

The Conservation of the Cultural Heritage Sites of the Exhibition of Achievements of National Economy (VDNH) in Moscow: Mosaics, Paintings, Sculptures

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The Exhibition of Achievements of the National Economy (VDNH) is a unique architectural and landscape ensemble that has no analogues in the world. In international practice, all major exhibition projects have a limited lifespan, whereas VDNH has retained its planning structure, the main pavilions and buildings, many elements of hard landscaping, the gardening component, fountains, and ponds over the decades, which confirms its uniqueness.

VDNH is one of the most popular public spaces in Moscow. More than 33 million visitors go there every year.

The Exhibition was inaugurated on August 1, 1939. During the Great Patriotic War, it was evacuated to Chelyabinsk City. Back then, it was called All-Union Agricultural Exhibition (VSKhV). The Exhibition once again welcomed visitors on August 1, 1954. At that time, many architectural monuments were built in the area, which changed the appearance of the complex. In terms of architectural form, most pavilions of the All-Union Agricultural Exhibition had a neo-classical basis with quite a restrained décor. The modesty of the artistic choices could only be explained by the fact that the material resources available for building the exhibition were extremely limited. In the most significant buildings, where

the budget was not so tight, the influence of the Art Deco style was palpable.

During the reconstruction of the exhibition in the early 1950s, a new main entrance was built, a triumphal arch in the spirit of the 18th and 19th centuries, with powerful fountains that recall the fountains of Versailles and Peterhof. The architectural appearance of the Exhibition which was established during this period has been largely preserved to the present day.

The Exhibition became a large-scale tool of Soviet propaganda, a representation of Soviet utopia – first agrarian, then industrial and finally scientific and technological. In the 1960s, many pavilions were rebuilt and reconstructed, and a number of pavilions were covered with false facades. At first, it was assumed that the exhibition would be able to make money out of advertising, holding competitive tendering, organising auctions for companies and selling scientific and technical information. However, the country's economic ties were rapidly disintegrating, and private trade remained the only growing sector. In the 1990s, the Exhibition (then the All-Russian Exhibition Centre) was not going through the best of times: the exhibition grounds were being split up

