# The Icons of "the Red Banker"

## Olof Aschberg and the transactions of social capital

by **Carl Marklund**

One of the more important collections of icons outside of Russia is to be found in Nationalmuseum in Stockholm. It totals 323 icons, the mainstay of which, 245 icons, were donated in 1933. This first donation was followed by another of 32 icons in 1952, both by the same donor. Most of the icons are Russian, but the collection also contains excellent examples of Byzantine and Greek icon painting.[1]

The primary donor of this collection was Swedish banker, businessman, and patron of the arts Olof Aschberg (1877–1960). Aschberg's lifelong interest in Russian religious art began when he was perusing the flea market at Moscow's Smolenskaya Rynok while employed as the director of one of the first Soviet commercial banks, Ruskombank, in 1922–1924.

Aschberg's road to Moscow can be traced in two different strands in his *vita* – first, his early engagement with the labor movement, and second his experience with financial transactions during the First World War. In 1912, Aschberg started Nya Banken [The New Bank], which was intended to become a workers' bank with the aim of providing capital for workers' housing. At the time, Stockholm was characterized by sub-standard, yet expensive, housing with adverse effects on the health and child care of the working class. Recognizing the potential of workers' power through their market share and by using the capitalist system for social improvement, Aschberg established close contacts with both left and right wing social democrats – including the Swedish Social Democratic Party's leader Hjalmar Branting and his wife, Anna, as well as Stockholm's radical burgomeister Carl Lindhagen. Gradually, Aschberg became deeply involved in the labor movement. In 1917, for example, Aschberg collaborated with several groups of social democrats and left socialists in various attempts at launching a peace conference to be held in Stockholm during that year.[2]

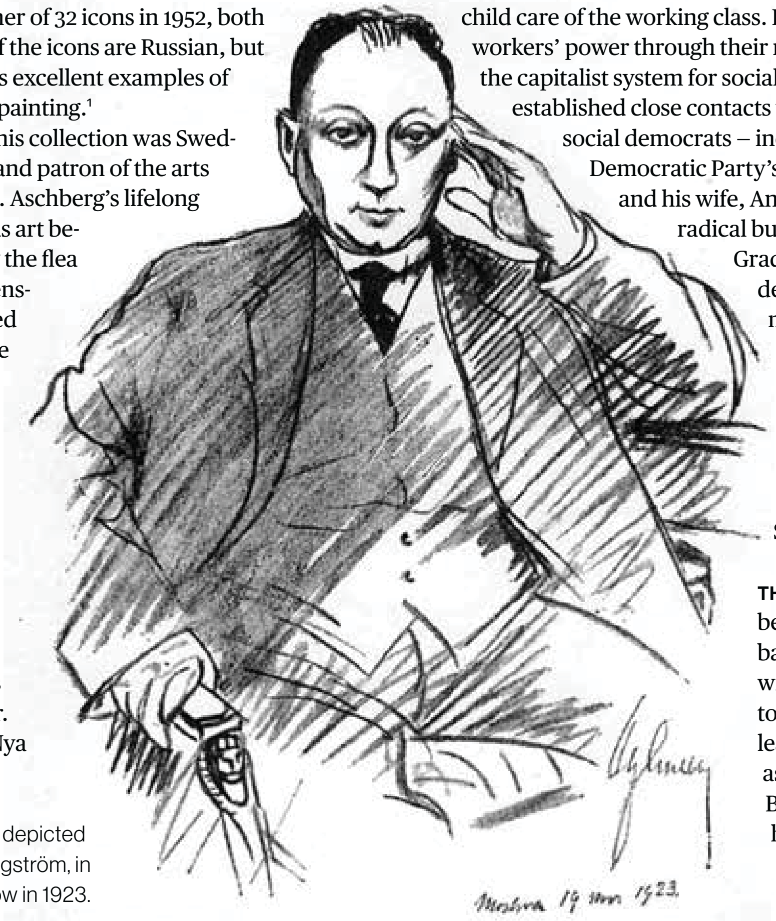

Fig. 1. Olof Aschberg depicted by his friend, Albert Engström, in Moscow in 1923.

