

Lifestyle | Features

Russia's pre-Revolutionary estates crumble in neglect



Photos show the neglected estate of Grebnevo, east of Moscow. — AFP photos

Boris Netchaev's family estate was once the image of aristocratic life in pre-Revolutionary Russia but is now a long-neglected site where teenagers hold what he calls "Satanist parties". Netchaev's grandfather abandoned the complex of buildings after the 1917 Revolution, leaving his home and his country along with a wave of other anti-Bolshevik Russians. But nearly a century later, Netchaev has returned to the country with plans to rescue from oblivion the Novosiltsev estate in the Oryol region, about 270 kilometers southwest of Moscow.

"Since my childhood, I dreamed of restoring the estate, it is a big part of my life," said Netchaev, who grew up listening to his grandfather's stories in France but now lives with his wife and children in Moscow. The Novosiltsev estate is one of thousands in the country, a specter of the life of Russia's aristocracy and merchant classes, who lovingly built their family nests over generations before often brutal nationalization by the Bolsheviks. Most of these places passed through the Soviet era as various state institutions. Some were turned into museums. The majority met the post-Soviet period in

ruin, with the government providing formal protection but no longer willing or able to care for them. "To say that these estates have some sort of bright future is difficult," said Vadim Solovyov, who heads a company overseen by the culture ministry that seeks investors for several state-owned estates. "The government should admit it cannot save all heritage and hand some of it to private hands, using the profits to save what it can," he said. The problem is that restoring estates takes millions of dollars but generating a profit from them is next to impossible, he said.

'Stalin's darkest crimes'

The estate of Grebnevo, east of Moscow, was once one of the region's most famous. Manicured grounds included "French" and "English" gardens, a cascade of ponds and islands, and neoclassical buildings around an elegant courtyard. Changing hands several times in its history, the estate was owned by decorated diplomats and military commanders, who had peaches and apricots growing in the orangery and staged

ballets. It turned into an expensive retreat in 1913. But after the revolution, the estate was nationalized, becoming a tuberculosis sanatorium. Local historians that kept the heritage of Russia's estates alive following the disappear-

specialist on estate gardens at the Russian State University for the Humanities. Like the Novosiltsev estate, Grebnevo stood empty and neglected for years, its regal colonnaded buildings now lacking roofs and covered in graffiti. Its most recent scheduled auction in October had a starting price of 80 million rubles (\$1.4 million, 1.2 million euros) but failed to attract any buyers, just like the previous attempts at a sale.

A 'wasteland'

Bringing Grebnevo back to its former glory would take at least a further \$10 million, said Solovyov, admitting the auction price might already be inflated. But, he said, that despite the disintegration of the structures, overgrown by weeds, the government is not permitted by law to go lower after the price was set by an independent expert. Grebnevo, which needs urgent work, could be waiting for new owners until it completely falls apart. Investors are not interested in a scenic landscape if it is illegal to build on the land

because of cultural protection regulations, Solovyov added, as is the case for Grebnevo. Professor Sokolov, whose grandfather was a gardener at Grebnevo, said the scheme of selling famous ruins is fundamentally flawed. "Who would live in this wasteland?" he said, referring to its out-of-the-way location far from Moscow. "To whom would they show off the restored palace?"

Instead the government should figure out why Russian society as a whole needs these estates and involve the broader public, he said. Boris Netchaev, however, is still yearning to breathe life back into his ancestors' home. He expects to win the right to rent the site long-term and develop a French cultural centre with the help of the French Embassy and cash from a Russian oligarch. "We want to clean up the park and alleys, to fix up the facade of the house" and set up artistic residencies for French and Russian artists, he said, in the hope of kindling his family's local memory. "My family was dispossessed of a lot more than just real estate," he said. "They lost their nation, their country." — AFP



A specter of the life of Russia's aristocracy class

ance of the original owners were persecuted between 1929 and 1931 to stamp out efforts seen as ideologically hostile to the new Soviet order. "It was one of Stalin's darkest crimes," said Professor Boris Sokolov, an art historian and

Controversial Da Vinci painting is New York auction season star



Christie's employees pose in front of a painting entitled *Salvator Mundi* by Italian polymath Leonardo da Vinci at a photocall at Christie's auction house in central London. — AFP

What is the only Da Vinci painting on the open market worth? A Russian billionaire believes he was swindled when he bought it for \$127.5 million. This week he'll find out if he was right. "Salvator Mundi," a painting of Jesus Christ by the Renaissance polymath Leonardo da Vinci circa 1500, is the star lot in New York's November art auctions that will see Christie's and Sotheby's chase combined art sales of more than \$1 billion.

It goes under the hammer at Christie's on Wednesday, something of an incongruous lot in the post-war and contemporary evening sale, which attracts the biggest spenders in the high-octane world of international billionaire art collectors. The auction house, which declines to comment on the controversy and identifies the seller only as a European collector, has valued it at \$100 million.

