



The brothers Morsink: Simon, left, and Hugo are carrying on their father's business, dealing antique Russian icons. They see a growing interest among younger collectors captivated by the beauty and spirituality of these works of art.

In the Name of the Father

For one family of art dealers in Amsterdam, a passion for religious icons is the tie that binds.

GROWING UP AROUND THE FAMILY ANTIQUES BUSINESS IN the small Dutch city of Hengelo, Simon and Hugo Morsink inherited their father's fascination with the exquisite detail and rich, saturated colors of Russian icons. At first these devotional objects were a private passion for Jan Morsink, who had been a dealer of 17th- to 18th-century Spanish and Italian furniture and medieval sculpture for a decade, working out of a restored farmhouse. But in 1977, icons became his specialty.

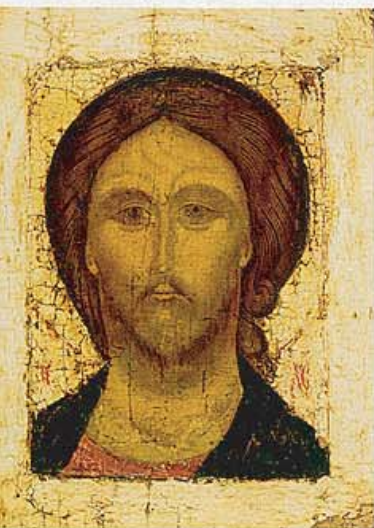
In 1991, Jan and his son Simon, then 25, relocated Jan Morsink Ikonen to Amsterdam. Settling into a 17th-century house at 454 Keizersgracht, near the museum district on the elegant Emperor's Canal, the gallery flourished, quietly becoming renowned for its Russian icons from the 15th to 19th centuries. Its inventory—traditional painted wooden panels depicting highly stylized sacred figures or scenes, as well as carved, gilded or jeweled crosses and other devotional ▶

◀ FROM PAGE 76

items—features treasures from the studios of Novgorod, Moscow and Palekh. As one of the world's leading icon specialists, the business has grown by 10 percent to 20 percent each year over the past decade.

Simon Morsink studied art history in Leiden, Louvain and Moscow, but found it "too theoretical." He appreciated the informal education he received from his father. "I developed an intuition for the objects that you can't get from books," he says. He primarily looks for "the way the panel is cut from the wood, the applications of paint, the quality of the workmanship and the restoration."

Devastated by his father's death in 1994, Morsink asked his brother, Hugo, who is three years his junior, to join the firm. "The world of icons is interesting but difficult," he says. "It's important to be able to talk to someone you trust completely." Since then, the two have rarely been seen apart. They live with their families in neighboring towns, drive to work together each day, and make all business decisions jointly. Until their mother intervened a couple of years ago, they even vacationed together.

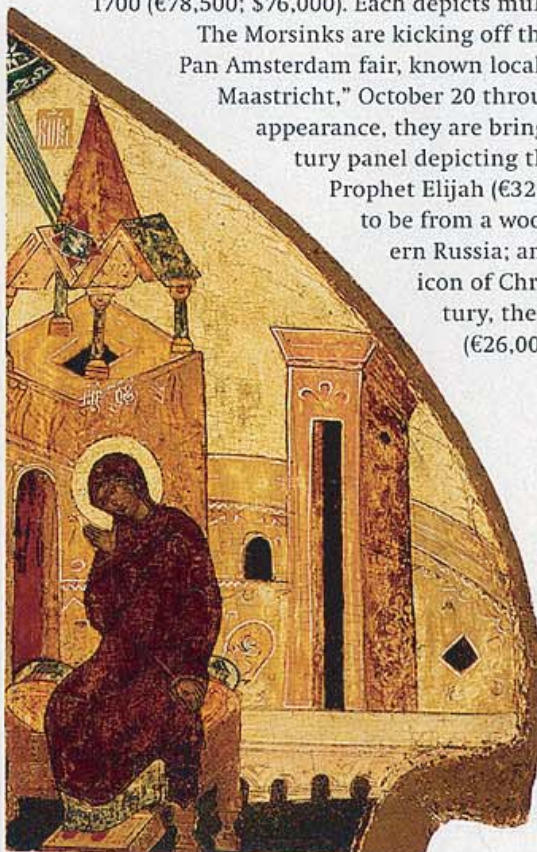


Two of the gallery's 16th-century Russian panels, *The Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple*, above, and an *Annunciation* on the upper part of a royal door from a church, below, sold at Maastricht in March; the *Savior of the Fiery Eye*, left, a typical representation of Christ from the same period, is on display at Pan Amsterdam in October.