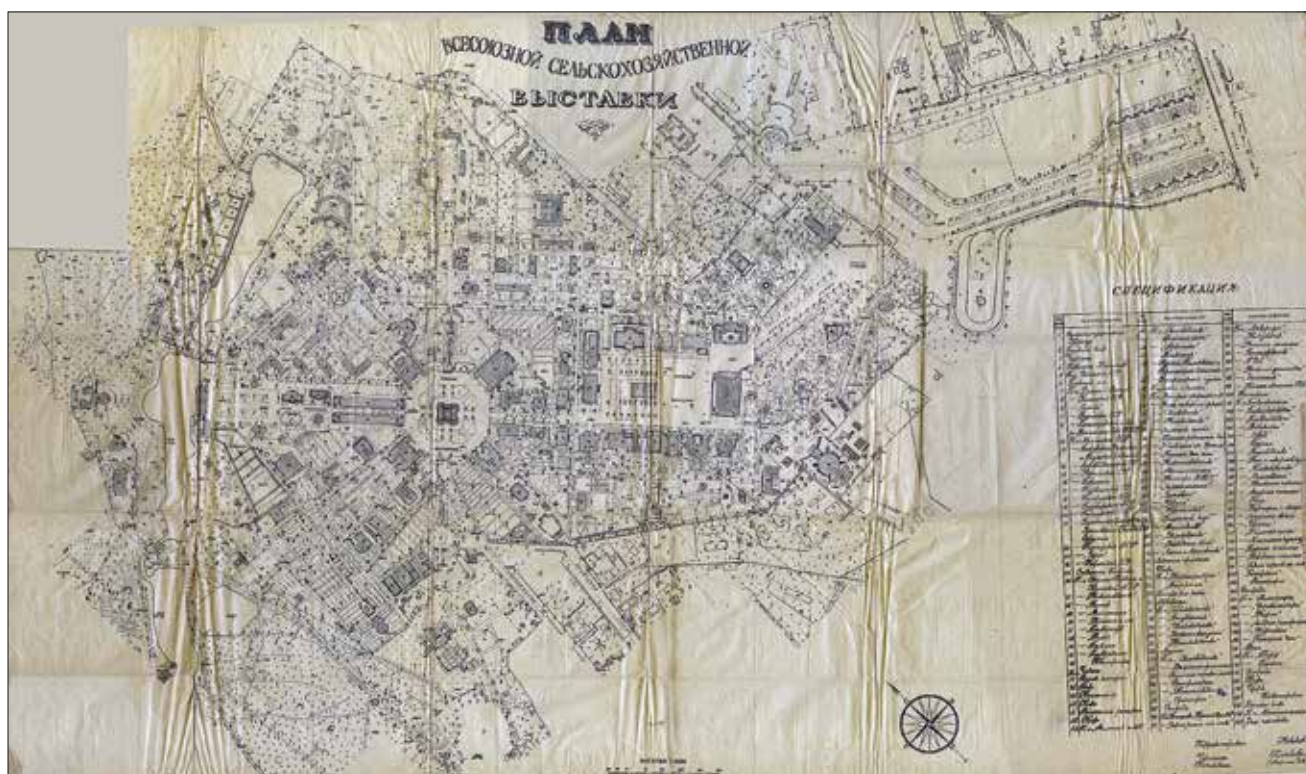


Fig. 1 General plan of the VDNH, 1939



Fig. 2 Panoramic view of the VDNH



Fig. 3 Fountain "Stone Flower"

and leased out for small commercial premises. In the 2000s, several projects were presented to further expand the area and create a huge multifunctional complex with a congress centre. Those projects proposed the demolition of the Montreal pavilion and the integration of the statue called "Worker and Collective Farm Woman" into the architecture of the new complex. All those attempts were not elaborate enough and came to nothing.

There are many architectural masterpieces located within the Exhibition area – 49 VDNH sites are recognised as cultural heritage sites. The Exhibition itself also has the status

of a protected landmark site. The total area of the VDNH and Ostankino Park is over 325 hectares.

The revival of the complex began in 2014. The exhibition was given its historical name, VDNH, and priority emergency repairs were made. Since then, the comprehensive restoration of 23 cultural heritage sites has been completed. The architectural appearance of the Exhibition is being restored to that of 1954.

A large number of professionals is involved in the restoration of the historical sites at VDNH, including not only restorers of architecture, paintings, plaster and gypsum decoration, but also parquet-floor layers and craftsmen who recreate chandeliers or work with artificial marble, ceramics, wood, and smalt.

In the 1950s, the smalt technology was used to frame the architectural décor of VDNH, which later became one of the distinctive features of the exhibition complex. Before the restoration, the sculpture "Tractor Driver and Kolkhoz Woman" was in a state of disrepair: the smalt needed to be replaced in some areas, the concrete base of the sculptures needed strengthening, and the sheaf had lost almost all its gilding. The restorers managed to preserve as much of the historical smalt on the "Tractor Driver and Kolkhoz Woman" as possible. It is also noticeable that the smalt is laid out not in a chaotic manner, but in a certain movement, so that the sculpture has a volume in the folds of the clothes and in the protrusions and recesses on the sculpture's surface, and its appearance becomes more dynamic and expressive.

Incidentally, Sergey Mikhailovich Orlov, the author of this sculptural composition, was the one who suggested this unusual technique of layering the concrete substrate with smalt – the pattern and layout are heterogeneous, the smalt being lighter in some areas and darker in others.

Soviet craftsmen used different methods of cladding: classical, Byzantine masonry was the most common, but fragments laid in a less uniform manner can also be found. A combination of different techniques was needed to give the sculptures an expressive volume. These sculptures were the starting point for the use of smalt cladding on the concrete elements at VDNH. Craftsmen call this technique "Soviet Gaudi". The author of the sculptures was also Sergey Mikhailovich Orlov.

