Authenticity in the revival of Orthodox ecclesiastical embroidery in post-Soviet Russia

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ABSTRACT The Russian Orthodox Church, together with the skills and practice of ecclesiastical hand embroidery, was undermined during the Soviet period of 1917–1991. The late 20th-century revival of ecclesiastical embroidery was possible because of the work of conservators and historians in museums in Russia who ensured the preservation of both the artefacts and the understanding of their ecclesiastical use. This paper focuses on the idea of the authenticity of these new embroideries, which is sought by the embroiderers as a key attribute to assert in relation to other types of ecclesiastical textile production. The case study provides a vivid example of the importance of authenticity and how it is invoked.

Introduction

This paper explores the nature of the ‘real thing’ by examining the authenticity attributed to embroidery made for use in the Russian Orthodox Church in the post-Soviet era. This ecclesiastical embroidery (tserkovnaia vyshivka) has two names according to the techniques and materials used: metal thread (zolotnaia) and pictorial (litsevaia). The latter term derives from the word lik meaning face, image or representation, and is closely related to the art of religious illustration as in the illustrated biblical chronicles (litsevy rukopisi) and to icons. The roots of this embroidery originate in the 10th century with Russia’s acceptance of Christianity following Byzantine traditions (Mayasova 2004). Production was undermined during the Soviet period of 1917–1991 when atheism was central to the state-imposed ideology of communism. ‘Unpicking’ how this new embroidery has gained the attribution of authenticity is at the centre of this paper which argues, first, that this emphasis on authenticity manifests the Russian Orthodox Church’s central, but contested, position in Russian society and, secondly, that women have played an important role in constructing the perceived authenticity of this revived Orthodox art form.

Interviews with embroiderers and conservators conducted by Luba Dovgan Nurse in Russia in 2006 provide the primary source for this research.

Revival of the Russian Orthodox Church and embroidery

The Soviet period, with its ideology of atheism, reached a crisis point in the 1980s that has been characterised as ‘a disintegration of the social groups and institutions, a break up of people’s identification with former social and cultural values and norms … loss of the state’s monopoly of official values, and
citizens’ growing trust in the Russian Orthodox Church coupled with their loss of faith in the Communist Party (Lapin 1992: 10). Informal social networks and countercultures, including those of the Orthodox Church, became a form of social response to the so-called ‘spiritual vacuum’ (see, amongst others, Ellis 1986). Women in particular took an active role in Orthodox religious practices during the Soviet period (Anderson 1993). The persistence of religious belief in this period despite the state’s policies has been discussed by several authors (such as Ramet 1993). The 1990s saw a restructuring of the relationship between the state and women, and the rapid creation of new social and professional roles available to women, including within the Church.

These new roles came about as a result of the political and economic reforms of the 1990s. One of these was the ‘Law of the USSR on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organisations’ (1990) that ended atheism as state ideology and acknowledged the equality of all religious confessions (Codevilla 1991). The revival of the Russian Orthodox faith, among other religions, was demonstrated by the number of churches opened. Ecclesiastical embroidery was revived initially in response to the rapid increase in demand for liturgical artefacts by these newly built and restored churches. The 1990 law gave registered religious organisations the right to set up educational establishments. Workshops specialising in hand embroidery were established under Church patronage or as part of theological educational institutions. Embroidery in these workshops is carried out by women and has acquired the label ‘traditional embroidery’.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union (1991), the Orthodox Church’s prominent social and political role was reinforced by the 1997 Federal Law, ‘On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations’, which stressed ‘the special role of the Orthodoxy in the history of Russia, in the establishment and development of its spirituality and culture’ (Federal’nyi Zakon 1997: Preamble). This law, and the expansion of the Russian Orthodox Church’s power, has been opposed by the dissident Orthodox movements, and criticised by many as an attack on freedom of conscience and the rights of other religious and secular institutions (Lekhel 1999).

