

# Tapestry of the Century sets up a tradition

The Palace of Independence will soon receive its first visitors and one more architectural sight will appear in the capital of Belarus. Until then, artists and weavers from the Borisov Arts and Crafts Centre make the last stitches on tapestries and other art textile works which will give national colouring to the interiors of the most splendid establishment in the country.

By Vladimir Yakovlev

The workers of this enterprise made the world's biggest *Tapestry of the Century* from sketches made by the People's Artist of Belarus, Alexander Kishchenko. The enterprise itself was named after him. This unique hanging is officially recognised as an object of cultural and historical heritage of world value. It even entered the Guinness Book of Records.

Manually woven pictures from Borisov decorate the interiors of the UN Headquarters in Washington, the National Library in Minsk, the Grand Hotel in Moscow and leading Belarusian and Russian theatres. They also can be found in the private collections of Russian collectors. 'But isn't tapestry making a French invention?' This question can be asked by a demanding reader, and he or she will be right. However there is no paradox in the earlier information. Almost simultaneously with its appearance in France, weaving with a vertical arrangement of threads appeared in Belarus in the same 17th century. The serfs of the Radziwiłł dukes were engaged in weaving, and tapestries from the castles of Mir and Nesvizh, Ukraine and Lithuania were spread across the whole of Europe. Since then, the Belarusian art of weaving using coloured woollen threads acquired its own characteristic traits and has become different from the French original. In particular, Belarusian tapestries not only have original artistic component, but also an original interweaving of threads. However, the period of classical Belarusian tapestry was rather short and by the 19th century had practically come to end, along with the manufacture of the well-known Slutsk belts.

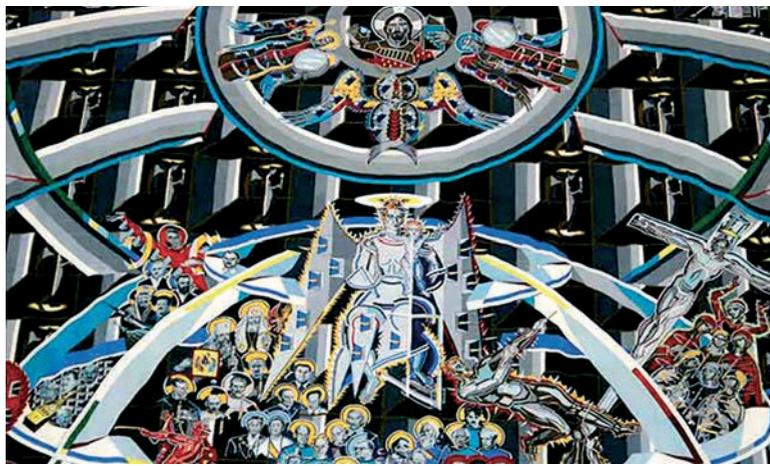
However, after a century, it was de-

cidated to revive this ancient art in Belarus. The art of tapestry allows makers to reproduce the grandiosity of political ideas, portraits of leaders or space and the Borisov Arts and Crafts Centre considerably contributed greatly to the modern art of weaving. Its current director, Grigory Shemit, rustling the pages of old certificates which have turned yellow with time, tells us, "The first Borisov tapestries appeared in 1967-1968. Gradually, a team of qualified weavers, and the group of professional artists creating the tapestry pictures was formed at the Centre. During the Soviet period, they had orders planned for two years ahead. Nobody looked at the prices. Tapestries were ordered by regional palaces of culture and collective farm-millionaires. But after the collapse of the USSR, the demand for highly artistic woven products fell off. The number of

workers at the enterprise was repeatedly reduced, and at present time there are around 100 workers, including 8 tapestry makers (down from 40). Nevertheless, the enterprise survived those dark times and did not lose its qualified experts. The ancient art was kept alive and gradually developed. Recently, for example, the Crafts Centre employed 6 young women who want to become tapestry weavers."

The government also helps to keep the unique tradition of weaving alive, exempting the works of art from value added tax. Thereby they became cheaper in price and that helps sales.

But why are these beautiful works of art not so in demand as they were twenty or thirty years ago? In order to understand this, our correspondents decided to visit the weaver's shop. There, coarse threads of the base,



Fragment of the world's largest *Tapestry of the Century*

## The MT's reference

14 skilled workers from Borisov worked on the *Tapestry of the Century* from August 1991 until February 1995. It weighs 300 kilograms and used 806 kilometres of pure woollen thread. The finished tapestry stands 19.5 metres by 14 metres. The subject is the struggle of good against evil and it depicts main characters in modern world history.



