

## Russian Orthodox icon of Alexander Nevsky, XIX C.

Tempera on wood, in convex "ark" shape and featuring an inner frame. Measures 29 x 34 cm (11 ½ x 13 ½"), weighs a little over 2 lbs. The icon portrays the greatest warrior and venerated saint of medieval Russian history, Prince Alexander Nevsky, (Александр Ярославич Невский, 1221 - 1263). Upon his death, he was laid to rest in Alexandro-Neviskaya Lavra in St. Petersburg where a magnificent silver sarcophagus, weighing more than 3,000 lbs, serves as an enduring reminder of one of Russia's most venerated and remarkable leaders. This icon also serves a purpose: for seeking protection through prayer from the magnificent hero and saint of the Orthodox Church. It is one of the most recognized icons, especially among diplomats and those facing difficult and complicated situations.

Mention of the "ark" shape of the icon bears a brief explanation. It refers to the convex (arched) shape of the wooden slab. Among Russian iconographers, this convex profile was known as "ковчег" ("ark", as in Noah's Ark). The inner frame and the gentle central bulge of the "arched" wood serve to emphasize the center and focal point of the imagery, separating the sacred from the profane. On a practical level, the convex shape also saves the board from deformation. The use of the biblical term "ark" ("ковчег") suggest that the icon painters attributed a higher spiritual context to this shape. However, in the absence of clear and generally accepted theories about the reasons for the appearance of the "ark", only aesthetic and technological assumptions remain.

The reverse of the icon features some contemporary inscriptions. They are partially illegible, so we cannot claim full and correct understanding of them but it appears likely that Павел Камышев (Pavel Kamyshev) to whom they are addressed was the person who commissioned this icon. Equally likely is that "П.Г." (P.G.) below the inscription on the left are the initials of the iconographer.

Throughout his life, Alexander held various significant titles, including Prince of Novgorod, Grand Prince of Vladimir, and Grand Prince of Kiev, during the tumultuous period of the Mongol conquest. While he never suffered defeat in battle, his political acumen played a crucial role in guiding Russia through a severe crisis, even if it meant cooperating with the Mongols to ensure the nation's survival. One of Alexander's notable victories occurred in 1240 when he thwarted a Swedish attack at the Battle of the Neva River, which led to the addition of "Nevsky" to his name, signifying his triumph on the shores of the Neva. Another pivotal battle took place near Pskov, along the shores of Lake Chudskoe where he defended Novgorod against the Teutonic and Livonian orders, which represented a Western coalition that claimed a crusade mission for Catholicization. Alexander's defense of Novgorod not only safeguarded the city but also protected the Orthodox Christian faith (Pravoslavie).

In recognition of his contributions, the Russian Church canonized him and bestowed upon him the titles of Blessed ("Blagoslavenniy"), Faithful ("Blagoverniy"), and Great ("Velikiy"). On an icon dedicated to Alexander Nevsky, two of these titles, "Faithful" and "Great," are prominently displayed. In the top left corner of the icon, Jesus is seen blessing Alexander while holding the Bible with his left hand. On the table ("postavets") below, the insignia of power are depicted: scepter and crown. It is worth noting that the first crown in Russia, "Monomakh's Hat", belonged to Prince Vladimir Monomakh, who preceded Alexander Nevsky in history. In the 19th century, the symbolism of Alexander Nevsky's iconography was significantly influenced by the image of Peter the Great, who ascended to the throne as the first emperor of Russia in 1720. This influence is evident in the depiction of Alexander wearing plate armor, wielding a spear, and adorned with an ermine mantle, symbolizing coronation. From the era of Peter the Great onwards, the Russian royalty emphasized their common origins with Alexander Nevsky.

The icon is in very good condition. The obverse shows only minor hairlines to the tempera and the primer under it, as well as minimal scuffing. There is a tiny bit of damage to the wood of the crossbar at bottom left. The reverse shows a number of old holes made by woodworms, adding a sense of authenticity more than detracting from the overall impression of the icon.

This icon is a remarkable religious and historical object, equally valuable as a beautiful artifact.

Please note that the pen in our photos is for size reference.

Item# 40248

**\$1,350.00**











