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New Forms Of Sacrilege

The Icon: Between The World And God

The icon, a cult image of the Eastern Orthodox Church, has been studied from many different perspectives, all of which fail to grasp the phenomenon as a whole. Can we all agree that it is not simply a picture—a mere portrait of a saint or an event presented according to principles stated more or less precisely in the hermeneiai (icon painters’ manuals)?

Theologians stress that an icon is much more than an ordinary object. The shortest definition could be that an icon is some kind of a membrane, maybe even a window between the worlds of heaven and earth. It enables two-way communication: on the one hand, the person standing in front of the icon can communicate with the depicted saint. As Saint Basil the Great stated in a letter to his protégé Amphiloehius of Iconium (which iconophiles often quote), “the honor given to the icon passes to its prototype.” On the other hand, through that window, saints can influence the earthly world where those who pray live. Ideally, characters appearing on icons are some kind of miraculous and always two-dimensional projections of archetypal characters—heavenly prototypes.

After the period of iconoclasm, when the supporters of icons were victorious, the Byzantine concept of an image was clearly defined. The discussions were mostly intended to distinguish between an icon and indisputably prohibited idols: icons must be respected, but they must not be objects of adoration. Although we certainly do not

see an icon as the place where a saint or deity resides (in contrast to an idol), popular religiosity has often given certain icons such treatment. Icons were often claimed to act like living beings: if hurt, they bled. In some cases, they cried or even acted as guarantors in court proceedings. In one instance, an icon took over the function of the Mother Superior of a monastery on Mount Athos. Endangered by iconoclasts, the famous icon of Madonna from Constantinople went on its own to Ostia, like a ship or, even better, by emulating Christ’s walk across the surface of water. It found itself in Rome, with only its lower edge being soaked and marked with sea salt after the transfer. Secretly scraped matter from the surface of the icon served as a natural health product, which made it quite like a relic.

In his introduction to the study of the history of painting before codification of the fine arts, Hans Belting summarizes the social position of the icon: “[the icon] not only represented a person but also was treated like a person, being worshipped, despised, or carried from place to place in ritual processions: in short, it served in the symbolic exchange of power and, finally, embodied the public claims of the community.”

In Luis Buñuel’s autobiography, there is a much later example of personalization of a cult figure from the western end of the Mediterranean cultural zone. During one extremely dry year in ever-dry Aragonia, when dark clouds gathered over Buñuel’s native village, the villagers organized a huge procession to beg the sky for a downpour. But when the clouds dispersed before the procession ended, the participants “got hold of Madonna’s statue at the front of the procession and, while crossing the bridge, they threw it into the Guadalupe River.”

Apart from the status of an icon as an object, its liturgical purpose, or the complexity of questions about the social role of holy images, there is also the issue of style, which is important to art historians. In the last thirty years, the icon has become a favorite of collectors. They point out its unusual appearance and, thanks to a certain kind of stylization, an educated person in the West will not confuse an icon with other old pictures. For Romans or Byzantine Greeks (or Byzantines, as some call them by mistake), the images on the iconostases and church walls were not unusual or rustic: they were the only possible way to decorate churches. When in 1438 the delegation of the Patriarchate of Constantinople attended the Council of Ferrara-Florence, Patriarch Gregory objected to the reunification of the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox

6 Greek-speaking descendants from the eastern part of the Roman Empire.
7 The ecumenical council at which the Roman Catholic and Greek church hierarchies tried to overcome their doctrinal differences and end their schism.
churches. Among other arguments, he gave the cult of images as an example: “When I enter a Latin church, I cannot pray to any saint because I recognize none of them. Although I recognize Christ, I cannot pray to him either because I do not recognize the way he is presented.”

It is important to acknowledge the origin of icons in the ancient art of portraiture. Even the root of the word, eiko, is Greek for “I am like.” Therefore, an icon can be described most simply and without mystification as a portrait. Even so, pictures of the saints gradually moved toward idealization and a generalization of iconographic types. However, common people still believed these were accurate representations. The Third Council of Constantinople (869–870) declared that those who reject icons would not be able to recognize Christ on the day of the Second Coming. Therefore, they defined a system of archetypes and templates in the creation of cult images and icons. No deviations were allowed. Originality was considered a sacrilege. Christ’s face had to be rendered as on the Mandylion. For the Madonna, the portrait painted by Saint Luke was the model. And so on.

