

Overview of the Annual Lecture 2017

held in the Church of St. Mary and St. Nicholas, Wilton on Saturday 18th March 2017. *By Clare Miles*

The Chairman welcomed Jane Angelini. Jane had graduated in Russian Studies and took a Masters degree in Byzantine & Early Russian Art & Architecture. As well as running St James's Art Tours she works as a free-lance lecturer for numerous organisations, including NADFAS, the Art Fund and Swan Hellenic Cruises.

The Annual Lecture: *Churches of Russia – Art and Liturgy* Given by Jane Angelini



The starting point for the lecture was the centenary commemoration of the 1917 Russian Revolution, a subject which in turn prompted a look at the broader historical sweep of art and liturgy of the Russian Orthodox Church. The impressive architectural setting for the lecture was reminiscent of Byzantine art and early Italian church architecture and seemed appropriate to the subject.

The scene was set with an illustration of a painting of a public meeting with sight of Tatlin's 1919 model for the sculpture, 'Monument to the Third International'. At the time of the Revolution progressive Russian artists were forging radical styles with revolutionary fervour but politicians eventually suppressed their avant-garde work in favour of Soviet Social Realism. However, in portraits of Lenin or pictures of industrial workers, iconic imagery could be detected. The Revolution could not throw off centuries of engrained artistic sensibility which had its roots in medieval art of the Russian Orthodox Church. The speaker first took us through Russia's misty beginnings.

In the 6th and 7th centuries, across a borderless land of vast forests, steppes and deserts, Slavs had merged with Viking traders and were exploring river routes between the Baltic, Caspian and Black Seas. By the 10th century Kiev was a flourishing commercial centre. In deciding on religious practice for Kiev, leaders favoured the Orthodox branch of Christianity and looked to Constantinople for guidance. Envoys were overwhelmed by Hagia Sophia Cathedral, the moving liturgy, the spiritual mysticism of the Church and its veneration of holy icons. In 988 Prince Vladimir of Kiev was baptised along with his people thereby creating a Christian state. The Cathedral of Saint Sophia followed the pattern of Byzantine church architecture with a central dome and prominent apse; craftsmen from Constantinople assisted with interior mosaic decoration.

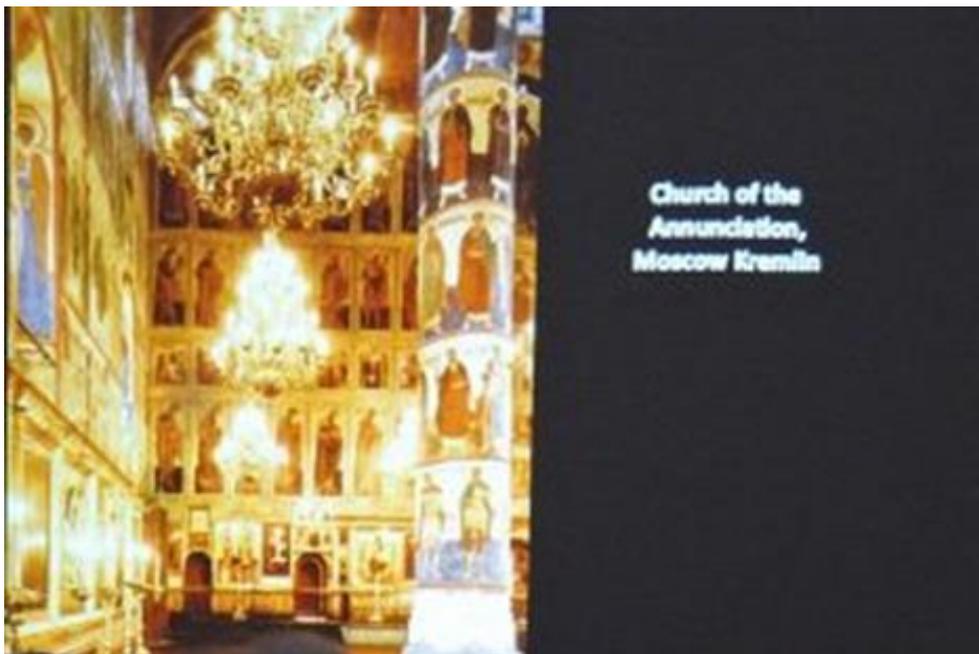
As frescoes and mosaics were not always practicable in wooden structures and sculptures deemed unacceptable, so the use of icons in churches was adopted. In 1131, the Greek Patriarch of Constantinople sent the 'Mother of God' icon to Kiev; it became a model for artists. The iconostasis for the display of icons was developed; it was a huge wall with a door behind which the sanctuary was placed. Artists, generally