**THESE ACTIVITIES** earned Aschberg the sobriquet "the red banker" and provided him with a first-rate opportunity to get to know some of the leading figures of European as well as Russian socialism. By the early 1920s, Aschberg had established a banking network between Moscow, Stockholm, and Berlin, eventually relocating to Paris in the late 1920s. After the Nazi takeover in Germany, the French capital replaced Berlin as the hub of “international solidarity” work of the international labor movement. Aschberg soon engaged himself in several anti-fascist and anti-racist networks operating out of Paris.[3] Besides his financial and solidarity work, Aschberg also found time for cultivating his cultural interests, supporting avant-garde arts, and often entertaining Swedish as well as international artists in his Paris home.

When Paris was occupied by the Germans in 1940, Aschberg was arrested. His property, including all of his artworks, was confiscated by the Vichy government, and Aschberg himself was interned in southern France. Eventually, Aschberg managed to move via Lisbon to New York, where he engaged in anti-fascist publicity work before he fell ill. At this point, he retreated to Florida where he began penning his first autobiography during his convalescence.[4]

As the Second World War came to an end, Aschberg returned to Sweden. In 1946, not forsaking his second adopted homeland, Aschberg acquired a new estate in France. Eventually, Aschberg donated this property to the Swedish labor movement in the early 1950s. Throughout his life, he was an outspoken proponent of closer ties between Sweden and other countries, primarily France and Russia/Soviet Union, engaging in what could be called “citizen cultural diplomacy.”

> **“ASCHBERG WAS AWESTRUCK WHEN HE SAW ICONS FOR SALE FOR THE FIRST TIME, NOTING THEIR DUAL ARTISTIC AND SPIRITUAL VALUE. HE DESCRIBES HOW HE BEGAN ACQUIRING THEM PRIVATELY, ADORNING HIS MOSCOW FLAT WITH ICONS.”**

**TODAY, THE SIGNIFICANCE** of Aschberg’s rich biography is difficult to assess. In fact, his 1933 and 1952 donations of icons to Nationalmuseum are what Aschberg is mostly known for today, at least in Sweden. Even though Aschberg was a very well known person in his own lifetime, also internationally, his activities are not well understood.

There appear to be two main reasons for this. First, Aschberg wrote no less than four autobiographical works or memoirs, which provide exciting insights into his rich, variegated life, his business activities, his cultural interests, and his myriad of social contacts.[5] While these memoirs confirm his role as a progressively oriented businessman, with far-ranging visions with regard to both enterprise and diplomacy, they are often imprecise regarding dates and context, making the information therein difficult to verify. Partly due to this vagueness, Aschberg has, secondly, become a household name in some of the literature on the nebuluous contacts between Germany, Western finance, and the Bolsheviks/Soviets in the tumultuous final stages of the First World War and the first phase of the Russian Civil War.[6]

The Bolsheviks and later the Soviets were eager to acquire hard currency as well as technology not only for rebuilding the infrastructure and industry of war-torn Russia, which was suffering from widespread famine, but also to equip the Red Army fighting the White Russians as well as numerous liminal countries. Confiscated Tsarist gold as well as both religious and secular art, not the least icons of the Russian Orthodox Church, were just some of the assets the Bolsheviks would rely upon in these attempts. Weimar Germany soon became the central site for the auctioning of Russian antiquities. This was primarily because Weimar Germany’s recognition of the Bolsheviks/Soviets as the legitimate rulers of Russia – de facto in the Brest-Litovsk treaty (1918) and de jure in the Rapallo Treaty (1922) – would make it difficult for the White Russian émigré community to protest the sale of seized assets. Several scholars have described the world-wide tour of icons that preceded large-scale sales of Russian-origin arts, furniture, prints, etcetera, in particular in Germany and later the US, from the early 1920s to the early 1930s.[7] These transfers were not merely intended to generate monetary gain, however. They were also instrumental in early Soviet cultural diplomacy. We know of the role of Armand and Victor Hammer in boosting the market value of icons as the cultural heritage of a fallen empire and the genius of Igor Grabar in improving the cultural respectability of the Soviet Union in saving it and making it available to Western markets.[8]

