

British kings' unique treasures settle at Radziwill Palace in Nesvizh and National Art Museum in Minsk



One of the exhibits from the Victoria and Albert Museum collection in London

Exhibits from the Victoria and Albert Museum in London are on loan to the National Art Museum of Belarus, going on show at the restored Radziwill Palace (part of the Nesvizh National Historical and Cultural Museum-Reserve)

By Victor Mikhailov

Belarusians have, for the first time, received the opportunity to view 83 rare treasures: 49 at the National Art Museum and 34 at Nesvizh Palace. These include a writing table which once belonged to the French Queen Marie Antoinette (1755-1793), with inlaid wood (Marquetry) table top. It is from her apartments in the Petit Trianon Palace in Versailles. Additionally, a snuff-box owned by the King of Prussia, Frederick II the Great (1712-1793), is on show, alongside a walking stick used by King George III (1738-1820). Each work on display is a masterpiece in its own right.

Brilliant examples of rococo painting are in evidence, from the brushes of two of the most outstanding French 'masters of gallant scenes'. Peter Paul Rubens' *War and Victory* was used as a frontispiece for an edition entitled *The Unforgettable and Glorious Trip of Cardinal-Infant Don Ferdinand the Austrian* (Antwerp, 1635). It is one of 48 famous title pages by the prominent Flemish artist, which he created for books of science, military art, archaeology and poetry. Another wonderful work is *Portrait of Thomas Baker* by Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598-1680) — the greatest Italian sculptor and leading representative of baroque style. On show also are *Portrait of the Marquise de Pompadour* by François Boucher and *The Swings* by Nicolas Lancret (1690-1793).

Treasures owned by British kings have aroused huge interest among Belarusians, with nine tourist groups (around 450 people) having booked an excursion to the exhibition even before it opened at Nesvizh Museum-Reserve. The next



Exhibition of British kings' treasures at National Art Museum has much to show

day, the exhibition was attended by another 800 people. According to preliminary orders, over 3,000 tourists will be visiting within a week.

A similar situation is observed at the National Art Museum; the event is being organised by the Culture Ministry, with support from the British Embassy to Minsk. The exhibitions in Minsk and Nesvizh will be open until November 4th. Before bringing the treasures to Belarus, British specialists visited our country several times to assess conditions at the museums, regarding temperature and security.

Initially, the National History Museum was the planned venue for the event but the National Art Museum and Nesvizh Museum-Reserve were later selected. Despite spending a whole year preparing for the event, the exhibition organisers only aim to cover its cost, with sponsorship and budgetary funds paying for most of

the expenses.

The artefacts are on an international tour, with many leaving the Victoria and Albert Museum for the first time. *The Royal Treasures: 1600-1800s European Masterpieces* exhibition is part of the V&A's *1600-1800s European Galleries* collection and

has already visited the National Museum of Korea, an art gallery in Western Australia and Oklahoma City's Art Museum (USA). After exhibiting in our country, the treasures are likely to return to London for the next 25 years.

The Victoria and Al-

bert Museum, founded in 1852, possesses one of the world's largest collections of European 17th-18th century decorative and applied art: paintings, sculptures, ceramic, metal and glass items, furniture, textile and clothes, engravings and drawings. Once owned by wealthy

and powerful Europeans, the treasures were created by the best painters and craftsmen from all over the globe, originating from Austria, the UK, Belgium, France, Germany, Holland, Italy, Portugal, Russia, Spain and Sweden.

The exhibition in Minsk comprises five sections: 'Royal Patronage' representing items owned by royal families who patronised

the arts; 'Power and Glory' — dedicated to armour and weaponry; 'Religious Splendour' — showcasing religious items; furniture and textiles in 'Interior Decoration'; and 'Fashion'. There are 49 artworks in all at the Art Museum while Nesvizh Castle's three grand halls are displaying smaller items which suit their surroundings perfectly.

Negotiations prior to the arrival of the exhibition lasted several months, with experts from London visiting Belarus to inspect various prospective museum venues; only two met strict international standards and security requirements. The British and Belarusian embassies liaised with museum employees, who also come to London for training. The 320sq.m hall at the National Art Museum is now filled with the wonderful artefacts, and its 18 display stands are a feast for the eyes.

According to security requirements, visitor access is restricted to one excursion group every 45 minutes, and no more than 30

people per group. Tourist companies have been able to book in advance for particular dates and times.

"The museum will do everything it can to make each visit to the exhibition (running until November 4th) unique: a landmark educational event, enjoyed in maximum comfort," notes Vladimir Prokoptsov, Director of the National Art Museum of Belarus.

Considerable budgetary and sponsorship funding has been attracted for the project, with great numbers of visitors expected. Children recuperating at Belarusian spas have been invited to attend and the museum hopes to see interest from tourist agencies operating within and beyond Belarus. From September, the museum plans classical concerts to add to the atmosphere of the exhibition, creating an even more memorable visit.

Of course, the insurance cost of the event is likely to be huge. Nevertheless, 50 percent discounts are reserved for pensioners (last Wednesday of the month) and the entry fee is a modest Br50,000 (just over \$5). Children under school age are able to enter free of charge.

Perhaps the most interesting treasures, besides Marie Antoinette's table, the snuff-box of Prussian King Frederick II the Great and the walking stick of British King George III, are masterpieces by outstanding Flemish painter Rubens, by world famous Italian sculptor Bernini and by the best known of French painters, François Boucher and Nicolas Lancret.

Viewing these classical pieces cannot but bring greater understanding of the life once led by the aristocracy and European monarchy. It's no surprise that the British are so proud of the collection.

