



# RESCUING A RUSSIAN TREASURE

by BERTRAND DU VIGNAUD

*Built in the late eighteenth century on the what were then the outskirts of Moscow, the neoclassical estate of Ostankino is poised for restoration.*

Commissioned by Count Nicholas Petrovitch Cheremetiev (1751-1809) at the close of the eighteenth century, Ostankino palace ranks among the most important surviving estates in the Russian Federation. The one-story neoclassical building is composed of a central pavilion, which is flanked by an Egyptian hall and an Italian hall along with a series of formal apartments and passageways. A man of the Enlightenment, Cheremetiev envisioned Ostankino as a “palace dedicated to the arts,” created by an extraordinary team of architects, artists, and craftsmen—many of whom were serfs of his estate. The result was an extraordinary neoclassical residence renowned for its concerts, receptions, and other lavish events.

The first part of the palace to be completed, the theater, designed by the architects Alexei Mironov and Grigori Dikouchine—both serfs of the count—and built between 1790 and 1792, survives as a rare and striking example of eighteenth-century theater architecture. Although private, the theater, which had a crew of more than 160 and state-of-the-art equipment, was run as a professional enterprise, entertaining audiences with performances of works by some of the leading playwrights and composers of the day.

We know that an opera by Andre Ernest Modeste Grétry was performed during the state visit of Czar Paul I just prior to his coronation in Moscow in 1797. Cheremetiev’s passion for the theater carried over into his personal life. The count was in love with one of his serfs, an actress named Praskovia Kovaliova whom he had tutored in music and the dramatic arts since the age of 7 and who performed in his theater under the stage name “the Pearl.” He eventually married the actress, having granted her freedom.

Ostankino's richly decorated Egyptian and Italian halls are the work of Francesco Camporesi, Pavel Argounov, and Vincenzo Brenna. Although executed in relatively inexpensive materials—wallpaper, stucco, wood, faux marble, and papier-mâché—the interior elements within the halls are extraordinary nonetheless, inspired largely by ancient Egyptian, Greek, and Roman designs. Among the other grand rooms of note at Ostankino is the Picture Gallery, which boasts a ceiling painted in 1797 by an unknown Italian artist. Although the painting has been damaged over the years by water leaks, it remains an extraordinary work of art.

While much of the original fabric that graced the interior has been lost, the original wallpapers have survived, particularly in the Italian Hall. Complementing the interiors are numerous lighting fixtures—chandeliers, wall sconces, brackets—as well as giltwood works created by craftsmen at the estate.

As it is so often the case in Russia, the palace, which was appropriated as a state museum following the Revolution, has suffered over the years from inappropriate repairs, damage wrought by war, pillage, and neglect. Groundwater has infiltrated its foundation, damaging the lower portions of its walls and various structural elements. Although the palace contains an impressive collection of neoclassically styled stoves, it has not been heated since 1917. At present, interior temperatures vary from ca -15° C in the winter to more than 25° C during the summer. Although measures were taken recently to reduce water saturation and stop the decay process as well as to remove intrusive vegetation—lichens, mosses—a lack of funds has made it impossible to carry out emergency repairs and has slowed the development of a master plan for the conservation of the site.

In an effort to call attention to the plight of Ostankino and raise funds for its restoration, WMF Europe held a benefit this past September in the Great Palace of Czar Nicholas I at the Kremlin in Moscow. The event, which coincided with the Moscow World Fine Arts Fair, was attended by some 500 guests from throughout Europe, who were treated to music provided by Yuri Baschmet and the Moscow Soloists and a private viewing of the newly restored Coronation, St. Andrew, and Malachite halls within the palace. Proceeds from the evening, which will be matched by the World Monuments Fund through its Robert W. Wilson Challenge to Conserve Our Heritage, will underwrite efforts to control moisture problems in the palace, perform structural stabilization work, and restore the Picture Gallery and its wallpapers. ■



**A FUNDRAISING EVENT, ATTENDED BY MORE THAN 500 PEOPLE AND HELD AT THE KREMLIN LAST SEPTEMBER, HIGHLIGHTED THE PLIGHT OF OSTANKINO. THE ITALIAN HALL, FACING PAGE, IS AMONG THE BEST PRESERVED ROOMS IN THE PALACE.**

**OSTANKINO PALACE RANKS AMONG THE MOST IMPORTANT SURVIVING ESTATES IN THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION.**