Aschberg does not appear to have been engaged in the selling of Russian artworks and icons on Western art markets, even if he was based in Berlin and Paris at the time of these sales. According to Ulf Abel, who has researched Aschberg’s donations to Nationalmuseum, no relevant documents remain. What we know, we know mostly from Aschberg’s own accounts.[9] There, Aschberg does not mention Grabar, Glavmuzei, or Gokhran. Instead, he describes the plundering of Russian Orthodox churches by the Bolsheviks as resulting in icons flooding the flea markets, where he himself discovered them in the Smolenskaya Rynok. Another reason for the icons to enter the market, Aschberg found, was that abject poverty led many private Russians to sell whatever artworks and valuables they might have in order to survive. Aschberg was awestruck when he saw icons for sale for the first time, noting their dual artistic and spiritual value. He describes how he began acquiring them privately, adorning his Moscow flat with icons.[10]

**IN HIS OWN ACCOUNT,** Aschberg does not appear to have had much of a collector’s interest at all before his Moscow stay, perhaps at least in part due to his demanding work and mobile lifestyle. However, in another episode already in 1907, Aschberg describes how he and his friend Martin Aronowitsch – who would later become the owner of the main Swedish auction house Bukowskis (until 1974) – travelled on a gambling tour to Ostende and Brussels, where they bought antiquities in such amounts that they had to hire a whole railway wagon to transport their acquisitions back to Stockholm.[11]

While Aschberg conducted his bank business in a triangle between Berlin, Moscow, and Stockholm in the early 1920s, he also realized the need to establish the respectability of the Soviet regime to Swedish business interests as well as his own reputation as an international businessman. Among Aschberg's many Stockholm friends was Albert Engström, a highly popular and esteemed Swedish artist and author of conservative inclination. Since 1922 a member of the Swedish Academy, Engström however suffered from personal problems with finances and substance abuse. His books were not selling very well any longer, and his publisher, Bonniers, refused him an advance. At this point, Aschberg claims that he came up with the idea that Engström could follow him to Moscow in 1923. As the turmoil in Russia had prevented ordinary travel and contacts, it could be assumed that Engström's impressions of the Soviet capital in images as well as words would be attractive on the Swedish book market.

In Moscow, Engström received unprecedented access to the most prominent Bolsheviks, except for Lenin, who was ill at the time, drawing the portraits of the world-famous revolutionaries, the leaders of the world's first workers' state. Both shocked and intrigued by the desperate poverty of war-torn Russia, Engström describes himself as enjoying less meeting with the Bolsheviks than walking the streets of Moscow, socializing with tramps and street urchins.[12]

**HERE IT IS INTERESTING** to compare memoirs. Aschberg explains that Engström became impressed with Aschberg's already then sizeable collection of icons and how he then initiated his own icon hunting at Aschberg's market of choice, the flea market at Smolensky Rynok. Engström, for his part, barely mentions Aschberg, but writes at length about the marvellous icons at the Moscow Historical Museum, confirming that he bought a few, but unclear from whom. Alongside the icons, Engström also acquired Soviet propaganda posters. Just as Aschberg, Engström also received offers to acquire fine arts, including a Murillo, but complained that he could not afford it. Like Aschberg, Engström considered his acquisitions in Russia to be his personal belongings and quite naturally wanted to bring them to Sweden when returning home. However, by 1923, bringing icons out of Russia was no simple matter. Engström finally managed to meet with Nataliia Trotskaia (née Sadova, Leon Trotsky's second wife). Trotskaia chaired a commission tasked with preserving Russian cultural "memory" – Glavmuzei – which in Engström's understanding primarily worked to prevent it from desctruction and export.[13] Together with Anatoly Lunacharsky, Trotskaia agreed to Engström bringing an undisclosed number of icons out of the country, as the Swedish writer was an "artist."[14]