THIS YEAR THE BROTHERS MARKED THE 25TH anniversary of Jan Morsink Ikonen with two special exhibitions. For the European Fine Art Fair in Maastricht this past March, they assembled 55 pieces and published a catalogue. (Their father was first invited to the fair in 1985.) The range of objects included a late 16th-century *Annunciation* from the royal door of a Russian Orthodox church (€40,000; \$39,000); an 18th-century Greek panagia, or bishop's medallion, carved in cyprus wood (€3,500; \$3,400); and a panel depicting the *Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple*, circa 1600 (€60,000; \$58,000).

A week later, they mounted "Easter on Icons" in their serene, minimalist gallery. A few of the highlights were two wings of a triptych made in the Armory, a 17th-century Russian imperial workshop (€24,000; \$23,000), and a Greek double-sided cyprus altar cross, circa 1700 (€78,500; \$76,000). Each depicts multiple religious scenes.

The Morsinks are kicking off their fall season at the Pan Amsterdam fair, known locally as "mini-Maastricht," October 20 through 27. For their 10th appearance, they are bringing a large 18th-century panel depicting the *Fiery Ascent of the Prophet Elijah* (€32,000; \$31,000), thought to be from a wooden church in northern Russia; and a typical Russian icon of Christ from the 16th century, the *Savior of the Fiery Eye* (€26,000; \$25,000). ▶





Greek Orthodox icons are a rarity among the Morsinks' stock. Left: An 18th-century carved cyprus panagia, a ceremonial medallion worn by a bishop, in a silver frame. Below: An intricately carved, double-sided altar cross of cyprus wood, circa 1700.



◀ FROM PAGE 78

“ICONS ARE ESPECIALLY POPULAR IN THE NETHERLANDS,” Simon Morsink says. He attributes this partly to major exhibitions such as the landmark “Icons from Northern Russia” and “Icons from Private Collections,” both presented in 1992 at the Catherijneconvent Museum in Utrecht, for which he served as a consultant.

But the highest-quality pieces tend to find homes elsewhere, particularly in Belgium, Germany, Switzerland, Argentina and Brazil. “South America is a major market for us,” Morsink says. “It’s just a few collectors. They don’t buy a lot, but they buy the best.” That translates into early 15th- and 16th-century Russian works, which sell for around €15,000 to €200,000 (\$15,000–195,000). Icons from the 18th and 19th centuries range between €2,000 and €40,000 (\$2,000–39,000).

All of the Morsinks’ clients are private, with just a few serious collectors as their most important market. Buyers tend to be older—typically between 50 and 70—but Morsink sees interest increasing among collectors in their 30s. He feels that clients generally regard the religious significance of icons as secondary at best. “When people see the beauty of these objects, they are always captivated.”

According to the dealer, the market is growing significantly, not only because there are more international exhibitions: Since the fall of the Iron Curtain, there are also more people traveling to Russia, where they can see the best examples. Moreover, Morsink notes, “there is an increasing interest in spirituality as a sort of counterthrust to all the commercialization in the world.”

At the same time, finding material has become more difficult. “The best icons are still in Russia, but it’s illegal to export them,” Morsink explains, which means, essentially, that a handful of major dealers in Russian icons compete for a limited number of works available in the West. This presents a challenge to what is already a difficult business. “This is not an easy art,” Morsink allows. “The icon painters used color and distilled form to give substance to what is in fact invisible. But if you look at icons attentively and with an open eye, they will fascinate you with their spiritual power.”

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