ARTUR PRUPAS

Borisov's artist-designer, Yelena Sheimit, at work

(the warps), were drawn on a big steel frame, and the weavers, sitting in a row were glancing at cardboard illustrations in front of them and were weaving, from side to side, (the wefts) using woollen threads of corresponding colours. After completing a row of the fabric, they pressed down the fabric using a wooden hammer-comb.

At first sight, it doesn't seem very difficult. I tried to make several small knots. Far from it! My fingers did not bend, refusing to take threads to the correct places. The weavers just smiled at my attempts.

"This is work for those who are good at knitting and sewing. And in addition it requires a lot of patience."

Yelena Alekhno, Tatiana Potapovich and Alla Fedisova are such people. They have been weaving tapestries for about a quarter of a century. They say that someone can become professional in several months, while another person may take many years. It doesn't just depend on self-opinion, but also on the actual tapestry on which they are currently working.

"Not everything is always good," say the skilled workers. "Sometimes it comes to tears. But we sit; confer with each other and with the artist and start to reweave a thread."

There can be a price that weavers pay for right to weave: blood spots on

threads, arthritis and back problems and deterioration of vision. It is not without reason that they are pensioned off 5 years earlier than others. The work is hard and progress is slow. In one day, a tapestry may grow by just 3-4 centimetres. A two-by-three metre carpet, made by six workers, working two shifts, takes two and a half months. They were working on the *Tapestry of the Century* for several years, which explains the high art value of the work. Nowadays there is automatic weaving equipment with programmable controls that allow for the production of cheap tapestries. But that, as they say, is another story. For now, the Borisov enterprise tries to keep the decades of accumulated experience of their manual weavers.

In Belarus, it is hard to find the ancient tapestries which were truly woven in the country. Wars, revolutions and moisture have done their destructive work. But today, after having gained experience from Lithuanian colleagues, the skilled workers of the Borisov Arts and Crafts Centre have restored two works of their unknown, 17-18th century, predecessors. The picture *Aurochs Hunting* needed filigree patching and those who will see it on display at Mir Castle will hardly notice the restoration. A tapestry based on the theme of the Trojan War is also kept in the Mir Castle.

## Bright stars on holiday of music

The concerts of the 8th *Yuri Bashmet International Festival* achieve great success in Minsk

The People's Artist of Russia, well-known viola player, conductor and teacher Yuri Bashmet is one of the most significant and expected musical events in Belarus.

It is compared to the well-known concerts in Austrian Salzburg and Swiss Verbier, and tickets are always sold out long before the festival starts. It is no wonder — Yuri Bashmet's performances can't be called normal, classical concerts. It is more like a modern

interpretation of classics with a lot of experimentation. Last year, for example, the festival opening was held in the form of musical-circus show in the capital's circus. Acrobats and gymnasts soared under the dome to the strains of classical music. And what is more, this festival always gathers a lot of stars!

This year, Bashmet brings the eighth festival to Minsk. The musical forum has pleased audience with performances of soloists from the best opera theatres of the world, the world famous pianist, Nikolay Lugansky, violinist Max-

im Vengerov, pianist Rostislav Krimer and talented actors from Russia, Belarus, Poland, Estonia, Sweden, Germany, Turkey and other countries. The President of Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko, congratulated the participants and visitors of the festival at its opening, noting that the festival was a 'real holiday of music that gathers a constellation of unique talent, from legendary stars to bright young musicians, and pleases us with the variety of musical genres and masterly skill of its participants'.

## The innocence of children captured in author's book

By Yekaterina Panteleeva

Belarusian nominated for Russian *Writer of the Year Prize*

Minsk's Anna Pankratova hopes to become the best Russian writer in the 'Children's Literature' category.

"For the contest I have presented a story from a series of fabulous stories named *About boy Dyoma*," says Anna. "At the heart of the stories there are moments in the lives of little children which I have seen watching my youngest son Demyan-Daniil. Children live in a special world

that is known only to them. For example, when there is foul weather, they can draw the sun on a window and believe that it is warm outside. Unfortunately, when they grow up, they forget such things. And I have tried to put these moments into my works."

If the Belarusian author gets the honorary title she will know on March 21st at a ceremony devoted to World Poetry Day, in Moscow's Central House of Writers. The winner will receive a contract with a big Russian Publishing House — Eksmo.