

The Art and History of the Marfo-Mariinsky Convent

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The first thing one sees upon entering the Marfo-Mariinsky Convent from Ulitsa Bolshaya Ordynka is the side of the Savior of the Mother of God Church. **John Freedman**

You enter the grounds of the Marfo-Mariinsky Convent looking at the side of the Savior of the Mother of God Church. If you are to find your way into this place of worship, you will have to take the extra steps and trouble to find the entrance around the corner.

The Marfo-Mariinsky is one of Moscow's spiritual, architectural and cultural gems, although I must say I rarely see it on must-do lists for visitors.

The church at the center of the convent, as well as all the outlying buildings, were designed by one of Moscow's greatest and, perhaps, most enigmatic architects Alexei Shchusev in the early 20th century. After decades of neglect, the entire complex was renovated beautifully for its 100th anniversary in 2009.

Shchusev, who was born in 1873 and died in 1949, was in many ways the man who built Moscow as we know it. His list of projects is staggering, including Kazansky Station, the Lenin Library, the Central Telegraph building on Tverskaya Ulitsa and the Moskva Hotel. A student of the great Alexander Benois, he was working on a new project for the NKVD building (later to be known as KGB headquarters) at the time of his death.

The Marfo–Mariinsky Convent was built on a commission from the family of the last tsar. Grand Duchess Yelizaveta Romanova, whose husband had been murdered by a terrorist in 1905, established it as a place of safe retreat for women.

But this is not only a place of peace and spirituality, it is also a remarkable work of art, dignified and eclectic at the same time.

Shchusev set the tone with the gentle, understated lines of his structures. But perhaps the architect's boldest move was to invite the artist Mikhail Nesterov to provide paintings and bas-reliefs to grace the inner and outer walls of the Savior of the Mother of God Church.

Nesterov, who was born in 1862 and died in 1942, was a major painter who at various times in his career incorporated symbolism, social commentary and heartfelt religious conviction into his work. He often employed traditions of folklore, and he brought that element to the fore in his murals and decorative designs for the Marfo–Mariinsky Convent. A bas-relief on the church's side wall features such images as a unicorn and the traditional Russian Firebird.

Inside the church, Nesterov's touch ranges from the lighthearted whimsy of flowers and tree branches on columns and in apses, to the symbolism that he applied to his triptych of the Annunciation. Generally employing shades of blue and gold, he gives the images a sense of momentousness and deep spirituality.

Perhaps my favorite element in the church's design is a pointless bit of whimsy that either Shchusev or Nesterov — I don't know whose idea it was — put in place on the back wall. Way high up, beyond anyone's normal sight line, a miniature image of a church is embossed in the white brick. If this were theater, it might be called a play-within-the-play. Moreover, it is surrounded by numerous, seemingly random, bits of decorative design — some holes, a circle, a square and several studded lines that appear to do little else but entertain us.

The church is surrounded by a beautiful, well-appointed garden in which benches and even a gazebo provide places for rest and contemplation.

The Marfo–Mariinsky Convent is located at 34 Ulitsa Bolshaya Ordynka. The grounds are open during the day seven days a week. See the photo gallery above for selected images.

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