Apart from the canonical obligation to copy good prototypes, icon painting in Byzantium was preserved under Turkish rule. Still, it was not immune from global trends in art. The traditional model of the icon was gradually infected with elements of the Baroque and illusionism, so that at one moment sacral art completely stepped out of

8 Belting, Likeness and Presence, 1.
10 The Mandylion—an icon of Christ’s face not painted by hand—comes from a medieval legend that Christ once wiped his face with a napkin and the napkin retained an imprint of his face more accurate than any painter could make. The name of this icon type comes from the Byzantine Greek word μανδύλιον (mandúlion), meaning napkin. See Svetlana Pejić, “Mandilion u poslevizantijskoj umetnosti” [The mandylion in post-Byzantine art] in Zbornik Matice srpske za likovne umetnosti [Collection of Matica Srpska for the Fine Arts], nos. 34–35 (Belgrade, 2003).
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traditional parameters. The last traditional zographs\textsuperscript{11} seen by contemporary experts were made by masters from a few Macedonian families that had been producing icons for generations. They explained the end of their craft as the process of “ruining” those standards which today’s public finds incomprehensible due to the entropy of good templates.\textsuperscript{12}

Only in an epoch sufficiently distant from initial and then canonically frozen principles could new discussions about the style of the Orthodox Church’s cult images occur. Most interesting was the debate about the “Orthodoxy” of iconography during the transition from Romanticism to Realism in Serbian art.\textsuperscript{13} The period after World War I in Serbia was marked by an upswing in the fine arts which broke from pre-war tendencies. Among the many contrasting movements and phenomena in architecture and painting, one group of artists stood out: they advocated a return to the old forms of art, or at least they looked there for inspiration.\textsuperscript{14} Stratification in the artistic scene finally separated art created for religious needs into a separate field. There the return to Byzantine norms was completely clear.

One must add that after a multitude of Russian painters skilled in the traditional Byzantine manner arrived in Yugoslavia, wall paintings of better or worse quality appeared in a large number of churches, all conforming to canon law. These painters confronted difficult challenges when they had to fit contemporary elements into images that were supposed to be timeless. A quite bizarre case can be found on the walls of a village church in the area of Mount Rudnik in central Serbia: next to a saint painted in the Byzantine manner, there is the donor, a rich twentieth-century industrialist living in the capital but born in that area. He is dressed in a tailcoat with a top hat and shoes with spats, accompanied by his wife and daughters in ball gowns. A similar and even better known case of clashing codes of representation is in the mosaics of the Karadjordjević royal dynasty’s endowment on Oplenac.\textsuperscript{15} Among the mosaic copies of medieval frescoes, there is a composition with the donor, King Peter I Karadjordjević. The effect of this anachronism is lessened by the fact that the king is also dressed in a non-contemporary way: he wears an ermine fur coat, atypical for his time.

\textsuperscript{11} Traditional Orthodox painters of icons. The word comes from the Greek ζωγραφος (painter).
\textsuperscript{12} Svetozar Radičić, “Zografi, O teoriji slike i slikarskog stvaranja u našoj staroj umetnosti” [Zographs: On the theory of image and painting in Serbian Old Art], Zograf, no. 1 (Belgrade 1966), 4.
\textsuperscript{13} The texts of the discussion are found in Lazar Trifunović, Srpska likovna kritika [Serbian art criticism] (Belgrade: Srpska likovna kritika, 1967), 87–140.
\textsuperscript{14} Lazar Trifunović, “Stara i nova umetnost, Ideja prošlosti u modernoj umetnosti” [Old and new art, the idea of the past in modern art], Zograph, no. 3 (Belgrade, 1969), 39.
\textsuperscript{15} Oplenac is a hill in the town of Topola where the royal family’s mausoleum was built.
Differentiating Icon from Idol

Representation was not the main issue in the period that historians define as Byzantine Iconoclasm. The main issue was the proliferation of cults.

Icons were intermediaries between people and God. In the Eastern Roman Empire, church and country were fully interconnected: In the Byzantine Empire, political and religious orders were mixed, and that mix was created through ceremony and ritual. A ritual that consisted of a set of symbolic forms proved that the world as it was (sociopolitical) and the world as it was imagined to be (religious) were in fact one. Therefore, the ruler’s role was important because he was God’s representative on earth—that is, an intermediary between God and the people, as well as between the sociopolitical and religious worlds. In other words, he was quite like an icon himself. This was shown in the way visual representations of both saints and rulers functioned in their cults and consequently in society.

Often there was an inversion: the living emperor had to take on some aspects of a picture. He had to sit motionless in the reception hall. During an audience, a curtain was opened and closed in front of him. Some travel writers also state that on certain occasions, the platform in which the throne stood was raised and lowered with special mechanisms, to display the ruler more impressively.

Of course, the rise of radically iconoclastic Islam near Byzantium cannot be ignored. Symbolic presentations of Christ were forbidden by the Council convened by Justinian II in 692—which, paradoxically, made figurative art and icon veneration thrive, provoking a crisis of imperial authority. It went so far that the defense of Constantinople from the Arabian siege in 717 was unanimously attributed to an icon of Madonna, not to Leo III the Isaurian, the emperor who would introduce iconoclasm nine years later.

