

“The Spiritual Treasures of Ukraine” Museum (Kyiv)

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Shortly after Ukraine recovered its independence in 1991, a well-known cardiologist from Kyiv, Ihor Ponamarchuk (1954–2020), later director of the museum, dreamed of establishing a museum of the old Ukrainian icon. A great and ambitious dream, but with passion and conviction, this challenging undertaking saw the light of day. In 2005, the doors of a building in the Kyiv city center opened its doors to Ukrainians as well as museum-goers from around the world, exhibiting the story of people’s religious beliefs and art in more than 400 pictures from the 13th through 19th centuries. It is currently one of the biggest collections of old Ukrainian icons in the world (along with the museums in Lviv, Sanok and Przemyśl). The preciousness of individual icons grows significantly considering how few have survived owing to various factors and historical causes. The collections outside of Kyiv are composed of mainly regional examples of icons, but the museum in Kyiv—which goes under the meaningful name of “The Spiritual Treasures of Ukraine”—holds icons from all corners of modern Ukraine, thus manifesting a cultural national unity. The collection is also a reflection of religious diversity with icons originating from both Orthodox, Greek-Catholic, and Roman Catholic churches. Beside standard works of Ukrainian icon painting by some of the best masters, the display also includes works by unskilled artists once decorating the walls of poor village churches, thus giving a fuller and more objective view of the history of the Ukrainian icon.

The external conditions behind this exhibition concept have now gained new relevance. In the early years of the 21st century, overshadowed by the history of Russian icon painting, the Ukrainian icon remained a little unknown subject on the world’s cultural map (and not much has changed in this respect even today). The core of the collection was formed in the first ten years of the post-Soviet era, which culminated in an explosion of Ukrainian national consciousness and political will the “Orange Revolution” in 2004—precisely when the Museum opened its doors. This political and cultural context, and the subsequent events around Russian–Ukrainian armed conflict, led us to an even more concerted effort to highlight the cultural differences between Ukrainians and Russians. The icons are, in our opinion, a very telling “window” through which one can observe the colossal cultural difference between Ukrainians and Russians in modern times. Our goal is to give other people of good will, open to learning the real history of Eastern Europe, the tools to do so.

Years of organizational work followed the opening of the museum. Items were conserved, works attributed to individual painters, catalogs and scientific papers written and published, tours and exhibitions prepared, cooperation initiated with various partner museums, funds replenished. Throughout this time, the museum was maintained from private resources under the patronage of the Ponamarchuk family from Kyiv. However, without external help the potential of the collection cannot be used for more significant and global purposes. Therefore, we call on the world’s scientific and business circles to unite around the study and popularization of the old Ukrainian icon to enrich European culture both aesthetically and intellectually and to contribute to keeping the European frontier thousands of kilometers deep

into an area that has been Europe for ages. Investment in this cultural weapon will bring great benefits—to CREATE instead of destroying!

Beside the icons, the collection of the „Spiritual Treasures of Ukraine” Museum includes hundreds of old prints, several dozen paintings by Ukrainian artists from the circle of Adrian Prahov, an influential artist shaping art in late 19th century Kyiv. The Museum must be viewed as truly one of Ukraine’s greatest centers of cultural memory.

Translated by Iwona Zych

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