

PRESS RELEASE

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Exhibition *Tsars and Knights* shows Hermitage's Western European medieval art collection and Arsenal objects in Amsterdam

Early 19th-century revival of romantic medieval world at the Russian court

This summer and autumn, the Hermitage Amsterdam presents *Tsars and Knights, the Romanovs' Love Affair with the Middle Ages*. The exhibition will tell an entrancing tale of tsars and medieval knights through more than 250 items specially brought here from the collection of European medieval art and the Arsenal of the State Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, many people in Europe fell under the spell of a romantic nostalgia for a distant era: the Middle Ages. There was a veritable revival, which spread to many different cultural spheres and sparked a craze for collecting medieval *objects d'art*. The passion was shared by the Russian court. Tsar Alexander III snapped up a celebrated medieval art collection that was about to be auctioned off in Paris, to the fury of the French. Tsars Paul and Nicholas I both contributed to the vogue for the age of chivalry, the latter by establishing a collection of arms and armour. Between them, these three tsars laid the basis for the present-day medieval collection and Arsenal at the State Hermitage – an assemblage of masterpieces that has expanded over time to become world-famous. Now, for the first time, a number of top items from the medieval art collection and the Arsenal are being brought to the Netherlands. They tell a tale of knights and ladies, of courtly love and tournaments, and the admiration for all this at the Russian court.



For photo captions, see note below

***Roman de la Rose*, Basilewsky collection and the armour of Charles V**

One of the themes of the exhibition will be courtly love: the chaste devotion between the sexes so widely celebrated in the literature of the Middle Ages. The high point will be a magnificently illuminated copy of the *Roman de la Rose*, one of the most famous works in all of medieval literature. The erotically charged love story dates from the thirteenth century and enjoyed an enduring popularity, due to its mixture of courtly traits and more explicitly sexual features.

Central to the exhibition, however, will be the medieval art collection of Paris-based collector Alexander Basilewsky. In 1884, when he decided to sell it, the collection numbered

around 750 items. Just as it was about to be auctioned off, Tsar Alexander III paid a record sum to purchase it. The exhibition will feature a number of top items from the collection, including: a rare gilded reliquary casket of c. 1200, produced in the Limoges region of France and adorned with scenes from the Flight into Egypt; small panels from an ivory quadriptych showing other New Testament scenes; and a precious reliquary bust of St Thecla (c. 1325–50), now in the collection of the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam.

The exhibition will also showcase around twenty complete suits of armour, spectacularly displayed in a veritable world of chivalric splendour culminating in a tournament.

Particularly noteworthy examples are the armour of Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, and a unique sixteenth-century suit of armour specially adapted for use by Tsar Nicholas I. And finally, a German suit of tournament jousting armour dating from around 1500 and weighing around fifty kilos.

The exhibition is scheduled to run from Tuesday 26 May to Sunday 8 November 2020.

Note to editors:

Photo captions f.l.t.r.: Horace Vernet, *The carousel at Tsarskoe Selo*, 1843 © Tsarskoe Selo Museum Complex, Pushkin, Russia; Reliquary bust of St Thecla. Upper Rhine region, Strasbourg, c. 1290–1300 and/or 1325–50. Silver, copper, enamel, glass, precious stones, gilding. On loan and © of image: Rijksmuseum Amsterdam; Illumination from a manuscript of the *Roman de la Rose* (Guillaume de Lorris, Jean de Meung, 13th century). France, copyist unknown, late 15th century, binding 16th century. Parchment, black morocco with gold tooling © State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg.

A selection of images can be downloaded via [hermitage.nl](https://www.hermitage.nl)

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