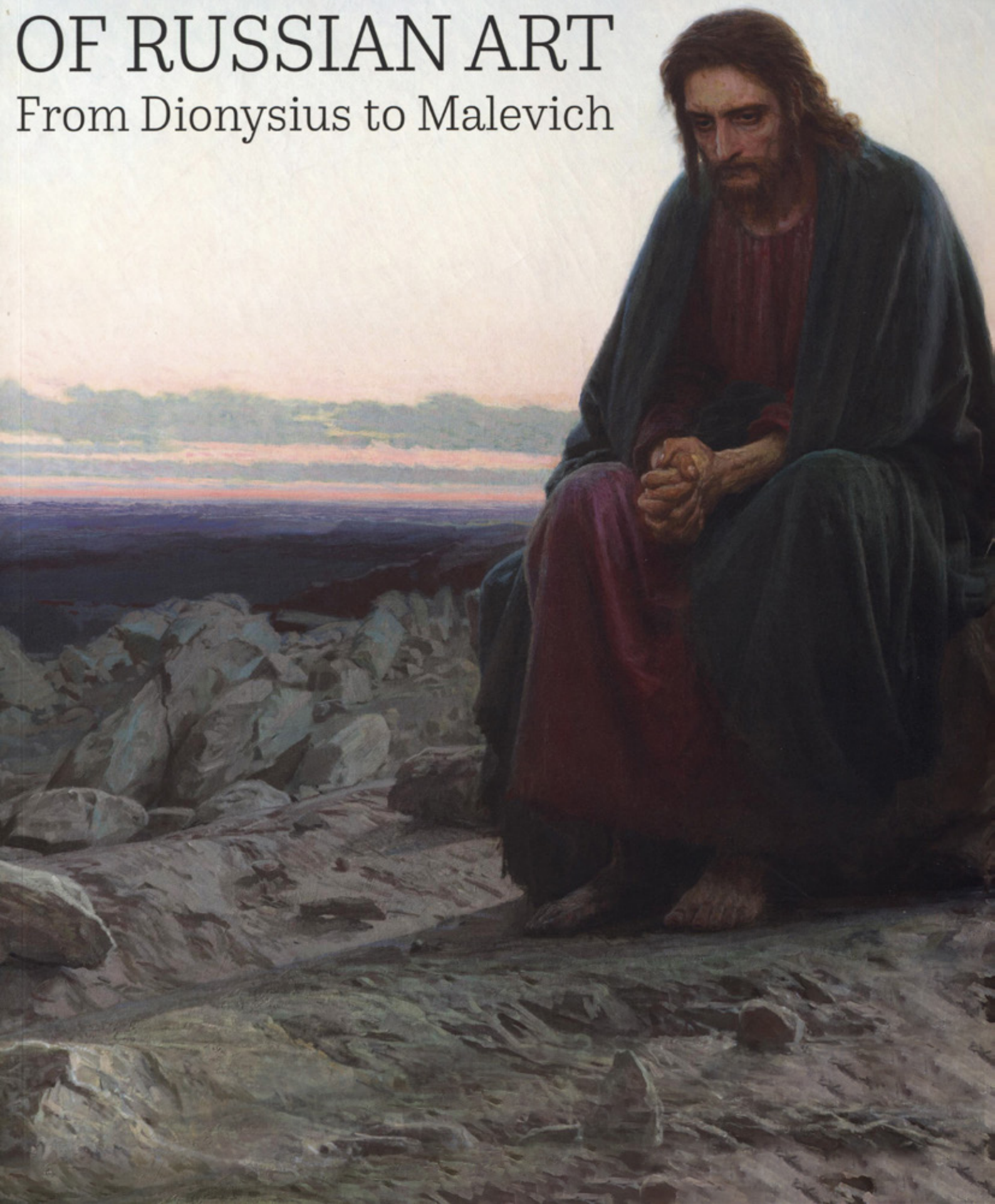


# PILGRIMAGE

## OF RUSSIAN ART

From Dionysius to Malevich





It is a great privilege to open an exhibition in such a place as the Charlemagne Wing of St. Peter's Basilica, the centre of European spirituality, art and history. The task of an exhibitor in this place is surely challenging. We thought hard — I would even say we agonised — about what we could show to express our gratitude for the remarkable exhibition *Roma Aeterna. Masterpieces of the Pinacoteca Vaticana*, and the wonderful works which were generously sent to us by the Vatican Museums for that exhibition. We finally decided to focus on the deep, inner relationship between icon painting and Russian realism of the 19th century.

Our goal was to offer an exhibition presenting Russian art from Dionysius to Malevich, which would not follow the usual chronological principle, but would seek unexpected, but clear analogies between the works of such different eras. The hanging of the works is determined to a large extent by the majestic ascension of Bernini's architecture: the exhibition strives to echo the intervals of the building. Our idea is to place *The Apparition of Christ to the People* by Ivanov next to icons *Nativity* and *Transfiguration* and to let Ivanov's work enter into dialogue with Paisius' *The Holy Trinity* on the opposite wall. *Inconsolable Grief* by Kramskoy is placed opposite the icon *Weep Not for Me, O Mother*, and Kramskoy's *Christ in the Wilderness* is next to the deeply felt *Christ in a Cell*, an 18th century wooden sculpture from Perm. *Life is Everywhere* by Yaroshenko neighbours *Theotokos Kikkotissa* by Simon Ushakov, echoing the format and colours of this remarkable icon. The Solvychegodsk icon *The Vision of Eulogius* is placed vis-à-vis *Above Eternal Peace* by Levitan, and the 16th century *The Last Judgment* is next to Malevich's *Black Square*. The exhibition ends with *Bearing of the Cross* by Nesterov and *In Thee Rejoiceth*, a 16th century icon that conveys the spirit of Russian communality. Icon painting remained a live art in the 19th and 20th centuries, and continued to play an important role in social consciousness and spiritual life in Russia. Icons, which are familiar to every Russian from childhood, determine a specific perception of any figurative art, so that the Russian eye always looks for metaphysical meaning beyond the visible and the nation's art has never considered artistry as a goal in itself. In the Russian tradition the canon is more important than individual mastery, and the supra-individual is more important than the personal.

The masterpiece, in Russian understanding, should not just be a work of art of the highest quality, but a global utterance on a theme that of universal importance. The mastery and quality of pictorial art are not negated, but they take second place to the spiritual value of the work. Masterpieces of Russian art are reproduced not only in art history books, but also in the books from which Russian children learn the proper use of their own language. They are familiar

to every schoolchild, imprinted in people's consciousness as matrices of national identity and accompany Russian people through life in reproductions, slogans, advertisements and caricatures. We are pleased to present these foundational works of the 19th and 20th centuries to the Italian viewer in conjunction with outstanding examples of the icon tradition, in which we believe they are rooted.

**Zelfira Tregulova**

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