The Stone-Flower Fountain is one of the main fountains at VDNH. It was installed in 1954; by 1990, the structure was severely dilapidated and was operated at half-capacity. The restoration began in 2018. Specialists restored the historical colour palette based on preserved mosaics. The total weight of the smalt used was around eight tons. The restorers carefully selected over 120 shades of smalt from surviving samples.

The two eight-metre sculptures "Tractor Driver" and "Kombinerka" (mistakenly called "Mechanizer" and "Tractor Woman") decorated the pylons of the main pavilion façade between 1951 and 1954. They were made of reinforced concrete and lined with gold and multi-coloured smalt. By the time restoration work began in 2017, the sculptures were in highly unsatisfactory condition. The restorers removed dirt, accretions of grime and bio-fouling from their surfaces, and repaired the loss of shapes and smalt.

The Golden Wheat Ear Fountain is the last of the “big three” fountains at VDNH, located in the middle of the upper pond. The massive ornamental Wheat Ear, 14 metres high, stands on a two-metre-high base in the form of horns of Amalthea. In the mid-1990s, the fountain stopped working. Its entire hydro-technical system was completely out of order, including the rust-eaten pipes and jet nozzles. The decorative smalt began to peel away from the concrete surface and crumble into the pond. The concrete lining of the base of the wheat ear then began to deteriorate. In order to compensate for the impression of the broken fountain, temporary fountains made of individual floating sections were installed in the centre of the pond for several years. In the summer of 2017, the long-awaited reconstruction of the fountain began. The pond was drained and cleaned. After the dismantling of the decorative elements, the entire internal structure of the fountain was completely replaced. The dismantling of the sculptural elements of the fountain lined with smalt was carried out after marking and photographing each part. 315 concrete parts were dismantled in total. All of the remaining smalt that had been removed from the original parts was cleaned and carefully inspected. The gold smalt was completely discarded (100 percent) and new, domestically produced smalt was used for the cladding. 84 percent of the coloured smalt was retained in total. A year after the restoration began, the Golden Wheat Ear Fountain was working again.

Extensive work has also been done by specialists on the restoration of the Mother Belarus sculpture, which was in a state of disrepair. During the restoration of the decorative smalt mosaic, all the newly manufactured mosaic pieces were installed on the prepared surface using a sophisticated cement-based adhesive composition. The same composition was used to directly set the mosaic when restoring local areas of the mosaic. An elastic adhesive mortar was used to locally glue the original smalt fragments together.

Painting

The Belorussian SSR was considered the third most important Soviet republic. The reconstruction of the Belarusian pavilion began in 2008, earlier than the other pavilions. The remains of the fresco “People of Belarus built Socialism” above the main entrance of the pavilion were found during the works – it had been hidden under a thick layer of plaster since the mid-1970s and was thought to have been lost. It had been clogged with plywood sheets for more than 30 years. The lost sections were restored on the basis of surviving photographs. The restoration of the mural was completed in 2015.

In Pavilion No. 71 “Nuclear Energy” (former pavilion of RSFSR) behind the portico in the loggia is a panoramic mural entitled “The Peoples of Russia Built Socialism”. In the centre of the composition is a paired portrait of Lenin and Stalin in a rich frame. After the 22nd Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union the process of de-Stalinisation intensified and public images of Stalin were removed everywhere. The portrait of Stalin in the mural was retouched, retaining the rest of the subjects. The mural was restored to its original appearance in 2018.



Fig. 4 Pavilion No. 14 (former pavilion of the Azerbaijani SSR) before restoration



Fig. 5 Pavilion No. 14 (former pavilion of the Azerbaijani SSR), 1950



Fig. 6 Pavilion No. 14 (former pavilion of the Azerbaijani SSR) after restoration

In Pavilion No. 13 (former pavilion of the Armenian SSR) the restorers managed to recreate and restore the marble floor, lost portals, windows and doors. The ceiling skylights, lanterns and marble facing of pilasters and plinth were also



Fig. 7 High-relief “Hail to the standard-bearers of peace, the Soviet people!”



