



**JAIME EGUIGUREN**

ART & ANTIQUES

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**PORTRAIT OF TSAR ALEKSEI  
MIKHAILOVICH ROMANOV**

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## *Portrait of Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich Romanov (1629 - 1676)*

Inscription: Alexius Mikhailovich Magnus Dux Moskovia 1657

Anonymous. Dated 1657.

Possibly the oldest live portrait of Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich.

Oil on canvas

116 x 94 cm

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The painting depicts the Russian tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich Romanov (1629 - 1676), the second tsar of the Romanov dynasty, he ruled Russia in 1645-1676. This tsar is less known in the Western world mostly because his eventful and significant rule is overshadowed by the fame of his youngest son - Emperor Peter the Great.

Alexei Mikhailovich had 16 children - 13 with his first wife Mariya Miloslavskaya, and after her death, another three with his second wife Natalya Naryshkina. The tsar was known as an exemplary family man, he was well educated, spoke several languages and had a vast knowledge of European literature. During his rule many books were translated into Russian, theatre started to develop and the post service was established. He was a keen falcon hunter and chess player.

His nickname was “The Quietest” because Alexei Mikhailovich was calm, reasonable and compliant by nature, though his reign had a fair share of historic dramas including wars and rebellions, not to mention the plague which halved the population of Moscow, from 300,000 - the highest population in a European city of that time - to 150,000. (In order to pay his army which was at war on the borders of Russia at the time of the plague, the tsar ordered that all the silver coins stored in the capital were washed with disinfectant to prevent the spread of the epidemic.)

Alexei Mikhailovich ascended the throne in 1645 at the age of 16, having lost both his parents.

The financial policy of the government of Aleksei Mikhailovich was focused on increasing taxes in order to replenish the treasury. The establishment of the Salt tax in 1645 led to the Salt Riot in Moscow in 1648, whereupon the tax on salt was canceled. Miscalculations in financial policy — the issue of copper money equated to silver, which brought down the ruble — provoked discontent among the population, which in 1662 grew into the Copper Riot. The riot was suppressed by the archers, and copper money was canceled. Later on, in southern Russia, the people rebellion arose under the leadership of the Don Cossack Stepan Razin (1670-1671) which led to the execution of Razin in June 1671.

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In 1649, under the guidance of the prominent aristocrats, Alexei Mikhailovich signed the text of the new foundations of Russian legislation, which affirmed the principle of a centralized state with the authoritarian rule of the tsar. New central government bodies were established and also the first reform of the Russian army began - the introduction of hired "regiments of the new system", similar to the ones in Western Europe. During his rule the feudal dependence of peasants was increased, the position of the nobility was strengthened. All urban settlements of lower classes had to bear the full tax burden.

In the 1650s and 1660s, Patriarch Nikon, who earlier impressed the young tsar by his spirituality and vast knowledge, carried out the reform of the Russian Orthodox Church, which led to the excommunication of the Old Believers.

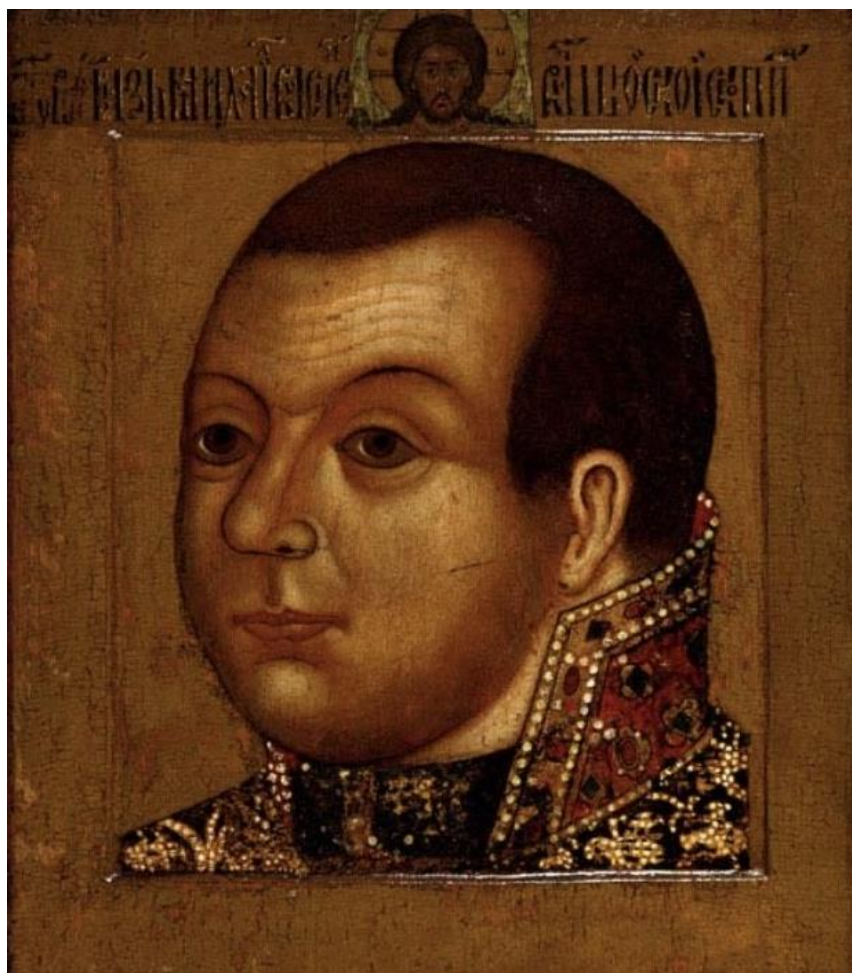
A major achievement of Russian diplomacy during the reign of Alexei Mikhailovich was the reunification of a significant part of Ukraine with Russia. In 1667, the 13-year war with Poland ended victoriously, and Smolensk, Kiev and the entire left-bank Ukraine were returned to Russia. The tsar personally participated in many of the military campaigns, led diplomatic negotiations and controlled the activities of Russian ambassadors. In the east of the country, some more territories of Siberia were adjoined to Russia as a result of the work of the Russian pioneers Semyon Dezhnev and Vasily Poyarkov. The cities of Nerchinsk (1656), Irkutsk (1659), Selenginsk (1666) and others were founded. Under the rule of Alexei Mikhailovich, Russia's southern borders were successfully defended from Turks and Tatars. The government encouraged industrial activity, patronized domestic trade, protecting it from the competition of foreign goods.

