ALMINE RECH

Serge Poliakoff
Image Divine

Sep 7 — Oct 5, 2024 | Paris, Matignon

Everything I want to paint is a divine image,
and I must be in this image, near it, with it,
elevating myself toward it to become part of it.
(Serge Poliakoff)

Poliakoff conceived of art as a world of God. He moved to France 100 years ago, in 1923, and lived most of his life there. The artist once reflected, “If I hadn’t come to Paris, perhaps I would not be a painter.” Kandinsky, who was also from Russia, recognized Poliakoff’s talent and recommended his work to gallerists. In 1962, Poliakoff represented France at the Venice Biennale.

He was a contemplative artist. Three major influences had a lasting effect on him: Byzantine art, Italian painting from the time of Giotto, and Russian icons. “As a child, I was impressed by the beauty of the icons in Russian churches, and this impression stayed with me. I kept traces of it in my art,” the painter recalled.

For Poliakoff, creating a painting was a process of seeking harmony by combining forms and techniques. He wanted to “follow the Old Masters” and often went to the Louvre, where he took his son Alexis. Which paintings did they look at? Alexis remembers *The Coronation of the Virgin* by Fra Angelico and *The Battle of San Romano* by Paolo Uccello. When studying Giotto’s *Saint Francis of Assisi*, Poliakoff was interested in the robes of the sleeping pope. All these artworks dealt with problems of the boundary separating the image from the background and the texture of the painted surface.

Poliakoff’s compositions, colors, and techniques were taken from Old Master paintings. In his own words, “As for the colors, it is a Divine Symphony, Gloria. Looking at the painting, it is as if you entered into the world of God.” In *The Coronation of the Virgin*, the figures of the saints at the foot of the throne, seen from behind, are divided into two groups, male and female. The empty space in the center separating them has a strange, irregular border, in which we can see the smooth steps of the throne. On the sides are the multicolored robes of the saints. If this fragment were removed and enlarged, it could be a painting by Poliakoff.

The surface of his paintings is always very vivid. It makes the colors pulsate and gives them their own life. They are filled with the energy of light. Poliakoff prepared his colors like a Renaissance painter, and Alexis helped his father to mix the pigments. Like an icon painter, Poliakoff added egg to the binder in his paint. During the famine years, reserving eggs for his studio was particularly difficult for his family. One of the first works in this exhibition is titled *Icône* (1949). Through its materials, size, and craftsmanship, it recalls Russian devotional images.

In Orthodox theology, an icon is a window through which the light of a higher world can enter. Did Serge Poliakoff have icons at home? To answer this question, Alexis takes out a devotional image. It depicts a saint who is standing and turned toward heaven, which has the shape of a semicircle. The signature at the top is in the Russian manner of the mid-seventeenth century: *The Venerable Saint Sergius of Radonezh the Thaumaturge*. This devotional icon belonged to the artist, who was named after Saint Sergius. The icon has never before been exhibited, and has been meticulously restored. Perhaps by Poliakoff himself? Saint Sergius is depicted in a monk's robe with a halo around his head. He holds a scroll on which is inscribed a fragment of his last instructions to the monks of his monastery: "Brothers, do not be grieved." His face and hands are turned toward a large black semicircle in the sky with three red spots: Saint Serge was known for his vision of the Holy Trinity. It is represented here in the semicircle. The red spots are three cups placed on the table in front of the angels. Their red lances are also visible. According to Alexis, Poliakoff reproduced this black semicircle in *Composition* (1950), which is featured in this exhibition, and in other paintings. "But here, the semicircle is upside-down," I point out. "Yes, but Poliakoff often made his paintings upside-down and then turned them around and signed them," Alexis explains. This was something I did not know!

A painting turned in a different direction was an important reference point for Kandinsky in his rejection of figurative painting. In his *Rückblicke* (1913), Kandinsky describes coming home after a walk outdoors, still deep in thought, and suddenly seeing against the wall of his house a painting of indescribable beauty that was filled with an inner radiance: "At first, I was stupefied, but I quickly walked over to this mysterious painting, whose content was completely incomprehensible and which was made only of colorful spots. And the mystery was solved: it was my own painting, leaning against the wall on its side [...] That day, it became undeniably clear to me that objects were detrimental to my paintings."

Turning the painting allowed Poliakoff to free himself from recognizable objects, to destroy associations, and to encourage defamiliarization. On the wall of his studio there were reproductions of Italian Renaissance paintings and photographs of icons. A Russian *Nativity* hung next to a sixth-century Coptic icon of Saint Menas. (I have placed clippings of books from his archive in the display case.) Nearby, there was a reproduction of Picasso's *Still Life in a Landscape* (1915), turned onto its side to hang vertically instead of horizontally!

The Holy Trinity (c. 1425), a major icon of the Trinity, was created 100 years after Saint Sergius's death by a monk in the monastery that he founded. The artist, Andrei Rublev, based his iconography on the saint's vision. It depicts three angels in brown, green, and azure robes, either in a landscape or a background filled with golden light. The texture of the surface, which is a shimmering golden ocher, plays a special role. This is the apex of Russian icon painting. Historical chronicles relate a pertinent fact about Rublev: on Easter and other days, when he and his icon painter friends were not busy painting, they "sat down holding divine and entirely honorable icons before them and looked at them unceasingly, filled with divine joy and lightheartedness."

Poliakoff's last painting, which was never completed, is his reflection on Rublev's *Trinity*. It can be seen in a posthumous feature on his studio in *Paris Match* of October 25, 1969, which is in the display case. The unfinished canvas is on an easel. It is filled with golden light: Poliakoff had time to paint a fragment of the angel's blue chiton, the delicate green of another garment, and a sharp angle of the red roof. He had to find the exact color for the two large shapes on the left and at the bottom, as well as the general balance between the gold and the yellow.

As Pierre Dmitrienko wrote in 1972, “Poliakoff was an icon painter, but he had the elegance and courage to use solar yellow. I think this was his way of being a twentieth-century mystic, but his yellows are as beautiful as gold.” But Poliakoff the “colorist” (as Jean Cassou called him) was more interested in the texture of the painted surface. This distinguishes him from other abstract painters and connects him more closely to Tachisme. What kind of technique could be developed so that the painting would let inner light shine through, like an icon, while still living its own independent life? “Colors are very capricious,” Poliakoff said in an interview with *Le Monde* in 1967. “If you mix turpentine, you have one color; benzene, another color; oil, another color… Even though it’s the same red!” He added various substances to his colors in search of an *immaterial surface* and a *conscious harmony*. I have borrowed these terms from the book *Faktura* by Voldemars Matvejs (Saint Petersburg, 1914).

Poliakoff had a spiritual experience when contemplating the surface of Old Master paintings, something that for him was close to a sacred act, a silent and sincere dialogue with the Absolute: “I feared so much to lose Him, the One in whom I had faith. But the time had come to express myself in a language of colors. Would people hear it or not, when seeing them?” While Kandinsky searched for harmonic relationships and worked on form and its verbal description, Poliakoff developed an artistic treatment of the painting’s surface to express “the divine image.” In *My Prayer*, the only text in his manuscripts that he did not have translated, he discusses God: “Christ, I have believed in You irrevocably. You taught me to love the Father, You bound me to Yourself, and You have become my Brother for always. But I cannot perform miracles or preach to people. I do not possess the word, I cannot sacrifice myself. I am weak of spirit, but are there not several brothers in the family?”

— Dimitri Ozerkov