Fig. 8 VDNH in the 2000s

restored. The fragment of a painting on the ceiling plafond was revealed during the restoration.

In Pavilion No. 30 “Microbiological Industry”, in addition to the carved wooden frieze lost in the late 1960s, restorers are recreating ceiling paintings. In the ceiling divisions (caissons) of the first hall, paintings depicting the cotton-ripening cycle from bud to capsule as well as oil-bearing plants – poppy, mustard, flax – were found under paint. Paintings were also found in the third room.

Because of Stalin’s death, a struggle broke out within the Soviet leadership. The most ceremonial images of the leader were tacitly withdrawn from the decoration of a number of pavilions. This also affected a huge painting by the painter Aleksandr Mikhailovich Gerasimov, which depicted Stalin’s speech at the rostrum of the 2nd All-Union Conference of Collective Farm Workers in 1935. The painting had been mounted on the wall of one of the halls of the Central Pavilion, but it was removed, wound onto a shaft and hidden in the basement until the pavilion opened. The painting was only discovered at the end of July 2014.

Pavilion No. 15 “Radio Electronics and Communications” (former pavilion of the Volga Region) was decorated with sculptural compositions and stucco decorations. The main decorative theme was the history of the Volga cities. At the end of the 1950s the decorations were concealed by false façades and damaged when the pavilion was repurposed. Work is now underway to clean the paintings and recreate the lost stucco elements and sculptures. Specialists are revealing, step by step, the paintings on the ceilings, which have been hidden from view for more than 60 years. The restoration is carried out using archival photographs and original materials. These paintings adorn the ceiling plafonds framed in stucco. They can be found in the halls of the Kuibyshev, Saratov and Ulyanovsk regions, as well as in the hall dedicated to the Chuvash ASSR. The paintings were painted by an unknown artist or by a group of artists for the opening of the Volga Pavilion in 1954. It is noteworthy that they were all made on linen canvases in casein oil tempera, which were glued on plaster. The main themes are harvesting in gardens and cattle breeders with livestock.

The situation was worse in the case of the stained-glass windows. Ninety percent of the colour of the framing of the stained-glass pieces was gone – it had to be recreated. The problem is that today the method of applying paint to stained-glass metal framing is unknown and it is not always possible to obtain similar colours from modern dyes. However, a special technique has been developed to recreate the colour characteristics of these stained-glass frames.

Let us get back to Pavilion No. 71 “Nuclear Energy” (former pavilion of RSFSR). The stained-glass windows of 1958 in the Soviet cubist style have been restored here. They are located in the rotunda of the building. The stained-glass windows are almost five meters high and about two metres wide. The stained-glass windows were assembled from thick coloured blocks of chipped glass between one and five centimetres thick. These blocks were placed in a foam plastic frame, pre-painted black, and poured with epoxy resin over a six-millimetre-thick pane of supporting glass. All the elements were then assembled into a single composition in a metal frame.

The plot of the stained-glass window “Pereyaslavska Rada” in Pavilion No. 58 “Agriculture” (former pavilion of the Ukrainian SSR) was based on a painting of the same name by Mikhail Khmelko, dedicated to the 300th anniversary of the annexation of Ukraine by Russia in 1954. The restoration of the 39.5 square-metre stained glass window began in autumn 2017 and was completed in April 2018. It had never been restored in the last 70 years. In order to clarify the state of conservation of the stained-glass window, all elements and pieces of glass were examined and conservation maps were made before the restoration work began, and then all 50 large fragments were dismantled. A team of six craftsmen worked on the restoration, so the work was done in a short time, and at the end of February 2018, all 50 fragments, each containing up to 200 single elements, were transported to the pavilion and installed in phases to their historic location.

