

Icons on Ammo Boxes

Sofia Atlantova and Oleksandr Klymenko

For their ongoing *Icons on Ammo Boxes* project, the contemporary Ukrainian artists Sofia Atlantova and Oleksandr Klymenko salvage the wooden lids of ammunition boxes from the eastern front in Ukraine, which has been destabilized for the past five years by Russian-backed separatist forces. Then, with egg tempera—and, in some cases, colored pencils—Atlantova and Klymenko transform these panels into icons of Christ and the saints. While the physical substrate remains visible, as a reminder of the horrors of war, the figures' dispassionate expressions, carefully painted in accordance with Orthodox iconographic tradition, convey an orientation toward the eternal.

The project brings patriotic commemoration and Orthodox Christian faith into a complex dialogue. On the one hand, the artists do not hide their sympathy for the cause of Ukrainian national sovereignty. Some panels even bear the names of Ukrainian soldiers who were killed in the deadly Battle of Ilovaysk in 2014. In this respect, Atlantova and Klymenko's project resembles the public war memorials bearing the names of fallen combatants that have proliferated around the globe over the past century, since the end of World War I, along with countless tombs "of the unknown soldier." Such memorials are more somber than earlier monuments to military triumphs and seek to present the warriors' deaths as having served a larger purpose, usually the glory of the nation. In light of this

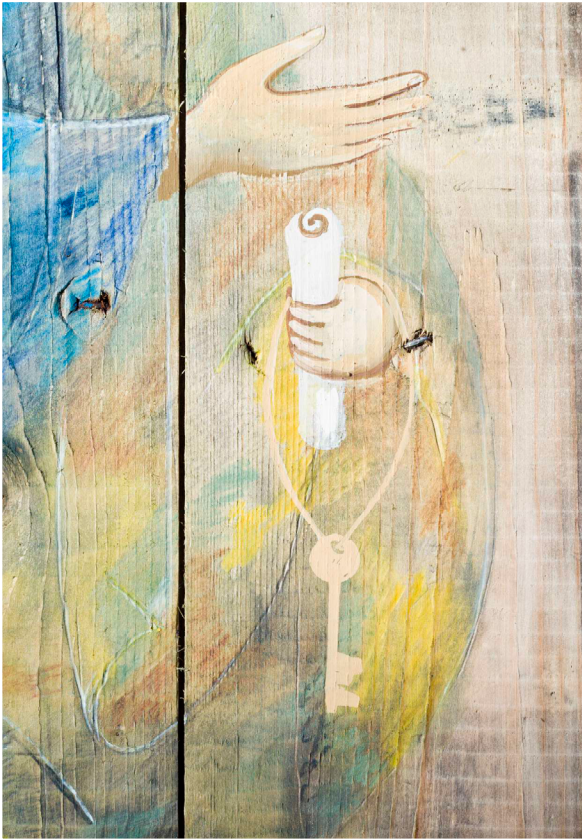
affinity, it is no surprise that the *Icons on Ammo Boxes* have found a warm reception in Ukrainian immigrant communities in Europe and North America, and that Klymenko was awarded a medal "for assistance to the Armed Forces of Ukraine" for his work on the project.

On the other hand, the *Icons on Ammo Boxes* are explicitly dedicated not to the "civil religion" of the nation but to the Orthodox Christian faith shared by Russians and Ukrainians alike. In the spirit of beating "swords into ploughshares" (Isa. 2:4), the artists describe their work as reclaiming the material of violent conflict and transforming it into a prayer for peace—a purpose accentuated by the profound lamentation visible in the saints' faces. In painting these figures, Atlantova and Klymenko drew on both Ukrainian and Russian visual sources, deliberately gesturing toward national reconciliation. Proceeds from icon sales support the Pirogov First Volunteer Mobile Hospital, a nongovernmental charity offering medical services to soldiers and civilians in the conflict zone regardless of political affiliation.

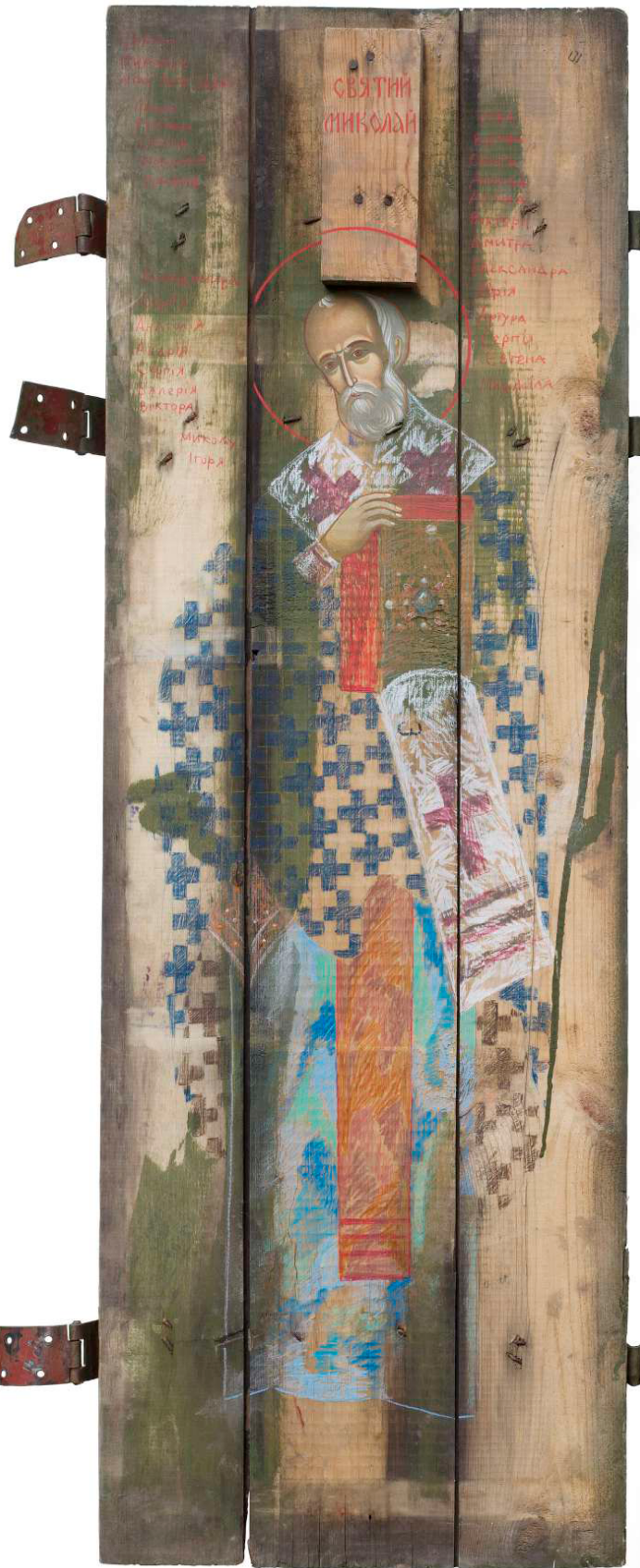
The value of an artwork often lies more in the questions it raises than in the answers it provides. The *Icons on Ammo Boxes* invite reflection on the symbolic role of Orthodox Christianity in the twofold aspiration to honor the nation's war dead and to transcend national conflict.

—Joseph L. Clarke ✽





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