GOLD AND BROCADE, ICONS AND IMPERIAL OBJECTS

Some aspects of the history of the collections and museum practices in the Finnish Orthodox Church

Katariina Roivas

Orthodox religion and culture has a rich material heritage, which is indeed most visible in its icons, sacred vessels and church textiles. Globally Orthodoxy has spread among different cultures and taken in some local characteristics in addition to its basic forms. Orthodoxy came to Finland from Russia and is therefore strongly influenced by Russian Orthodox culture and history. The Finnish Orthodox Church was in fact part of the Russian Orthodox Church until the early 1920s. The Orthodox Church museum, situated in Kuopio, was founded in 1957. Nevertheless, museum practice in the Finnish Orthodox Church started earlier. During the period when Finland was a Grand Duchy of Russia, a predecessor of the Orthodox Church museum, the Valamo collection of ancient objects, was founded.

THE VALAMO COLLECTION OF ANCIENT OBJECTS

Valamo Monastery in Lake Ladoga, most probably founded in the middle of the 12th century, became from that date a centre of eastern Christianity in Karelia. The monastery was located in the border area between Russia and Sweden. It therefore eventually suffered during the many periods of warfare between the two kingdoms. At the beginning of the 17th century monks had to escape to the Russian interior when Swedish soldiers attacked the

monastery and burnt it down. Over the next hundred years Valamo stayed deserted until Peter the Great took possession of the Karelia area and ordered the rebuilding of the monastery. The monastery started to grow and by the second half of the 19th century it had become the third largest in Russia.

Over the years the monastery received several valuable objects as donations. These objects were kept in the vestment store and library as some kind of a collection. They were divided into groups according to practices followed generally

100 in the monasteries. A group of treasures included various kinds of objects made of valuable materials, and two other groups consisted of objects which were of spiritual importance or aesthetically antique. In addition, imperial gifts formed their own separate group.

At the beginning of the 20th century the spiritual consistory of Finland¹ suggested that a diocesan museum should be founded at Valamo Monastery. The idea was that the old icons, liturgical vestments, communion vessels, manuscripts and books that already belonged to the Valamo Monastery, and which were kept separated as a collection, would form the basis for the new museum. In addition, an effort was made to collect material from the whole diocese. The spiritual consistory sent several circular letters to parishes and to Konevitsa Monastery encouraging the recipients to send to the museum project objects and literary and pictorial documentation of places and events which were perceived as important from the point of view of Orthodoxy in Finland. Interestingly, parishes were encouraged to take photographs of churches and other places if no previous pictures existed. It was also mentioned that the photographs should be properly documented. The aim of the whole museum project is clearly detailed in the preface to the museum's first catalogue written by a curator of the museum, priest-monk Policarp, and published in 1913. In his preface he states that the aim was to form a diocesan museum of the Finnish Orthodox Church that would illustrate in an interesting way the existence of the Orthodox Church in Finland, not only its past but also its present.

The museum (Fig. 1) was inaugurated in 1911 in the presence of distinguished guests. Soon after this it was noted with disappointment that the collection that was supposed to form a museum of the whole diocese was in fact a museum of Valamo Monastery. The parishes had sent very few objects and documents to the museum in spite of numerous requests. In a second catalogue published in 1924 priest-monk Policarp concludes that only a few of the parishes had sent photographs with satisfactory documentation, some had sent postcards and others had not made any contribution.

The museum was located in the former church of St. Nicholas, which was situated in the monastery's innermost quadrangle. It had three rooms at its disposal. In the first catalogue 200 items were mentioned, but in a later catalogue published in 1924 there were 1,600 numbered objects. In reality the number of items was greater, because sometimes several objects were included under one number. Despite the ecclesiastical nature of the collection being emphasized, only a quarter of the objects were linked directly to the Orthodoxy in Finland. More than a half of the exhibits consisted of a collection of coins and medals², and the rest were paintings, old letters and maps, souvenirs, curiosities and basically anything that was considered interesting and worth exhibiting. One whole collection comprised objects connected with the imperial family. For example, there was a wooden spoon which the Empress Maria Aleksandrovna used to eat monastery food in 1858, a Cavalier Regimental cap and chamois leather gloves which Czar Alexander II wore when he was assassinated in 1881 (Fig. 2), and a

