

The art of Russia

From stunning large-scale canvases of old masters to priceless religious icons **Robin McKelvie** explores Moscow's wealth of cultural attractions

As befitting the capital of one of the world's most intriguing, colourful and deeply historic countries Moscow overflows with a dramatic sweep of museums and galleries. The city in fact boasts over 200 galleries and museums. One-time bastions of communist ideology have evolved to reflect the new faces of Russia, others have stayed gloriously poignant timepieces and venues

have sprung up on a tide of creativity and private capitalist patronage.

If Moscow only had the museums, galleries and churches of the landmark Kremlin (also the seat of Russian power) it would still be rich in cultural wealth. You could lose days exploring its myriad exhibits. The undoubted highlight is The Armoury, which houses such delights as costumes and carriages belonging to the once omnipotent



Left: Faberge egg

Below: The Cathedral of Christ the Saviour has a museum

and Guelman Galleries – closed to commercial sales. All have committed to continuing in various forms. Aidan's story is positive as it now functions as an art gallery and studio based around the works of its director, Aidan Salakhova. Another bright spot is the continued success of the large exhibition space TsDKh, which specialises in contemporary art and is in the process of a revamp.

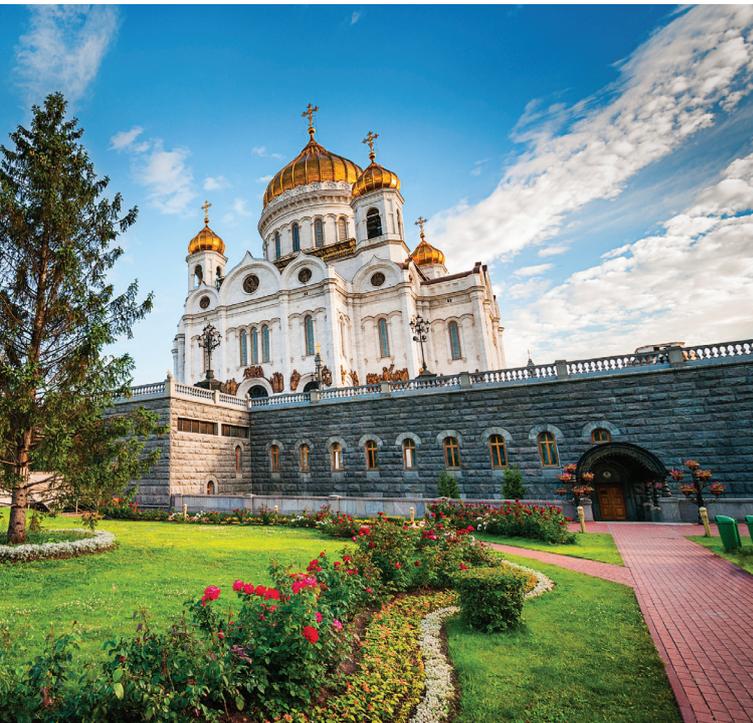
One of Moscow's most poignant museums is housed within the epic Cathedral of Christ the Saviour. The largest orthodox cathedral in the world was dynamited by the atheist Communist authorities back in 1931, only to rise again after Communism's collapse. It was consecrated in 2000 and today the church museum tells its tumultuous story, a tale that mirrors the country itself.

If you are lucky you will be in town during a 'Day of Historical and Cultural Heritage' event. The last one – the seventh – was held in May this year and saw more than 20 venues keep their doors open beyond closing time to stage a smorgasbord of special events, guided tours and talks. This impressive coming together of cultural institutions of all hues is a testament to a city whose cultural scene, built solidly on centuries of eclectic history, today offers a lucid insight into Russia and its intriguing capital. ■

Tsars, as well as the very sleigh that transported the Empress Elizabeth – Peter the Great's daughter – from St. Petersburg to Moscow for her coronation. Then, of course, there are the world famous Fabergé eggs. Beyond the Kremlin the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts houses the city's finest collection of European Art. It first swung open its grand doors to the public in 1912 and has since amassed a world-class collection. Here you can admire everything from the works of Botticelli and Rembrandt, through to Van Gogh and Gauguin, and on to Matisse and Picasso. Look out for Van Gogh's *La Vigne Rouge*, said to be the only painting sold during his lifetime.

While many of St Petersburg's cultural institutions tend to gaze westwards to Europe, Moscow has always kept a keen eye on the East and all things Byzantine. Delve through the permanent collections at the State Museum of Oriental Art and you move beyond Russia into the exotic climes of China, Japan, Central Asia and Iran, with temporary exhibitions too on Russian and foreign themes.

In the 1990s private galleries flourished showcasing the work of previously ignored domestic artists and offering art for sale. Last year was a difficult one for private art galleries as three - XL, Aidan



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