The year 726 is considered the formal beginning of the iconoclastic period. Leo III ordered the removal of an image of Christ (probably an icon on wood or a mosaic panel) from its prominent place above the main entrance into the Great Palace. Then

18 Anthony Bryer and Judith Herrin, eds., ICONCLASM—Papers given at the 9th Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, Centre for Byzantine Studies, 1975). This is the most complete collection of studies in chronological order and an anthology of original texts which became one of the most stimulating in the whole history of Byzantium.
he had it destroyed and replaced by a crucifix.\textsuperscript{19} It was no coincidence that the first manifestations of iconoclasm happened at this place. Belting says:

In an image, a person is made visible. It is completely different with a symbol. One can register one’s presence with a symbol but without the help of an image which offers both appearance and presence. Where God is present, the emperor cannot represent Him.\textsuperscript{20}

Replacing Christ’s picture with a crucifix can only be understood in the context of other social developments at the time—namely, other efforts to remove figurative representations from the Christian cult. These, however, did not produce major social disorders, nor did they create a movement, let alone cause a wave of icon destruction. It seems a combination of historical circumstances brought success and a relatively long duration to the iconoclastic movement.

A few monuments have retained traces of the deliberate destruction of old figurative pictures until the present day (or at least until contemporary historians could study them), such as the Church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople and one in Salonica, as well as the Church of Assumption in Nicaea, now gone. Nevertheless, we cannot fully determine the true level of destruction due to iconoclasm. Based on written testimonies, we know that portable icons were burned, chalices melted, miniatures from illustrated books were cut out, and mosaics scraped off the walls or simply covered with plaster. Still, those actions did not seem to have a comprehensive character since some representations from the patriarchate—the very center of the iconoclastic movement—were only removed forty years after they were banned.\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{19} There are no precise data about this incident, but based on an analogy with the documented action after a short iconophile period in December 814, a crucifix probably replaced Christ’s image in both incidents.
\textsuperscript{20} Belting, \textit{Likeness and Presence}, 9.
Subsequent iconophile texts portray the whole iconoclastic movement as heretical, and the destruction or removal of icons as sacrilege. Visual evidence of this attitude can be found in the drawings which illustrate the Chludov Psalter (made around 830). One illustration that stands out shows iconoclasm as comparable to the crucifixion of Christ.\textsuperscript{22}

As already mentioned, debates about the use of images in cults produced a precise theory of icons. The church gave so much significance to the triumph of figurative representation that the date of victory over iconoclasm was declared an Orthodox holiday and is still celebrated in local churches. This victory resulted in a range of legends about the miraculous powers of holy images and the virtues of those who resisted their destruction or died defending them. And thus the names of new saints were added to the church calendar.

The attributes and principles of Byzantine art remained long after the empire disappeared. However, the specific symbiosis of empire and church also disappeared. Perhaps most surprisingly, some cult aspects of holy images migrated to social formations that were intent on abolishing religion.

**Profane Icons: A Socialist Innovation**

After the October Revolution in Russia and the emergence of the first resolutely atheist state in 1917, many hundreds of monasteries and churches were closed all over the newly founded Soviet Union. Many of them had workshops or small manufactories for icon creation. In the new social environment, their products became not only unnecessary but unwanted. Iconographers who neither managed to get to the West nor died in the revolutionary turmoil found a new outlet for their skills: Palekh. The style (named for the village in which it first developed in the 1920s) applies mainly to wooden objects covered with paper maché and lacquer, painted in intricate and colorful detail—something like a souvenir insecurely rooted in folk traditions.\textsuperscript{23} The themes illustrated in Palekh are mostly from old Russian fairy tales, but one could also find scenes celebrating the triumphs of socialist construction. With their composition, colors, and even ornamentation, Palekh repurposed the motifs of “hagiographic” icons. Palekh workshops even created monumental wall paintings for public buildings similar to what had previously decorated churches.

\textsuperscript{22} Maria V. Shchepkina, ed., *Miniatyury Khludovskoy psaltyri* [Miniatures of the Chludov Psalter] (Moscow, 1977) in Russian.

\textsuperscript{23} N. M. Zinoviev, *Искусство Палеха* [The Art of Palekh], 2nd edition (Leningrad: Khudozhnik RSFSR, 1975).
In Soviet Russia, the whole body of religious motifs went through a broad transformation. They not only appeared to be, but substantively were, creations from Palekh workshops. Of course, traditional icons were an essential source of imagery but not the only ones. New potentates were well aware of how deeply rooted religion was in the Russian people and it was natural to use some of the existing frameworks for political purposes. The first who wrote about this was Nikolai Berdyaev, a Russian philosopher of religion between the two world wars.24 Later an extensive literature appeared, more or less based on his premises. It expanded after the fall of real socialism in the Soviet Union and the countries of Eastern Europe.