In 1925, Aschberg encountered the same problems as Engström had. Aschberg also wanted to bring his far more numerous collection of icons to Sweden, when he found that he had to ask for special permission from Leonid Krasin. As a result, "four gentlemen" from the "museum board" (*museinämnden*,

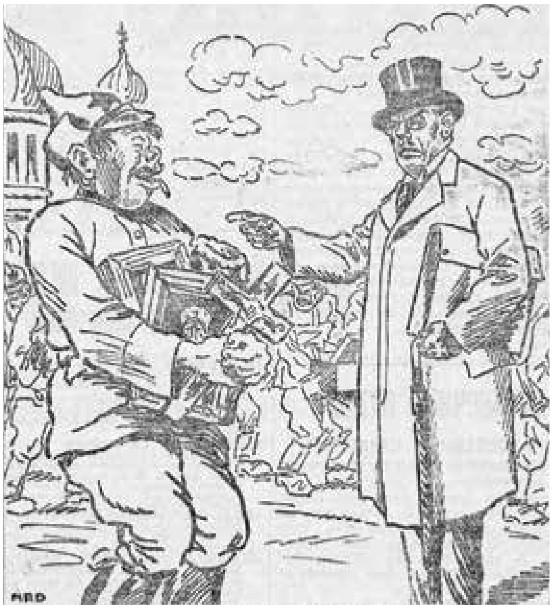

Fig. 2. The March 1930 issue of the Paris émigré newspaper *Vozrozhdenie* commented upon the sales of Russian sacral art in this satirical drawing. The caption reads "First of all, we protest against the looting of churches and second, how much do you want for these things?" Source: Reprinted in Anne Odom and Wendy R. Salmond (eds.), *Treasures into Tractors: The Selling of Russia's Cultural Heritage, 1918-1938,* ed. (Washington: Hillwood Estate, Museum, & Gardens, 2009).

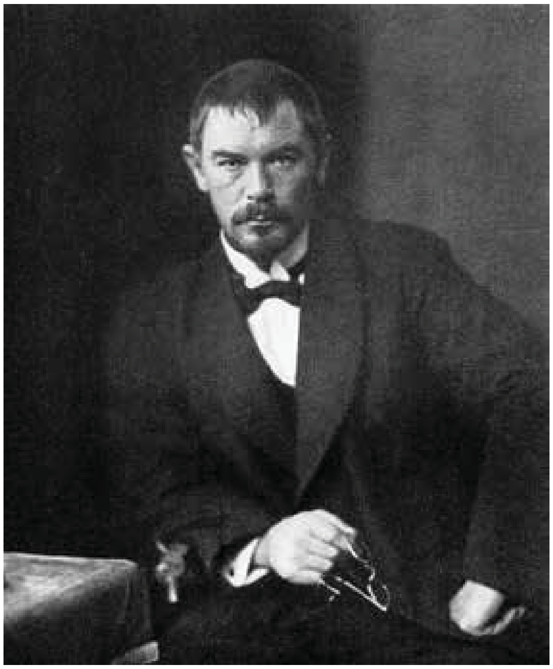

Fig. 3. Albert Engström.

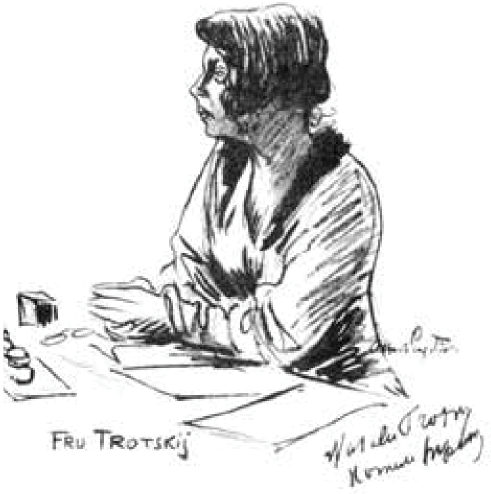

Fig 4. Nataliia Trotskaia. Albert Engström, Moskoviter (Stockholm: Bonnier, 1924), 121.

