



Peasant, Christian God: Babichi Icon exhibition in the National Art Museum

New blessing of ancient images

National Art Museum in Minsk and Museum of Belarusian Folk Art in nearby village of Raubichi introduce icon exhibition revealing huge layer of Belarusian spiritual culture

By Victor Mikhailov

The *Peasant, Christian God: Babichi Icon* exhibition is a joint project by two Gomel District museums: the Vetka Museum of Old Belief and Belarusian Traditions (named after Shklyarov) and the Chechersk Historical and Ethnographic Museum. Hosted by the National Art Museum, the collection promotes unique Babichi national iconography, from the village of Babichi in the Chechersk District of the Gomel Region. It was there that the last masters of the famous peasant dynasty of icon painters, Vladimir Gerakov and Gavriil Gerakov, lived and worked in the late 19th-early 20th century. They painted images for local churches and for villagers, who believed that icons would protect them from illness and other misfortune. Some icons were used in blessing newly married couples while others were thought to have specific 'jurisdiction' over spheres of life — such as those portraying patron saints of animals. The peasant icon painters from 'the village of Babichi in the Pokotsk volost of the Rogachev District' were first mentioned in Description of the Mogilev Province, in 1884: that their skills were passed on to pupils is proven by a signature on the Trinity of the New Testament icon, painted in 1894.

The exhibition boasts 38 works on various themes. *The Song of Songs*, the *Psalms* and the *Apocalypse* inspired Coronation of the Mother of God: a theme popular from the 12th century onwards and which reached its peak during the Italian Renaissance. That time of self-determination and expression embraced the portrayal of gods and heroes in artistic works, with many West European masters — from Giotto to Velázquez — addressing the theme. Velázquez's creativity made a great impact on Catholic and Uniate painting within the Rzeczpospolita, which featured Chechersk elders in its structure. In Transformation, and

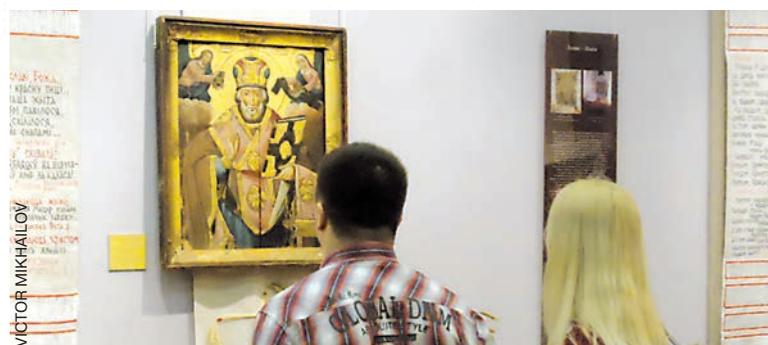
Saint George and the Dragon, we find Baroque elements, drawing on well-known European engravings and works by Italian masters. These were painted at the request of Count Chernyshev, the 18th century owner of Chechersk.



Altar icon of the Mother of God Hodegetria

calling card for the Gomel District.

The National Art Museum exhibition includes the remarkable altar icon entitled Mother of God Hodegetria. Undoubtedly of the Belarusian school, although by an unknown, gifted artist, probably from Vilno, its portrayal of the Virgin Mary is typical: a thin, extended nose, small lips and wide-open eyes. With a canonical gesture of the right hand, Mary points to Jesus, who is shown facing forward, as a beautiful and cheerful youngster. His nose is upturned, and his forehead high, surrounded by curly brown hair, while his eyes are large. His right hand blesses and points to Mary, while his left palm contains a sphere with a cross (a symbol



The Babichi icon combines western influences and archaic agricultural imagery: a mutual enrichment of cultures by Gomel District icon painters. The unique 19th-20th century regional phenomenon of 'Babichi national icons' is a vital part of Belarus' art history: an original

of sovereignty over the Universe). The gold crown over Mary's head is supported by angels, who also hold symbolic lilies and roses. The composition is much like The Coronation of the Virgin, where a dove (the Holy Spirit) soars to the top of the icon. The background is char-

acteristic of Belarusian icons, being gilded and engraved with foliage imagery. Originally decorated with a silver riza and crowns, this icon is mentioned in church inventories of 1789 and 1830. Under Mary's foot is a moon of silver, spanning the width of the icon. A Monastic brotherhood, established in the name of the Virgin, was approved by Pope Benedict 14th in 1740 and the icon was possibly painted between 1740 and 1760. The altar was consecrated in 1760.

The 19th century icons have been on show at the Museum of Belarusian Folk Art in the village of Raubichi,



near Minsk, inviting us to explore this fascinating layer of Belarusian spiritual culture. Iconography has never before been fully studied in Belarus, despite icons long having been part of the Belarusian home, accompanying the Faithful in their lifelong journey. Each newborn was given an icon, which would remain with them through their life: a focus of religious feelings and used to inspire a respectful attitude towards family and elders. Icons were present at each marriage and acted as a guardian talisman, often passed from father to son and always displayed at home. A protecting force, they were entrusted with secrets, dreams, woes and hopes, through prayer. Through them, people drew strength and deepened their belief.

National icons are different to canonical icons, since those who painted them had no special training, being guided by their inner feelings — rather than established canons. The iconography of such masters tends to be simple rather

than featuring multiple figures. They show saints with human traits and paint Jesus as a healthy cheerful child — much like a peasant boy; Mary tends to appear as a bonny woman with ample bosom. Folk elements — such as symbolic floral designs — are often included while works tend to follow the use of colour seen in canonical works: whereby each colour has symbolic meaning.

Another characteristic of such 'peasant' iconography is that family members were often named after esteemed saint patrons. The most common images were the Mother of God of the Three Hands, Saint Nicholas the Wonderworker, Archangel Michael, Saint Varvara the Martyr, and Paraskeva Pyatnitsa. Especially in Polesie, Saint Stylianos, Saint Zosim and Savvatiy (Sabbatius) were also widespread.

We are now making a full scientific study of Belarusian national iconography, although works are rarely on display in museums and collectors are only just paying attention to this unique phenomenon. The exhibition at the Museum of Belarusian Folk Art, in the village of Raubichi, shows 44 icons from a private collection, restored by experts from the National Art Museum.