The exploitation or misuse of religious references was not without precedent. Even the last Romanovs and many pretenders to the Russian throne before them commissioned portraits in the style of icons to appeal to the Russian people. In his famous history of Russian culture, James Billington claims that during the rule of the former theologian Stalin, icons did not continue to live as inspiration for creative art. Instead they became a model for mass indoctrination. Lenin’s pictures in factory “red corners” and public places replaced icons of Christ and the Virgin Mary. Photographs of Lenin’s successors were placed in a well-regulated order, both left and right from Stalin,

replacing the Deisis where saints were put in a well-established order on both sides of Christ on the throne.  

Based on the system of transferring idols, this practice spread to the countries that introduced socialism after World War II. One of those states was the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

Possibly the best sublimation of para-religious motifs into the figure of a Soviet leader can be seen in Nikita Mikhalkov’s film *Burnt by the Sun*. In the film’s final scene, a gigantic face of Stalin painted on a canvas resembling a sail or the Mandylion is raised by a balloon and flown over the Russian landscape. Flying over sunny fields

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with its frontality and mysterious smile, Stalin's representation here approaches a type of Pantocrator.\(^{26}\)

In portraits of the new communist potentates, one of the first things that can be seen is a source filtered through the concept of an icon: the ancient imperial portrait. Just like icons of later periods, imperial portraits were the subject of special and very precise legislation. Sent to provinces, they literally replaced the figure of the tsar. People were supposed to show them the same respect they would show the actual person.

As already noted, icons developed as a tradition in the Eastern Roman Empire, which was a highly ritualized society. The socialist countries were also highly ritualized, but of course, they differed from societies whose spiritual backbone was Christianity. After a short interruption, the ideologists of socialism realized how deeply rooted icons and rituals were in public consciousness. The new socialist governments knew it was pointless to reject the possibilities these cult manifestations offered for shaping public opinion. So they adapted and used some of the familiar patterns: they created secular versions of almost all the rituals that had marked life in the pre-socialist period. The ceremony of “giving a name” in Soviet society was a kind of profane baptism. Acceptance into the Young Pioneers replaced the first Communion. Civil marriage ceremonies took many elements from former church weddings.

Countries in the former socialist bloc tried to emulate Soviet practices in many fields, sometimes producing strange caricatures. For example, at the end of the 1960s, Bulgaria founded a state commission for rituals. According to reports in the Serbian newspaper \textit{Politika}, they established the first concrete measures to realize the idea of rituals and symbols as important emotional elements in patriotic communist upbringing. The Council of Ministers decided that the executive committees of national

\footnotesize{\textit{Figure 1.6. “Almighty” Stalin—the final scene of Nikita Mikhalkov’s film Burnt by the Sun (1994).}}

\footnotesize{\textit{26} The Pantocrator is a depiction of Christ as ruler of the universe, one of the earliest and most common concepts in the decoration of Byzantine churches. “Pantocrator” might be translated as “all-mighty” or “all powerful.”}
councils, along with labor unions and the committees of the Fatherland Front and Komsomoł should adopt measures to expand, strengthen, and popularize new civic rituals connected to the important moments in people’s lives—birth, marriage, death, etc. They directed national boards to provide suitable rooms and professional staff for organizing ceremonies such as civil marriages, the naming of new-borns, etc. Architects were told to create special facilities for these rituals in administrative buildings, cultural centers, study halls, and elsewhere. The Ministry of Finance and the People’s District Committee would provide funding for these activities in their annual budgets. Also, orders were given to open special shops where people could get the supplies needed for these rituals. The government committee for art and culture was obliged to enable the creation of works of art, music, and literature to give form and meaning to these new civil rituals.

In the Yugoslav practice, there were no explicit examples of standardization. Still, over time, not only the calendar but certain categories of civic ritual iconography emerged. Apart from those already mentioned, there was a ritual of vital importance in Yugoslavia: sending one’s son to the army. In rural areas, this rite would last a few days, as if it were a wedding. Celebrations of national holidays in socialist Yugoslavia (which affirmed the legitimacy of the state, as in any other country) incorporated some practices from abandoned traditions.

The cult of relics (very closely related to the cult of icons) also gained profane analogues. The remains of the father of “real socialism,” Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, were mumified. First, a makeshift temple was constructed, then the permanent mausoleum on Red Square. Lenin died in his home in Gorky Park on 21 January 1924. More than a year before this event, Lenin’s health started to deteriorate. The right side of his body was paralyzed, he lost the power of speech, and he had terrifying hallucinations. Therefore, as early as October 1923, amid political intrigues and the fight between Stalin and Trotsky over who should succeed Lenin, there were already discussions about where to inter the leader of the world proletariat. Stalin was the first to come up with the idea of embalming him. In a speech to top party leaders, he noted that “comrades from the provinces” would not understand if Lenin were cremated because that was not a Russian custom. Some party leaders suggested that modern science should be able to preserve his body for a while, “at least as long as we need to get