Alexei Mikhailovich died on February 8 (January 29 according to the old style calendar) in 1676 at the age of 46. The portrait of the tsar Alexei Mikhailovich is an example of the changes, which were appearing in the Russian painting in the 2nd half of the 17th century. The composition of the painting is quite traditional, in fact it seems quite close to a type of Russian portrait known as parsuna (парсуна), a transliteration of the Latin word persona, or person. Parsuna appeared in Russia in the 17th century and usually depicted monarchs or other notable people.



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17<sup>th</sup> century parsuna of Prince Mikhail Skopin-shuisky

Initially, the word simply referred to any portrait of a secular person, and their similarity to icons of saints was down to nothing more than the “iconographic” method of painting being the only one widely known by artists in medieval Russia. The inscription alone would be enough to distinguish parsuna of notable people from holy icons of saints, and we can see such inscription shaped as an arch at the top of the painting.

As new artistic techniques were introduced from the west, parsuna in the late 17th century tended to be painted on canvas, rather than wooden boards. However, it still maintained the same basic iconographic style as earlier parsuna. The stylised forms used in parsuna reveal a lack of concern with preserving the actual features of a person, but rather their overall image: the tsar; the military leader; the influential boyar.

# JAIME EGUIGUREN

ART & ANTIQUES

In this portrait we can trace the transition from two-dimensional icon painting on wood to three-dimensional portrait on canvas. Its charm lies in its naive union of the archaic devices of icon painting and the attempts of the anonymous artist to conform to the European portrait genre. The artist is already concentrating on capturing the texture and folds of the clothes and the facial features of a concrete individual.

How realistic is the painting, which bears the date 1657 when the tsar was 28 years old? It comes quite close to the description of the appearance of the Russian tsar given by Samuel Collins (1619-1670), an English physician invited in 1660 to serve as a personal doctor of Aleksei Mikhailovich: "I shall now give you a further description of the Czar. He is a goodly person, about six-foot-high, well set, inclined to fat, of a clear complexion, lightish hair, somewhat a low forehead, of a stern countenance, severe in his chastisements, but very careful of his Subjects love." ("On the Present State of Russia", 1671 - a compilation of letters written by Collins to Robert Boyle, a well-known English scientist.)

In the later portraits Alexei Mikhailovich is depicted at an older age, often with dark hair and beard, and only occasionally blonde.

In the portrait, the tsar is depicted with two symbols of regal power - he is wearing the regal cap and he is holding the sceptre in his right hand. The regal cap is similar in shape to Monomakh's Cap, also called the Golden Cap, a chief relic of the Russian Grand Princes and Tsars used at their coronation (before the appearance of the Emperor's Crown).

It's a gold filigree skullcap composed of eight sectors, elaborately ornamented and inlaid with precious stones (ruby and emerald) and pearls and trimmed with sable. The cap is surmounted by a simple gold cross with pearls at each of the extremities.

We can see from the portrait that the cap of Alexei Mikhailovich differs from the Monomakh's Cap - its design is dominated by geometrical lines of pearls, whilst such lines are absent on the Monomakh's Cap featuring big rubies and emeralds surrounded by just a few pearls on the background of gold filigree.

# JAIME EGUIGUREN

ART & ANTIQUES

The tsar's cap in the portrait is also different from his father's one which Alexei Mikhailovich would have inherited. We can assume that the artist was familiar with the style of the formal regal accessories but chose to depict them approximately, which doesn't contradict neither the style of *parsuna*, nor their symbolic nature. Another important feature of the tsar's regal costume is a wide collar (*barms* - бармы) adorned with pearls and precious stones, on top of which there's a cross.

