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Undark Ages: Tales of Medievalism and Academia

Exhibition

16+

13 Nov 2025 — 3 May 2026

Galleries C3–C4

GES-2

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Interest in history and in the artistic styles of the past, from Ancient Greece and Rome to the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, is alive and well in all areas of contemporary culture. However, images of these past eras tend to be romanticised, reflecting the aspirations of those who are fascinated by them rather than what they really were. We see how role-playing game participants and fantasy readers generate their own versions of the Middle Ages, while artists, much like in Napoleonic France, increasingly look to Leochares and Polykleitos for beauty ideals.

However, the study of past cultures and the search for new interpretations of their context is not just about nostalgia for times that we did not experience ourselves. It also shapes the image of a desired present—progressive and experimental or, on the contrary, stable and traditional.

The first part of the *Undark Ages* project looks at how artists, longing for a golden age of European culture, have often viewed the work of ancient masters through the lens of academicism, entailing a mechanical copying of classical models and creative stagnation—the repetition of aesthetic techniques and thematic monotony. The project questions the uncritical admiration for ancient ideals that is apparent in some contemporary art and analyses academicism not only as a mark of decadence, but also as a cultural phenomenon in its own right: in Russian art, academicism is strongly associated with traditionalism, and the project may help to understand the reasons for such an association.

The second part of the project addresses the aesthetic system of the Middle Ages, from which there emerged many of the ideas and phenomena that shape the world today. In his essay *Dreaming of the Middle Ages* (1986), the Italian thinker Umberto Eco compared our attitude towards the Middle Ages with an adult's view of their childhood. Just as a doctor asks a patient about their childhood illnesses in order to make a diagnosis of their present state, so reflection on the Middle Ages can help us to understand the present. The works that are presented transport the viewer not only to the past, but also to a future where society returns to earlier stages of development—a conceptual "New Middle Ages".

The term is chosen to describe the disintegration of global systems into local communities, the growth in importance of religious and cultural identities, a return to regional economic models, and the emergence of "digital feudalism", where online platforms assume functions that were previously performed by the state. In this context, contemporary art appears not as an echo of old images, but as a barometer of the era: it uses the past to analyse the crises of the present and sketch the contours of a possible future.

Chapter I
Academicisms

Ever since the Renaissance, thinkers, politicians, and artists have perceived Classical antiquity as a golden age of cultural and social life. Later, as new imperial states appeared in Europe, Ancient Rome, with its political structure and culture, became a benchmark for young empires, including Russia, which borrowed the language of its academic art from the artistic centres of Europe.

The "Academicisms" section of the *Undark Ages* project opens with paintings and graphic works displayed in the "Salon hang" manner that was usual in the eighteenth century, presenting an overview of borrowed academic subjects in Russian art. The narrative begins with the works of Russian classicists, who often depicted scenes from the history of their own country in conventional settings borrowed from Antiquity, and continues with the experiments of the "Russian Romans" (Russian artists who lived in Italy) and works of salon art. The section concludes with Art Nouveau graphics, rich with neoclassical motifs and nostalgia for imperial aesthetics.

The space of the exhibition is arranged as a peristyle—the inner courtyard of an Ancient Greek or Roman house. The works that are displayed here demonstrate the mythologisation of Antiquity and its inaccessibility as a real historical era. They interact with images of Ancient Greece and Rome as ideals of order and beauty, reproducing, criticising, or even deriding them. These dissimilar statements have one thing in common: they are based not on real history, but on a heroic myth. Some artists sought to expose its fantastical nature; others used this heritage as the basis for a new and often reactionary myth. Hence there arises a dialogue that is still relevant today: not with the past itself, but with our perceptions of it, which continue to influence the imagination.

The vitality of this myth compels attention to its darker side. The motif of the fragility of a great civilisation, the premonition of impending catastrophe, is an integral part of the legend of Antiquity that emerged after the decline of Greece and Rome. This section of the exhibition concludes with a dialogue between the works of Léon Bakst and Boris Orlov, created, respectively, at the beginning and the end of the twentieth century. The works transport the viewer to a moment when the "eternal" begins to crumble and the marble begins to crack. For artists who work in times of historical transition, Antiquity often loses the features of an unattainable ideal and appears instead as a living, contradictory world where there is room for tragedy as well as happiness.

Chapter II
Middle Ages

This part of the *Undark Ages* project presents the European Middle Ages as an era when new forms of culture and social order emerged from chaos amid the ruins of ancient civilisation. Naturally enough, the section lacks the stylistic consistency of the "Academicisms" section.