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27 The youth organization for spreading the teachings of communism.
used to the idea that he is no longer with us.” Trotsky criticized this as “the replacement of Sergiy Radonezhsky’s and Saint Seraphim of Sarov’s relics with Vladimir Ilyich’s.” Bukharin agreed with that criticism, saying it would be an insult to Lenin to turn his body into a relic (he had asked to be buried). Kamenev believed there were better ways to preserve Lenin’s memory. He suggested that St. Petersburg should be renamed Leningrad. Stalin was in the minority in this argument but in the end, things turned his way. (The same happened in his fight for power.) There is no doubt that Stalin saw embalming as a good way to hold the interest of the primitive masses and portray the regime as Lenin’s caretaker. And of course, the para-religious cult of the founder of the state was a way to strengthen his own power.30

The cult of relics and the establishment of a link to older mythic histories take an even more grotesque form in societies like North Korea. As the daily press reported,31 for the permanent resting place of Kim Il-Sung, the recently discovered tomb of Tan-Gun, the mythical founder of the Korean nation, was chosen. As Korean children learn at school, Tan-Gun was born from the mating of a tiger with a she-bear who lived in a cave filled with garlic cloves. Among sculptures and glass cases with the remains of Tan-Gun and his wife, there would also be a specially-created glass case with the body of “The Great Leader.” A new spiritual/technological experience would be offered: the Korean leader’s body would be positioned to give visitors the impression it was floating in the air. Vapors of a special liquid hidden in the lower part of the display case would make annual repairs of the mummy unnecessary.

30 This discussion, as well as many other details about Lenin’s embalmment, were reported by the son of one of the experts who preserved the body. His father and colleagues apparently turned their connections and experience into a business, preserving the bodies of leaders of other Communist countries, and eventually finding new clients among Russia’s mafiosi. Ilya Zbarsky and Samuel Hutchinson, Lenin’s Embalmers (London: Harvill Press, 1998).

31 Based on reports from a Korean news agency and Reuters, quoted in the Serbian daily newspaper Borba, 6 September 1994.
A bizarre and less known transfer of religious toposes is also connected to Lenin’s mausoleum. When Stalin died in 1953, Lenin’s eternal resting place in Red Square became the home of both leaders—at least for a while.

Stalin’s cult of personality started to deteriorate in 1956 with Khrushchev’s famous secret speech at the 20th Congress of the Soviet Union’s Communist Party. At a later party congress, when the campaign against Stalin had advanced, a female delegate announced that Lenin had come to her in a dream and confided that he was embarrassed to lie next to someone who had inflicted so much misery on the party. That gave the Congress an incentive to take Stalin’s body out of the Mausoleum and bury it in the Kremlin Wall Necropolis in 1961. This case is quite atypical for the twentieth century, even more so in a society that considered itself the embodiment of dialectical materialism. But it was consistent with a range of Christian legends. There are many stories of saints who came to people in visions and dreams with specific instructions on how to act.

Processions were also re-established in socialist societies but under a different name: parades. Apart from the line that connects them to the special tradition of military parades, they also had a clear pseudo-sacral dimension. In such exhibitions of “Gesamtkunstwerk” in the street, pictures and models of leaders were carried on special standards like those used to carry icons in communal religious processions. Mausoleums of leaders and places of important victories marked by public monuments became places of pilgrimage.

Figure 1.8. The eternal house on Red Square in Moscow that Lenin and Stalin shared—at least for a while. Stalin’s body was transferred only when an instruction came from Lenin in a dream. This picture was published in 1931 as a postcard, now in the collection of the Children’s Postcard Museum in Moscow.

33 Maguire, The Icons of Their Bodies, 12–15, 42, 44.
34 The German word for creative work where different artistic media are combined in a single coherent form.
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As in Christianity, in the para-religious cult of communism there were also heretics, those who strayed from the canonical path defined at party congresses. In photographs—historical documents—those who were thought to have betrayed the revolution were made to disappear by retouching. This phenomenon, described in literature, for example, by the Czech writer Milan Kundera, had its roots in the distant past. Apart from examples from ancient Egypt, another that is especially interesting and surprisingly close to modern practices is a family portrait of Septimius Severus created around 200 CE, now in the collection of Berlin’s Altes Museum. On it, the face of Geta, one of Septimius’ sons, has been scratched out and covered with excrement. As his brother Caracalla ascended the throne, Geta was condemned to damnatio memoriae.

The Icon in Serbia’s Post-Socialist “Popular Awakening”

Yugoslav socialism was considered “something in between.” At least this is what Yugoslavs believed. At any rate, it differed from the Soviet and Eastern Europe patterns, so visual manifestations of the cult of the ruler and the use of his icons were somewhat different as well.

The image of Josip Broz Tito, “the president with an unlimited mandate,” was omnipresent but not too obtrusive. (This description, quoted from the Constitution, could mean he is still president—more than two decades after his death—since his mandate was not limited by death, as we can conclude from a strict reading of this phrase.)

