

LOST MOSAICS

Kornoukhov: my work destroyed to make way for Rupnik

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"I found out a few months later that the mosaics on the vault and the side walls had been destroyed. They were destroyed on the pretext that the tiles had fallen down, but it was absolutely impossible without having dislodged them. I still have the strong

suspicion that Rupnik invented this 'accusation' in order to replace me as the mosaicist for the project", says the Russian mosaicist Alexander Kornoukhov to the *Daily Compass*.

Alexander Kornoukhov is talking about the mosaics in the Redemptoris Mater Chapel in the Apostolic Palace in the Vatican, to which the name and the legend of the former Slovenian Jesuit, who worked there with several collaborators at the end of the 1990s, are linked. At present, only the Heavenly Jerusalem is visible on the altar wall (its upper part is missing, as can be seen in the photos below), but the Russian master confirms that he had completed much more before he was dismissed. His entire work included "the west wall, the vault, some figures of saints, the Annunciation and the scene of Jacob's dream, the side walls (north and south)".

On his Facebook page, Kornoukhov posted an image of the Annunciation (post dated 7 April 2023) with the caption: "The Annunciation - Vatican (destroyed). Destroyed. But let's recall what happened at the beginning of the work. The reconstruction of the former Chapel of Matilda (renamed Redemptoris Mater for the Marian Year 1987-1988) was a gift from the Sacred College on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the priesthood of St John Paul II in 1996. On this occasion, the Pope wished to make it a place symbolising unity with the Christian East, visually embodying the theme of the 'two lungs' of the Church, which was very dear to him.

The entire project, under the supervision of the Jesuit Tomáš Špidlík (later to become a cardinal) and the Aletti Centre, was entrusted to Alexander Kornoukhov an artist faithful to the Byzantine tradition. "Špidlík suggested that I create the mosaics for the chapel after seeing the pictures of the mosaics I had created in the Church of the Transfiguration in Tùšino, Moscow," says Kornoukhov. And were you the only artist involved? "The whole project of mosaics for the chapel was entrusted to me alone". And what was your collaboration with the Aletti Centre like? I was a guest at the Aletti Centre and I did my mosaic tests there (the fragments with the portraits of the saints)". And with Rupnik? "I knew Rupnik from the beginning as the coordinator of the project: he was in contact with the Vatican administration. But I never had any artistic collaboration with him". At that time did you have any idea of the scandal that was about to engulf him? "No, it was an unexpected discovery for me.

Kornoukhov is also among those who want to know the truth about Rupnik, but in his case it is about the mosaics that were lost and replaced by those of the former Jesuit, whose unstoppable fame was born precisely from that first prestigious commission. Federica Tourn ([Rupnik, il Vaticano e l'artista russo: il pasticciaccio della "nuova Sistina"](#) - Rupnik, the Vatican and the Russian artist: the mess of the 'new Sistine')

recounts the story and the controversy surrounding it, giving the versions of both sides'. For the Aletti Centre, these mosaics were not important because the glue was unsuitable and the tiles would have eventually fallen off. For Kornoukhov, on the other hand, their removal would have been deliberate, in order to replace him with Rupnik. For her part, Tourn wonders: "If the Aletti Centre was supposed to supervise and assist the Russian artist, why didn't they solve the possible problem of the glue at the start? Assuming that the tiles had given way and that the mosaics had to be reproduced from scratch, wouldn't it have been better to let Kornoukhov do it again instead of replacing him with another artist who had never done mosaics?"

At the time, Rupnik was a painter, not a mosaicist, but according to a somewhat hagiographic account, he became one by virtue of the 'fourth vow', which binds Jesuits to special obedience to the Pope: 'This chapel is the result of this special obedience, because Father Rupnik didn't make mosaics before, he was a painter. But when the Pope asks you for a mosaic, what do you do? You make a mosaic," jokes Nataša Govekar from the Aletti Centre in a [video](#) clip dedicated to Redemptoris Mater. And immediately afterwards, with the heavenly Jerusalem behind her, she mentions "a Russian artist who worked about a year before... a Russian artist who is, let's say, more faithful to a traditional style". But without naming him, as if he were just passing through.

Traces of Kornoukhov's 'passing' remain, in addition to the surviving Jerusalem celeste, on his website ([here](#) and [here](#)), whose images are extremely valuable because they allow us to see what the Redemptoris Mater would have been like, or rather, what it was like before it was transformed in the image of Rupnik, who also 'reinvented' the chapel's original inspiration: "I think that Rupnik's art is far from the Byzantine tradition and is an example of postmodernism, without any connection to architecture," comments Kornoukhov. Indeed, the difference in style is striking, not only when comparing Kornoukhov's Heavenly Jerusalem to the other walls, but also when comparing the "before" and the "after" (in the two photos below). The Christ depicted in the centre of the vault is perhaps the most radical change between the [Russian artist's version](#) and that of the [Centro Aletti](#) (both are shown side by side in the top photo at the beginning of the article).

The fact is that the Redemptoris Mater Chapel saw the 'baptism' of Rupnik as a mosaicist and his art as a bridge to the East. A myth so strong that, even when faced with much more serious issues than a (probable) technical problem, the mere idea of removing or covering any work by the former Jesuit, present in churches all over the world, raises a hornet's nest of controversy and a thousand precautions that were not

taken for the mosaics of Alexander Kornoukhov.