priests, followed the strictly prescribed and hallowed ways of depicting Christ, the Holy Virgin or Saints. Painted images on wooden panels did not simply illustrate sacred episodes for the pious who could not read. Icons were consecrated objects of meditation which showed the Heavenly Kingdom and Sacred Truths in visual terms, conveying mysteries that were beyond man's understanding. Early icons

of the Kiev School displayed the rigid monumentality of Byzantine works and little depth or naturalism.

Churches from the 11th century onwards retained the influence of Byzantine Orthodoxy. Buildings were adapted to suit local materials and Russian winters; single domes were replaced by clusters of small domes. The decoration of the interior walls was hierarchic, from Heaven down to Earth – a microcosm of the Universe. Uppermost in the apses were the large-scale images of Christ or the Holy Virgin, below in tiers were ranks of Saints and biblical scenes. The speaker explained characteristics of these Orthodox presentations: they inspired hope, depictions of The Crucifixion or of Damnation were rare; mysticism prevailed as God alone had the answers and man was inconsequential.



Church of the
Annunciation,
Moscow Kremlin

We were treated to evocative illustrations of white painted and domed churches and monasteries in sometimes remote sacred places. Novgorod was a rich Holy City, Suzdal monastery, a spiritual centre and the exquisite Cathedral of the Annunciation in Moscow's Kremlin was a treasure house of icons.



The extraordinary mass of the colourful domes of St. Basil's Cathedral seemed to embody a Heavenly Jerusalem.

Following the 13th century Mongolian invasion the economic significance of Kiev diminished. By the 15th century Moscow had grown in influence and prosperity and the nearby Trinity Monastery of St. Sergii became the

spiritual and artistic centre for the Orthodox Church. Its achievements were exemplified by the art of the monk Andrei Rublev. The schools of icon painting in Novgorod and Suzdal had earlier softened the rigid Byzantine Kiev style, compositions had more depth, rhythm and bright glowing colour. Rublev's style now combined grace, spirituality and humanity. His celebrated icon of 1420, 'The Trinity', showing three angels seated around a table, was imbued with religious symbolism to focus on the mystery of the Holy Trinity.

Russia had been isolated from the influence of the Italian Renaissance but by the 16th century western styles of art and architecture were slowly being introduced. Greater freedom of interpretation in religious art and architecture was sought and the more secular Europeanising policies of Peter the Great consolidated this trend. However, by the end of the 19th century wealthy industrialists and the intelligentsia began to reclaim Old Russian Art. Arts and Crafts Movement buildings based on traditional styles were produced and the art of icon painting was revived. In wider art historical terms, icon painting which had been considered a debased form of classical art, now found its proper place. After the Revolution, with the cleaning and classification of historic examples, a better understanding of their aesthetic grew.

In the years preceding the 1917 Revolution knowledge of European artistic movements combined with the interest in traditional art to encourage a modernist culture. The painter Kasimir Malevitch founded Suprematism which centred on the primacy of feeling whereby the visual phenomena of the objective world were meaningless. With other avant-garde artists, he employed a 'grammar' of flat geometrical forms. The centrepiece of the 1915 Suprematist exhibition was his, 'Black Square', placed in the 'red/beautiful corner' which, in the Russian Orthodox tradition, was the place for the main icon in a home. In this contemplative work, the speaker recognised a 'cosmic energy'. This breakthrough in modernist thinking was to be influential in the development of abstract art in the West, however Malevitch eventually returned to figurative art. His, 'Self Portrait' revealed stylistic features of icon painting



in the flatness of form and the emphasis on boldly defined eyes and hands. He could also portray a religious intensity in, 'Peasants at Prayer.'

Soviet figurative painter, Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin produced modern day religious images and icons even. His 'Madonna and Child' showed a contemporary

'Worker' woman and child. Jane Angelini saw in Russian culture in its widest sense an abstract communion of worship and rigorous zeal – a force behind the Revolution itself.

Stunned by the speaker's enlightening accounts and a succession of beautiful illustrations, the audience showed its warm appreciation. The Chairman thanked her for a wonderful lecture.