*Fig. 1: An exhibition room at the Valamo Monastery Museum at the beginning of the 20th century.
Photo: The Orthodox Church Museum.*

102 plaster cast made of the Czar's hand post mortem. Naturally, the monastery had received several gifts, such as icons, sacred objects and liturgical textiles from the imperial family, but most of them were placed in the churches where they had originally been used.

The reason why some of the ecclesiastical objects were situated in the museum was that they were considered to be old and rare. Most of these items were from the 17th century and made of various materials. Usually sacred objects were made of gold and silver and textiles were made of silk, gold and silver brocade. The exceptions were two sets of communion articles as one was made of pewter and the other was made of wood. Most of the icons located in the museum were from the 17th century. A collection of manuscripts and printed books is also worth mentioning. One of the most interesting manuscripts was a *sinodik* (commemoration book) that contained in its first pages a 17th century copy of a list of names for intercessory prayer sent by Ivan the Terrible to Valamo in 1583. The list ends with the following words: «Remember, O Lord, even the other men and women of various age who were murdered by the guard and whose names are known only to You, Almighty.»

One part of the collection showed everyday monastic life in the form of clothing and dishes used by the old monks. Moreover, heavy old iron chains and crosses were exhibited at the museum to highlight the hard, physical form of ascetism. Some objects could be called «ecclesiastical curiosities» because they had some kind of religious significance although they were not actually sacred objects that

had any liturgical use. In the museum for instance there was bottled water from the Dead Sea in the Holy Land. It was acquired by priest-monk Markiano on his pilgrimage in 1911. In the exhibition, there were also exact copies of a nail and a spear, reminders of the events of the passion.

It is very likely that the most important influences on Valamo's museum came from St. Petersburg. The second museum of Christian Archaeology in Russia was opened at the St. Petersburg Spiritual Academy in 1879, and consisted of a large collection of ecclesiastical objects. At the Orthodox Church museum there is an impressive catalogue from the Spiritual Academy's collection³, that probably belonged previously to the Valamo Museum. It can be seen from the photographs taken from these two museums that the interiors and displays of objects were very similar.

THE FIRST MUSEUM WORKER IN THE FINNISH ORTHODOX CHURCH

Priest-monk Policarp (Pjotr Schorin) was the first curator of the Valamo collection of ancient objects which was opened in 1911. Like most of Valamo's monks, he was born of a peasant family in the governance of St. Petersburg. According to the archives of Valamo monastery, he had no education but yet it is mentioned that he was able to read Holy Books and sing when he entered Valamo as a young man in 1894. Six years later he became a novice, then in 1909 he was ordained a hierodeacon and in 1910 a hieromonk. At the beginning of his monastic life, he worked as the monastery's housepainter and gardener and he also participated in the servi-

*Fig. 2: Cavalier regiment cap and chamois leather gloves belonging to Alexander II, 19th century.
Photo: Vesa-P. Takala, The Orthodox Church Museum.*

ces probably as a reader and singer before his deaconhood. Later, his obedience works included supervision of the monastery's correspondence and the management of its finances. He was also named as the sole supervisor of the collection which means that he was responsible for all functions of the museum. His duties in the museum profession expanded in 1912 when he was appointed a member of the Diocese historical and archaeological committee. Monastic duties also took him outside the Valamo islands, to St. Petersburg and to Moscow. As a priest-monk he served as father confessor in Lintula Convent located in Karelia. During his monastic career he received

several marks of ecclesiastical recognition.

