

SEE THE INVISIBLE. Russian icons from the Intesa Sanpaolo collection
In conversation with
VALERY KOSHLyakOV. Architetture celesti (Celestial architectures)

AT THE GALLERIE D'ITALIA IN VICENZA THE INTESA SANPAOLO COLLECTION OF RUSSIAN ICONS: A NEW EXHIBITION BETWEEN ART AND SPIRITUALITY, IN CONVERSATION WITH THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

- At the Gallerie d'Italia – Palazzo Leoni Montanari from 3 July 2021 the Intesa Sanpaolo collection of Russian icons will once again be available to visitors in an innovative immersive experience accompanied by an original conversation with contemporary art
- The first guest, until 3 July 2022, the Russian artist Valery Koshlyakov
- Project curators: Silvia Burini and Giuseppe Barbieri, Directors of the Centre for the Study of the Arts in Russia (CSAR) at Ca' Foscari University, Venice, Italy
- The vault in which the other icons of the collection are kept is also new and available to scholars and connoisseurs.

Vicenza, 2 July 2021 – **From 3 July 2021 the Gallerie d'Italia of Intesa Sanpaolo in Vicenza**, recognised as the “home of icons” since the museum’s opening in 1999, will offer the public a selection of **seventy Russian icons from the Intesa Sanpaolo collection**, displayed in a revamped permanent exhibition. **Until 3 July 2022**, the museum tour – in the ground floor spaces – is enriched by the **conversation with the works of contemporary artist Valery Koshlyakov**. The project is curated by Silvia Burini and Giuseppe Barbieri, Directors of the Centre for the Study of the Arts in Russia (CSAR) at Ca' Foscari University, Venice.

Giovanni Bazoli, Chairman Emeritus of Intesa Sanpaolo, states: *“The management of the Group’s art heritage involves not only the careful conservation of the works, but also a continuous and constantly renewed cycle of how these works are studied and displayed. The new exhibition of the collection of Russian icons, which is one of the most valuable private collections, combines respect for tradition with a contemporary interpretation of this artistic production, highlighting the topical significance and value of these extraordinary works. The initiative is a sign of our commitment to the city of Vicenza, where Intesa Sanpaolo’s first museum was established, and which launched a major project to share our bank’s historic buildings and art collections with the public”*.

A journey through spirituality and art

The selection of icons offers the opportunity to contemplate a wide sequence of masterpieces of sacred art in Russia, different in terms of periods and places of their production.

Peculiar aspects of the iconic language – the colour timbre, the compositional geometry, the proportions of importance, the reversed perspective – encourage the observer to abandon schemes linked to representation based on criteria of plausibility, in order to discover the symbolic richness of a language that is naive only in appearance.

Thematically and diachronically organised, the exhibition shows the gradual development over time, from the 13th to the 19th century, of this art, practised mainly by monks and iconographers in the workshops of the cenobi.

Their artistic expression is destined to remain completely anonymous, with no signature, since it is offered humbly and silently as an offering to God and as a gift of charity (brotherly love) for the world. Spiritually guided by divine inspiration, the artist “writes” his own visual message of faith, honouring the memory of tradition and ideally projecting this work into the future, under the banner of the eschatological event.

This perspective of hope stretching beyond the limits of earthly life is exemplified by two ancient and precious examples, both dating back to the 13th century: the *Ascension of the prophet Elijah* and *Christ's Descent into Hell*. In a century marked by bloody dramas, such icons embody confidence in a new time, capable at last of social justice and mercy.

The setting up

The exhibition is set up with new museographic criteria, to welcome and “narrate” the icons through innovative ways of displaying and using them: the choice was to move from an exhibition to an experience. The visitor is accompanied into the world of the representation of the sacred in the Russian tradition, embodied in the Orthodox rite, relived daily: the rite that Florenskij indicated as a living “synthesis” of the arts, contrasting it with the neutral space of the “museum”.

