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A Mythological Menagerie, Made Only of Sand

By Simone Peek

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An attendant administering the glue treatment to one of the competition's winning sand sculptures depicting St. George fabled slaying of the dragon. **Simone Peek**

Twelve different sand statues, crafted by competitors from eight different countries are currently on display in Kolomensky Park, as part of the 7th edition of a sand sculpting competition.

The competition is organized by artist collective "Art Bliss" in cooperation with Kolomenskoye Museum and according to organizer Pavel Mylnikov, last year's summer exhibit attracted close to 50,000 visitors.

Pavel Mylnikov is five-time sand sculpting world champion and the self-proclaimed "first Russian sand sculptor." Educated at Moscow Art Lyceum Surikov, he had a broad base of experience with ice sculpting, but it was not until 1997 that he first began to make sand sculptures.

"A friend from Finland invited me to a Guinness book record attempt in the United States, and there I caught the virus of sand sculpting" Mylnikov said.

Because of this year's theme, "Tainy Narodov Mira" (Mysteries of the World's Nations), a visit to the exposition is like a mythical journey through history. Amongst the contesting statues are an image of the Minotaur, George slaying the dragon, an Indian-chief and the public's favorite: an all-sand reproduction the 17th century Orthodox "Transfiguration Church," originally located at Kizhi Island.

All sculptures are impressive in size, ranging between 3 and 5 meters high.

To maintain their shape in the face of any adverse weather conditions, the statues are sprayed with a glue mixture up to three times a day. This should keep the art pieces in top condition up until Oct. 6, the exposition's end date.

Many of the statues are marked as prize winners: This is due to various rounds of voting in which both visitors and competing sculptors chose their favorites. A jury of experts elected the final top three, with the Kolomenskoye museum picking its favorite too.

Remarkably, each group ended up praising a different statue, and none of them won two prizes.

From May 22 to 26, the exposition will be expanded by 10 more statues through a new competition. This time Russian artists are challenged to sculpt a figure around the theme "My Protiv Terrorizm" (We oppose terrorism).

"The goal is to make something beautiful. This is to try and distract people's attention from the aggressive things and all the drama that is around them, towards something nice," Mylnikov said. "So it will not be a series of twin tower sculptures," he added dryly.

During the competition, the exhibition ground is open to visitors, who are invited to come and see the process of sculpture building. This is recommended to anyone who is planning a visit, because when watching the final outcomes, one can't help but wonder, "how on earth did they manage this?"

And who knows, you might catch the "sand sculpting virus" yourself.

The exhibition is located in Kolomenskoye park, open daily from 10 a.m. to 9 p.m.. For more information, visit art-bliss.ru *and* mylnikov-art.ru

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