

Beauty and strength come to the fore in painting Italian scenes

In the early 19th century, Russian poet Dmitry Venevitinov called Italy 'a homeland of inspiration'. The exhibition of Russian paintings — from the Belarusian National Art Museum's collection — demonstrates that these words remain true for Russian artists over a long period of time

By Victor Mikhailov

The largest global museums have achieved their high status owing to the huge collections they keep in their stores. In this respect, Belarus' National Art Museum can hardly compete. However, it still has much to attract audiences, boasting artistry by painters from far and wide. Its recently opened *Italy is the Homeland of Inspiration* confirms this well, uniting works by Russian artists who worked, lived or travelled through Italy in the 19th century; all were inspired by the beauty of the land. The pictures have been acquired by the Minsk museum at various times but, now, they are all on show.

Italy — a country with many centuries of history and a treasury of global cultural masterpieces — was discovered by Russian artists back in the 18th century. Peter I introduced the tradition of sending young talented painters to Italy to study and such trips became regular once the Arts Academy was set up in St. Petersburg; its best alumni were granted scholarships to spend on further education in Europe. Most were attracted by Italy, largely owing to its picturesque landscapes, unique monuments and national colour. Italy was not just a school of professional mastery but a source of artistic inspiration. Many thought that they could breathe more freely there, far from cold Russia and its strict academic leaders.

Actually, such trips were especially favourable for landscape painters, as is evident in the present show. All artists dream of working with nature all year round; moreover, winter landscapes were not so popular among art lovers in Russia and Europe at

that time. Summer sights were more alluring. Unsurprisingly, it was in Italy that Fiodor Matveev (1738-1826) revealed his talent, spending almost fifty years in the country. He is known in Russian landscape drawing as the most consistent classicist, as his *Rome. Fo-*

sunny Italy, he was so impressed that he immediately began sketching in the open air. He was among the first Russian painters to master this method and managed to significantly lighten his palette, achieving an incredible delicacy in painting the sky. His

Imperial family). The latter rendered support to the Chernetsov brothers: Grigory, Nikanor and Polikarp. From 1840 to 1842, they travelled through Italy, working in Rome. Their hard work and diligence attracted much attention. During their first week in

Encouragement of Artists — arrived in Rome, keen to gain acquaintance with the life and artistry of Russian scholarship holders.

Grigory Chernetsov was much thankful to the Society for the Encouragement of Artists and personally Mr. Grigorovich. It

air. Forty three artists are shown, against the majestic ruins of ancient Italian architecture — standing in groups.

Among those depicted by Mr. Chernetsov are marine painter Ivan Aivazovsky (young at the time but already well known), landscape artist Socrat Vorobiev, portrait painter Pimen Orlov, Grigory Chernetsov himself and, also, his brothers. Some paintings of these artists — drawn in Italy — are also on show in Minsk. All perfectly characterise the artistry of those 19th century 'Russian Italians'.

From the 1840s, Russian artists in Italy shifted to painting daily routine, with the most popular themes covering scenes from real life: holidays, festivals and rendezvous. Plots were simple, with artists eager to depict national colour and the conventional perspectives on Italian character (common for foreign travellers). Pimen Orlov reflects classical national beauty and well recognised folk details in his *By the Well* (1843), while Fiodor Moller speaks of the Italians' hot character and passion in his *Kiss* (1840s).

In the late 19th century, Russian pictorial art was primarily realistic yet Italy remained a country of endless happiness for many. Ivan Reimers depicted grape collection as a noisy holiday in his *Grape Picking in Rome's Suburbs* and Alexander Popov's *Roman Girl* (1884) depicts a sensitive Italian beauty. Interestingly, even social-themed plots are poetic when depicted by Russian artists using the 'Italian genre'. They experienced no problems in perceiving the wonderful land which inspired them with optimism and spiritual tranquillity.



Works by Russian artists devoted to 19th century Italy on show at National Art Museum

rum Ruins well confirms. Contemporaries highly appreciated Mr. Matveev's ability to 'tangibly' draw rich Mediterranean landscapes and truthfully depict the delicate blue gauze of the horizon. His mastery is convincing even now.

During the Napoleonic wars, the tradition of sending scholarship students abroad was abolished in Russia but, in 1817, foreign trips of Arts Academy alumni revived. Landscape painter Silvestr Shchedrin (1791-1830) was among the first to take up the opportunity. Having travelled from dark St. Petersburg to

New Rome. The Castle of S. Angelo perfectly shows this mastery.

While in Italy, Russian artists travelled much, staying in Venice, Naples and Florence. However, Rome always attracted most of all. In the early 19th century, Russian masters united for the first time in a large colony of several dozen people in the Italian capital. Some were holders of private scholarships but most received funds from the Arts Academy or the Society for the Encouragement of Artists (a charity organisation which opened in 1820, patronised by the

Rome, the brothers worked hard sketching the Forum and Coliseum — much to the amusement of others.

Despite the obligation to regularly send written reports on their stay in Italy (in addition to paintings) most scholarship holders managed to enjoy their freedom. To strengthen control over them, the post of 'head of Russian artists' was created in Rome in 1840; Russian Embassy Secretary P. Krivtsov was appointed. In 1842, V. Grigorovich — the Arts Academy's Conference Secretary and the Secretary to the Society for the

took Mr. Chernetsov less than two months to complete his painting of Rome Forum — adding the portraits of Mr. Krivtsov, Mr. Grigorovich and all those Russian painters who lived in Rome at that time. A 'group portrait' was created, known as *Russian Artists in Rome in 1842*. It is vital to the history of Russian art and is also on show at the Minsk museum at the moment. The major characters of Mr. Krivtsov and Mr. Grigorovich do not stand out from the others, with the artists depicted in friendly communication, with a natural and easy

Major award received for third time

By Larisa Shiganovich

Brest Puppet Theatre's *Kholstomer (Strider)*, based on Leo Tolstoy's story, wins Grand Prix at 15th World Festival of Puppet Art in Prague

The forum in the Czech capital brought together 35 theatrical companies from

over 30 countries worldwide. Belarus was represented by Brest's Puppet Theatre. Director and Artistic Leader Mikhail Shavel notes that, alongside winning a Grand Prix at this prestigious theatrical forum, prizes were also claimed for best stage direction, sets, puppets and background music.

Kholstomer is a joint Bela-

rusian-Russian project, staged by St. Petersburg director Ruslan Kudashov. "A letter of gratitude, received by our theatre from the festival's director reads that it was the first time in the history of this event that one performance has won so many awards," notes Mr. Shavel. "Of course, it's very pleasant and is a perfect stim-

ulus for further work."

Prior to this, Brest's Puppet Theatre has twice taken part in the World Festival of Puppet Art in Prague (in 2006 and 2010), also winning major awards. It is the first time in the existence of the festival that one theatre has been awarded the Grand Prix three times.

"We've now been invited to take part in another prestigious forum of puppetry — in Charleville-Mézières, near Paris, in September. It's conducted under the aegis of the International Union of Puppetry," explains Mr. Shavel. "The festival will be celebrating its 50th anniversary. As far as I know, over the last three



Salieri's Moon puppets decades, Belarusian theatrical art hasn't been represented at the event. We'll show our *Salieri's Moon*, based on Pushkin's work, in Charleville-Mézières."