

EXHIBITION REVIEW

THE COLLECTION OF RUSSIAN ICONS AT THE PALAZZO LEONI MONTANARI IN VICENZA

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Figure 1. Ascension of the Prophet Elijah, 13th century

That Vicenza, a city in Northern Italy largely defined by the Renaissance architecture of Andrea Palladio, should also be home to a large collection of Russian icons in the West covering the whole period from the 13th to the 20th century, may come as a surprise. After all, Palladio's imprint on the city was achieved by a host of landmark buildings that consciously sought to evoke Roman Antiquity and obscure, even obliterate, the more immediate medieval past. A striking visual symbol of Palladio's project was the Basilica Palladiana, a medieval structure in the Gothic style to which Palladio attached a loggia in the form of a two-storied arcade, which enveloped entirely the sides of the building. As a result, the original medieval look of the building was completely altered. Not far from the Basilica is the Palazzo Leoni Montanari, a sumptuously decorated 17th-century Baroque palace, which has been converted into a museum since 1999. The third floor of the palazzo holds a permanent exhibition of Russian icons, an art which depends on following canonical forms, which were largely established during the Medieval period.

While there is some irony in the fact that the “city of Palladio” houses a large collection of icons, there is a sense in which the region of the Veneto in general is the appropriate place for a museum devoted to the art of the icon. Throughout the Middle Ages, Byzantine art and culture had an enormous influence on Venice. Historians have even described medieval Venice as “a Byzantine enclave in a Latin world”¹. Indeed, for the Venetians, as well as for the other inhabitants of the surrounding territories, which as Vicenza, became part of the Venetian Republic for a time, icons were a familiar medium to an extent which was unique in Western Europe. In this sense, the Russian icon collection in the Palazzo Leoni Montanari sits comfortably within the *longue durée* history of the region.

The permanent exhibition of Russian icons in Vicenza is based, in large part, on the pieces purchased en bloc by the Banco Ambrosiano Veneto from Davide Orler, an Italian artist and art dealer based in Venice. Orler had started collecting icons after the Second World War and in the following decades had acquired close to two thousand works out of which the Banco selected several hundred. At the recommendation of the art expert John Lindsay Opie, some more icons were acquired including the collection of Blanchette Rockefeller. The end result is the show that can be seen in Vicenza—high-quality icons, ranging from the 13th to the 20th centuries.

1 Obolensky, D., *Byzantium and the Slavs*, (Crestwood, New York, 1994), p.91.

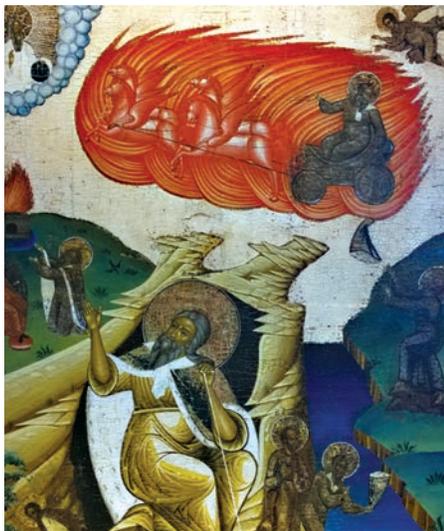


Figure 2 (above). Detail of Ascension of the Prophet Elijah, 19th century.

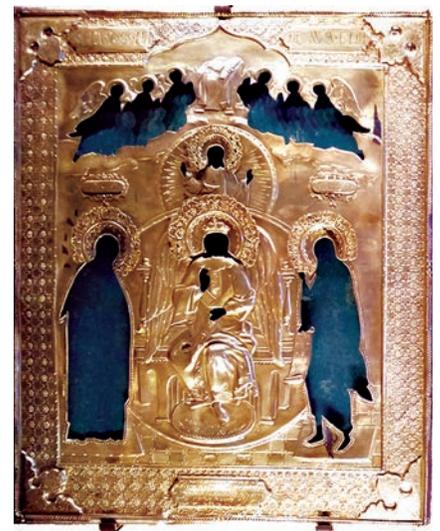
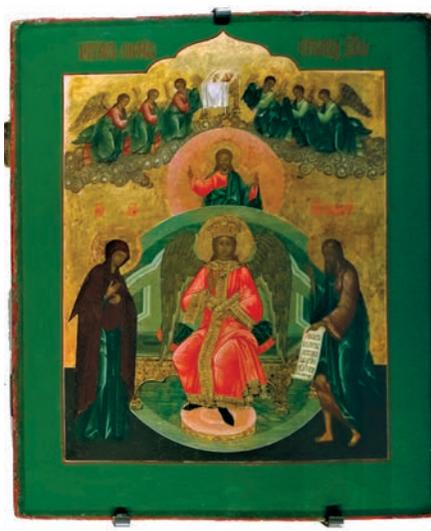


Figure 3 and 4. Icon of Saint Sophia (center) and oklad (right). Late 19th century.

The arrangement by iconographical subject, rather than in chronological order, works very well. Thus, a 13th-century icon of the Ascension of the Prophet Elijah (Figure 1) can be seen alongside a 19th-century image on the same subject (Figure 2). The charming, “primitive” look of the earlier piece and the much more elaborate composition, developing in a landscape suggesting some sort of spatial depth, of the later one are a striking illustration of the evolution of style. The iconographical subjects that are chosen give a distinctly Eastern Orthodox and Russian feel to the show. The icons of Sophia, the Wisdom of God, refer to a typically Byzantine iconography which influenced profoundly the rest of the Orthodox world, including Russia (Figure 3, 4). The same applies to the several pieces which show groups of saints venerating an icon. The composition of an icon within an icon is a long artistic tradition which reflects the cult of images, a fundamental feature of Orthodoxy. There is a room with images of St. Nicholas the Miracle-worker, one of the most beloved Orthodox saints, as well as exclusively Russian saints as Zosima and Savvatij of the Solovki. A depiction of the latter two shows them with a model of the Solovki Monastery on the White Sea, a place with a dramatic history already in the Tsarist period, which was converted into a labour camp in the 1920s. There is a room with icons with their silver covers, another Orthodox tradition which became especially prominent in Russia.

One of the ways in which the exhibition in the Palazzo Leoni Montanari could be understood is as an attempt at what the Russian religious philosopher Evgeni Trubetskoy referred to as “theology in colour”.² Going from room to room, the visitor is drawn further and further into the world of the Orthodox believer. Each iconographical subject speaks of a theological idea and reveals an aspect of popular devotion.

2 In the years 1914-1917, E. Trubetskoy wrote several essays on the art of the Russian icon that were collected in a volume titled *Theology in Colour* (after the title of one of the essays). There is an English translation of the volume.

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