**Researching authenticities in Orthodox ecclesiastical embroideries**

What definition of authenticity is appropriate for the analysis of authenticity in the context of this form of religious art? The connection with icons, which have a central and well-defined functional role in liturgical services in Orthodox Christianity, is significant. Pictorial embroidery comes with a strong aesthetic tradition characterised by its two-dimensional plane, inverse perspective (the vanishing point for creating perspective is located outside of the image, in the viewer), and conventional, symbolic representations of objects and figures accompanied by inscriptions identifying those represented. At its heart is the belief that the prototype (i.e. the holy figure) is present in the image: for example, there is a presence of Christ in the image of Christ. This presence is bound to the object by adhering to the established canons guiding the forms and rules of representation. These embroideries, like icons, can be understood as material representations of the immaterial. Authenticity attributed to ecclesiastical textiles used for veneration and liturgy thus rests on the theological ideas and an understanding of religious rituals. Such views have had a prescriptive effect on Orthodox embroidery.

The development of the Russian Orthodox aesthetics supposedly ceased with the Communist Revolution of 1917. During the period of the state’s repeated attacks on religion, limited production of ecclesiastical textiles was restricted to monasteries, which retained relative religious freedom. Under severe repression, adherence to religious aesthetics was masked as secular. A priest’s stole made in a forced labour camp serves as an example here. This was made in the shape of a secular false shirtfront, embroidered with
geometric patterns in cross-stitch, to mask its ‘true’ religious function which is to signify the priest’s power to serve the Eucharist.4

While the teaching and the aesthetics of this form of art are familiar to religious and secular audiences in Russia, such familiarity cannot be taken for granted outside the country. This study of the perceived authenticity of newly made ecclesiastical embroidery is therefore based on analysis of materiality (valued features of techniques and producers) and language of ecclesiastical embroidery production.

The Russian adjective podlinnyi (authentic) is used to explain the values assigned to Orthodox embroideries at different points in history, and is a property attributed both to persons and objects. It has three meanings: original and not a copy; someone or something that is genuine, not an imitation or fake; and that which is true in essence (Slovar Russkogo Iazyka 1999).

Language and the ‘real thing’

The starting point for this research was Eastop’s teaching on ‘Textiles as Metaphors’,5 which drew on Tilley’s insight that culturally salient artefacts may function as material metaphors (Tilley 1999). Often ‘taken for granted’ in the context of their use, their meaning is experienced; it does not need to be articulated in words. The value of ‘experiencing’ is important because Church Slavonic remains the primary language of Orthodox services. This is known to the celebrants but is only understood by those contemporary Russians who regularly attend services or study it independently.

The metaphorical impact of elaborate vestments is shown in the following analysis of ecclesiastical cuffs embroidered with scenes of the Annunciation and explanatory inscriptions from the Gospel of Luke (Fig. 1). Two types of meaning transfer occur simultaneously: metonymic and metaphoric. Metonymic transfer occurs when a part stands for the whole: the text of ‘Annunciation’ (part) stands for the Bible (whole), and the pointing ‘hand of God’ represents the divine being. When the priest wears the embroidered cuffs, his hands may be understood as standing for the divine. A short prayer is read as clergy put on each vestment prior to a service. The prayers for the cuffs are:

**Right hand:** ‘Your right hand, O Lord, is glorified in strength. Your right hand has crushed the enemies. In the fullness of Your glory You have shattered the adversaries’ (Exodus 15:6–7).

**Left hand:** ‘Your hands have made me and have fashioned me. Grant me understanding and I shall learn from Your commandments’ (Psalm 119:73).

The role of the vestments as material metaphors for the transfer of divine power is evident. These cuffs demonstrate what Tilley calls ‘metaphoric condensation’ of primary and secondary meanings that would require ‘an entire string of different linguistic metaphors to accomplish’ in words but is achieved in an unspoken, condensed form by the cuffs in ritual use (Tilley 1999: 263).

