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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Irina Antonova, Head of Pushkin Museum for 52 Years, Dead at Age 98

She passed away due to complications from the coronavirus.

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Pavel Smertin / TASS

Irina Antonova, longtime head of the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts and renowned expert in Renaissance art, has died at the age of 98, the museum's press service said in a statement on Tuesday. She died from complications caused by the coronavirus.

Antonova was born in Moscow in 1922. As a child, she spent several years in pre-war Berlin, where her father worked at the Soviet Embassy. The Antonov family returned to Moscow after the Nazis came to power in Germany.

In 1940, she entered the art history department of the Philological Faculty of the Institute of Philosophy, Literature and History (IFLI). In 1941, after IFLI merged with Moscow State University (MGU), she joined the art history department and graduated with honors in 1945. During the Second World War, she worked as a nurse in a Moscow hospital.

In April 1945, she got a job at the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts. In her interviews, Antonova has repeatedly said that she did not fall in love with the museum immediately, since the post-war museum made a depressing impression.

After the war, when the museum returned evacuated collections and received trophy exhibitions from Hungary and Germany, Antonova changed her attitude toward the museum: "I began to immerse myself in the world of art, which I had previously only known from reproductions. All this made a huge impression on me. Every day I looked forward to the opening! Art captured me, and gradually the museum became my home," the RBC news website quoted Antonova as saying.

Irina Antonova headed the Pushkin Museum for 52 years, from 1961 to 2013. She actively developed cooperation with foreign museums and exhibitors. Under her leadership, in 1974 for the first time people in the Soviet Union saw Leonardo da Vinci's works and his masterpiece "Mona Lisa."

Da Vinci's masterpiece caused real furor in Moscow. Art lovers lined up nearly all day and night just to get a chance to gaze for 15 seconds at one of the most famous portraits in history. Antonova and the museum administration also had to organize a special bulletproof box for the transportation of "Mona Lisa" and to secure multimillion-dollar insurance for da Vinci's work.

Later, the Pushkin Museum hosted a number of landmark exhibitions of foreign art: "Moscow-Paris. 1900-1930" (in 1981); "Moscow-Berlin. 1900-1950" (in 1996); "Treasures of Troy from the excavations of Heinrich Schliemann" (in 1996); and "Picasso" (in 2010).

Antonova also advocated strongly for the museum's expansion. The museum complex now includes the Museum of American and European Art, the Museum of Private Collections, and a children's art center.

In addition to managing of the museum, Antonova lectured and taught in Russia and abroad. She lectured at MGU and at the Institute of Cinematography, and at the Institute of Oriental languages in Paris.

In 2013, she was appointed as chief curator of state museums across Russia and became the president of the Pushkin Museum.

Antonova was an honorary member of UNESCO's International Council of Museums. Her contribution to the popularization and promotion of art was lauded not only in Russia, but also across the globe.

Antonova will be buried at the Novodevichy Cemetery in Moscow next to her husband and mother. Due to the pandemic, the funeral ceremony will be private.

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