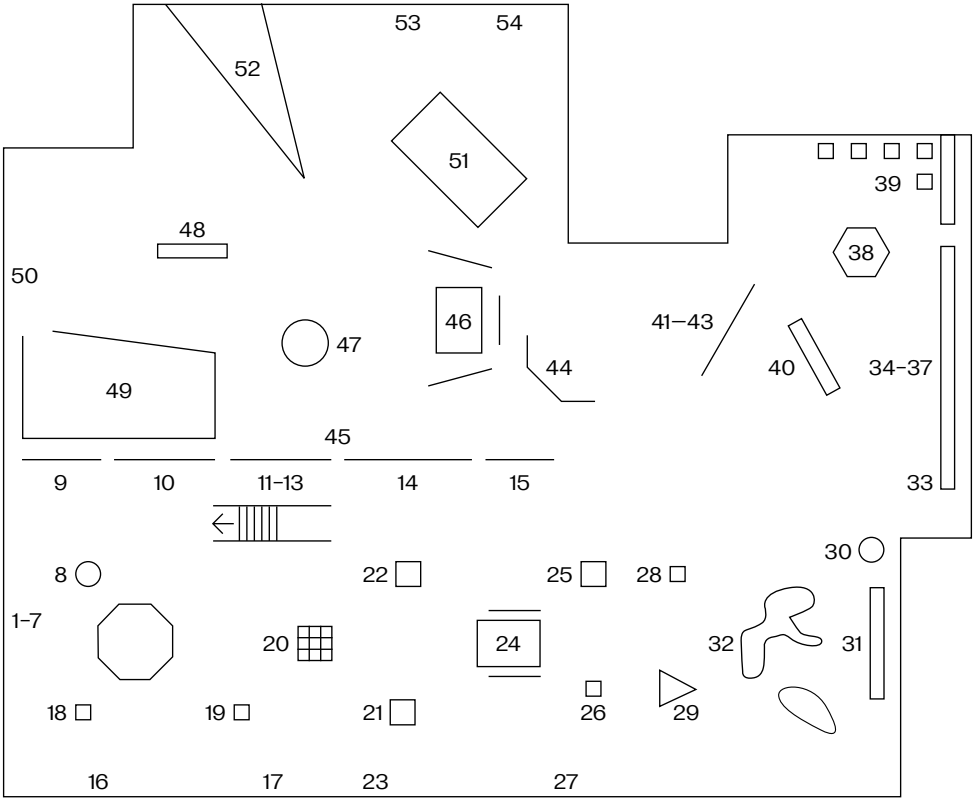
The Middle Ages are often thought of as a period of darkness and decline, but the artworks presented in the exhibition refute this view, emphasising the creative potential of those times. The invention of printing, the development of technology and of market economies together shaped the reality we live in today. Medieval aesthetics continue to fascinate us in the present and percolate through mass culture, as witnessed by the unprecedented upsurge of fantasy and role-playing games with medieval settings, or the use of knightly armour and royal garments in the collections of fashion designers. This visual and decorative projection of medieval paradigms onto the present day gives rise to images of a future where civilisation endures a crisis and rethinks itself.

This part of the exhibition is organised along two visual lines, focused, respectively, on books and icon painting. The first brings together works created under the influence of the language of miniatures and manuscripts. The second draws on Russian icons and European sculpture, illustrating the spatial principles of medieval art and showing how contemporary artists are rethinking the formal discoveries of past masters.

The core of the section consists of new works created especially for the *Undark Ages* project. In these pieces, artists transport themes that preoccupied people in the Middle Ages into our present day. These works offer interpretations of eschatological themes and the symbolism of that era and its influence on visual culture, and show how themes that emerged centuries ago live on in our everyday lives.

The artists address historical creative achievements, which were reflected even in the Soviet avant-garde, and draw parallels between medieval and modern science, exploring how the Middle Ages were, in some ways, open to progress even as they remained cautious or even hostile to change. We see how a multidimensional picture of the world can emerge from a blank page. Such a picture, based on a living connection with images of the Middle Ages, can offer answers to the cultural and social challenges of today.

Exhibition plan



Academicisms

1. Fyodor Bronnikov. *Hymn of the Pythagoreans to the Rising Sun*, 1869

2. Alexander Ivanov. *Head of Apollo Belvedere and Head of a Grey-Bearded Male, Turning His Head and Putting on a Shirt*, second half of the 1840s

3. Alexander Ivanov. *Apollo, Hyacinthus and Cypress, Playing Music and Singing*, 1831–1834

4. Ivan Akimov. *Grand Prince Svyatoslav Kissing His Mother and Children on His Return to Kyiv from the Danube*, 1773

5. Pavel Svedomsky. *Orgy*, 1883

6. Alexandre Benois. *Apollo's Song to Dryads and Fauns*, 1908

7. Alexandre Benois. *The Venetian Garden*, 1910 (on display until February 2026) / Anton Losenko. Study for the painting *Farewell of Hector and Andromache*, 1773 (on display from February 2026)

8. Alexandra Paperno. *Broken Column*, 2018

9. Vladimir Dubossarsky. *When You Wake Up in the Morning and Don't Know What to Do*, 2025

10. Bella Matveeva. *Leda and the Swan*, 2019–2025

11. Ippolit Bogdanovich. *Dushen'ka. Drevniaia povest' v vol'nykh stikhakh ("Dushenka: An Ancient Story in Free Verse")*, 1783