**Authenticities explored**

This research suggests that contemporary Orthodox embroidery gains authenticity via the following three main attributes:

- by being made for veneration;
- as a form of religious art that is handmade and thus viewed as a form of prayer;
- by reference to historic textiles as models.

**Made for veneration**

Orthodox textiles with pictorial embroidery can be grouped into four main categories according to their functionality in church services and worship: icons, shrouds and palls (Figs 2 and 3); the clergy’s vestments (Figs 1, 5 and 6); veils used in the Eucharist service to
Figure 1 Diagram of ecclesiastical cuffs, embroidered with scenes of the Annunciation and inscriptions in Church Slavonic. (a) Proper left cuff. The ‘Hand of God’ is represented by a ray of light. Inscription above the image reads: ‘Annunciation’. Inscription below the image reads: ‘I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me’. (b) Proper right cuff. Inscription above the image reads: ‘Blessed Mother of God’. Inscription below the image reads: ‘as you have said’ (Luke 1:38). Based on the cuffs produced by the workshop of the Sretensky Monastery, Moscow. (Image courtesy of Olya Mikhailova.)
cover the bread and wine that signify the body and blood of Christ, and veils for the altar table; and banners.

Sacralisation of these artefacts happens through the rituals and can be understood by the degree of physical access that the public are allowed and by the eventual disposal of these artefacts by the Church. With icons, shrouds and palls, contact with the venerated happens through the embroidered visual representation. Tomb palls are used to cover tombs containing human remains of a venerated saint. The material presence of the venerated saint is extended with the help of the pall bearing the saint’s portrait. The congregation interacts with the shrouds by praying, looking, touching and kissing them. Two shrouds made accessible for veneration by the laity once a year include the Easter shroud of Christ, representing the body of Christ, and the Dormition shroud of the Mother of God, representing the body of the Mother of God (Figs 2 and 3). Anointing oil (myrrh, as in the preparation of Jesus’s body for burial) aids the somatic perception of Christ’s shroud. Multiple layers of fabric that are seemingly flat, despite the raised embroidery, create artefacts that are soft and pliable and that carry the evidence of their use by absorbing the oils from hands and myrrh.

Vestments are kept in the vestry, which is either a separate room or a locked cabinet inside the sanctuary. Access to them is restricted to the clergy and, via the clergy, to people charged with their maintenance and cleaning. Eucharistic veils are kept inside the sanctuary and are used during the services only by consecrated clergy. Banners, when not used in public processions, are displayed for visual veneration high up above the klirodes (areas for singers and readers), located on both sides of the iconostasis (a wall of icons separating the nave from the sanctuary).

**Figure 2** Shroud of the Mother of God, 2009–2012, 145 × 90 cm, workshop Ubrus, St Petersburg. Silk and metal thread embroidery. Inscription in Church Slavonic reads: ‘In giving birth you preserved your virginity. In falling asleep you did not forsake the world, O Theotokos. You were translated to life, O Mother of Life, and by your prayers, you deliver our souls from death’ (troparion for the Dormition of the Mother of God). (Image courtesy of Ubrus workshop.)
Truth to materials: making sacred things

The active revival of hand embroidery, instead of printing or painting on textiles, suggests that the material properties of embroidery, as well as the process of embroidering, are as important as the images. The importance of the newly made embroidered textiles being ‘true’ in their materials, both aesthetically and theologically, is exemplified by the use of gold and yellow silk threads that carry the meaning of immaterial and divine illumination through the association of Christ with sun and light (Malachi 4:2) (Figs 2 and 3).

Treating the embroideries as sacred begins from the initial material selection and is completed by their official consecration. Unlike mass production when the fabric is first embroidered and then cut up in order to assemble the piece in parts, the production process of hand-embroidery workshops is designed to make one object in its entirety. All leftover fabric pieces and threads are disposed of in the reverential manner applicable to the disposal of holy images. It is not known whether the same practice is carried out by the mass producers of ecclesiastical textiles.

