

Temporary Exhibition “Greek Paper Icons”

Press-release



Culture and Sports.

It's one of the most holy places for the Orthodox Christians and is consecrated as the garden of the Mother of God. Mount Athos has been listed as a World Heritage Site since 1988.

It is certain that monks have been there since the fourth century, and possibly since the third. In 676 Emperor Constantine IV transferred the ownership of Mount Athos exclusively to the monks. The Monastery of Great Lavra was the first monastery built on Mount Athos in 963, still the largest and most prominent monastery existing today. After the Greek one the Russian, Georgian, Serbian, Bulgarian and Rumanian monasteries were founded. According to the constitution of Greece, Mount Athos (the “Monastic State of Agion Oros”) is, “following ancient privilege”, “a self-governed part of the Greek State, whose sovereignty thereon shall remain intact”, and consists of 20 Orthodox monasteries which constitute the Holy Community, and the capital town and administrative centre, Karyes, also home to a governor as the representative of the Greek state.

The historical centre of the Orthodox monasticism Mount Athos has been the centre of the paper icon since the 18th century. Early engravings ordered in the Western Europe and in Russia. In the 18th century the domestic prints originated on Mount Athos. According to the documents there were the engravings workshops in the Great Lavra, Iveron monastery and Helandariou Monastery as well. But the unique artistic manner and technique formed only by the middle of the 19th century.

The exhibition features about 70 engraving paper icons, textile icons and copper plates as well.

This is the summer major exhibition to feature the full history of Greek paper icon - the phenomenon in the Orthodox art, and is organized in partnership with the Museum of Byzantine Culture (Thessaloniki, Greece) as a part of the Russia - Greece Cross-Cultural Year and is coincided to the 1000th anniversary of the Russian monasticism on the Holy Mount of Athos.

The exhibition project includes two exhibitions: in the State Museum of the History of Religion (opens on the 21st of June, 2016) and in the Museum of Byzantine Culture (opens on the 24th of October, 2016) and catalogue as well. The exhibition is supported by the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation and Hellenic Ministry of

The State Museum of the History of Religion's collection of Greek paper icons contains around 70 prints. The limited collection is various and comprehensive enough. The Museum part of 35 engravings will provide insight into the difference between the paper icons ordered in the Western Europe and Russia and made in the local engraving workshop on Mount Athos. The focus of the exhibition is on the three amazing items.

The earliest dated one is the “Abraham II of Jerusalem Absolution Certificate” (Unknown engraver, Bucharest (?), 1783, etching). The icon with a general view of the Holy Mount of Athos (Unknown engraver, Mount Athos (?), middle of the 19th c.) demonstrates the unique iconographic type. The traditional one combines two views of Mount Athos both from the West and from East in one icon. Thus, Athos has two peaks. That type became popular from the early 18th century. There is only one peak on the presented icon which is very rare image.

At the centre of the exhibition will be the icon “The Mother of God of Life-giving Spring with a church view” (Unknown engraver, Greek printing house “Amalthea”, Constantinople (?), November, 2, 1836). The engraving consists of 3 parts: image of the Mother of God of Life-giving Spring, view of the church surrounded by a wall and engraved explanations in the Greek. Outside Constantinople, near the Golden Gate used to be found a grove of trees. A shrine was located there with a spring of water, which from early times had been dedicated to the Mother of God. The first church was constructed here in the 5th century. Historians Procopius and Cedrenus stated that Emperor Justinian erected a new church, larger than the first, in the last years of his reign (559-560). After the fall of Constantinople in 1453, the church was torn down. In 1833 the reforming Ottoman Sultan Mahmud II gave permission for the Christians to rebuild the church. Construction was completed in 1835. This new church was engraved on the second plate. It might be the first known image of the new church add into the iconography of the Mother of God of Life-giving Spring.

The Museum of Byzantine Culture house the most comprehensive collections of engraving paper icons of the 17th – 19th centuries in Greece. Most of the collection was acquired in 1994 by gift of the famous researcher of the Greek engravings Doris Papastratos. The collection also includes original wooden and copper plate.

The Greek and Athos engraving, especially, is characterized by the flatness, which is evident in the printed icons most of all. The Greek artists developed the unique technique in engraving of the faces by dotted line (crible).

In the heart of the exhibition will be the ones, which unlock hidden secrets of the Athos engraving technique. Many of these exhibits have never before been seen outside Greece. Three stunning examples of these objects are beautiful copper plates “The Virgin the Life-giving Spring” (Constantinople, 1807), “Saints Constantine and Helen, The Virgin of the Sweet Kiss” (Mount Athos, 1867) and two-sided plate “The Last Supper” and “The Nativity – The Baptism” (Mount Athos, 1865).

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