Press-Release

Single Masterpiece Display: “The Last Judgment” Icon (14th Century) to Be Exhibited at Moscow Kremlin Museums Following 10-Year Restoration

On 8 October 2026, the exhibition “Masterpiece Reborn: ‘The Last Judgment’ Icon from the Assumption Cathedral of the Moscow Kremlin” is opening at the State Anteroom of the Armoury Chamber. The display marks the completion of the multi-year restoration of the earliest medieval iconographic image dedicated to the theme of the end of time.

‘The Last Judgment’ is a gold-standard specimen of Muscovy’s art at the turn of the 14th and 15th centuries and one of the rare works created for the earliest Assumption Cathedral in the Kremlin, the predecessor of the present building. For many decades, the icon was part of the southern wall-adjacent iconostasis of the Assumption Cathedral, yet it remained largely unknown to the general public, concealed beneath a layer of darkened restoration varnish applied in the 1920s — the period when the icon was first cleared from later overpaintings.

The restoration, which began in 2016, did more than restore the masterpiece to its historical appearance: it also provided valuable material for further study.

“We have obtained entirely new data on this icon and significantly refined its attribution. It dates to the late 14th – early 15th century, a golden age of Old Russian painting, the time of Andrey Rublyov and the Greek masters who frequently came to Rus to decorate churches and paint icons,” said Elena Gagarina, General Director of the Moscow Kremlin Museums.

Thanks to infrared and X-ray studies of the icon, two layers of painting were identified: the lower one is light and transparent, with a visible author’s underdrawing of outlines and folds; the upper one is dense and textured, with explicit light-and-shadow modelling. This may indicate the artist’s search for forms and the movement of the figures during the creation of the icon.

The icon’s subject deserves special attention: it derives from a whole range of Old and New Testament texts, as well as numerous apocryphal texts and interpretations of the Scriptures. In Byzantine and Russian medieval art, the theme of the Last Judgment is mainly represented by church murals, while icons with this subject are very rare. In Rus they became widespread only in the 16th–17th centuries. This makes the image from the Assumption Cathedral the earliest Russian monument dedicated to the Second Coming of the Saviour. Its distinctive iconographic features suggest that the icon served as one of the main prototypes for the similar representation in the 1408 wall paintings of the Assumption Cathedral in Vladimir by Daniil Chorny and Andrey Rublyov.

What makes the icon truly distinctive is its overall interpretation of this well-known subject: the culmination of earthly human history is presented not as a fearsome punishment, but as a joyful reunion with the Saviour. The viewer sees an image of a transfigured world after the Second Coming of Christ, rendered in light and vibrant colours.

The vertical composition of the icon is divided into three tiers. At the very centre of the upper tier is Christ, seated within a blue-and-azure radiant sphere — the mandorla. He is flanked by Our Lady and John the Baptist; nearby, the apostles are seated on thrones, and behind them stand three rows of angels in regal vestments.

In the centre of the middle tier, Adam and Eve are shown kneeling and imploring the Saviour in His glory. Behind Adam stand the righteous, while opposite them are portrayed the sinners, including the Jewish high priests Annas and Caiaphas, members of other faiths, and people of other ethnicities.

On the right side of the lower tier sits Satan, enthroned amidst a lake of fire, within which numerous images of sinners were revealed during the restoration research. This tier also depicts Paradise, with Our Lady at its centre and angels in attendance. To Her left stands the Penitent Thief, and to Her right are the forefathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, with the souls of the righteous in their laps. Beneath Our Lady's throne lie the Gates of Paradise. From either side, the Apostles Peter and Paul approach, guiding the righteous.

“The apparition of this ancient monument from the darkened oil varnish is, without doubt, a great event not only for the museum, but, first and foremost, for Russian culture,” shared Alexey Barkov, the curator of the Assumption Cathedral.

General Sponsor:

Exhibition dates: 9 October 2026 – 13 January 2027.
Venue: the State Anteroom of the Armoury Chamber.

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