When Finland became independent in 1917, Valamo Monastery became a part of a new republic in spite of its close connection to Russia. Behind the eastern border the turbulent tides of revolution turned Russia red under the Bolsheviks. In Finland nationalistic sentiments increased in society as well as in the Orthodox Church. Needless to say, everything connected with Russia was viewed with suspicion, a fact which caused many problems for Valamo and other monasteries in the Finnish territory. Most of the monks were Russian, the language used in the monastery was Russian and thus questions concerning the canonical status of the Finnish

104 Orthodox Church and changes in the Church calendar were extremely problematic⁴. These political events and the tense atmosphere among Finnish Orthodoxy also determined the life of hieromonk Policarp. In the Valamo Monastery's archive we can find some correspondence between Valamo's hegumen (leader of the monastery) Pavlin and priest-monk Policarp, who had been in Russia when the borders were closed and was unable to leave and return to Valamo. During this time he stayed with relatives in Izhora, near Petrograd. It is apparent that the letters were not sent by regular mail but were delivered by different people. The reason for this was that Valamo's monks were regarded as questionable by the Finnish authorities, and the monastery's correspondence was therefore regularly inspected.

In the year 1922 hegumen Pavlin wrote to Policarp that the President of Finland had granted him Finnish citizenship, and that the monastery was trying to arrange a permission for him to leave Russia as a foreigner. Policarp returned to Valamo with great difficulty in early October 1922 and continued his monastic duties there. An anonymous article directed against Policarp personally was published in a newspaper called «Karjala» in May 1925. In the article he was accused of intrigue and circulating propaganda. The hegumen and the monks wrote a reply to the article stating that it was libelous and an intentionally ugly lie, but the newspaper refused to publish their letter. The Finnish Authorities took action against Policarp expelling him to Soviet Russia on 17 October 1925 where he was apparently executed⁵.

THE WAR YEARS 1939-44

The outbreak of the Winter War between Finland and Russia in November 1939 led to the development of a dramatic situation in Karelia and Petsamo. Most of the population were evacuated to inner Finland, but some people in the villages near the border were captured prisoners of war. This also happened in northern Finland, where the monastery of Petsamo was not evacuated. There were no plans for the evacuation of the congregations' property and the deans of Karelian churches tried to save archives and ecclesiastical objects with the help of the soldiers. Archives were packed in various boxes, sacred objects and books were gathered in potato sacks, icons were sawed into smaller pieces and nailed together in order to get them loaded and transported. Most of the objects were sent to Kuopio to be stored in various ways.

The evacuations of the Konevitsa and the Valamo monasteries were more successful. At the beginning of the war the most valuable objects had already been safely packed and transported from the islands over the ice with the evacuees. The Valamo collection of Ancient Objects was evacuated with the monastery's other property fairly efficiently, even an inventory was included. A branch of Valamo museum was established at the monastery of Konevitsa in the 1930s. Although much of the monastery's property was saved, including the articles at the museum, identification of these objects became difficult due to the lack of any inventories.

The war ended in March 1940 and many evacuees returned to Karelia and

Petsamo where they found their homes and churches destroyed. A new war started in 1941 and lasted until 1944, when victory for the Soviet Union seemed imminent. The peace with the USSR established Finland's current eastern frontier, which meant that a considerable part of the country's former territory was lost. The losses to the Finnish Orthodox Church were particularly extensive, amounting to about 90% of its property while two-thirds of the Orthodox population became homeless evacuees.

THE ORTHODOX CHURCH MUSEUM

After the war Kuopio became a centre for the Finnish Orthodox Church. During the 1950s thousands of refugees were resettled all over Finland and a law about rebuilding the Orthodox Church was passed. New churches were built throughout Finland and, as stipulated by the law, the ecclesiastical objects which had been evacuated from the lost area were distributed to new congregations. The Archbishop's secretary, protodeacon Leo Kasanko did most part of this enormous job. He also drew attention to the condition of the objects that had been kept in inadequate and temporary storage. When he drew up a plan for the distribution of objects, he left a number of items to be located in the new museum. Consequently, Leo Kasanko became the first curator of the Orthodox Church Museum, which was opened in the three-room basement of a Rectory House in the autumn of 1957.