When the Central Pavilion was cleared of the commercial buildings, an unexpected surprise was the discovery of Vuchetich’s high-relief mural sculpture “Hail to the stand-



Fig. 9 Canvas “Stalin’s speech at the Second Congress of Kolkhoz Farmers and Shock Workers”



Fig. 10 Panoramic mural “The Belorussian people have built socialism”

ard-bearers of peace, the Soviet people!”), which had been obscured by a temporary partition. The sculptures and background had numerous minor mechanical damages, but overall the work was well preserved. It is the biggest and most memorable art work from the All-Union Agricultural Exhibition of 1954. The high-relief depicts a triumphal march of the Soviet people, the total number of which reaches up to 1500 people moving in a single formation towards the viewer. The high-relief is made of plaster and tinted bronze. It covers 88 square metres and is only 73 centimetres deep.

The restoration began in 2015 as an “open restoration” behind clear glass. Visitors were able to see it, in particular participants and guests of the 6th Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art. In March 2016, the restored high-relief was unveiled.

During the restoration of Pavilion No. 15 “Radio Electronics and Communications” (former pavilion of the Volga Region) specialists also found elements of high-reliefs with battle scenes which had decorated the pavilion since 1954. They were found under false facades that were installed a few years later, in the late 1950s. In addition to the high-reliefs, lost sculptural compositions (a soldier, a sailor, a worker and a collective farmer holding the coat of arms of the RSFSR) are being restored. The four columns at the entrance to the building and the high-reliefs that adorned them are also being restored, depicting tractor drivers starting tractors, collective farmers inspecting crops, fishermen admiring a huge sturgeon, farmers pouring grain into the sower, cattlemen feeding sheep, and agronomists examining the ears.

Pavilion No. 11 “Exhibition Centre of the Republic of Kazakhstan” had deteriorated badly by 2017: the façade slabs had begun to fall off in places, revealing the original 1954 façade. Therefore, it turned out that some of the bas-reliefs had not been destroyed in the reconstruction. The idea emerged to restore the Kazakh pavilion to its original form, including recreating the glass dome, façade decor and statues. After dismantling the brick wall, the restorers were convinced that the historical bas-reliefs were well preserved. They cleared and reinforced them and restored the missing fragments.

It took about half a year to recreate the sculptures of the Kazakh singer and poet Dzhambul Dzhabaev and of the Hero of Socialist Labour Shyganak Bersiyev, which are 3.5 metres high. To begin with, the specialists collected photo materials and made an enquiry to the Central State Archive of the Republic of Dagestan, from where they received additional electronic copies of photos of works by Khas-Bulat Askar-Saryji, the People’s Artist of Dagestan, of 1953 and 1957. They then developed sketch models of the sculptures, assembled life-size metal frames, moulded the models in clay and cast the monuments in concrete according to these models.

Pavilion No. 14 (former pavilion of the Azerbaijani SSR) is one of the pavilions on the left-hand side of Central Avenue which underwent “modernisation” at the end of the 1960s with the help of hinged facade boxes. After the facades were dismantled, it turned out that the modernisation of the Azerbaijan SSR pavilion had been carried out relatively gently – its original appearance was virtually unaffected. During documentary research and consultations with the National Museum of Art in Baku, experts found the preserved original plaster casts and later copies of sculptures cast in bronze. Based on the available original plaster casts, plaster moulds were made to make copies of sculptures. The original sculptures were made by the Azerbaijani sculptor F. Abdurakhmanov for the official opening of the Azerbaijan pavilion in 1954.

Gradually, the former greatness of the VDNH ensemble is being revived and its pavilions are being filled with life. Rare archive footage takes us back to the past of the Exhibition. Contemporary photographs depict the laborious process of restoring the famous monuments. Under the later layers and false façades, restorers are finding sculptures, reliefs, fragments of original paintings and even unique showpieces once exhibited at the VDNH. Restoration works are continuing at the main exhibition of the country. VDNH has long been an essential part of Moscow’s identity, a point of attraction for city residents and tourists. In Russian society, there is a strong perception that the VDNH is a major historical asset and part of the collective memory and cultural code of the inhabitants of our country.



Fig. 11 Stained glass “Pereyaslavska Rada” in Pavilion No. 58 Agriculture (former pavilion of the Ukrainian SSR)

Credits

Figs. 1–11: Archive of the Department of Cultural Heritage of the City of Moscow, VDNH archive