

# Reproduction in Museum Construction of Belarusian National and Cultural Identity

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## Abstract

The essay reveals the historical-political preconditions for the loss of original museum objects in Belarusian museums in the 19th and 20th centuries: such as their transfer to other state museums within the Russian Empire and later the USSR as part of internal cultural policy, as well as due to the outbreak of two world wars. After 1991; Belarus became an independent state that had to search for its national identity. Museums didn't stay away from these processes and actively participated in the retranslation of new ideas through their exhibitions. However, one of the main problems in presenting a holistic view of Belarusian history was the lack of real museum artifacts, which could serve as material proof, evidence of historical events and achievements of the ancestors. To solve this problem the museum community used reproductions to show a new image of Belarusian history and culture in local and state museums.

## Introduction

In 1991, after centuries of ethnic Belarusian lands being part of various states, Belarus gained independence. This process coincided with the formation of other sovereign states in Eastern and Central Europe. After decades of Moscow's socialist influence, countries of the region had to rebuild their identities. For Belarus, which was called “самая советская из всех советских” [translation: *‘the most Soviet of all Soviets’*] (Чернявская [translation: *‘Chernyavskaya’*]), this process was challenging. It was affected by two world wars, the division of Belarusian ethnic territory (1920-1930s), massive political repression, and the suppression of national culture within the Russian Empire and the USSR.

After achieving independence, Belarusian society needed to distance itself from the Soviet past and the Soviet interpretation of history, redefine its identity, and become an ‘imagined community’ i.e., a full-fledged independent nation (Anderson 1991). On the other hand, the Belarusian authorities also needed museums as institutions which Tony Bennett called the “*major vehicles for the fulfillment of the state’s new educative and moral role in relation to the population as a whole*” (1995, 109). Although Bennett used this figurative expression for the museums of the 19th century, taking into account the delay in the formation of Belarusian statehood, it can be applied to the description of museums in Belarus after the 1990s.

Museums have actively engaged in the processes of redefining Belarusian identity, seeking to find and disseminate new ideas through their exhibitions. In his 1972 work *Sincerity and Authenticity*, Trilling argues that societies typically pursue authenticity only when they perceive a threat to the truth (Trilling qtd. in Penrose 2020). After the fall of the communist ideology and radical revision of the historical discourse, Belarusian society became interested in establishing a real national history; museum expositions with authentic artifacts and evidence of historical events could satisfy this demand.

However, one of the main obstacles to the creation of a holistic image of national history was the lack of artifacts - authentic museum objects that could serve as physical evidence of historical events and cultural achievements of our ancestors. Museum originals were lost as a result of the long period of absence of an independent Belarusian state, which led to the relocation of valuables of Belarusian origin to other territories.

This topic is especially relevant, given the almost complete absence in Belarusian and foreign historiography and museum practice of studies that comprehend the significance of originals and copies in the construction by Belarusian museums of the image of national history, and the search

for national and cultural identity. Such understanding becomes especially relevant in the conditions of socio-political instability, and changes in foreign policy, which can have a significant impact on museum expositions.

This essay analyzes how Belarusian museums used reproductions, copies, and models in their expositions to form national and cultural identity in the post-communist period.

The first two sections analyze the reasons for museum losses, which provide an initial insight into such a massive recourse to museum copies and reconstructions in museum practice. The third section shows the general context of museum construction in Belarus after the fall of the communist regime and draws parallels with the experience of other post-communist countries. Furthermore, the examples analyzed in the essay are considered in chronological order.

To analyze the problem, an historical and analytical approach was used to trace the development of museum collections in the Belarusian lands in the 19th and 20th centuries. The comparative method makes it possible to reveal the scale of museum losses in Belarus in comparison with neighboring countries. Considerable empirical material about the quality of reconstructions and their place in the expositions was collected by the authors directly during their visits to the analyzed museums. The work of one of the authors as a museum guide also contributed to the collection of information for this article.