For smaller pieces, embroiderers work individually. Large objects are worked on collectively but with the aim of making the embroidery look as if it was ‘done by one pair of hands, by one person,’ that is, a higher value is
placed on the mastery of collective skills within the group (Fig. 4). This principle of community in spirit and in work suits the production of large hand-embroidered textiles that take years to complete.

The expression ‘embroidery is prayer’ (vyshivka e to molitva) is used by embroiderers and circulated by the popular Orthodox press. This can be understood as a ‘structural metaphor’ that structures one concept in terms of another by the association with similar body positions, emotions and entities (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 14). Prayer is the discipline of ‘attaching the name of Jesus to one’s breath’ (St John Climacus cited in Meyendorff 1982: 170), and requires concentration helped by the conditions of ‘quietness, solitude and regularity’ (Palmer 1977: 17). Monastic life, which has a history of using embroidery as a form of obedience, offers these conditions. The recreation of a monastic environment is mentioned by some workshop embroiderers as an ideal, and the same conditions of quietness, solitude and regularity can be seen in the act of embroidery. The metaphor of prayer is evident in images shown in the Orthodox Church press of an embroiderer seated, holding a needle (Darina 2006). Quietness is communicated by showing the seated body with hands occupied by the work; concentration is suggested by the fine work produced and the need to count stitches. This creates what Turner calls ‘a cultural realm’ where time has a different quality, thus underpinning the public perception of the authenticity of the newly created artefacts (Turner 1982: 24).

Figure 5 Mitre, crown height 16.5 cm, width 22 cm. Final degree project by Olga Fishchuk, assisted by the embroiderers of the Moscow Theological Academy, Sergiev Posad, 2009. Wool felt foundation covered by cotton velvet and silk, silk and metal thread embroidery, pearls. Inscription reads: ‘Return, we beseech thee, O God of hosts: look down from heaven, and behold, and visit this vine; And the vineyard which your right hand hath planted, and the branch that you made strong for thyself’ (Psalm 79:15–16). (Image courtesy of Olga Fishchuk.)
The tensions imposed by the ethical framework of the traditions and by the iconic canon demand a disciplined approach to material and techniques. This struggle over collective aesthetics, hidden under the guise of an individual’s spirituality and vice versa, helps to show the influence exerted by the embroiderers over the process and its outcome, and enables the resulting embroidered textiles to be positioned as genuine.

Truth in production: making by hand

Following the economic freedoms of the 1990s, demand for liturgical artefacts generated a considerable response. Numerous producers of machine embroidery and printed textiles came into existence, competing with Sofrino (established in 1949 and owned by the Moscow Patriarchate), the largest enterprise producing church commodities. Interviewees stressed the importance of making artefacts that they see as original and genuine, in contrast to the proliferation of mass-produced artefacts that are seen as devaluing religious aesthetics. Their emphasis on the making of singular, unique embroideries lies behind continuing efforts to reconstruct ancient techniques using as models historic textiles in museum collections.

Like icon painters (Uspensky 1976: 25), hand embroiderers use distinct techniques for the creation of faces, hands and other uncovered parts of the body, referred to as ‘personal’ (lichnoye), and vestments, landscapes and surroundings, referred to as ‘preceding the personal’ (dolichnoye). Freestyle split stitches are used for depicting the former and a variety of counted surface stitches and laid and couched stitches are used for the latter. This careful selection of stitches distinguishes machine- and hand-stitched embroideries. Machine embroidery is capable of producing high quality work that could pass as hand-stitched, counted, and laid and couched embroidery but is unable to compete with the quality and scale (as small as 2 mm) of split stitch reserved for the faces and bodies.