The Valamo collection of ancient objects formed the basis for the collection, but now only ecclesiastical items were put on display⁶. A significant collection of

sacral objects and church textiles came from Konevitsa monastery and also from other ceded areas in Karelia and Petsamo. It is worth mentioning that the objects remained in the monastery's ownership although they were located in the museum. In general, the objects which were selected for the museum were considered to have significant historical, cultural and artistic features. Their continued liturgical use could no longer be justified because of their age and condition. The display in the central room was designed to be church-like and its aim was to capture the atmosphere of a village church in East Karelia (Fig. 3). In this way, the museum exhibited Eastern Christian religious art. It also attempted to shed light on Orthodox practices and rituals.

The Orthodox Church Museum moved to its present location at the end of 1960s, when a new central building for the Finnish Orthodox Church was completed. At the same time, its collections received a great number of objects from the newly located Valamo Monastery. The board of the monastery decided to place a significant part of its property in the care of the museum. The most important part of the collection was formed by the objects transported from New Valamo to Kuopio. Most of the objects date back to the 18th and 19th centuries with a few older exceptions. The variety of the objects is also noteworthy, because the collections include a rich variety of material culture connected with Orthodox religion and ritual. Another significant feature is the historical unity of the objects. Nearly all the items are connected with the history of the Finnish Orthodox Church and its monasteries and parishes in Karelia and Petsamo.

Fig. 3: A model church at the Orthodox Church Museum in 1957.

Photo: Istvan Rács, The Orthodox Church Museum.

Cultural and historical values are emphasized by the fact that the places where these objects originated were destroyed and lost in the Second World War.

SACRED OBJECTS AT THE MUSEUM

Generally when an object is placed in a museum context, it is considered that it will remain there permanently. As a consequence the object seems to lose its principal function, which then becomes its history. In the case of Orthodox sacral objects the situation is more complex. One significant feature is that the objects retain their sacred nature and function in spite of being in a museum. In post-war circumstances, a museum was considered to be the best place in which to relocate the most precious objects evacuated. Nevertheless, it was clearly stated that these objects were deposited in the museum and if, for example, the monasteries were

to be reorganized in the future, it would be possible to return liturgical objects to them.

This is exactly what occurred in the 1970s. The monastic community of Valamo was rebuilt in Heinävesi, where a new church was completed in 1977. The monastery had many icons and other liturgical objects, but many of the items were moved from the museum collections to the new monastery church. For instance, the icon of Jesus Christ the Lord Almighty that was originally evacuated from Karelia and located in the museum, was set on an iconostasis along with an icon of *Mother of God of Tihvin* that had also previously been in a museum. In the Rectory Museum the icon of Christ had been on display and in the new museum it was hung in the main hall, opposite the entrance. Actually, it was the first exhibit that a visitor saw upon entering the museum. The picture of that icon was also

used on the cover of a museum catalogue and in a way it had become a symbol for the Orthodox Church Museum⁷. The fact that it was returned to its original function as a liturgical object in spite of its central position in a museum makes it clear that from the ecclesiastical point of view the principle context, i.e. liturgical use, is considered to be superior to a museological context. It may appear strange that objects can alternate between museological and primary contexts but this is possible because the object's actual identity and its connection to its Orthodox context do not vanish as a result of the musealization. The advantages of this conception are quite apparent when we compare this viewpoint to the so-called museum problem and questions about the alienation and decontextualization of museum objects.

In the current situation, the Finnish Orthodox congregations, Valamo Monastery and Lintula Convent, have in their possession a large number of liturgical objects which were evacuated from the lost areas of Finland and relocated to new churches. Although the majority of evacuated objects were distributed onwards during the 1950s, the Orthodox Church Museum has an extraordinary collection of objects which are located in the museum. Nowadays, one important task for the museum is the study and preservation of this material heritage, which includes not only its own collections but also those owned by other ecclesiastical institutions. The museum actively disseminates knowledge to congregations about the maintenance and preservation of objects⁸. In fact, the situation is in practice quite close to the idea of a decentralized museum.