The theoretical basis of the study is formed by the works of Benedict Anderson, Jan Penrose, Simon Knell, Lionel Trilling and Tony Bennett. Among Belarusian researchers, the problem of copies and reproductions in expositions has been considered mainly within the framework of applied museology (Ладзісава [translation: '*Ladzisava*'] 1991, Мірончык [translation: '*Mirončyk*'] 2004) and the history of museology (Гужалоўскі [translation: '*Hužaloŭski*'] 2001; 2002).

The essay analyzes the largest museum projects of the period after 1991: the Museum of Belarusian Printing, well-visited UNESCO World Heritage sites (Mir, Niasviž), material artifacts significant for Belarusian history (the cross of St. Euphrosyne of Polack and the Hedwig glass), regional museums dedicated to important Belarusian historical figures (the house-museum of the composer Michał Kleofas Ogiński and museums of the artists Ilya Repin, Walenty Wańkiewicz, Napoleon Orda), and the Museum of the History of the Viciebsk People's Art School.

The independent Belarusian state needed to use museums as a tool to display its history and demonstrate its cultural heritage in the context of a shortage of real artifacts. To solve this problem, the museum community

turned to reproductions in the broadest sense. Reproductions, copies, and models became a way out of the situation, allowing museums of various levels to present a new image of the history and culture of Belarus.

### The Origins of Museum Losses in the 19th and 20th Centuries

Today, there are 156 museums under the Ministry of Culture in the Republic of Belarus, whose collections consist of a total of 3.5 million items (‘Число Организаций Культуры На Конец Периода’[translation: ‘*Number of Cultural Organizations at the End of the Period*’] 2024). Compared to neighboring countries, which exceed Belarus in terms of area and population but share a common historical and cultural heritage, the Belarusian museum collections appear very small. For instance, Polish museum collections have more than 20 million museum items (‘*Działalność Muzeów w 2021 Roku*’ [translation: ‘*Activities of Museums in 2021*’] 2022), while Russian museum storages contain more than 92 million items (‘Музеи и Зоопарки Российской Федерации в Цифрах 2020’[translation: ‘*Museums and Zoos of the Russian Federation in Figures 2020*’] 2021). The comparison of Belarusian and Lithuanian museums does not favor Belarusian ones. The museum collections of the Republic of Lithuania, which is about three times smaller than Belarus in terms of population and area, have more than 7.5 million items (‘Museums and Galleries’).

Several reasons can explain such a situation regarding the size of the country's museum collections. In the 16th – 18th centuries, the Belarusian lands were part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth - a single state where the ancestors of modern Poles, Belarusians, Ukrainians, and Lithuanians lived. Representatives of the privileged estate, including natives of the present-day Belarusian lands, accumulated wealth, and traveled extensively, acquiring art objects and enriching their private collections. Unique furniture collections, weapons, arts and crafts, books, and other artifacts were formed in noble residences.

As a result of three partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (1772, 1793, 1795) the present Belarusian lands were ceded to the Russian Empire. From that time onwards the active export of cultural valuables from the territory of modern Belarus began. An illustrative case is the Radziwiłł palace and park complex in Niasviž (Minsk region). The castle, built in the 16th century, was the family residence of the wealthy and influential Radziwiłł family [bel. ‘Радзівілы’].<sup>1</sup> Over the centuries, the Radziwiłłs amassed extremely valuable collections in Niasviž. After the first partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (1772), the Russian Gener-

al-in-chief A.I. Bibikov took most of the archive and library from Niasviž to St. Petersburg (Гужалоўскі [translation: 'Hužaloŭski'] 2001, 18).

During the Napoleonic Wars, the Radziwiłłs, like many other noble families in the Belarusian lands, supported the French emperor and sided with him against the Russian Empire. After Napoleon's unsuccessful campaign in 1812, a wave of confiscation of the cultural treasures of his followers began. In January 1813, Russian Admiral P.V. Chichagov gave the order to send the Radziwiłł collection to Moscow, which was valued at 10 million zlotys (a very large sum for that period). The numismatic cabinet (over 13,000 items) from Niasviž was transferred to Kharkiv University (in present-day Ukraine). As a result of the confiscation and relocation, the Niasviž collection was never restored.

