

Unique ancient artefacts shall rise from ashes

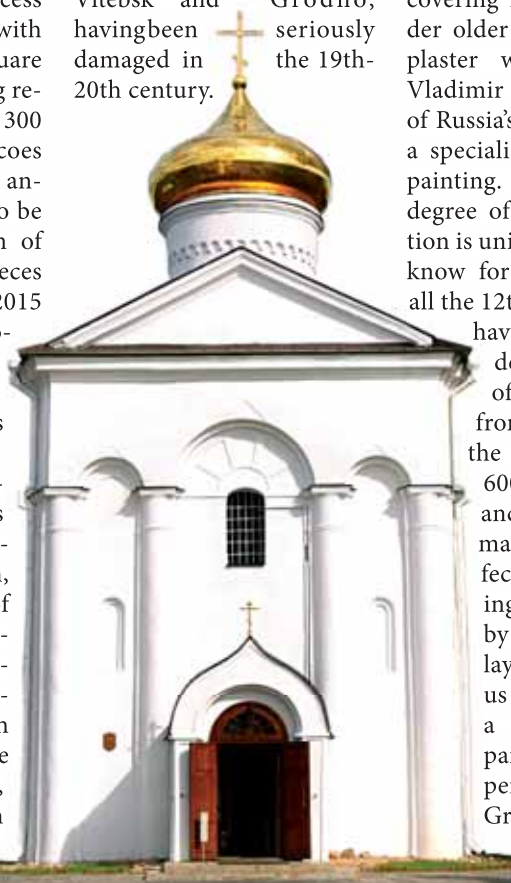
Restorers to unveil all of the 12th century frescoes at Polotsk's Holy Transfiguration Church by 2015

By Viktor Korbut

The restoration process requires much effort, with no more than 10 square centimetres of a painting revealed each day. So far, 300 square metres of frescoes have been revived, with another five hundred yet to be tackled. The restoration of these unique pictorial pieces is guided by the 2011-2015 *Culture of Belarus* programme, with state funds annually allocated to ensure the process is complete by 2015.

The Holy Transfiguration Church was founded in the 12th century by architect Johann, under the blessing of Saint Yevfrosiniya Polotskaya, the Mother Superior of Polotsk's monastery. Inside, the church was painted by Byzantine and Belarusian masters, making it the only 12th century church in Belarus to have kept its wall paintings. Another

two buildings from that era are partially preserved in Vitebsk and Grodno, having been seriously damaged in the 19th-20th century.



Holy Transfiguration Church



Moscow restorer Darya Skobtsova working on Holy Transfiguration Church's altar

Specialists from Minsk and Moscow are now uncovering frescoes from under older oil paintings and plaster work, headed by Vladimir Sarabianov — one of Russia's top restorers and a specialist in Old Russian painting. He explains, "The degree of church preservation is unique. Moreover, we know for sure that almost all the 12th century frescoes have been hidden under several layers of other paintings, from the ceiling to the floor. In all, over 600 square metres of ancient paintings remain in almost perfect condition, having been protected by these covering layers." He reminds us that, back in 1929, a famous Russian painter and art expert, academician Grabar, visited Polotsk and, on seeing its frescoes, wrote: "The ma-

terial is unique, interesting and significant". Restorers then began initial exploration but it was only in the 1990s that true work was launched, when Belarusian master Vladimir Rakitsky took on the job of restoring the Holy Transfiguration Church's frescoes. The Head of the Belarusian Orthodox Church, Metropolitan Filaret, blessed the project and finances were allocated.

Mr. Sarabianov is continuing Mr. Rakitsky's work, noting, "A more detailed and thorough study has enabled us to detect paintings from the 18th and, even, 16th century." Not long ago, masters uncovered the last fresco over the church's altar; they're now busy restoring the southern and northern parts of the church.

