

# Ingenious preservation of ancient art

National Art Museum of Belarus now offering visitors the chance to tour its restoration workshops

By Yuliana Leonovich

The country's foremost depository of treasures, the National Art Museum, recently launched its exclusive tours, touting them under the slogan 'The Art of Restoration'. Aimed at those with 'discerning tastes' the tour takes visitors into the heart of the archive, to the restoration rooms, where magic worked to revive ancient works.

On the day of my visit, accompanied by our photographer, nobody came forward to join us at midday. Accordingly, we waited until evening, when two female students and two older ladies chose to take the tour, headed by guide Arkady Shpunt, who oversees the workshops and is a world class restoration expert. He initiated the tour, telling us that he was keen to allow visitors to 'see with their own eyes the whole process of restoration'. He admits, "Of course, the tour has a price, which also helps the museum financially."

The restoration workshops have the feel of den-

tists' rooms, full of mysterious instruments; 18th century works are restored with surgical accuracy, including using scalpels, while the masters wear rubber gloves and white coats. Like professional doctors, their main aim is to do no harm,



In the process of restoration

returning works as close to their original appearance as possible, without altering the image — either to improve or correct. Keeping the original intention is vital and their work is truly a success when others are un-

able to tell that restoration has taken place.

I catch sight of the familiar face of Olga Mikhailova, a graduate of the Department of Traditional Belarusian Culture and Modern Art, at the Belarusian University of Culture and Arts. This spring, she took a job placement at the National Art Museum and has been working as a grade II restorer for the past month, specialising in ancient Belarusian art. Overseen closely, her first major project is an 18th century icon: 'Mother of God with Baby'.

She tells us, "We've already strengthened the paint layers. Before your arrival, we'd just selected solvents to soften the paint. Unfortunately, we haven't yet created the desired effect so we need to try a 'dry' method, using a scalpel."

In the next workshop, restorers Ilona Karlionova and Diana Mokhtar pore over an ancient textile piece. It's laborious work, taking over a year, but they are diligent, working stitch by stitch. Ms. Karlionova stresses the need



During the excursion through workshops

to imitate original techniques. Meanwhile, Sergey Shatilo is just disclosing a painting from dark layers accumulated over the centuries. Mr. Shpunt explains, "Icons were covered with varnish which darkened within 80 years, losing its transparency. In the past, people painted over the top to 'renovate' so the images often lost their initial appearance, becoming something else altogether."

Moving from one workshop to another, only Olga Lutsevich, a student from the Academy of Arts asks questions, while the others follow quietly, seemingly without any personal connection to the art world. Student Karina is a little disappointed, having expected some 'interactivity'. "I thought, they'd allow us to scrape something," she admits, adding that she's rather confused by the proc-

ess of placing notches to probe samples for chemical analysis.

There's no doubt that the tour will be of interest to all those connected to the art world: students and professionals. For those without any background in restoration, it's probably a good idea to undertake some reading before taking the tour, so that you have some familiarity with what you're likely to see.

# Electronic intestines of musical giant

Belarusian State Philharmonic Society organ — the biggest instrument countrywide — launching anew

By Andrey Sokolov

The musical giant has been reconstructed by one of the world's top specialists, Eberkhard Khilze, gaining a clearer tone and a new, German made control console: the Orgelbau Fleiter. Based on the previous console, it uses electronics, avoiding the need for so many wires linking old mechanical controls. The new device is lighter and far more mobile.

Thanks to using fewer components, the delay between striking the keyboard and hearing the note from the pipes is reduced, making the organ easier to play, as well as clearer and louder, notes Yuri Gildyuk, the Art Director of the Belarusian State Philharmonic Society. He tells us, "From this season on, we can invite the best organists in the world to come to Belarus. Before the reconstruction, it was difficult to work with



The keeper of organ — Gennady Chernyavsky

the instrument and some sounds were lost. Now, thanks to the Ministry for Culture, which donated almost Br800m for repairs, the organ is ideal."

Many Minsk residents and

guests of the capital have already heard the results, as the first organ concert of the new season took place at the Belarusian State Philharmonic Society in early September.

# Worthy people awarded

In Chisinau, the 21st Maria Bieșu Invites International Opera and Ballet Festival recently took place

Held at the prestigious National Opera and Ballet Theatre, Pavel Petrov, the Belarusian opera singer, and Yulia Tereshchuk, the Ukrainian opera soloist, were awarded the first prize, Anna Dimitriu and Ion Timofti — soloists of the National Opera of Moldova — took the second and the third places at the contest.

Jury Ljanke, Prime Minister of Moldova, presented the awards to the winners. He noted that the participants of such a major cultural event turned Chisinau into a real international centre of opera and ballet. He also stated that the festival was not only a big cultural event but also a fitting tribute to the memory of the late Maria Bieșu — the Moldavian opera diva who died last year.