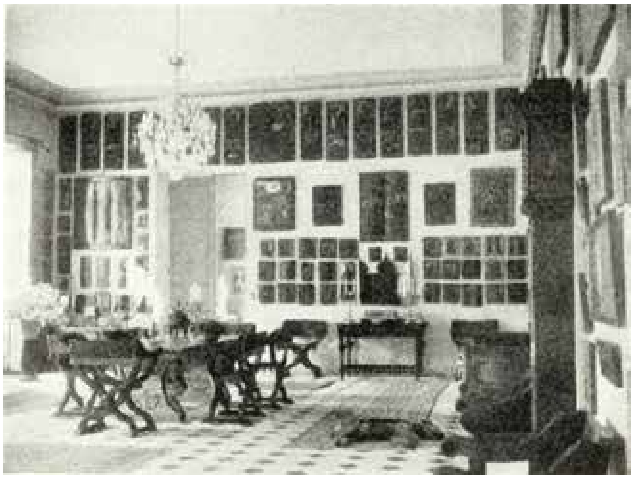

Fig. 5. Aschberg's icons in his home outside of Paris in 1928. Olof Aschberg, *En vandrande jude från Glasbruksgatan* (Stockholm: Bonnier, 1946), 269.

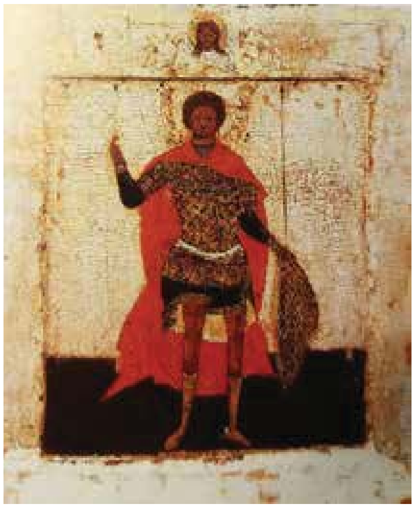

Fig. 6. Saint George in Adoration of Christ "Not Made by Human Hands" from the first part of the 17th century, Central Russia. Originally belonging to the Rumiantsev Museum in Moscow, it was sold by Antiquariat to Aschberg in 1935 and donated to Nationalmuseum in 1952. Ulf Abel and Vera Moore, Icons (Stockholm: Nationalmuseum, 2002).

**"ASCHBERG SKILFULLY USED ART AND ARTISTRY AS WELL AS COLLECTING AND COLLECTORSHIP TO FACILITATE TRANSACTIONS BETWEEN DIFFERENT FORMS OF CAPITAL AND MEDIATIONS OF VALUE — CULTURAL, ECONOMIC, POLITICAL, AND SOCIAL."**

probably indicating Glavmuzei) came to inspect his collection. According to Aschberg, the museum men expressed surprise at how Aschberg had managed to bring together such a fine selection of icons and promptly prohibited their export. Aschberg then offered them to select whichever icons they wanted to be donated to four unnamed Soviet museums in return for permission to transport the rest.[15] As early as the next year, in 1926, Aschberg left Sweden for Paris with his family, taking many of his icons with him.[16]

In Paris, Aschberg contemplated for a while setting up a museum devoted to icons. In the end, however, he arranged for a donation to be made to Nationalmuseum in Stockholm in 1933. The timing was well chosen, as it followed upon an international arts conference held in Stockholm where Aschberg had showcased his icon collection. The donation letter states an interest in cultural contacts through research and artistic inspiration in general, but also alluding to possible links between Swedish and Russian-Byzantine early Church art. At the same time, it is also clear that the Soviet selling tour organized in cooperation with the Hammer brothers as well as the Great Depression had caused a drop in the global market value for icons by this time.[17]

