

South Ossetia, Tbilisi Fight Over Icon

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A stolen medieval ivory triptych will be returned to Tbilisi, not the museum that used to exhibit it in South Ossetia.

A precious 11th century icon, stolen more than a decade ago and now in Switzerland, has been caught up in an ownership tussle between the government in Tbilisi and the breakaway authorities in South Ossetia.

The South Ossetian government is demanding the icon be returned to its former home, the Tskhinval State Museum. But after a Geneva judge ruled in favour of the Tbilisi authorities, a Georgian delegation will fly to Switzerland at the end of this month and take the icon to Georgia's main art museum.

"The result is that the international community is depriving peoples who have been termed 'unrecognised republics' by the will of fate of their rights, including the right to their own cultural treasures," said an outraged museum employee in South Ossetia.

The unique "Tskhinval triptych" is a three-panelled icon dating back to the 11th century made of ivory and depicting Christ the Saviour and the faces of saints. Unlike other similar triptychs exhibited around the world, it is in excellent condition and all three panels are undamaged. The icon was discovered in a small chapel in the village of Okoni in 1924 and was then kept in the Tskhinval State Museum. A special commission from Christie's has valued it at two million US dollars.

However, politics has overshadowed art history for the last three years as the governments in Tbilisi and Tskhinval have fought over the icon's ownership, with Georgia's security ministry coordinating Georgian policy.

The two sides fought a conflict in 1991, which is still unresolved and led to the de facto secession of South Ossetia from Georgia. As many as 2,000 people were killed and 100,000 displaced.

The icon disappeared from the museum during the fighting. Museum employee Sergei Chibirov blames the Georgian side for its theft. "In January 1991 the part of Tskhinval where the museum is located was occupied by the Georgian police," he told IWPR. "The triptych was then being exhibited in the most prominent place. When we were able to get back to the building a few days later we found that this, the most valuable exhibit, as well as several daggers in silver scabbards and ancient coins, had disappeared."

For their part the Georgian side accused "Ossetian fighters" of carrying out the theft.

At that time, when people were dying, villages were being burned and thousands of refugees were on the move, the loss of a medieval icon moved few people apart from art historians. Within a few years, the triptych was more or less written off as lost.

Then in the summer of 2001 a man by the name of Zemlyanikov brought a triptych in to the Geneva offices of Christie's, saying that he had acquired it from a stranger in Vladikavkaz, North Ossetia. Christie's called in Byzantine expert Krasimira Plackova to study the icon. "She confirmed that the object in question was the missing triptych from the Tskhinval Museum," related Inga Karaya, an adviser to South Ossetia's culture ministry. "Her clinching argument was that she herself had studied it in the Tskhinval museum several years before."

After protracted hearings in a Geneva court, judge Carol Barbel ruled that the icon should be sent back to the State Art Museum in Tbilisi. Her verdict said that “the icon should be returned to Georgia but it should not lead to any complication of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict”. However, this is exactly what happened.

South Ossetia’s foreign ministry called on the Swiss authorities “not to hand over the icon to Georgia, as there is no guarantee that it will be returned to its lawful owner, the State Museum of South Ossetia. Moreover this will not help the improvement of relations between Georgia and South Ossetia”. However, the letter, as well as similar ones addressed to the UN and OSCE missions in Georgia, were not answered.

Merab Jioyev, foreign minister of South Ossetia, told IWPR, “The main argument in favour of handing the icon to the Georgian side is the assertion that conditions in the Tskhinval Museum are unsatisfactory to preserve this holy object. But we have to ask how did the judge Carol Barbel come to this conclusion? No one came to inspect the museum in Tskhinval. The judge used completely one-sided information provided by the Georgian authorities.”

However, some museum experts, who preferred not to be quoted by name, told IWPR that conditions in the Tskhinval museum are extremely poor, following artillery damage during the war and an earthquake in 1992.

There are legitimate worries too about what kind of maintenance the triptych can be expected to have in the Tbilisi museum. The annual budget for all 120 Georgian museums under the control of the culture ministry is a mere 25,000 dollars. This is barely enough to cover the salaries of the staff and basic bills.

Kote Kavtaradze, director of the Georgian foreign ministry’s internal cultural relations department, stoutly defended the decision of the Geneva court, saying it had followed “scrupulous research”. “The treasure is national property and is being returned to its own country, to Georgia,” he said.

Murat Jioyev countered that this argument set a dangerous precedent and that the Georgian authorities might start calling for other museum exhibits in Abkhazia and South Ossetia to be sent to Tbilisi. “There has already been talk of this in Tbilisi,” he said.

Several Swiss officials will follow the returning triptych to Tbilisi at the end of this month and a ceremony is planned to which the Georgian authorities say they will invite guests from South Ossetia. The invitation was greeted with sarcasm in Tskhinval, where the South Ossetian authorities say they will continue to battle for the return of the icon.

Whatever happens to the triptych, its fate is likely to be remembered as a strange sub-plot in the Georgian-Ossetian dispute, while bigger political issues are debated. “Let’s suppose that the new authorities in Tbilisi decide to return the triptych to Tskhinval,” said conflict specialist and analyst Gia Anchabidze. “Of course it will be a step towards easing the situation but I don’t think it will play a big role in resolving the conflict.”

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[North Ossetia](#)
[Georgia](#)
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