The materials and stitches used, and the importance of capturing the true essence of the person represented govern the order in which the stitching proceeds. Faces and bodies (lichnoye) are embroidered first to avoid tensioning the fabric. This order reverses that used in icon painting and helps to demystify the stereotypical idea of strict canons of religious art production. In contrast to counted and laid and couched-stitch embroidery, freestyle split stitch in silk thread has no constraints as ‘the size and direction of the stitch can be varied at will to suit the maker’s pattern’, although the quality of the resulting work depends greatly on the embroiderer’s skill (Ellis 2001: 9). The facial expression of the depicted saint is controlled by the angle and size of the stitches and requires great skill to achieve the desired effect. This is recognised as the most difficult part of the production process, technically and emotionally, as is indicated by the practice of unpicking errors noted below.
Truth to canonic representation

The making of singular and unique works within the framework of the iconic canon is seen as the true living tradition of this art form. The importance attributed to the image resembling the prototype is seen in the occasional unpicking of the embroidery of the face if the result does not match expectations. Some workshops argue against producing copies of historic textiles, viewing such copies as artefacts that, although may be technically exemplary, lack contemporary understanding of the represented image and in their view are artefacts that are ‘empty of essence’. The illusive ‘spirituality’ of the produced work is viewed as its true ‘essence’, a quality attribute of this form of religious art, capable of instigating a spiritual, emotional response in the viewer. The spiritual power of these works is viewed as an outcome of both the technical ability and the spirituality of their makers.

Traditional Russian Orthodox Church practices for the preservation of liturgical artefacts and icons are aimed at maintaining their functionality resulting in restoration and renovation. The integrity of the image of the represented saint, in particular the face, is what makes the icon functional. When the face is lost due to wear or damage and is considered to be beyond restoration, the artefact bearing the holy image is withdrawn from circulation by burning or burial to avoid risk of sacrilege. However, some historic textiles have been preserved, such as those serving as relics that are substitute artefacts standing in for the venerated saint, those linked to a noble donor and those of exceptional aesthetic and material value.

Figure 7 Altar frontal, Christ Enthroned with Mother of God, St. John the Evangelist and Metropolitan of Moscow St Iona and St Kiprian, 2006–2008, 164 × 102 cm. Drawing by M.S. Agafonov, embroidery workshop of the Moscow Theological Academy, Sergiev Posad. Fabric, silk and metal thread embroidery, pearls, amber, garnet, tourmaline, lapis lazuli, jade, citrine, silver. Inscription reads: ‘We venerate Your most pure image, O Good One, and ask forgiveness of our transgressions, O Christ God. Of Your own will You were pleased to ascend the Cross in the flesh to deliver Your creatures from bondage to the enemy. Therefore with thanksgiving we cry aloud to You: You have filled all with joy, O our Saviour, by coming to save the world’ (troparion for the Feast of the Triumph of Orthodoxy). (Image courtesy of the embroidery workshop of the Moscow Theological Academy.)
Truth to tradition: collecting and preserving

The preservation of ecclesiastical embroidery as documents of history grew out of the religious and sumptuary reforms of Peter the Great (ruled 1682–1725) and with the establishment of private and state collections in the early 18th century. Aleksandrova-Dolnik provides a case study of a 16th-century shroud that underwent extensive cycles of restoration by the Church while in use and the decision processes of the State Restoration Workshop which was charged with its preservation in the 1920s (Aleksandrova-Dolnik 1926).

Historic textiles serve as models for the newly created works providing references for techniques, construction and aesthetic style. The importance of knowledge transfer between museum professionals and embroiderers was stressed by all the embroiderers interviewed. One such collaboration was the 2004–2010 project by the Moscow Theological Academy’s embroidery workshop to reconstruct a particular diagonal solid infilling stitch found in some ecclesiastical textiles of the 15th and 16th centuries (Figs 7 and 8). It drew on the work of textile conservator Tamara Aleksandrovna Goroshko (Sergiev Posad State History and Art Museum-Reserve) and the expertise of Nina and Nadža Osipovy, embroiderers at the Trinity Lavra of St Sergius in Sergiev Posad since 1984, who have a background in folk embroidery, a tradition that continued during the Soviet period (Biriukova and Fishchuk 2009).