It is likely that the 1933 donation served to maintain Aschberg's contact with the Swedish cultural sector despite his relocation to Paris. Similarly, the 1933 donation was followed by another in 1952. Again, in the donation letter Aschberg cited the interest in Swedish-Russian cultural contacts and in providing access for the public as well as researchers in seeing this "cultural heritage."[18] Among the 1952 donations, we find Saint George in Adoration of Christ "Not Made by Human Hands," acquired directly from Antiquariat in 1935. Some of the highest quality items of the Nationalmuseum collection originate from this acquisition. We do not know how these icons were selected, but it is not impossible that some of these icons had already been in Aschberg's possession before 1928, when his collection was first screened by the four museum men.

Coming to a close of this brief essay, it stands clear that Aschberg skilfully used art and artistry as well as collecting and collectorship to facilitate transactions between different forms of capital and mediations of value – cultural, economic, political, and social. Gifts and donations were his primary instrument for managing these transactions, alongside more unorthodox means of supporting and providing valuable contacts for artists and authors in need. Distinctions between collectorship, patronship, philanthropy, and financial investment might appear clear-cut in theory. But in the multifaceted biography of Aschberg, we see how these activities seamlessly followed from one another. Just as the Soviets could trade "Rembrandts for tractors," Aschberg could trade icons for social capital, while his donations also served the purpose of establishing links between himself in Paris and his business, cultural, and political contacts in Stockholm and ensuring the longevity of Swedish contacts with its great neighbor to the east, Russia.

**TODAY, CLAIMS ARE** sometimes voiced that the Nationalmuseum icon collection – although unclear if all of it, or only the Aschberg donations – should be given back to Russia, either because the *objets* are holy or because they are somehow ill-gotten.[19] However, the circumstance that these icons are today located in Stockholm is in itself evidence of the cultural heritage of the contacts that proliferated between the workers' state of the Soviet Union and the Western world of capitalism throughout the short 20th century – as well as the special role played by the Baltic Sea Rim, Sweden and Stockholm in serving as a conduit for such contacts.

Carl Marklund is an assistant professor in Nordic Studies at the University of Helsinki and is a project researcher at CBEES, Södertörn University.

## references

1 Ulf Abel and Vera Moore, *Icons* (Stockholm: Nationalmuseum, 2002); see also Maritta Pitkänen, "Olof Aschberg and his icon collection in Stockholm," in Marja Usvasalo, Päivi Salmesvuori and Anja Törmä (eds.), *Northern Byzantine Icons* (Espoo: The Finnish National Committee for Byzantine Studies, 2014), 81–103; Karin Sidén, "Den röde bankiren och donationerna av ikoner till Nationalmuseum," in *Givandets glädje i konstens värld* (Stockholm: Nationalmuseum, 2008), 61–71; Helge Kjellin, *Ryska ikoner: Olof Aschbergs till Nationalmuseum överlämnade samling* (Stockholm: Norstedt, 1933).

2 For a discussion of Aschberg's early engagement with the Swedish labor movement, see, for example, Gustav Johansson, "Lenin och Sverige," in Gustav Johansson and Trond Hegna (eds.), *Lenin och den nordiska arbetarrörelsen: En samnordisk antologi* (Stockholm: Rabén & Sjögren, 1970).

3 For studies of anti-fascist and anti-racist international solidarity work in the interwar era, see Holger Weiss (ed.), *International Communism and Transnational Solidarity: Radical Networks, Mass Movements and Global Politics, 1919–1939* (Leiden: Brill, 2017); Kasper Braskén, *The International Workers' Relief, Communism, and Transnational Solidarity: Willi Münzenberg in Weimar Germany* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

4 Olof Aschberg, *En vandrande jude från Glasbruksgatan* (Stockholm: Bonnier, 1946).

5 In addition to the above-mentioned book, see also Olof Aschberg, *Återkomst* (Stockholm: Bonnier, 1947); Olof Aschberg, *Gästboken* (Stockholm: Tiden, 1955); Olof Aschberg, *Gryningen till en ny tid: Ur mina memoarer* (Stockholm: Tiden, 1961).