12. Fyodor Tolstoy. *Dushenka: Drawings for Ippolit Bogdanovich's Poem. Composed, drawn, and engraved by Count Fyodor Tolstoy, 1829–1840*

13. Timur Novikov. *Cupid and Psyche*, 1993

14. Vitaly Pushnitsky. *Waiting no. 3*, 2014

15. Boris Orlov. *Iconostasis*, 1975

16. Alexander Vinogradov, Vladimir Dubossarsky. *Summer*, 2007

17.1–17.5. Olga Tobreluts. Works From the series *Models*, 1995

18. Nadya Likhogrud. *Shaped Vessel in the Form of a Woman's Head (3)*, 2025

19. Alexander Povzner. *Torso of Aphrodite*, 2008

20.1–20.8. Joulia Strauss. *Busts of Timur Novikov and members of the New Academy*, 1996

21. Polykleitos of Argos. *Doryphoros (Spear-Bearer)*, 5th century BCE / 2025

22. Ivan Shadr. *Girl with an Oar*, 1934–1935

23. Georgy Guryanov. *Olympia*, 1994

24.1–24.3. Georgy Guryanov. Photo documentation of the *Bonfire of the Vanities* memorial action, 1998

24.4–24.6. Photo documentation of the *Bonfire of the Vanities* memorial action, 1998

24.7. *New Academy* radio programme, 1998

24.8. Newspaper *For the Five-hundredth Anniversary of Art Will*, 1998

24.9. Flyer *For the Five-hundredth Anniversary of Art Will*, 1998

24.10. Flag of the New Academy, 1990s

24.11. Ceremonial flag of the New Academy, 1990s

24.12. Flag of the Art Will movement, 1990s

25. Leochares. *Apollo Belvedere*, 6th century BCE / 2025

26. Olga Tobreluts. *Antinous*, 2003

27. Olga Tobreluts. *Nymph*, 2018

28. Boris Orlov. *Chronos*, 1971

29. Vladimir Kupriyanov. *Three Graces*, 1993

30. Sergei Shekhovtsov. *Column*, 2008

31. Léon Bakst. *Terror Antiquus*, 1908

32. Boris Orlov. *Icarus*, 1991

Middle Ages

33. Unknown artist. *Madonna and Child Crowned by Angels*, 15th century (?)

34. Unknown artist. *Resurrection (Descent into Hell)*, first half of the 17th century

35. Unknown artist. *Archangel Michael, the Commander of Formidable Forces*, mid to late 19th century

36. Unknown artist. *Myrrhbearing Women at the Tomb of Christ*, 16th century

37. Unknown artist. *Intercession of the Virgin*, 17th century

38. Maria Safronova. *Reliquary*, 2024

39.1–39.5. Anton Kuznetsov, Maria Safronova. *Bee Zone* project, 2024–2025

40. Video of Medieval Western European illuminated manuscripts, 2025

41–43. Dmitri Prigov. Works From the series *Bestiary*, 1994–2003

44.1– 44.4. Fenso

44.1. *Fenso Digital Lights*, 2002

44.2. *Untitled*, 2021

44.3. *Returnmix*, 2001

44.4. *Returnmix*, 2001

45.1–45.6. Anton Kushaev. From the series *Tremors of the Earth*, 2022

46. Lyudmila Baronina. *The Unicorn Hunt, or The New Fabric of Time*, 2025

47. Daria Surovtseva. *ALLUZ Numero No0 Zero, or Hymn to the Circle: How to Measure Spaces?*, 2025

48. Viktor Vasnetsov. *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, 1887

49. Provmyza. *Despair*, 2008

50.1– 50.7. Julia Mortiis

50.1. *From Chaos to Eternity*, 2025

50.2. *Sinij dragon*, 2025

50.3. *Misty forest*, 2025

50.4. *Midnight clowns*, 2025

50.5. *Dream of peace*, 2025

50.6. *rivendell*, 2025

50.7. *unicorn sword*, 2024

51. Alexei Gromov. *Ivory Tower: No Re-entry*, 2025

52. Danya Pirogov. *Undermining*, 2025

53.1–53.4. Tanya Pioniker. From the series *New Medievalism*, 2020–2022 (on display until February 2026) / Tanya Pioniker. From the series *Seven*, 2021 (on display from February 2026)

54. Tanya Pioniker. *Danse macabre*, 2024–2025 (on display from February 2026)

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The exhibition is organised in collaboration with
Antiquarian Department
of the Moscow House of Books
Central Andrey Rublev
Museum of Ancient
Russian Culture and Art
Elena Mutsoeva Collection
Fenso Museum Archive
Gathering Gallery
Moscow Museum
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MYTH Gallery
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New Academy
Shalva Breus Collection
Sobo Gallery
State Museum of the
History of Religion
State Russian Museum
State Tretyakov Gallery
Triumph Gallery
VLADEY
Zoya Galeeva Collection
and other private collections

Special thanks to the
pop/off/art gallery
and personally to Olga Popova
for their assistance in realising
Tanya Pioniker's project.

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