

Jeweler Takes Inspiration From Orthodox Church

By Galina Stolyarova
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The spiritual journey began with a young man, who was yet to serve in the army, cutting grass in a village just outside Veliky Novgorod, almost 30 years ago at the end of the Soviet era. Little by little, Vladimir Mikhailov, who was studying to be a lapidary, worked his way to the edge of the field where he stumbled across an old, crumbling wooden house next to a derelict church. Curious to see inside the hut, he was bemused and mesmerized by what he saw: A secret Orthodox prayer house, something of an improvised sanctuary arranged by the religious residents of the nearby village.

Three decades on, Mikhailov, now 50, occupies the unique position of a jeweler crafting collections inspired by Orthodox symbols, saints and values in a centuries-old technique developed in the 12th and 13th centuries in northern Russia — and all with the blessing of the Russian Orthodox Church.

"The sight of the tiny hut dotted with old icons, manuscripts and other things that the secret believers from the village had brought there was absolutely mesmerizing," Mikhailov recalls. "It was my first real exposure to the Orthodox faith, and I really felt it at a close and personal level."

"From that moment, I never really stopped thinking about it, but it took a few years for me to decide to make it my life's work to create Orthodox-inspired jewelry."

A native and resident of the town of Borovichi near Novgorod, Mikhailov seeks inspiration from ancient relics in the Orthodox monasteries of northern Russia, making pilgrimages to meditate on centuries-old icons and create objects of art devoted to the most revered saints and martyrs in the Russian Orthodox religion, including St. Nicholas, St. Panteleimon, St. George and St. Andrew the First-Called.



Mikhailov visits monasteries in search of inspiration for his jewelry designs.

Carved in silver or gold in an ascetic style using a highly intricate technique, Mikhailov's rings, pendants and crosses have proved equally appealing to both the clergy — originally the artist's main clientele — and secular, even non-religious customers. His clients include Queen Sophia of Spain and Hollywood stars such as Mickey Rourke, both of whom bought items of jewelry spontaneously while shopping in St. Petersburg.

"When I started out, I made most of my items to order, and mainly for priests," Mikhailov remembers. "Now I just work on the designs, and then they go to production."

The jeweler, who presented his art abroad for the first time this spring at the Festival International d'Art Monaco - Cote d'Azur, is ready to go international. In the near future, Mikhailov is opening branches of his stores in London, Berlin and Nice following the success of his display at the festival.

Some of the collections, such as the Easter Collection that has just been released, take up to a year to design. Af-

ter Mikhailov creates a design, it is then sent to the Baltic Jewellery Company, which in turn produces a certain number of pieces.

Mikhailov had a number of teachers. "I never had what one would call 'the teacher' or 'the master;' I had to look out for different artists who knew the art and learn from them whatever I

could," Mikhailov recalls. "It was not easy, and it took time to find the right people."

Studying the art brought with it a deeper perception of Orthodox values, Mikhailov said. "It was a parallel process that involved a lot of thinking," the artist said.

Mikhailov's meeting with the late Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, Alexy II, back in 1983 during Alexy's tenure as the Metropolitan of Leningrad was a life-changing experience for the artist.

"His recognition and blessing meant the world to me," the artist said.

"When the Metropolitan listened to me and told me that he appreciated what I was doing and gave me his blessing, it gave me a very special sense of security, inner peace and also confidence."

Although Mikhailov received a blessing for his work, the items of jewelry on sale at the stores are not blessed, which is a conscious decision. The jeweler believes in giving freedom to the customer to choose whether to wear the piece as a religious object or

talisman, or simply as a work of art. In no way, says Mikhailov, does he want his art to be regarded as religious propaganda.

"Naturally, every piece that we create shows that we share the spiritual values of the Russian Orthodox church, but we do not actually campaign among our customers to join us in our beliefs," Mikhailov said. "I know that some of my clients choose to make this step and go to church and get their items blessed, and, more importantly, I have even seen examples of art inspiring a spiritual change in people. But I would hate to be seen as preaching."

The artist says that when he talks to a client, he can tell whether they are attracted by the harmony and finesse of the design, or whether they came to the store specifically to choose a ring for a baptizing ceremony, for example, or a pendant with an image of a patron saint for their saint's day. Mikhailov says he never attempts to convert shoppers. "It is not for me to judge anyone; and it is indeed a temptation to be in a potential position to influence people's mentality, but this is what I do not allow myself to fall for," he said.

"What I do allow myself is to appeal to people's emotions and soul. I try to create items with a festive spirit — like, for example, Easter angels. In Russia, many people go to church in times of sorrow but far less to say thank you when they are happy."

Has the artist ever felt that the religious theme somewhat hampers his creativity, by forcing him to follow a number of canons?

"No, it is quite the opposite," Mikhailov said. "It is not the urge for self-expression that motivates me most. Of course, every design that I create bears my personal touch — but this touch is more emotional than visual, and can be sensed rather than seen."



An icon-inspired piece by Mikhailov.



A ring with an image of St. George.