6 There are earlier, but often unverifiable, news reports on Aschberg's activities in this context, but one of the first accounts of these connections be found in Georges Solomon, *Parmi les maitres rouge* (1930, German translation in 1930, Swedish in 1930, English in 1935). For later treatments in a similar vein, see Antony C. Sutton, *Wall Street and the Bolshevik Revolution* (New Rochelle, N.Y.: Arlington House, 1974); Sean McMeekin, *History's Greatest Heist: The Looting of Russia by the Bolsheviks* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); Sean McMeekin, *The Russian Revolution – A New History* (London: Profile Books, 2017); Richard B. Spence, *Wall Street and the Russian Revolution 1904–1925* (TrineDay, 2017). For more specific discussions of Swedish locomotives exchanged for Russian gold, see Helene Carlbäck, "Pengar eller politik: Ekonomiska förbindelser mellan Sverige och Sovjet 1917–1924," in *Historisk tidskrift*, Vol. 105 (1985), 187–233; Helene Carlbäck-Isotalo, *Att byta erkännande mot handel: Svensk-ryska förhandlingar 1921–1924* (Uppsala: Univ., 1997); Anthony Heywood, *Modernising Lenin's Russia: Economic Reconstruction, Foreign Trade and the Railways* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

7 See, for example, Oleg Yakovlevich Neverov, *Great Private Collectors of Imperial Russia* (New York: Vendome Press, 2004); Anne Odom and Wendy R. Salmond (eds.), *Treasures into Tractors: The Selling of Russia's Cultural Heritage, 1918–1938* (Washington: Hillwood Estate, Museum, & Gardens, 2009); Natalya Semyonova and Nicolas V. Iljine (eds.), *Selling Russia's Treasures: The Soviet Trade in Nationalized Art, 1917–1938* (Paris: The M. T. Abraham Center for the Visual Arts Foundation, 2013); Irina Sandomirskaja, "Catastrophe, Restoration, and Kunstwollen: Igor Grabar, Cultural Heritage, and Soviet Reuses of the Past," in *Ab Imperio: Theory and History of Nationalities and Nationalism in the post-Soviet Realm*, No. 2 (2015), 339–362.

8 For a discussion of Grabar's role, see Irina Sandomirskaja's contribution to this special section.

9 Ulf Abel and Vera Moore, *Icons* (Stockholm: Nationalmuseum, 2002).

10 Olof Aschberg, *En vandrande jude från Glasbruksgatan* (Stockholm: Bonnier, 1946), 227–232.

11 Olof Aschberg, *En vandrande jude från Glasbruksgatan* (Stockholm: Bonnier, 1946), 79–80.

12 Albert Engström, *Moskoviter* (Stockholm: Bonnier, 1924).

13 Aschberg does not mention this episode.

14 I have not been able to establish what what happened to the icons Engström supposedly acquired in Moscow.

15 Olof Aschberg, *vandrande jude från Glasbruksgatan* (Stockholm: Bonnier, 1946), 228–229.

16 Later, Aschberg made further acquisitions of icons – directly from Grabar in 1928 and from Antiquariat in 1935. Ulf Abel and Vera Moore, *Icons* (Stockholm: Nationalmuseum, 2002).

17 For the selling tour, see also Irina Sandomirskaja's contribution in this special section.

18 Ulf Abel and Vera Moore, *Icons* (Stockholm: Nationalmuseum, 2002); see also Karin Sidén, "Den röde bankiren och donationerna av ikoner till Nationalmuseum," in *Givandets glädje i konstens värld* (Stockholm: Nationalmuseum, 2008), 61–71.

19 See, for example, Gunnel Wahlström, "Återlämna heligt stöldgods!," in *Svenska Dagbladet*, 30 May 2003; for a counter-view, see Petter Larsson, "Ryskt tsarguld såldes i Stockholm," in *Aftonbladet*, 15 May 2013.