

## ***Jews bringing old Russian icons to Israel; Christian images become precious source of income***

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### **Body**

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Tel Aviv - Cash-starved immigrants from the former Soviet Union are **bringing precious Russian** Orthodox **icons** to **Israel**, where they sell them at low prices to middlemen or dealers who sometimes resell them for tens of thousands of dollars.

The **icons** are paintings used in the worship of the Orthodox Church, the chief religion in Russia and much of Eastern Europe. They depict Christ or other figures sacred to Christians. Those **brought** into **Israel** are usually done on wood, and the immigrants can sell them for anywhere from several hundred to several thousand dollars, depending on their age, condition and the name of the artist.

In some cases, the **icons** have been in mixed **Christian**-Jewish families for generations. In others, the immigrants buy them before they leave their **old** homeland so they can sell them when they arrive in **Israel**.

Taking them out of the former Soviet Union - or its successor independent republics - is illegal. But the immigrants take the risk, often bribing customs officials to look the other way.; Soviet cash is worthless

The immigrants are barred from taking money out of the former Soviet Union. So before leaving, they spend their rubles - which are worthless elsewhere - on items like **icons** that they can resell in their new country. In **Israel**, they also frequently sell valuable family heirlooms, such as silver.

The sale of **icons** is similar to what occurred in the 1950s, when **Jews** came to **Israel** from Arab countries in the Middle East. They **brought** with them Persian and other expensive rugs - often, these would be their most valuable possessions - and sold them cheaply to earn cash.

Denny Pinkus, one of **Israel**'s best known antiquities dealers, said genuine antique **icons** can cost from \$ 500 to \$ 2.5 million. Most of those being **brought** by the immigrants into **Israel** are later sold to tourists and collectors for as little as \$ 500 or as much as \$ 30,000, said Mr. Pinkus, who lives in Jaffa, near Tel Aviv.

The most valuable **icons** and other antiquities being smuggled out of the collapsed Soviet empire are going to Berlin, Munich, Zurich, Geneva and London, Mr. Pinkus said. Those cities have more people interested in buying the **icons** and more purchasing power than exists in **Israel**, he said.

High-quality **icons brought** to **Israel** are often bought and then shipped to Europe or the United States where they will command higher resale prices, according to Mr. Pinkus and other dealers in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem.; Some are overvalued

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A spokesman for Sotheby's Auction House in Tel Aviv said the **oldest icon** she has seen **brought** to **Israel** by the immigrants comes from the 18th century. But most of them are from the 19th century, which are considered quite valuable in Russia, but far less so on the international market.

Most of the Soviet immigrants believe the **icons** they **bring** in are much **older** than they really are, said Sotheby's representative.

Under Israeli law, an object must have been made before 1700 to qualify as an antiquity.

One antique dealer in Tel Aviv said **icons** from the 16th or 17th century are quite valuable, while most from the 19th century are not. Sometimes, the dealer said, he buys an immigrant's **icon** that he can sell for \$ 10,000. But neither he nor any of the other dealers would reveal the prices they pay the money-starved immigrants for the religious symbols.

## Graphic

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photo: This is an Orthodox **icon** of Christ. **Older icons** from the former Soviet Union are being smuggled to **Israel** and resold. / LOUIS J. SALOME / Staff

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