

InterCultura

Gates of Mystery: The Art of Holy Russia From the Russian Museum Collection

Exhibition Description

Introduction

InterCultura, an international non-profit museum service organization, is preparing an unprecedented exhibition of medieval Russian art in association with the Ministry of Culture of the USSR. Entitled *Third Rome: Treasures of Medieval Russia*, this will be the first major exhibition in the United States devoted to the achievements of Russian artists during the formative period of their culture, and will be drawn from the Russian Museum in Saint Petersburg, and other collections within the Soviet Union. The exhibition will open in 1991 at the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore, the leading American museum to specialize in the art of the Byzantine world, before traveling to the Dallas Museum of Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.

The Exhibition

The exhibition will include approximately 110 objects of the highest aesthetic quality from the twelfth to the seventeenth century, selected to reveal the influence of the Byzantine legacy in Russia, the development and refinement of technique and style which resulted in a specifically Russian art, and the social and political significance of this art within the context of medieval life. To display the integrated iconographic program inherited from Byzantium, the selection of objects will include the full range of media employed by medieval Russian artists: approximately 60 icons, painted in tempera on wood panel; 20 gold and silver objects, including icon mountings (*oklady*), icon lamps, and liturgical plate; 20 embroidered and brocade textiles, including vestments, altar frontals, and shrouds; 5 pendant icons and crosses carved in steatite, bone and wood, with gold and silver mountings; 3 illuminated manuscripts; and 2 painted wooden sculptures. Through the display of works never before seen, the exhibition will bring viewers into a new relationship with the objects within a specially designed installation which conveys the original liturgical purpose as well as the visual majesty of the sacred objects.

Advisory Committee and Curator

Since there are no major collections of medieval Russian art in Western museums, the most significant studies of medieval Russian art are written in Russian, by Russian art historians with access to collections within the Soviet Union; and since these studies are rarely translated into Western languages, most Western students have been unable to incorporate the results of Russian research into the wider field of medieval studies. The project will therefore provide a unique opportunity for cooperation between leading medieval specialists in the Soviet Union, the United States, and Europe, and an international advisory committee has been established which includes: Russian art historians like Tatiana Vilibakhova (curator of medieval art at the Russian Museum and acting curator of the exhibition), Olga Popova, Engelina Smirnova, and Gerold Zdornov; Western specialists in Byzantine art history like Robin Cormack and Gary Vikan; and authorities in Russian social, political, and ecclesiastical history like Simon Franklin and John Meyendorff. The advisory committee will participate fully in all aspects of

the exhibition, including conceptualization and formulation, and in the preparation of the fully illustrated catalogue to accompany it. A symposium will be organized to coincide with the opening of the exhibition, at which members of the committee will be invited to deliver papers and participate in seminars and discussions, and publication of the symposium papers is envisaged.

Background

Sixty years ago, the young English art historian Robert Byron was able to see a newly restored icon by the most famous of Russian masters, Andrei Rublev. "The view was a revelation," he wrote, "a work of unprecedented invention to which nothing in art that I could think of offered any sort of parallel...one which differed in its greatness more than I had thought possible from the accepted canons of greatness."

The reasons for this difference lie in the decision taken by Prince Vladimir of Kiev in 988 to adopt, not the Catholic faith and culture of western Europe, but rather the Orthodox system of the East, the state religion of Byzantium, which maintained the Roman empire for a thousand years after the fall of Italy to barbarian invaders. According to the account of the conversion in the Russian *Primary Chronicle*, it was the great beauty of the art created for the liturgy of the Byzantine church which played a major role in Vladimir's adoption of Byzantine culture. "We cannot forget that beauty," his ambassadors told him. "We did not know whether we were in heaven or on earth, and we cannot describe it. We only know that God dwells there among men."

The nature and function of religious art, especially the veneration of painted portraits of Christ and the saints, had been the subject of intense discussion in Byzantium, and in the eighth and ninth centuries produced a social and political convulsion known as the Iconoclastic controversy. To defeat the Iconoclasts, who had opposed the veneration of such portraits, Byzantine theologians elaborated a belief that the representation of Christ in material form continued the work of his Incarnation, restoring the world to the perfect harmony which existed before the Fall. Through the various media employed in church decoration and furnishing, which provided the setting for the sacred theater of the divine liturgy, Byzantine artists believed they were both depicting this process and actively engaged in it. This was the art which so favorably impressed the ambassadors of Prince Vladimir, and after his conversion the artists and patrons of medieval Russia devoted virtually their entire energies to its production.