The historiography of ecclesiastical textiles and their interpretation and preservation in Russia points to the long tradition of collaboration between embroiderers and museum professionals (Semechkin 2011). It also helps in understanding how the values attributed to the embroideries have changed over time. In the 1920s, the ideology of aggressive atheism justified the confiscation of religious artefacts as the economically stranded new state saw the artefacts’ only value to be their weight in precious metals and stones, resulting in their artistic value being downplayed. At the same time, museum specialists of this period campaigned for the preservation of the nation’s cultural heritage in its totality, including its religious heritage, in anticipation of the ‘complete reconstruction of state and social order’ (Grabar 1919).

Many of these specialists belonged to what the Bolsheviks called ‘former people’ (byvshye), that is members of the old relatively privileged classes or ‘old cultural intelligentsia’, a network of highly educated and skilled social groups upon which the new political system came to depend (Koenker et al. 1989). Among the staff of the State Restoration Workshop were embroiderers who were formerly nuns at the disbanded Voznesensky convent, which was responsible for the restoration of textiles from the Kremlin collection prior to the Revolution. The role of this restoration workshop in establishing the foundation for textile restoration in the Soviet Union and in developing the next generation of restorers has been emphasised by Ermakova (2006: 16).

Throughout the Soviet period, the official ideology and its mechanisms of censorship affected the freedom of interpretation of religious artefacts by the museums. Ecclesiastical embroideries were, with some exceptions, interpreted as decorative arts by art museums although their interpretation by museums of atheism is unknown. It is possible that the Orthodox counterculture mentioned previously recognised the ‘true’ significance of such artefacts despite the politically correct museum labels.
Conclusion

‘Authenticity’ can be a useful concept in analysing changes in significance over time that respond to contemporaneous political, social and economic environments grounded in prevailing ideologies. The initial premise of this paper was that the authenticity ascribed to contemporary pictorial ecclesiastical embroidery is based on links made between theology and aesthetics. However, additional aspects of authenticity, achieved through materiality (materials and making) and referencing historic textiles, have been demonstrated. Analysis of materiality and production techniques helps to understand how the newly created embroidery is ascribed authenticity. These new authenticities rely on the stability of the iconographic canon and the preservation of historic textiles.

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Notes

1. Russian words have been transliterated according to the Library of Congress system. Translations from Russian into English are by Dovgan Nurse, unless stated otherwise.
2. Interviews with workshop heads as follows: Elena Katasonova, Ubrus; Vera Kazarina, Pokrov; Irina Kesler, Sodeistvie; Marina Biriuikova and Olga Fischuk (former pupil), Moscow Theological Academy; Irina Kachanova, senior textile conservator, Kremlin Museums. See Dovgan Nurse 2006.
3. Parish numbers rose from 6,893 in 1988 to 19,000 in 2003; monasteries increased from 8 in 1980 to 480 in 2003 (Knox 2005: 6).
4. The priest’s stole was displayed in a touring exhibition in 2012, Neperemolotye Opyt dukhovnogo soprotivleniia na Urale i Russkom severe v XX veke (The Unground: Experience of Spiritual Resistance in the Urals and the Russian North in the Twentieth Century), initiated by the Preobrazhensky Community of Smaller Orthodox Congregations. Two expressions serve as submerged metaphors that convey the meaning of ‘the unground’. The first is ‘when the corn is milled, we will have some very fine flour’ (peremeletsia, muka buдет). The second is the name by which the repressive system of the state is known colloquially, ‘the meat grinder’ (miasorubka).
5. D. Eastop, ‘Textiles as Metaphors’ lecture from the course Anthropology of Cloth, Master’s programme, History of Textile and Dress, University of Southampton.
6. I. Kesler, the head of the workshop of the Orthodox Humanitarian Institute Sodeistvie, Moscow, personal communication, July 2006.
7. V. Kazarina, the head of the workshop Pokrov of the Priory of the Konstantino-Elenensky Monastery, St Petersburg, personal communication, July 2006.
8. E. Katasonova, the head of the workshop Ubrus of the Priory of Optina Hermitage, St Petersburg, personal communication, July 2006.

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