

RUSSIAN ICONS NOW DISPLAYED IN FLORENCE'S PITTI PALACE



■ BY LUCY GORDAN

Eike Schmidt, the German director of the *Uffizi* Galleries, announced in Moscow at the very beginning of September that the new year will bring big changes to the Palazzo Pitti, the de Medici dynasty's former residence. For the first time ever, 78 Russian icons, the world's largest collection outside Russia, will go on permanent display in four 17th-century frescoed rooms on the Museum's ground floor, never opened to the public before. They will be included in the ticket price, thus allowing visitors to discover the little-known connection between Florence's past rulers and the Eastern Orthodox Church.

Most of the icons date to the second quarter of the 18th century, but when and why they came to be in Italy remains a mystery. Scholars have theorized that they may have been a gift for the Grand Duke from an ambassador or, more likely, a thank-you present to Francis I (1708-65), Holy Roman Emperor and Duke of Tuscany, who with his wife Maria Theresa founded the Hapsburg-Lorraine dynasty, from the Orthodox community in Livorno for his approval of the construction there of the Greek Orthodox Church of the Blessed Trinity. This church was built between 1757 and 1760, nearly destroyed by

bombs during World War II, but reconsecrated in 1957.

What is known is that the icons were present in Florence in 1761, though a permanent home for them was only found now. Starting in 1796, for only a few years they were stored in the *Uffizi* before the majority of them were moved to the Medici *Villa di Castello* with its magnificent gardens and grounds where they remained until the beginning of the 20th century, then to the *Accademia* from 1958-1968, then to the *Palazzo Pitti*, back to the *Accademia* from 1984 to 2013, and then in 2014 to the *Uffizi* where they were displayed during the Christmas holidays.

The collection has two stars, which will remain at the *Uffizi* because of their importance. One is the two panels of the *Menologion*,

or the calendar of the Orthodox religious festivities divided into two semesters: from September to February and from March to August. Each panel has twenty horizontal rows of sacred scenes and of saints, each identified with an inscription. The other is the icon of Saint Catherine of Alexandria, datable to 1693-94 thanks to the stamp in its gilded silver *oklad* (the metal protective casing which covers some parts of icons). The press release tells us that "the martyr-princess is portrayed with attributes very similar to those in Western art:

Above, one of the four rooms being opened for Russian icons' displays. Here, the two panels of the *Menologion*; right, September to February, and, left, March to August



the palm, books, and an armillary sphere, all of which allude to her vast knowledge. This work of art is attributed to the workshop in the Kremlin's Armory. It is believed to be in the style of Kirill Ulanov, one of the well-known masters of this workshop at the end of the 17th and beginning of the 18th centuries.

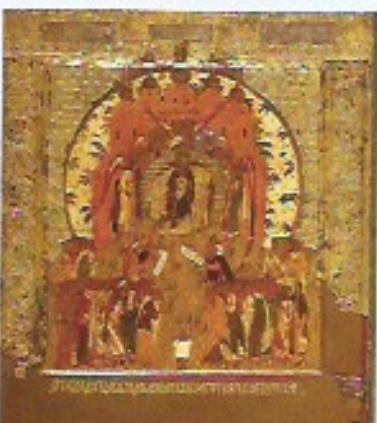
Patroness of lawyers, librarians, millers, nurses, philosophers, rope makers, secretaries, school girls, spinsters, students, wheelwrights, and universities and invoked against diseases of the tongue, St. Catherine of Alexandria is one of the most popular saints of Christendom. She was an Egyptian princess or queen, "who, despite her great beauty," *Saints Preserve Us!* by Sean Kelly and Rosemary Rogers reports, "preferred the study of philosophy to the prospect of marriage to the Roman Emperor Maxentius. Inspired by a visit by the Blessed Virgin, a desert hermit sought her out, and showed Catherine a picture of the Madonna and Child. Immediately she not only became a Christian, but 'mystically married' the Christ Child (He's said to have given her a ring). Appalled, Maxentius summoned a team of fifty pagan philosophers to debate religion with her. She not only confounded them in argument, but converted them to the Faith. The Emperor had them all slaughtered, but spared Catherine, after whom he continued to lust. Rebuffed once more, he ordered her chaste body stretched out on a spiked wheel, the infamous "Catherine wheel." Before her torture could begin, lightning-wielding angels appeared and shattered the device, causing its blades to hack up bystanders. She was then beheaded, but milk, not blood, flowed from her holy neck. The angels transported her body to the monastery of Saint Catherin below Mount Sinai."