Toward the middle of the 19th century, the traditions of private collecting gave way to public museums, which to a certain extent reflected the historical development of the Belarusian lands and contributed to the dissemination of knowledge about the region's past. Such was the Museum of Antiquities in Vilnius, opened in 1856. Vilnius (now in present-day Lithuania) was historically the political, economic, cultural, and religious center of the Belarusian lands. The exhibition narrated the historical path of the Lithuanian and Belarusian peoples during the existence of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, showing the history and development of these lands, separate from the Russian territories. However, after the next armed January Uprising against the Russian Empire (1863-1864), the museum's activity was recognized as harmful by the Russian authorities, part of the collection was removed, and the institution's work was significantly restricted.

In the 20th century, Belarusian cultural collections suffered irreparable losses during two world wars and revolutions. The frontline of the First World War passed through the territory of Belarus in 1915. Before that, the export of cultural valuables and other property to the interior of Russia began. The western regions were occupied and looted by German troops. After the Russian Revolution of 1917, many valuables were lost in the whirlwind of civil war, migration, and nationalization. For the Belarusian lands, the period of turmoil would end in 1921 with the signing of the Treaty of Riga. This agreement between Poland on one side and Soviet Russia and Soviet Ukraine on the other would lead to the division of the ethnic territory of Belarus into two parts: the western part would become part of the interwar Polish state, while the eastern part would form the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) as part of the USSR.

In the BSSR, cultural and church valuables would be recognized as national treasures, and attempts were made by state authorities to record and

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protect them. At the same time, some of the valuable items were exported to the territory of Russia. For instance, in 1919 the emissary of the Museum Department of the People's Commissariat (Ministry) of Education, the RSFSR, V.V. Pashukanis, participated in the export of cultural and church valuables to Russia. Pashukanis spearheaded the removal of collections from the Rumyantsev-Paskevich Residence in Homiel (Belarus) to the Historical Museum in Moscow. In the same year, he inspected the Belarusian cities of Mahilioŭ, Orša, and Niasviž, intending to export cultural treasures (Гужалоўскі [translation: 'Hužaloŭski'] 2002, 19).

The establishment of Soviet power, on the one hand intensified work on the creation of new museums and, on the other, contributed to the illegal export of collections. Church valuables became the property of the state and were often sold abroad.

The greatest losses of the country's museum collections are associated with the years of the Second World War. The rapid German offensive in 1941 prevented the organization of mass evacuation of cultural treasures. As a result, the museum collections were looted by the German army and destroyed during the fighting. Only a small proportion of the objects were returned to Belarus after the end of the war.

Even after the end of the war, museum objects left the territory of Belarus. Examples of the export of archaeological materials and the transfer of art collections abroad will be shown below. As a result, by the time Belarus gained independence in 1991, Belarusian museums had rather small museum collections that could not reflect the historical and cultural development of the country. In order to fill the gaps in the new expositions, the museums used reproductions, copies, and models of the lost valuables.

### The Euphoria of Independence

Despite a rather small state museum collection, the Republic of Belarus experienced a real museum boom in the first half of the 1990s. In 1990-1994 about 30 new museums were established (Вінакурава [translation: *Vinakurava*] 2012, 183). Similar processes were not unusual in the post-communist cultural space. As noted by Simina Badica in Romania, "[i]n the enthusiasm that followed the 1989 change of regime, everything had to be reinvented" and museums faced significant difficulties in reinterpreting national history (Badica qtd. in Knell 2011, 274). In the Belarusian case, the museum specialists faced not just the task of rediscovery, but the creation of a new national and cultural identity.