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36 Belting, Likeness and Presence, 106. Damnatio memoriae in Latin means “condemnation of memory,” indicating a person to be “disremembered”—that is, excluded from official accounts.
In addition to being represented in images, there were also concessions to iconoclasm: the word “TITO” was created by arranging blocks of limestone or by planting seedlings on mountain slopes. It was also written on factory facades as well as on public and private buildings. The display of Tito’s pictures in classrooms, courtrooms, hospitals, military barracks, and offices had become customary, even though the first legislation on the use of his image occurred relatively late, in 1977—in other words, while Tito was still alive.

Another law dealing with the same issues was passed after his death by the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia [SFRY] Assembly on 26 September 1984. Its exact title was “Law on the Use of the Name and Likeness of Josip Broz Tito.” Unlike the first one, the more recent law stipulated prison sentences. It replaced “customary” and “voluntary” implementation with the obligation to exhibit images, and forbade the use of his likeness, name, or signature as trademarks. This can be viewed as a final codification of a ruler’s iconic representation—in this case, Tito’s.

This law was not in force for long. And the manner in which his images disappeared discreetly or, more often, noticeably and in a well-organized manner could be a subject of study in the context of historical iconoclasm.

The way Josip Broz Tito was buried in May 1980 also differed from the norms of other countries in the socialist bloc. Despite later press speculations about a 1980 proposal that Tito’s remains should be embalmed, it is evident this was not what the party leadership had in mind, even for a single moment. This is confirmed by reports of the medical council. Their daily records of the last months of Tito’s life were printed on the front pages of all Yugoslav newspapers to support the notion that an autopsy was not necessary.

And so Tito’s body did not become yet another product of the best supplied biochemical laboratory in the Soviet Union, Moscow’s Institute of Medicinal and Aromatic Plants, where a team was responsible for the preservation of Lenin’s “mummy.” Their list of accomplishments includes the preserved bodies of Georgi Dimitrov (Bulgaria’s leader), Klement Gottwald (East Germany’s leader), Hồ Chí Minh (North Vietnam’s

39 The pro-regime daily newspaper Politika published in 1991 (when Slobodan Milošević was in power) the news that a gigantic monument of Tito created by Frano Kršinić had been removed from the square in the Serbian town of Užice. The news coincided with the start of the removal. But during the process of removal, they found that the bronze figure was anchored more strongly than expected, so removal of the sculpture was postponed to the following day. Borba commented on this incident in “Politika izlazi u susret željama svojih čitalaca” [Politika fulfills the wishes of its readers].
40 Aleksandar Ćirić, “Punjeni komunisti” [Stuffed communists], Vreme (Belgrade: 8 August 1994).
leader), Agostinho Neto (Angola’s leader), and other giants of the international workers’ movement.

Nor was a smaller replica of the mausoleum in Red Square built for Tito in the center of Belgrade, as was done in Sofia for Georgi Dimitrov. Nevertheless, despite the distance from the Soviet model, we cannot say the House of Flowers (Tito’s mausoleum) has no clear connection with ancient history, although officials presented it as an almost arbitrary choice for a tomb.

The burial of “common” people on their property or in a home garden instead of in a public cemetery is a custom that persists in some parts of the Western Balkans. Janko Maglovski, probably the only researcher so far to observe the House of Flowers through the matrix of sepulchral customs, concludes it isn’t a grave of some ordinary person on his land (the land on which the House of Flowers was built wasn’t Tito’s property, but that’s another subject). By burying a heroized person in a new grave, a locus profanus [a profane place] became a locus religious [a holy place]. Clearly, such a place would become a pilgrimage site, as was obvious to anyone who knew Belgrade in the 1980s. This location created a triangle: “the court,” “the treasury,” and “the grave”—an archetypal spatial arrangement that can be traced back to the Old Testament.

The display of pictures of Tito wearing civilian clothes or one of his many martial uniforms was hardly the only form of cult behavior established during his lifetime. Perhaps even more important was the annual—or more precisely—the springtime mix of pilgrimage and procession called the Relay of Youth. This state “Juvenalia” coincided