Only one of the icons in the *Uffizi* collection has a definite painter, Vasilij Grjaznov. He signed the icon of the *Madonna and Child of Tichvin*, dated July 16, 1728. It's a replica of the miraculous image, which according to tradition, appeared to fishermen on Lake Ladoga in 1383 at Tichvin near Novgorod. The icon was hovering over the lake's waters amidst a radiant light. The website www.oca.org reports: "According to an early 16th century Russian manuscript, *The Tale of Miracles of the Icon of the Tikhvin Mother of God*, the Theotokos [the title of Mary, mother of Jesus, used especially in Eastern Christianity] herself decided that her image should leave Constantinople, perhaps in anticipation of the impending fall of the Byzantine Empire."

Shortly after its miraculous appearance, the icon was discovered in several neighboring



From top to bottom:
St. Catherine of Alexandria, Vasilij Grjaznov's *Mother of God of Tichvin*,
Mother of God in the style known as
"in you every creature rejoices," and
St. John the Baptist Being Beheaded



towns, including the village of Motchenitsy on the bank of the Tikhvinka River, before it finally appeared near the town of Tikhvin." On Grjaznov's icon the date is inscribed according to the Western system introduced in Russia by Tsar Peter the Great (1672-1725) along with Arabic numbers and the Julian calendar, replacing the Byzantine calendar used up to then.

The oldest icons to go on display will be one portraying the Mother of God in the style known as "in you every creature rejoices," and another, *The Beheading of St. John the Baptist*. These two icons arrived in Florence before the House of Lorraine started to rule the Grand Duchy of Tuscany beginning in 1737 when the last descendant of the Medici family, Gian Gastone, died without heirs. We know that, already in 1639, during the reign of Ferdinand II and his wife Vittoria della Rovere, the icons were part of the liturgical objects conserved in the "Chapel of the Relics" in the Pitti Palace.

Speaking of chapels, Schmidt also announced the daily opening, starting in December, of the Palatine Chapel, adjacent to the icons' new rooms. Until now, the chapel has rarely been open to the public, save for special occasions. The *Uffizi* website tells us: "Built by Bartolomeo Ammannati in the 1500s on the ground floor of the Pitti Place, formerly a drawing room, it became a Bridal Chamber, frescoed in 1661 by Jacopo Chiavistelli (1618 or 1621-1698) on the occasion of Grand Duke Cosimo III dei Medici's wedding. In 1765 it was turned by Grand Duke Peter Leopold of Hapsburg-Lorraine into the new and sumptuous chapel of his court, thus radically transforming the original premises. Choir stalls and upper balconies were then realized along with the large arch window. [The Florentine painter] Vincenzo Meucci (1694-1766) was charged to turn the original fresco by Chiavistelli from a profane to a sacred subject only with a few brush-ups! The altar was realized in 1785. Its two gorgeous tiles were inlaid with semiprecious stones and framed by marvelous white marble and gilt bronze. Some 30 years later, Grand Duke Ferdinand III commissioned Neoclassic painter Luigi Ademollo (1764-1849) to redecorate the vault and the walls with spectacular frescoes of the Crucifixion and Palm Sunday."

Epilogue: A plaque on a building opposite the Pitti Palace (Piazza Pitti 22) explains how the great Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky, poverty-stricken, homesick, and epileptic, completed his masterpiece *The Idiot* while living there with his newly-wed second wife Anna for nine months between 1868-9. O