The rapid growth of the state museum network brought to the forefront the issues of creating new expositions reflecting new topics that in



the Soviet period were either portrayed sporadically or ignored in museum expositions, such as the culture of privileged estates, church history, and the artistic heritage of cultural figures who had left the country. This period saw a kind of romanticization of the past, the creation of an ideal image of glorious history. In such processes, turning to medieval history, which considered a rich period of Belarusian triumphs, was almost inevitable. The Russian historian Филюшкин [translation: '*Filyushkin*'] drew attention to this trend in the museum expositions of the Baltic countries and Belarus (2016). The search for the Golden Age of prosperity led to the need to reflect this period in museum exhibitions. However, there were very few medieval artifacts in the collections of Belarusian museums.

There were several alternative ways of solving this problem: the restitution of Belarusian cultural valuables, the creation of copies and reproductions, and the creation of museum spaces of symbolic content that reveal the topic without museum originals by other means, for example, modern information technologies or installations. Belarusian museums in general have followed the path of using various copies in their construction of national and cultural identity. One of the first such projects was the Museum of Belarusian Book Printing in Polack.

### **Museum of Belarusian Book Printing in Polack**

This project was implemented at the end of the existence of the USSR, during the period of democratization of society and a great growth of interest in national history. In Soviet times, history teaching was largely focused on the Soviet period, the history of the Communist Party, labor, and revolutionary movements. The history of Belarus was presented rather schematically, in the Marxist understanding of historical processes. What was emphasized was not the originality and uniqueness of the Belarusian culture, but the unity of the cultures of all Soviet peoples, especially the Slavic ones (Russia, Ukraine, Belarus). But by the late 1980s, the situation was changing significantly. Society began to discover both national history and the figures of this history.

During this period, the personality of Francysk Skaryna [bel. 'Францыск Скарына'] became a symbol of national and cultural revival. This native of Polack was a pioneer of East Slavic printing in the sixteenth century. After studying at European universities (in Krakow, Padua, and Prague) he engaged in book publishing (1517), bringing the printed word to the Belarusian lands.

In September 1990, the Museum of Belarusian Book Printing was opened in Polack on the 500th anniversary of Skaryna's birth. According to

the creator of the scientific concept of this museum Ладзісавя [translation: ‘*Ladzisava*’], the main goal of the institution is “*to show the book as an integral part of the historical and cultural process, as a complex phenomenon that simultaneously belongs to the spiritual and material spheres of human activity*” (1991, 25). A separate hall of the museum is dedicated directly to Francysk Skaryna, the remaining halls reflect the history of writing in the Belarusian lands, and demonstrate the reconstruction of the printing press of the 17th-18th centuries, writing instruments, and book culture of different centuries.

The author of this essay introduced visitors to the museum as an accompanying guide. Visitors repeatedly shared their impressions of the visit, often regretting the lack of authentic items, especially the old printed books of Skaryna. A very large number of exhibits, especially from the period before the 20th century, are copies, models, and reproductions that can be explained not only by the need to protect paper museum objects from the negative effects of light and other factors but also by the lack of originals.

Out of 523 known books by Skaryna, only 28 exemplars have been preserved in Belarus. The largest number of books, 350, is kept in the Russian Federation; in Ukraine, 47; in Poland, 36; in Slovenia, 19; in Denmark, 18; in Germany, 11; in Great Britain, 10; and in Lithuania and the Czech Republic, two copies each (Мотульский [translation: ‘*Matuľski*’] 2019, 10). Moreover, in the state museum collections, there are no other museum originals related to the life and work of Francysk Skaryna. That is why the museum workers of the Belarusian Book Printing Museum often turned to copies rather than originals.

### Artifact Reconstruction

The creation of another iconic copy of a museum object is also associated with Polack. This is a copy of the cross of St. Euphrosyne of Polack, an exceptional masterpiece of jewelry art of the 12th century. The cross in the cloisonné enamel technique was made by the master Лазар Боґша [translation: ‘*Lazar Bohša*’] at the request of St. Euphrosyne of Polack in 1161. The cross was of great importance not only as an example of high jewelry art of its epoch but also represented historical value (as it had inscriptions about its creation); and religious value (as it contained Christian relics).