TRADITION AND MUSEOLOGY

Tradition is one of the elementary concepts in Orthodox religion and culture. In general, it denotes the cultural inheritance that passes from one generation to another. Its aim is to protect and maintain the immaterial and material heritage of the eastern Christianity. In other words, it concerns the ideas, values and ecclesiastical practises that belong to the religious culture. The Orthodox attitude towards sacred objects is based on their canonically determined status⁹. Their identity is therefore by tradition based primarily on their ecclesiastical function. According to the church fathers and the statements of the synod, a traditional approach towards one's own culture is active and positive.

Indeed, when examining the motivation for tradition it appears to be very similar to the cultural motives studied by museology. They both aim to create cultural reality and maintain its values and mentality by re-conveying knowledge about cultural values back to society. Furthermore, museality is considered to possess a specific documentary value related to the need to preserve selected objects. In other words, it is connected to a value-based relationship between man and object. It is quite evident that none of these ideas are problematic in Orthodox practise. On the contrary, from the Orthodox point of view the essential religious values and meanings of objects increase their documentary value.

The collections of the Orthodox Church museum can be seen in many ways. Icons and other items made of precious materials can be viewed as art treasures with an artistic and economic value. They are also

108 evidence from the past reflecting the life of lost churches and monasteries. In a way, they are relics from the past and they share a mutual history with thousands of evacuees. In addition to artistic and historical values, they are inseparable from the Orthodox tradition. This living tradition ties them not just to the past but also to the present.

The article is based on the author's seminar paper «Museotoimintaa Suomen ortodoksisessa kirkossa» which was prepared as a part of Museology studies at the University of Jyväskylä in May 2000.

NOTES

1. The Finnish Orthodox diocese was part of the Russian Church when Finland gained its independence in 1917, and declared itself autonomous in 1918. The Patriarch of Moscow recognized this autonomy in 1921. Final separation from the Russian Church occurred in 1923, when the autonomous Orthodox Archbishopric of Finland came under the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople in 1923.
2. A considerable part of the collection was comprised of a donation given to the monastery by V. M. Obrastchov, who worked for 40 years as treasurer of the Imperial Art Academy.
3. Presently, there are no actual studies available on the Valamo collection of ancient objects or priest-monk Policarp's museum work. The information about Policarp's biography is based on data from the Valamo monastery archives located in New Valamo, Heinävesi. The information was kindly brought to the author's attention by Archimandrite Sergei, Hegumen of New Valamo.
4. Later the icon of Christ was located in the rearranged winter church of Uusi Valamo and the icon of Mother of God of Tihvin was returned back to

Orthodox Church Museum.

5. At present, there are no actual studies available on the Valamo collection of ancient objects or priest-monk Policarp's museum work. The information about Policarp's personal history is based on data from the Valamo monastery archives located in New Valamo, Heinävesi, and was kindly brought to the author's attention by Archimandrite Sergei, hegumen of New Valamo.
6. Due to financial difficulties, it was decided that the Cavalier regiment cap and the Chamois leather gloves belonging to Alexander II were to be sold. An American buyer, Mr. Jules Higier who owned a glove factory and a private glove museum, was found. Eventually, the selling of these items never took place, because the ministration of the Orthodox Church forbid it. The museum project was financed with the help of contributions and partly by selling two silver bullions that were donated to the museum by the Konevitsa monastery.
7. Later the icon of Christ was located in the rearranged winter church of Uusi Valamo and the icon of Mother of God of Tihvin was returned to the Orthodox Church Museum.
8. The Valamo Art Conservation Institute also carries out this work.
9. The Ecumenical Council in 787 condemned the heresy of iconoclasm and at the same time defined the church's attitude towards icons and other sacred objects. The statements of the Synod affirmed the earlier established custom of using icons, church textiles and other liturgical objects.

Katariina Roivas is an icon painter and a student of Art History and Museology at the University of Jyväskylä.

*Address: Department of Art History, University of Jyväskylä, PL 35 (A), FIN-40351 Jyväskylä, Finland.
E-mail: kroivas@st.jyu.fi*