Holy Transfiguration Church is unique not only for its frescoes but for its inscriptions. About a hundred written phrases have been discovered on the altar and in St. Yevfrosiniya Pol-

otskaya's cell. Some are devoted to European historical events. One inscription states that, in 1492, the King of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania, Kazimir, died, leaving his son, Alexander, to take the throne. The latter visited Polotsk in 1497. Recently, another record was uncovered, stating that, in 1492, three representatives of the Vasilievich boyar family died (the oldest branch of Polotsk's most ancient families — the Korsaks).

Polotsk is unique not only for its 12th century church but for being the oldest city in Belarus and Eastern Europe; it celebrates its 1150th anniversary of being first mentioned in historical manuscripts next year. Polotsk's oldest monuments are commonly connected with the name of St. Yevfrosiniya. Among them is 11th-18th century Sophia Cathedral, Holy Transfiguration Church and neighbouring territories. Back in 2003, these sites were proposed for inclusion

on UNESCO's World Heritage List, under the common title: 'Material Incarnation of the Spiritual Heritage of Saint Yevfrosiniya Polotskaya'. Experts are now considering the application.

Polotsk is preparing for major festivities, as the city is soon to celebrate the 850th anniversary of the creation of the original Cross of Yevfrosiniya Polotskaya. On September 27th, the modern reproduction will be paraded as part of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross celebrations. The saint ordered master Lazar Bogsha to make a cross in 1161, using a host of miraculous relics: a fragment of Christ's cross, with drops of his blood, a stone from Our Lady's tomb, relics of the bodies of St. Stephan and St. Panteleimon and the blood of St. Dimitry. The Cross disappeared during WWII but Brest jeweller Nikolay Kuzmich reconstructed a modern day version of the priceless relic.

Ecologists to take special care of Belovezhskaya Pushcha's natives

Natural Resources and Environmental Protection Ministry develops plan for preserving Belarusian aurochs

By Tatiana Stepanova

The plan envisages the formation of a genetically sustainable robust population for the Belovezhskaya Pushcha's aurochs, guaranteeing their preservation as an animal species. The document aims at the further growth and stabilisation of their population in the Pushcha, at a level to guarantee their long-term survival: 1,500 animals.

The plan has two stages of realisation, with the first running until 2015. It aims to manage the Belovezhskaya Pushcha's auroch population, while preserving seven micro-populations of Belarusian aurochs (Belovezhskaya, Boris-

ovsko-Berezinskaya, Nalibokskaya, Polesskaya, Osipovichskaya, Ozerskaya and Ozeranskaya) and overseeing the sustainable use of their resources. Inventories are to be kept of hunting sites, aiming to detect promising areas for the formation of new micro-populations of these rare animals.

Jointly with ecologists, scientists plan to develop schemes for the aurochs' resettlement, creating at least five new man-regulated micro-populations. A package of veterinary-sanitary measures is being prepared, overseeing the improvement of the animals' living conditions. Additionally, technologies are to be elaborated for the aurochs' adaptation to their new

micro-populations, ensuring their optimal, ecologically friendly, livestock structure.

A scientific-selection centre is to be set up at the Naliboksky Republican Landscape Reserve, studying Belarusian aurochs' preservation and improvements to their population. Ecologists plan to establish a single database for Belovezhskaya Pushcha aurochs — including information on their number, distribution and micro-populations.

The second stage is to cover the period from 2016 to 2030, focusing on preparing genetic passports for aurochs. Proposals will be prepared to guide forestry users and other legal entities operating on the territories where aurochs live. These



Belovezhskaya Pushcha auroch population is largest across country

will ensure the sustainable growth of animals' micro-populations, while applying rational use of their resources.

Belarus began to breed aurochs in 1946-1947 at its Belovezhskaya Pushcha National Park. Seven micro-populations (numbering a total of 983 animals) are now registered, with the Park enjoying the largest of them. Over 64 years, their number has risen 40-fold, reaching

415 by early 2011. Adult animals form over half of the herds. Against the recommended number of 220-250 animals for the Belovezhskaya Pushcha, its micro-population fell in the late 1980s (due to natural resources). Over the next twenty years, a few more new aurochs were registered, although disease became more common. At present, the Belovezhskaya Pushcha enjoys a stable auroch micro-population.