



Vetka provided Old Believers worldwide with icons and books

# Outstanding masterpieces endure through the centuries

National Art Museum of Belarus hosts *18th-19th Century Vetka Icons in Embroidered and Beaded Covers* from Vetka Museum of Folk Arts and private collections

By Victor Mikhailov

The exhibition is a sight to behold, so extraordinary that words are insufficient. It is certainly worthy of being hosted by the country's major museum. About 50 exhibits are on display, including beadwork icons.

Around fifty items are on show, featuring beaded and embroidered icon covers. Ivan Abramov, who has written an ethnographic essay about Vetka, tells us that it became a shelter for Russian Old Believers in the early 20th century. Accordingly, an 'abundance of female head-dresses is found there: beautiful brocade kokoshniks with strings of beads which veiled the eyes, and huge pearl earrings — called 'korzinki' and 'malinki.'

Moreover, Vetka residents liked to cover their icons with rich ornamentation, richly beading and em-

bellishing them with pearls. It is an art long known in Vetka, since Byzantine times, when ancient Russian icons were decorated in this manner. The technique continued until the 1930s before falling into disuse but ancient skills have now been restored at the Vetka museum, with techniques used to restore unique artworks.

Vetka used to provide Old Believers worldwide with icons and books, while Old Believer monasteries were known for their sewing mastery. The art crossed all layers of Vetka society, spreading like ripples on water. Everyone sewed: monks, peasants and middle-class families. Accordingly, their religious symbolism became imbued with the powerful breath of folk culture. People used gold threads, river pearls and beads, as well as gemstones and coloured glass to entirely cover icons.



Unsurpassed beauty

Their garments and crowns were naturally embellished, while even the backgrounds of each picture were studded with decoration, making figures appear to be absorbed into a fantastic landscape of beads. Strings of beads were placed tightly, repeating the outline

and accentuating its volume. At the same time, the background was filled with vertical 'streams' of bead strings, appearing like rain, dew and light. All this is easily noticed and felt if we scrutinise the exhibited icons or just icon covers. Each icon on show at the exhibition is worthy of

display. The icons' garments, halos and surrounding backgrounds are covered in beads, making the figures appear immersed in a fantastic landscape of beads. Threads of beads are placed tightly to outline the object and give it volume while the background is filled with vertical 'streams' of bead threads, which symbolise rain, dew and light. Each work makes a strong impact, individually and as a collection.

Undoubtedly, the icons display great variation and continue to fascinate us today, regardless of being monochrome or encompassing dozens of shades. Paradisiacal flora were commonly embodied in Vetka arts, symbolising the 'heavenly' Vetka land. Craftswomen would use a branch with fantastic flowers which naturally grows in the environment. The 'style of blossoming Vetka' also encompassed bead and pearl

weaving.

Byzantine tradition gave deep spiritual meaning to pearls, which appeared luminous and mystical, as if illuminated by divine light. According to Biblical traditions, the souls of the righteous would enter paradise through gates of pearl, bringing the ancient Russian notion of a 'pearl soul'.

Gilded and pearl strings also had archaic symbolism in Slavonic women's outfits while the rain (filled with light) brings us to pre-Christian topic of 'divine wedding'. Of course, life-giving dew resembles pearls and spring wells, while being connected with images of the Moon and Sun and the Mother of God.

The beauty of these icons is unsurpassed so it's quite possible to spend endless time admiring each work. Their attractiveness is so great that it is easy to imagine them as inspired from above.

## Integration of museums is topical

Polotsk National Historical and Cultural Museum-Reserve has won first prize (500,000 Russian Roubles) at the prestigious *Intermuseum-2012* International Festival, held in Moscow, for its *Preservation of 12-19th Century Murals at the Holy Transfiguration Church in Polotsk*

By Tatiana Polokhova

Our State Museum of Belarusian Literature and the National Nesvizh Historical and Cultural Museum-Reserve were also awarded. Nine Belarusian museums took part in all, including the National Art Museum, the

National History Museum, Gomel's Rumyantsev-Paskevich Palace and Park Estate, Mir Castle Complex, the State Literary Museum of Yanka Kupala and the Lida History and Art Museum. Each had its own stand.

The *Intermuseum* forum allows the most significant issues of mu-

seum development to be discussed each year. The huge event was held in Moscow for the 14th time, attended by 216 museums from Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The Grand Prix went to Yelabuga State Historical, Archi-

tectural and Art Museum-Reserve. *Intermuseum-2012's* slogan — 'A Cultural Space Is One of Trust' — supported its theme of integration to help the tourism industry.

Belarus was taking part for the third year in a row. The Belarusian State Museum of Great Patriotic

War History made its debut in 2010, while three others joined it last year. Of course, there were more participants this year. A year ago, our Great Patriotic War History Museum and the Vitebsk Regional Museum won first prize in several nominations at the event.