41 Slobodan Milošević is buried in the garden of his family home in Požarevac.
43 In this case, “the court” is Tito’s residence at present day 15 Užička Street (previously named Rumunska Street) in the most luxurious part of Belgrade, Dedinje. It was built as a family house by architect Aleksandar Acović in 1934. Tito moved into it in October 1944 after Belgrade was liberated from the Germans in World War II. Since then, it has been thoroughly reconstructed twice. The whole “Memorial Center” was radically reconstructed when Slobodan Milošević moved in with his family after he became the President of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. When NATO missiles hit it in the spring of 1999, this carried strong symbolism and was interpreted by the regime as an assassination attempt. The second point of the triangle—the treasury—could be either the Museum of Yugoslavia or Villa Mir [Peace House]. The Museum of Yugoslavia (also known as 25 May) was built in the early 1960s to store the presents Tito received. It probably has the largest collection of relay batons in the world. Villa Mir is a circular house officially called the “Memorial collection.” It was built in the late 1970s as Tito’s new residence, adapted for his old age. Tito never moved in (he died before it was completely finished), but Slobodan Milošević did after his house on Užička Street was demolished. He was arrested in this building in the spring of 2001, in the presence of a small number of his “defenders” and a large number of photojournalists who tried in vain to capture this moment. The third point—the grave—is of course the House of Flowers.
with Tito’s proclaimed birthday (proclaimed because the date was chosen for celebrating Tito’s birthday among several dates given in his documents, even though 25 May was not among them). The ritual that culminated in a grand show in a football stadium changed through the decades. Its changing form meant that the federal relay (which replaced numerous local relays in the early years) created a certain “mystique of touch.” It was a symbolic connection among the celebrant’s subjects who would hand over the relay to the next carrier, thus connecting the whole country and emphasizing the unity of its regions.

Ideological inertia enabled these processions to continue even after Tito’s death. Nearly a decade later, a thoughtful and highly sophisticated art provocation ended this custom. When, according to the established plan, it was Slovenia’s turn to host the Relay of Youth in 1987, a group called “New Collectivism” (part of the “Neue Slowenische Kunst” movement) won the design competition. They created a relay baton that looked nothing like traditional batons and weighed several kilos, which made it completely unsuitable to carry in a race. The relay was publicized with a poster which turned out to be a repackaged Nazi poster, as the ideological committees found out too late. That scandal marked not only the end of a long tradition—and foreshadowed the end of Yugoslavia as a federation of diverse republics—but it was also the only serious and well-grounded action of radically critical art in Yugoslavia during the 1980s.

Despite the lengthy development of Tito’s cult in multiple contexts, and regardless of the two laws on uses of his image and identity, Yugoslavia’s socialist “self-gov-

44 Pejić notes that in celebrations of Youth Day before 1980 images of Tito were rarely included, since the “original” was present. After 1980, the practice of substituting visual representations for the original began and over the years these became larger. Pejić, “Tito, ili ikonizacija jedne predstave,” 114.
1. New Forms Of Sacrilege

government" never built a consistent set of rules concerning the social role of visual representations of this important icon. The two laws regulated the use of Tito as a trademark more than they gave clear directions regarding the place of the ruler’s portrait in society.

This lack of clarity persisted into the following epoch of a new leader, Slobodan Milošević. Yet apart from the lack of ideological direction in the marginal field of political iconography, the Milošević era has been characterized as an “anti-bureaucratic revolution”—or, as one writer called it, “a happening of the people”—marked by a complete lack of ideology concerning all aspects of society. Instead of ideology, there were simulacra. Thus, at times it looked like the main social concept was nationalism, but at other times it looked like a renewal of communist patterns. In reality, survival of the ruling circle was all that filled the void space for ideology.

Such a society quickly left its imprint on the arts. This was most visible in architecture, the art most directly connected to the social fabric. Since Yugoslav society didn’t have any guiding idea, architecture didn’t either, as it reflected the country of the time, including the suddenly generated capital of war profiteers. Serbian architecture in the era of Milošević was permeated by kitsch, primitive new-money projects that were highly eclectic and self-deluding in the belief that they belonged to the postmodern idiom. Entire neighborhoods of Belgrade were full of buildings with newly added top floors and Corinthian columns affixed to concrete facades—an accurate portrait of Serbia in the 1990s.

During the war which officially “didn’t even exist” but which left countless ruins and massive civilian casualties, urban development quickly devolved into chaotic local conflicts with ever-changing goals. This was obscured by a return to the importance of icons—especially the return of the ruler’s portrait as a cult image, as well as the renewed popularity of religious icons in secular public spaces. Because Marxist parties were officially atheist, religious icons had been sequestered for decades in religious institutions and the privacy of believers’ homes. As was the case in earlier times in many Eastern European countries, icons now had a role in reinforcing the collective identity: they were timeless in style and content. More importantly, they were clear signs of a wish to differentiate the countries that had an Orthodox heritage from “the West” and emphasize a certain kind of ethnic authenticity.

Enlarged icons, together with the leader’s image, became essential elements in mass meetings aimed at establishing a new government. Similar icons with the same function also appeared in mass meetings of the opposition parties. What is interesting is the interaction between two types of icon. In Serbia in the late 1980s, not only could one see pictures of Slobodan Milošević and religious icons next to each other on the dashboards of trucks and cars, but one could also find them in people’s homes,
where a cresset was hung between a photograph of the President and a picture of the family saint.

Applying religious practices to profane images or to the leader’s pictures took other forms as well. This photo shows a woman kissing a photo of Slobodan Milošević in the same way that a believer would kiss an icon in an Orthodox church. The picture was taken in Belgrade in December 1996, at a Socialist Party event presented as a spontaneous manifestation: the regime wanted to show that they, and most importantly the leader, still had the people’s support despite months of protests against the Party’s theft of the most recent election.