With the conversion of Vladimir, Kiev became the center of Christian Russian culture, and has long been remembered by Russians as a "golden age." This had already passed by 1237, when the armies of the Golden Horde appeared from the steppes of Central Asia, and although the Mongols imposed a heavy tribute, they allowed Christian Russia to retain its own culture. Indeed, since travel to Byzantium was now more difficult, the Mongol armies were a stimulus in the development of more distinctively Russian styles.

During the Mongol occupation various Russian princes struggled for supremacy, with the princes of Moscow emerging as the most skilled both at exploiting submission to the overlords, and at leading resistance to them. The triumph of Moscow after two centuries of living under the "Mongol yoke" coincided with the collapse of Byzantium to the Ottoman Turks, and the Russian church began to encourage the princes of Moscow to see themselves as the heirs of the Byzantine emperors, and their city as a "Third Rome." In 1510 the monk Filofey wrote from Pskov to the Grand Prince of Moscow Basil III: "The Apostolic Church stands no longer in Rome or in Constantinople, but in the blessed city of Moscow, which shines in the whole world brighter than the sun...Two Romes have fallen, but the third stands, and a fourth there shall not be."

As the expanding Muscovite state absorbed other Russian principalities, it absorbed other schools of painting like that of the northern merchant democracy of Novgorod into its own vision of a divinely ordered autocracy, and Moscow itself became a center for the leading painters of the nation, like Andrei Rublev and Dionysii. The art of Moscow, therefore, became the art of all Muscovite Russia, a process given impetus by the Moscow fire of 1547, when a vast quantity of art was required as quickly as possible in rebuilding lost churches, and artists were summoned from all parts of Russia to the state workshop in the Kremlin Armoury.

In contrast to such official state art, northern merchant families like the Stroganovs began to commission small intricate icons for more private religious devotion from artists like Procopii Chirin, and this new style led to the dazzling complexity of Yaroslavl painters like Semyon Spiridonov. By the middle of the seventeenth century, Simon Ushakov had begun to experiment with Western techniques, a foreshadowing of the social revolution of Peter the Great, which transformed Russian culture and produced a secular art in imitation of Western models.

By no means all Russians chose to participate in this new Westernized culture, however, and conservative merchant families—especially Old Believers who had left the established church in the middle of the seventeenth century in protest at departures from ancient ritual—began to collect icons from earlier centuries. It was these private collections which were to form the basis of the great state collections, like the Russian Museum in Saint Petersburg, and to provide material for the Russian art historians who began to study the medieval period in the late nineteenth century. Yet it was only after the October Revolution of 1917, when large numbers of icons from churches across Russia were gathered into the newly established state restoration workshops, that historians were able to see medieval art in something like its original splendor, once the layers of paint and oil applied over the centuries were removed with the dramatic results witnessed by Robert Byron in 1929.

Exhibition Themes

Through the display of icons, illuminated manuscripts, gold and silver liturgical vessels, and brocade vestments adorned with embroidery and pearls, the exhibition will be able to examine:

- the influence in Russia of Byzantine culture, both from the imperial capital Constantinople, and via Serbia and Bulgaria, the Balkan Slavs within the Byzantine Commonwealth;
- the structure and significance of the iconographic program inherited from Byzantium, and of the Russian contributions to this program, from the depiction of national saints and festivals to the elaboration of the iconostasis;
- the nature of artistic patronage in medieval Russia, and the relationship between patronage and developments in style and iconography in different centres of production like Pskov, Tver, Yaroslavl, Novgorod, and Moscow;
- the impact of Western techniques in the seventeenth century, leading to the secularization of Russian art following Western models;
- the rediscovery of old Russian art by nineteenth century collectors, and the work of restoration experts and art historians in revealing the legacy of earlier centuries.

Conclusion

The exhibition will provide an unprecedented opportunity for the general public to see masterpieces of medieval Russian art, and to learn of the work of Soviet museums and restoration experts in preserving this heritage, and of Russian historians in revealing its secrets. It will also provide an unprecedented opportunity for specialists to collaborate with colleagues in a variety of disciplines, to benefit from the encounter between different traditions of scholarship, and to present specialist research to a wide general public on topics of continuing relevance to the cultural identity of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.