

History of the Vologda Museum-Reserve Collection of Medieval Russian Painting

The collection of Russian Medieval fine art, which forms the basis of the Vologda Museum-Reserve, is one of the best of its kind. Studying the panels that are exhibited here, we can easily follow the evolution of local icon-painting, as well as Vologda's links with the leading cultural centers of the epoch, such as Moscow, Novgorod, Kostroma and Yaroslavl. Owing to the efforts of several generations of museum specialists, who had worked with great enthusiasm, it presently amounts to about 4000 icons, which used to adorn the numerous monasteries and churches of Vologda and surrounding territories. Here, in northern Russia, amid dense forests, several hundred miles away from the famous Troitse-Sergiev Monastery near Moscow, on the lands around Belo Ozero («White Lake»), there were founded a number of religious houses, which later acquired nation-wide importance. Pilgrims who visited them were greatly impressed by an enchanted world, striking not so much in its richness, but in the harmony of its singular beauty, based on age-old spiritual traditions.

Nineteenth-century travel notes often record the magnificent impressions left by the works of Vologda icon-painters and architects. S.P. Shevyriov, philologist, art-historian, literary critic and a professor of the Moscow University, who visited the city in July 1847, wrote about the local church of St. Constantine: «Entering it and examining its icons, I realized how it could inspire an educated man with a feeling of love and reverence for our ancient sanctuary. The spirit of innovation has not penetrated this place. The poverty of the church and of its clergy left its cherished icons intact. Silver and gold did not hide its sacred images. Everything here has the air of undisturbed antiquity. The Vologda Region became the homeland of a number of enthusiastic scholars, many of whom did not limit their research to local history, but greatly contributed to studying Russian culture as a whole.

It seems that documents referring to the history of Vologda churches first attracted attention in the 17th century in connection with an attempt to create the «Vologda Chronicle». The first work devoted to the city's history appeared in print in the late 18th century. We can regard the scholar A.A. Zasetki as the founder of studies in local history. In 1780 the Moscow publishing house of N. Novikov released his book «Historical and Topographical Note on Antiquity in Russia and Particularly on the City of Vologda and its *Uezd* (district). This work was written for all those interested in history and covered a period up to 1780. Zasetki collected many interesting facts about Russia and Vologda, taking them from chronicles, Russian and foreign history books, old deeds and documents, as well as from hagiographic texts. Written in the manner of a chronicle, this edition describes the past of the region, its geographical and economic features, administrative division, everyday life and work of various social groups, paying special attention to religious beliefs and, which is particularly important for us, to the wooden and stone architecture of Vologda and its environs. The two serious drawbacks of this book are insufficient historical data and the absence of direct reference to some of the unique documents being used. The author, unfortunately, simply relates their content in his own words.