroslavl and Rostov Kirill].” *Temy i litsa*, 4 (84): 8-9.

¹³ See, for example, Skorokhodova, I. 1992. “Vstrecha I. A. Lisitsina i Arkhiepiskopa Iaroslavskogo i Rostovskogo Platona [The Meeting of the Governor of the Yaroslavl Region I. A. Lisitsyn with the Archbishop of Yaroslavl and Rostov Platon].” *Zolotoe kol'tso*, 2 (260): 1; “Za ramkami ofitsialnogo vizita [Beyond the Scope of the Official Visit].” 2006. *Iaroslavskie eparkhial'nye vedomosti*, 178: 7.

¹⁴ GAYO. F. R-700. Op. 1. D. 62b. L. 19-23.

¹⁵ GAYO. F. R-700. Op. 1. D. 116. L. 4-5.

religious property transfers.¹⁶ As a result, in early 1993 a commission formed to address the loan of icons from regional museums to functioning churches in Yaroslavl.¹⁷ During the initial first months of its work, museum employees were pessimistic about the chances for compromise between the Church and regional administration. They stressed to officials that the physical condition of museum icons demanded constant monitoring and precluded their usage in liturgical practice. Museum specialists offered to find alternative means to supply churches with icons, such as the manufacture of new icons in modern icon-painting studios, the purchase of older ones in antique shops, the transfer of seized property, and public donations.¹⁸

As a result of active transfer of icons from regional museums, the employees of the Yaroslavl Art Museum developed and presented a technique of transferring religious artifacts including eparchy-funded conservation and restoration work under the control of the restoration council of the museum, and loans of icons in which the museum retained the right to monitor their safekeeping.¹⁹ In practice these recommendations were followed only partially under certain conditions.

In December 1995 the regional commission decided to transfer one of its most famous Russian Orthodox icons, the icon of the Virgin Mary of Tolga from the Yaroslavl Art Museum to the Yaroslavl Tolga Monastery.²⁰ The Department of Culture of Yaroslavl region prepared an agreement between the art museum and the monastery on the use of the icon, which was transferred in 2003. It should be noted that the experience of transferring one of the most significant relics became a “model” example of church-museum interaction on property transfers. A stationary icon case with armored glass was specially made for the icon. The monastery acquired a device to measure the indoor microclimate. The museum employees exercise regular supervision of the icon.²¹

In 1996 and 1997 Yaroslavl museums transferred a number of icons to the Feodorovsky cathedral in Yaroslavl,²² as well as transfer of

¹⁶ GAYO. F. R-1400. Op. 1. D. 1036. L. 3.

¹⁷ “Khramy vozvrashchaitsa hoziaevam [Churches are Returned to the Owners].” 1995. *Gubernskie vesti*, 12: 1.

¹⁸ GAYO. F. R-993. Op. 1. D. 2435. L. 118-119.

¹⁹ GAYO. F. R-993. Op. 1. D. 2435. L. 107.

²⁰ GAYO. F. R-700. Op. 1. D. 131a. L. 5-6.

²¹ Egorova, T. 2003. “Iz muzeia – v monastyri’ [From Museum – to the Monastery]”. *Iaroslavskaiia guberniia* (Supplement to the *Severnyi krai* newspaper), 57: 1; Stikhareva, Iu. 2003. “Vozvrashchenie domoi [Return to Home].” *Iaroslavskie eparkhial’nye vedomosti*, 09 (147): 6-7.

²² GAYO. R-700. Op. 1. D. 131a. L. 22-24.

the icon of the Virgin Mary of Kazan to the Kazan Monastery.²³ In 2005, twenty-two icons of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were transferred from the Yaroslavl museum and heritage site and the Yaroslavl Art Museum to the eparchy.²⁴ These icons were the last substantial items from Yaroslavl museums that were returned to the Church.

In conclusion, the interaction of regional administration with representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church was one of the important directions of Russian state policy during the transition period of the early 1990s. In this regard, the return of property to the church was a significant step in crafting a new, collaborative relationship. As a result, religious artifacts in museum collections represented an extremely difficult and ambiguous situation, in particular in regard to objects intended for regular church use.

Overall, legislative activity and official policy on the return of property to the Church, in the first post-Soviet decade appeared at the time to serve the goal of “making amends” to the Church to the detriment of many artistic artifacts. The ambiguity of regional government policy on icons and its often unilateral protection of church’s interests provoked conflict between museum employees and clergy over control of the icons. Only toward the end of the 2000s did a relatively quiet and peaceful relationship between representatives of the Yaroslavl eparchy and regional museums begin. Mutual recognition of the necessity for a competent approach to preservation remains an ongoing process.

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²³ “Kazanskaia [The Icon of the Virgin Mary of Kazan].” *Iaroslavskie eparkhial'nye vedomosti*, 233: 12-13.

²⁴ “Vozvrashchenie [Returning].” 2005. *Iaroslavskie eparkhial'nye vedomosti*, 173: 6.

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