

Medvedev's Photo Outdoes Putin's Painting

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A black-and-white photograph taken by President Dmitry Medvedev being sold by charity auction organizer Igor Gavryushkin in St. Petersburg on Saturday. **Dmitry Lovetsky**

President Dmitry Medvedev's photo fetched 51 million rubles (\$1.7 million) at a charity auction in St. Petersburg on Saturday, surpassing Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's record for a painting sold at the same event last year.

The signed, black-and-white aerial photograph in a silver frame, "Tobolsk Kremlin," depicts the Siberian city's 18th-century fortress. It was sold to Mikhail Zingarevich, a board member at St. Petersburg-based Ilim Group, after heated bidding quickly sent the price to 40 million rubles.

"It's going on the office wall," Zingarevich said after the bidding. St. Petersburg news portal Fontanka.ru reported that the rarely seen Zingarevich attended the auction specially to purchase the work by his former colleague.

Medvedev became Ilim's legal affairs director in 1993, while teaching at St. Petersburg State University, and later joined the board of its Bratsk Paper Mill subsidiary. He left both positions in 1999 before moving to Moscow to join Putin's first government as deputy head of its administration.

Experts said the stunning price tag for the photo was indeed more charity than a reflection of the work's artistic merit.

"This photo has nothing to do with art, because photography is Medvedev's hobby. Buying this photo was a political gesture," said Larisa Grinberg, director of the Photographer.ru gallery. "Everyone knows that Medvedev supports the arts, and the one who bought his photo wanted to demonstrate that he also contributed to this support."

Medvedev, an avid photographer, took the photo while visiting Tobolsk, a town in the Tyumen region, just after he was elected in March 2008. The town was one of the final homes of Russia's last tsar, Nicholas II, and his family before they were assassinated in 1918.

The auction was part of the fourth annual charity fair Rozhdestvenskaya Azbuka, or Christmas Alphabet. Russian politicians, artists and athletes attend it to paint pictures that illustrate each letter of the Russian alphabet.

Professional painter Ivan Slavinsky, whose works are in the collections of Microsoft founder Bill Gates and Formula One driver Michael Schumacher, helped the festival participants create their masterpieces.

This year, the event was devoted to the upcoming 300th anniversary of Tsarskoye Selo, a garden and palaces ensemble outside St. Petersburg now known as Pushkin. The auction collected a total of 81.53 million rubles (\$2.75 million), surpassing last year's earnings of 70 million rubles.

All of the lots had a starting price of 20,000 rubles, or about \$670.

The proceeds from the auction will be spent on furniture for World War II veterans' long-promised free apartments — which Medvedev has promised will be ready by May — as well as equipment for a local children's hospital and a kitchen for an alcohol and drugs rehab center, St. Petersburg Governor Valentina Matviyenko said.

Guests learned at the last moment that Medvedev's photo would be among the items on the auctioneer's block. "Tobolsk Kremlin" was the only photograph among the artwork.

An invitation was sent to Medvedev in November to paint something for the auction, but he could not attend because of his tight schedule, Matviyenko said. He sent the photograph instead.

The president met on Saturday afternoon with the heads of the four political parties that have seats in the State Duma, including fellow artist and Federation Council Speaker Sergei Mironov.

His "Portrait of Pushkin," a profile image that bears quite a resemblance to some of Pushkin's self-portraits, sold for 500,000 rubles.

Zingarevich jostled for Medvedev's photo with Alexander Yevnevich, board chairman of Maxidom, a household goods retail chain.

After being outbid for Medvedev's photo, Yevnevich bought a painting by Matviyenko, "Marble Bridge" for 13 million rubles — the day's second-most expensive lot.

It was also not his first work by Matviyenko. The businessman spent 11.5 million rubles for her painting "Blizzard" at last year's auction.

Putin did not take part in this year's fair. His painting "Uzor," or Pattern, which featured a frosty window framed by embroidered curtains in a traditional Russian hut, aroused everyone's interest at last year's auction. Moscow gallery owner Natalya Kurnikova bought it for 37 million rubles.

Medvedev, who has posted several photo galleries at his [web site](#), is not the Kremlin's first noted aerial photographer. Sergei Yastrzhembsky, a former senior foreign policy aide to then-President Putin, has held several exhibitions of his photography — including overhead shots of the heavily protected Kremlin — since leaving the administration in 2008.

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