

# Ol'ha Ryzhova. Ikonopys u khudozhnii kul'turi Kyieva kintsia XVII-XVIII stolit': Monohrafiia [Iconography in the Artistic Culture of Kyiv at the End of the Seventeenth and in the Eighteenth Centuries: A Monograph]

John-Paul Himka

Volume 8, numéro 2, 2021

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1083573ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.21226/ewjus684>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies University of Alberta

ISSN

2292-7956 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Himka, J.-P. (2021). Compte rendu de [Ol'ha Ryzhova. Ikonopys u khudozhnii kul'turi Kyieva kintsia XVII-XVIII stolit': Monohrafiia [Iconography in the Artistic Culture of Kyiv at the End of the Seventeenth and in the Eighteenth Centuries: A Monograph]]. *East/West*, 8(2), 379–381.  
<https://doi.org/10.21226/ewjus684>



**Ol'ha Ryzhova. *Ikonopys u khudozhnii kul'turi Kyieva kintsia XVII-XVIII stolit': Monohrafiia*** [*Iconography in the Artistic Culture of Kyiv at the End of the Seventeenth and in the Eighteenth Centuries: A Monograph*]. Vydavnycho-polihrfichnyi tsentr "Kyivs'kyi universytet," 2020. 464 pp. Illustrations. Bibliography. List of Illustrations. Paper.

**When** I first embarked on a serious study of Ukrainian icons in the late 1990s, I was struck by a number of problems observed in the iconological literature produced in Ukraine. There was too much nationalism and not enough scholarship. On the basis of little evidence, grand narratives were spun on the unity and continuity of the Ukrainian icon and on its superiority and distinctiveness. There was scant appreciation of how different iconographies could exist across time and place in what is present-day Ukraine. In addition, many scholars were continuing to search for and highlight "elements of realism"—an approach that came straight from the old Soviet playbook. Interpreters of icons, emerging from decades of state-sponsored atheism, were hamstrung by an ignorance of Christianity and its liturgy, lore, and texts. But icon studies in Ukraine have come a long way since then.

Ol'ha Ryzhova's work *Ikonopys u khudozhnii kul'turi Kyieva kintsia XVII-XVIII stolit': Monohrafiia* is a perfect demonstration of this last point. It demarcates a particular time—from the end of the seventeenth century through the eighteenth century—and limits itself to a particular place, that is, Kyiv. Ryzhova is not at all interested in the progress toward "realism," a term that does not even appear in her book. She does, however, employ the concept of the baroque, which in Ukrainian cultural history forty years ago was a taboo term. Her familiarity with theology, hagiography, patristic writings, liturgy, Scripture, and apocrypha is extremely impressive.

Ryzhova examines in detail around two hundred icons produced in Kyiv between 1691 and 1802—all of them on iconostases (in one case, on the reverse side of an iconostasis)—and her monograph boasts 279 illustrations (in black and white). For each icon, she marshals the appropriate literary sources. Ryzhova makes an interesting point about how iconography frequently drew on specifically Kyivan literary productions—works published in the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, such as the Kyivan Caves *Patericon* and volumes by Ioanykii Galiatovs'kyi, Antonii Radyvylovs'kyi, and Dmytro Rostovs'kyi (Tuptalo). She is often able to reconstruct the depth of thought that went into the choice and placement of icons on a particular iconostasis; the predellas were sometimes intellectual elaborations of what was depicted in the sovereign (*namisnyi*) tier above. Ryzhova also demonstrates how Kyivan iconographers in the later part of her chosen period studied the works of their somewhat earlier predecessors; the

iconostases of the Kyivan Caves Monastery acquired particular authority and were regarded as models. She shows that the graphics printed in Kyivan liturgical and other books inspired some of the icons as well. She refers to books that were in the Caves Monastery library and served as training manuals for iconographers. One emerges from a reading of Ryzhova's monograph with a new-found and profound appreciation of how spirited and interconnected sacral culture and intellectual life were in Kyiv in the late seventeenth to eighteenth centuries.

Ryzhova explores how many of the icons were influenced by, and in some cases almost duplicated, prints produced in Western Europe. The Caves Monastery held copies of the illustrated (Nicholas Johannes) Piscator and (Christoph) Weigel Bibles; images from these works are clearly recognizable in the iconostases of Kyiv during the period examined. Other prints also intersected with the iconography of Kyiv, as this monograph clearly demonstrates. Certain Western techniques were applied, notably oil painting and a more painterly modelling of faces. But the use of Western models and techniques was not unmindful of tradition. Ryzhova points out that on the sovereign tier, tempera was used more often than oil paint was, and the iconography was traditionally more Byzantine, especially in the case of icons of the Saviour and of the Mother of God. More innovative approaches were explored by the artists on the predellas and the festal tiers.

Throughout the book, Ryzhova corrects errors in the rather fragmented earlier literature relating to her theme. She also dates previously undated works and calls attention to heretofore unnoticed signatures of artists. Furthermore, she attributes to specific iconostases works that came loose from their original site and are now in storage in various museums.

Ryzhova's enormously erudite monograph makes an unparalleled contribution to our understanding of the development of iconography in Ukraine and of intellectual life in eighteenth-century Kyiv. But I will make a few suggestions for future research in this area. Wider art history (not just Ukrainian art history) is often a silo that is little informed by general history, literary studies, the scholarship on mentalities, sociology, philosophy, and other disciplines. This is what we can observe in Ryzhova's book and in many other works on Ukrainian sacral art history. The problem is accentuated by the tendency in Ukrainian scholarship to stand apart from the global scholarly conversation. For example, not included in Ryzhova's bibliography is a very relevant work by Serhii Plokhyy, *Tsars and Cossacks: A Study in Iconography*. And there are no references to the new Western scholarship on early modern Kyivan culture represented by scholars such as Natalia Pylypiuk and Maria Grazia Bartolini. The way for scholarship and understanding to grow is through participation in a larger discourse. This

goes both ways: those of us who come from different disciplines need to pay much more attention to what the art historians are telling us.

It is also a good idea for scholars to take a step back from their work and attempt to visualize and present a wider overall picture. In this monograph, we get a “tree-by-tree” account instead of a description of “the forest.” For example, in the detailed and valuable narrative concerning the pre-existing literature on her topic, Ryzhova proceeds text by text, pointing out areas with fragmentary or mistaken views. She does not identify the recurring issues that have obscured earlier scholars’ understanding; nor does she seek out the sources of their errors. In addition, in her conclusions, she proceeds from one research conclusion to the next, not distinguishing major discoveries from minor ones. The result is essentially a list—a long and impressive list, but nonetheless a list instead of an essay. Finally, as I read, I kept wondering why Ryzhova’s study made no comparisons with Russian sacral iconography of the same period. Even in strictly focused studies such as this one, referring to related trends helps make sense of the object of investigation.

All in all, the monograph under review is incredibly impressive. It does share some of the deficiencies that continue to dog the history of Ukrainian iconography more broadly. But I believe that it is indispensable reading for anyone who wants to understand Kyivan culture in the eighteenth century and the development of Ukrainian sacral art.

John-Paul Himka  
*University of Alberta*

#### Work Cited

Plokyh, Serhii. *Tsars and Cossacks: A Study in Iconography*. Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute, 2002. Distributed by Harvard UP. Harvard Papers in Ukrainian Studies.