"Look at the painting, it is an extraordinary work of art," said Francois de Poortere, head of the old master's department at Christie's. "That's what we should focus on." But the price will be closely watched—not just as one of fewer than 20 paintings by Da Vinci's hand accepted to exist, but by its owner Dmitry Rybolovlev, the boss of soccer club AS Monaco who is suing Swiss art dealer Yves Bouvier in the city-state.

Rybolovlev accuses Bouvier of conning him out of hundreds of million dollars in parting with an eye-watering \$2.1 billion on 37 masterpieces. One of those works was "Salvator Mundi" which has been exhibited at The National Gallery in London. Bouvier bought the Da Vinci at Sotheby's for \$80 million in 2013. He resold it to the Russian tycoon for \$127.5 million. The painting's rarity is difficult to overstate.

For years it was presumed to have been destroyed. In 1958, it fetched 45 pounds (\$60 in today's money) and disappeared again for decades, emerging only in 2005 when it was

purchased from a US estate. It was long believed to have been a copy, before eventually being certified as authentic. All 11 other known paintings by Da Vinci are held in museum or institutional collections. "For auction specialists, this is pretty much the Holy Grail," Loic Gouzer, co-chairman of Christie's Americas post-war and contemporary art department, has said. "It doesn't really get better than that."

Ferrari first

Christie's has sought to emphasize Da Vinci's inestimable contribution to art history by hanging "Salvator Mundi" next to Andy Warhol's "Sixty Last Suppers"—which depicts Da Vinci's "The Last Supper" 60 times over, also on sale with a \$50 million estimate. Pablo Picasso holds the world record for the most expensive piece of art ever sold at auction. His "The Women of Algiers (Version O)" fetched \$179.4 million at Christie's in New York in 2015.

Other highlights being offered by the auction house are "Contraste de formes," a 1913 Fernand Leger valued at \$65 million and "Laboureur dans un champ" by Van Gogh, painted from the window of a French asylum in 1889 valued at \$50 million. Sotheby's, whose May sales languished behind Christie's, says it has more than 60 works making their auction debuts this week.

Chief among them is Francis Bacon's "Three Studies of George Dyer," valued at \$35-45 million, and which it says is appearing in public for the first time in 50 years. Painted in 1966 during his passionate relationship with Dyer, two other such triptychs are in museums and two others have been offered at auction in recent years. Sotheby's other star lot is a 1972 Warhol "Mao," exhibited in Berlin, Turin and Paris, and now back in public view for the first time since 1974. It has been given an estimate of \$30-40 million. — AFP



Alyssa Bordonaro walks with her Harris's Hawk named Dany as schoolchildren ask questions at the Museum of Modern Art.

HUSBAND-WIFE TEAM USES HAWKS TO SCARE OFF 'PEST' BIRDS IN LA

A hawk named Riley soars between high-rises in downtown Los Angeles. Smaller birds take notice. And take flight. Riley lands on a branch, surveys the concrete jungle below and swoops down to land on the gloved hand of her owner. Blazer-clad professionals on their way to lunch do double-takes.

Husband-and-wife falconers Alyssa and Mike Bordonaro are "The Hawk Pros," just one of a number of Southern California bird-abatement businesses. They and their birds of prey are hired guns, brought in to scare away seagulls, pigeons and other "pest birds" that create nuisances and leave behind messes. Their clients include the agricultural city of Oxnard, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and downtown Los Angeles' US Bank Tower, the second-tallest building west of the Mississippi River. Most of the places they work are outdoor eating areas.

"What seagulls do in their aftermath when they eat, it's pretty messy," says Mike, 35. Alyssa, 30, says pest birds are able to thrive in metropolitan areas because they feel safe there. "They need shelter, food and water, and they're finding it in these false environments basically that



Alyssa Bordonaro gives a kiss to Dany her Harris's Hawk.

have sprinklers and fountains and food 24/7, but they're also using the humans as a shield against the predators who are too scared to come in," she says. "So by bringing in a predator that's not afraid of people, it just ruins everything for the pigeons." Alyssa got the idea for the business while in college, when she spent time working with someone else's hawk scaring off seagulls at a landfill. Occasionally people criticize the use of hawks for bird abatement, saying they should be free. For one, the birds are born in captivity and can't be released to the wild, Alyssa says. "I say, 'Look, she's totally free.' I fly them free and they come back, and it instantly changes their mind," she says. "All she's doing is flying, which she loves, and coming back for treats, which she loves." — AP



This April 7, 2017 photo shows falconer Alyssa Bordonaro releasing her Harris's hawk named Dany at the Museum of Modern Art in Los Angeles.



Falconer's Mike Bordonaro and his wife Alyssa pose for a photo with their children Hunter and Ayla in the families backyard. — AP photos