

An icon of the « Martyrs of Libya » at the Petit Palais museum

Review Painted in memory of the 21 Coptic workers assassinated in Libya by Daesh in 2015, this contemporary icon of Nikola Sarić was acquired by the Petit Palais in Paris. It reflects the desire of this young artist to renew the vocabulary of the icon, sometimes confined in repetitions a little sterile.

Sabine Gignoux, 26/09/2019, 16:00 h / Non-authorized translation from the originally French article by Detlef J. Reuleke



Nikola Sarić, *Les martyrs de Libye*, 2018. Courtesy : Petit Palais

A unique contemporary watercolor has just enriched the icon room at the Petit Palais in Paris. This great work (0.70m by 1m) entitled *The Martyrs of Libya* represents the killing, in 2015, of 21 Egyptian Coptic workers on a beach in Sirte by Daesh militiamen. Painted in 2018 according to the video of the execution diffused on Internet by the terrorists, it shows the macabre ritual instituted by these: the kneeling workers, dressed in an orange jumpsuit reminding prisoners of Guantanamo, and the militiamen hooded in black, standing behind them and armed with a knife..

The painter Nikola Sarić however, wanted to transcend this drama as a collective martyr. He was inspired for that by the traditional Byzantine iconography, especially that of the *Forty Martyrs of Sebaste* whom Christ, above, welcomes in his arms. *Martyrs de Libye*, placed in a disposition reminiscent of the disciples of the Last Supper, are thus united in the arms of Christ, also dressed in orange. In the same way, the pink orb which nimbuses it echoes the blood of the workers flowing on the shore ...

An unusual style for the icon

The stylized and naive style, evoking in turn the comics or the art of the 1930s, testifies to the desire of this young artist, trained at the Academy of the Serbian Orthodox Church for the conservation and the arts and working today in Hannover, to renew the vocabulary of the icon, sometimes confined to somewhat sterile repetitions.

The pastel shades and the original choice of watercolor are part of this revived approach, which attracted in 2019 the acquisition committee of the Petit Palais. It is the first contemporary icon that joins the collections of the Paris museum which holds more than 80 icons dated from the 15th to the 19th century.