Interestingly the collar on the portrait differs from the one made later to the tsar's order by Greek craftsmen in Istanbul in 1662 (a new sceptre was also made in Istanbul a few years earlier, in 1658). This doesn't contradict the date written on top of the portrait - 1657, when the tsar didn't yet possess those new regal accessories. These accessories were part of a formal regal costume of the tsar, which included a wide mantle with wide sleeves made of the most expensive heavy fabrics adorned with precious stones.

The costume of the tsar in the portrait differs from the traditional one - its sleeves are wide at the shoulders and upper arms but narrow at the wrists, and it is not as loose around the body as the traditional mantle would be, making it look closer to European, especially Polish attire. Alexei Mikhailovich was wearing European costumes as a small child and often as an adult, he invited many foreigners from different countries of Europe to serve at his court - which also allows a possibility of the European origins of the author of this portrait. The inscription on top of the portrait adds a certain degree of credibility to this suggestion as it is made in Latin, not in Russian.



Unknown artist, *Portrait of Alexius Mikhailovich*, end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century

Despite the fact that in 1675 the tsar issued a decree banning European fashion, European costume was gaining more and more popularity and eventually won the battle with tradition during the rule of his direct successors.

This portrait bears a definite similarity to another portrait of the tsar Alexei Mikhailovich by unknown artist (end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century) based on the engraving by Cornelis Meyssens which can be found among illustrations of the book "Historia di

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ART & ANTIQUES

Leopoldo Cesare" ("History of Leopold Caesar", Vienna, 1670). An inscription in Latin, in the past tense "reigned and ruled" (an artist's alteration) suggests that the portrait was made after the tsar's death. Technical characteristics of this portrait also point to the fact that the work was painted at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

The portrait **Alexius Mikhailovich Magnus Dux Moskovia 1657** reflects the time of transition in the Russian society and culture in the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, combining traditional elements in its composition and overall technique with a more realistic than previously portrayal of the face. Further research will lift the mystery of this painting depicting one of the most significant rulers in Russian history, the man who laid down the foundation for the transformational policy of his famous son Peter the Great.



Unknown artist, *Portrait of Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich*,  
Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg, end of the 18<sup>th</sup> –



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Unknown Artist

*Portrait of Alexis I of Russia*

1670's

Ptuj Ormož Regional Museum



Unknown artist

*Portrait of Tsar Alexis Mikhailovich*

End of the 17<sup>th</sup> century (1680?)

Russian Museum

Received in 1931 from the Society of Lovers  
of the Ancient History and Arts

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Unknown artist

*Portrait of Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich  
Romanov*

Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg



Unknown artist

*Portrait of Tsar Alexis I of Russia*

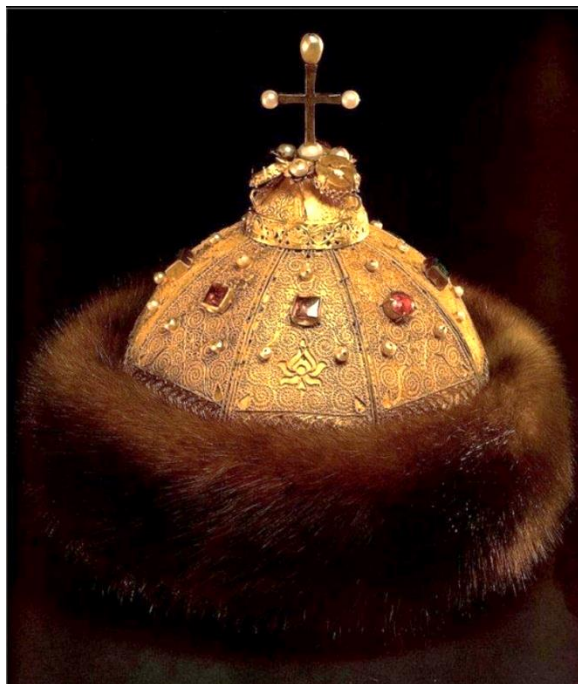
Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg

Between 1790 and 1810



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Monomakh's Cap, Museums of Moscow Kremlin



The Cap of the tsar Mikhail Fedorovich (the father of Alexei) Museums of Moscow Kremlin

Alicia Maksimova  
Art History Researcher



## Condition Report

This impressive portrait is in overall very good condition.

Canvas, stretcher and lining: the original canvas had been glued to a later canvas to make it more resistant but over time it had slightly lost its tension resulting also in the old stretcher (not original) creating marks to the front of the painting so it was decided to detach the original canvas from the later addition and after being cleaned and consolidated it was strip-lined to a wooden key-able new stretcher. Very good tension is being observed now.

Paint and Ground: paint appears to be in good condition, no heavy signs of age-cracking, good adhesion between the different layers of the painting (paint/ ground/canvas).

Varnish: a discoloured varnish visible throughout the surface was removed. At close inspection it was also noted that the oval background around the figure had been repainted at a later date with a dark colour altering the original palette and colour contrast so it was decided to carefully remove it revealing a vivid and brighter composition beneath.

A few minor losses of paint have been retouched with dry pigments in MS2A resin. A final transparent and stable varnish (Laropal A81 in shellsol) was then applied over the surface of the painting.

**Angelica Pediconi & Fabio Mazzocchi**

Fine Art Conservation & Restoration Studios



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