The Guardian

Russian museum director who exposed Soviets to hidden masterpieces dies at 98

Irina Antonova, head of Pushkin Museum for 52 years, brought Mona Lisa to Moscow despite cold war

Andrew Roth

Tue 1 Dec 2020

Irina Antonova at an exhibition on the age of Rembrandt and Vermeer at the Pushkin Museum in 2018. Photograph: Valery Sharifulin/TASS

A longtime museum director dubbed the grande dame of the Russian art world has died at 98, prompting an outpouring of grief and admiration for the woman who brought the Mona Lisa to Moscow and returned masterpieces hidden for decades from the Soviet public to her museum's exhibition halls.

Irina Antonova, whose work at the Pushkin Museum began under Joseph Stalin and ended under Vladimir Putin, died on Monday evening of complications from the coronavirus. Her death was confirmed by the press service of the museum, where she served as director for 52 years from 1961 to 2013.

Antonova, who joined the museum at the end of the second world war, often prided herself on a 1974 exhibition of paintings that saw great works of cubism and impressionism long banished as products of bourgeoisie European culture rehung alongside Russia's master impressionists.

"Opening the exhibition, I was preparing to be fired," she said in a recent interview, describing a heated meeting with the Soviet cultural officials. "I knew that I was in danger of that. But I understood that it was impossible to keep Picasso, Matisse, Léger, Van Gogh, Gaugin in the vaults any longer."

She was not fired and her tenure came to be referred to as the Pushkin Museum's "golden age", one that included must-see exhibitions of artworks taken from Dresden's Picture Gallery after the second world war, the Treasures of Tutankhamun's Tomb and a famous 1974 exhibition of Leonardo da Vinci's masterpiece Mona Lisa, which was brought to Moscow under the condition that it be secured behind bulletproof glass. The exhibition was one of several sensational exchanges with European museums that she managed to negotiate despite the political tensions of the cold war.

Irina Antonova and Marc Chagall in Paris in the 1970s. Photograph: Igor Detinkin / Pushkin Museum

Born in 1922, Antonova spent part of her childhood in Germany, where her father worked at the Soviet embassy until the Nazis came to power. She worked as a nurse at a Moscow hospital during the second world war, a memory that she sometimes recalled when facing criticism over artworks looted from Nazi Germany still held in the museum's collections.

"I know that this is a painful problem for some of those in Germany who are dealing with it. But you know, during the war, I worked as a nurse; I had to remove the amputated legs of young soldiers and pilots who were shot near Moscow," she told Germany's Deutsche Welle news agency in 2016. While many works had been returned, she said, others "remain here as a deposit, the price paid for remembering".

She met with Russia's top politicians, including Leonid Brezhnev, Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin. She befriended the artist Marc Chagall and pianist Sviatoslav Richter, with whom she created December nights, an international music festival held in the museum. After posing with actor Jeremy Irons on a motorcycle for the opening of an exhibition of American art, the two took a ride "to the Lenin museum and back". She was in her mid-80s at the time.

The Russian president, Vladimir Putin, talks with Irina Antonova in 2017. Photograph: Mikhail Klimentyev/Tass/Getty Images

Antonova courted controversy late into her career. In 2012, she confronted Vladimir Putin during a national call-in show to appeal for a pet project of hers: reviving the 1948 Museum of International Art, which had once held the combined collections of Sergei Shchukin and Ivan Morozov, two 19th-century merchants who had amassed famous collections of impressionist art.

Their collections, which included works by Monet, Renoir, Cézanne, Gauguin, Matisse and Picasso, were divided between the Pushkin Museum and the Hermitage after the Museum of International Art was disbanded by Stalin in 1948.

Antonova was ousted from her post in 2013 at the age of 91, but was given a ceremonial position as president of the museum and remained a fixture on the Russian art scene until her death.

"The division of the collection between the Pushkin Museum and the Hermitage is a crime that continues to this day," she said in a recent interview, adding: "I am still fighting."