There are also scenes from the early days of Milošević’s rule when people supported him more strongly. At the “Rally of Truth” in Belgrade’s Ušće Park, one could see a para-religious trance recorded by a television camera: In an act of intimization of the ruler’s picture which even a medieval king would envy, an old woman danced the waltz with a framed portrait of Slobodan Milošević.

The return of the icon as a traditional cult image with a clear sacral purpose in the social environment was a new kind of misuse—a sacrilege not seen before that time. This sacrilege had different forms but common to all of them was that the instigators got the attention they wanted, profiting their cause as if these icons were propaganda tools.

In a strict sense, an icon cannot be separated from its liturgical function, so one might consider it a sacrilege even to display an icon in a museum, or to create it without a spiritual purpose.

Yet sometimes icons were displayed in places totally at odds with Christian moral principles. For example, the tradition of putting pictures of saints on war banners.

45 A cresset is a cup suspended as a lantern which holds oil or wax that can be lit for illumination.
Saint Andrew, patron of the Karadjordjević dynasty (Serbia’s royal family), appears on regimental flags of the Serbian Army.

On Bulgarian banners, the Mandylion showing Christ’s face appears with the inscription “God is with us.” Though it may be hard to determine whose side God is on when armies praying to the same God clash, the use of icons on military banners recalls an even older tradition—the military use of religious insignia like Constantine’s labarum.46

However, such traditions don’t justify one paramilitary formation’s wall calendar published during the 1990s war in Bosnia—the unit called “Mandy’s Lions” from Ugljevik. There one can find two icons for each month along with more than 80 group and individual portrait photos of the members of this not-so-large formation. Careful examination shows that all the photos were taken on the same day, and the same combatants appear in mutually exchanged uniforms, in different poses, and with different weapons. The members of this paramilitary unit are presented on the calendar as if they were models. The icons also have an inappropriate function—to give this little-known paramilitary group some “spiritual credibility.” This kind of sacrilege isn’t unique: starting in the 1990s, icons were used on wall calendars to advertise many different products. This is just a particu-

46 The “labarum” was a military standard which displayed the “Chi-Rho” symbol, an early “christogram.”
Figure 1.14. Icons as the warrior/models’ “heavenly pledge,” below the center of a calendar created by “Mandy’s Lions,” a paramilitary unit from Ugljevik.
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larly drastic example. The most frequent kind of sacrilege is trivialization.

In the last decade of the second millennium in Serbia, holy images or icons could be found on ballpoint pens, key rings, badges, notebook covers, cigarette lighters, and menus. The distribution of what an increasing number of iconographers create (often crudely copied from ancient designs) went from car hoods to bookstores. During the 1990s in Belgrade, there were almost no bookstores without at least one icon in the window—either painted by hand or photoprinted. And so the images to which one regularly paid special respect in churches and homes were increasingly found among scandalmongering publications and video cassettes with dubious content.

The social ambiance where an icon becomes a souvenir, something “authentic” to offer foreign visitors, is typical not just in Serbia. It is common in all post-socialist countries where Orthodox Christianity is the dominant religion. In the gift shop of the monstrous monument to Nicolae Ceaușescu’s megalomania—the People’s House (more about it in the following chapter)—which is almost a necessary destination for tourists visiting Bucharest, one cannot buy any brochure or book about that monument, or the people who ordered its construction, or Romania under the Ceaușescu couple. Not even a postcard. The only objects awaiting buyers in the glass cases are icons.

But probably the peak of icon misuse, as well as a completely new type of sacrilege, was their appearance on beer labels. One could almost say that to print an icon on a wine label would be less sacrilegious. Here are two examples of icons on beer labels. First is a reproduction of the White Angel from the “Myrrh Bearers” fresco in the thirteenth century monastery of Mileševo. The other shows a contemporary icon of St. Ilija (Elijah) reprinted without much skill on the label of Slavsko Piva, produced by Beogradska Industrija Piva (BIP). Those who put icons on beer labels surely wanted to establish some connection between this drink and national customs and traditions. But this is a false claim since beer brewing in Serbia is a modern import, not from the time they want to evoke.
In the societies of the “Byzantine Commonwealth,” icons were important symbols of faith inseparable from the liturgy. Therefore, one must wonder what an icon on a beer label symbolized in the context of Serbian society in the last decade of the second millennium. It was a society without any code of political behavior, marked by an ad hoc ideology based on elements completely lacking in depth and meaning. Therefore, everything was possible in it and nothing mattered. So, an icon on a beer label could be seen as just another juxtaposition in a vast matrix of arbitrary coincidences. However, if we put this phenomenon in a traditional matrix, we can see that mediation between the spiritual and material worlds takes place between beer drinkers and some imagined tradition. The ritual by which this symbolic exchange takes place is getting drunk.