The **first room** of the exhibition, **immersive and multisensory**, is a narrative environment that initiates a conversation between the millenary Russian civilisation of the depiction of the sacred and an updated “western view”, respectful and rigorous towards that tradition and at the same time committed to providing visitors with adequate and stimulating keys to understanding it. The room welcomes visitors at the beginning of their **visual journey into Russian Orthodox spirituality** and allows them to perceive the space in which icons are actually enjoyed: if for the West, the icon is simply an artefact made in a particular historical period, in Russia, it is instead an ever-living organism. The icon is a word for images, an act of prayer and a liturgical instrument: it is not an object to be observed (and admired), but a living sign in a dimension of devotion and contemplation. Produced by Studio Arts Media of Moscow, directed by Nikita Tichonov, the video immerses us in the intensity of the rituals of the Church of the Annunciation of the Blessed Mother of God, in the village of Pavlovskaya Sloboda, in the Moscow Region.

In the **second room**, together with some of the **most representative icons of the collection**, about thirty panels have been placed side by side to form a sort of **evocative iconostasis** (the wall that in Orthodox churches separates the space of the faithful from the presbytery to which only priests have access), so as to allow visitors to effectively understand the primary function of icons in the Russian tradition.

In the **third room**, there is a periodic **conversation between the world of the icon and modern and contemporary artistic expressions**, which refer to that ancient matrix. On this occasion, the comparison is with one of the greatest living Russian artists, **Valery Koshlyakov**.

Born in 1962 in Sal'sk, southern Russia, Koshlyakov has lived in Paris for many years and often uses materials of explicit poverty to create his works: cardboard, packing tape, overlapping layers of oil paint and spray paint. After a long and detailed survey of popular architecture and everyday objects that he felt referred to the compositional structure of the icon, Koshlyakov has, over the last few decades, produced a wide-ranging sequence of ikonosy, suggestive signs that bring together the settings of the icon's backgrounds with the present day. The exhibition *Architetture celesti* (Celestial architectures) is composed of a nucleus of site-specific ikonosy, created specifically by the artist in close conversation with four icons selected from the Intesa Sanpaolo collection, in which it is possible to detect the presence of details that have then "migrated", transforming themselves into his architectural fantasies.

In the **fourth and last room**, together with **didactic contents** on the technique of icon making, some metal coverings – rize and basme – that have protected and embellished the painted panels over the centuries are displayed.

The exhibition concludes with a **multimedia touchscreen installation**, curated by camerAnebbia, Milan, which provides essential information about the icon and its phases of creation, with a specific focus on menologues, icons that represent the saints and religious festivals of the liturgical calendar.

Also new is the vault in which the icons of the collection not presented in the exhibition halls are kept, **available (on request) to scholars and connoisseurs**.

The room, which is spread over two floors, is equipped with a system of racks that houses the precious plates and allows the preservation of the works according to the latest museum standards.

Numerous collateral initiatives to the exhibition project are planned: guided tours and thematic itineraries to discover the symbolic language of icons or to approach the imagination of a contemporary artist; animated stories for children and free educational activities for schools of all levels.

The exhibition is accompanied by the Valery Koshlyakov catalogue. *Architetture celesti*, Edizioni Gallerie d'Italia | Skira.

PRESS IMAGES AT THE LINK <https://bit.ly/2UPO4aj>

PRESS INFORMATION

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INFORMATION FOR THE PUBLIC

OPENING TO THE PUBLIC: 3 July 2021 – 3 July 2022

LOCATION: Gallerie d'Italia – Palazzo Leoni Montanari, Contra' Santa Corona 25, Vicenza

OPENING HOURS: from Tuesday to Sunday from 10.00 a.m. to 6.00 p.m. (last entrance at 5.30 p.m.), closed on Mondays

INFORMATION: Procedures for safe visits and information info@palazzomontanari.com, Freephone number 800.578875; reservations www.gallerieditalia.com

TICKET: Joint ticket exhibition and permanent collections: Full € 5 | Reduced € 3

Free for members, schools, children under 18, Intesa Sanpaolo Group customers

Online booking is recommended on the Gallerie d'Italia website