The Soviet authorities confiscated this artifact from the church, but later, thanks to the efforts of the director of the Belarusian State Museum, Ластоўскі [translation: ‘*Lastoŭski*’], it was added to the collections of this institution. The cross was found during the Polack expedition in the local financial department and, despite the protests of the Polack District Exec-

utive Committee, was transferred for storage to the Belarusian State Museum in Minsk (Гужалоўскі [translation: ‘*Hužaloŭski*’] 2002, 36). In 1929 the cross, together with other items, was transported from Minsk to Mahilioŭ, where it was lost with the beginning of hostilities in 1941. The search for the missing artifact did not yield any results.

After Belarus gained independence, the cross of Euphrosyne of Polack became a symbol of the rich historical past of the Belarusian lands, the golden age in the development of culture and the state. At the same time, it was a personification of the huge losses that this culture had suffered during the centuries of the absence of statehood. Publications about the cross appeared in mass media and scientific publications, and reports on the results of its search were heard at the state level.

The problem of returning this artifact to the cultural space was solved in the spirit of the time, and it was, of course, the recreation of the shrine in its original form. The initiators of the project to create a replica of the missing cross were the clergy, the World Association of Belarusians ‘Baćkaŭščyna’ [lit. ‘Fatherland’], as well as state institutions. As a result of the analysis of the surviving images and descriptions of the cross, the cross of Euphrosyne of Polack was reconstructed in 1992-1997 by Brest craftsman Мікалай Кузьміч [translation: ‘*Mikalaj Kuźmič*’]. The recreation of the cross was carried out in a highly professional manner, matching the dimensions, materials, technology and even the Christian relics included in the original cross. Today the reconstructed artifact is stored not in the museum collection, but in the Saint Eufrosyne Monastery in Polack.

If in the 1990s the creation of reconstructions seemed completely justified, then the implementation of such projects in the 2020s raises the question of their rationality. However, a similar approach to restoring the so-called ‘Turaŭ Cross’ is now being implemented in Belarus.

Back in Soviet times, due to archaeological excavations of the ancient town of Turaŭ, archaeologist Пётр Лысенка [translation: ‘*Piotr Lysienka*’] found three lead images dating back to the 12th-13th centuries. Following extensive study, it was concluded that they belonged to the cross in the Turaŭ temple. This cross was most likely very similar to the cross of Euphrosyne of Polack, but in the case of the Turaŭ artifact, no images or descriptions have survived. Nevertheless, in 2017 it was decided to reproduce the ancient artifact (Чаплева [translation: ‘*Čaplieva*’] 2021).

Following long discussions, a decision was made that ignored scientific arguments about the original appearance of the artifact. Instead of silver, the cross was recreated in gold and with a controversial interpretation of the images of the saints depicted on it. Implementing this project in the

21st century, it was quite possible to make use of information technology to visualize the image of the cross. Instead, following the paradigm of previous decades, an expensive and controversial replica (whose conformity to the original remains highly questionable) was created. In spite of this, it will be promoted in the public space as an analog of the cross of Euphrosyne of Polack.

A more modern approach to the peculiar return of a medieval artifact was realized in the case of Hedwig glass (Hedwig beakers) that was found during archaeological excavations in Navahrudak, conducted under the direction of Гурэвіч [translation: 'Hurevič'] in 1955-1962 (Щапова [translation: 'Shchapova'] 1976, 209). Even though there were many museums in the BSSR at that time, the valuable find was taken out of the territory of Belarus and sent to the collection of the State Hermitage Museum (in Leningrad, now St. Petersburg). The significance of the find is confirmed by the fact that it was included in the main exposition of the largest Russian museum.

In 2022, as a result of three years of work by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Belarus, the Belarusian Geographical Society, the Navahrudak Museum of Local History, and the priest of the local Catholic parish, two polymer copies of the Hedwig glass from Navahrudak were created and exhibited in the local history museum and the Catholic Church (figure 1). The copies do not match the original in materials, but were made with the proportions and decoration intact.

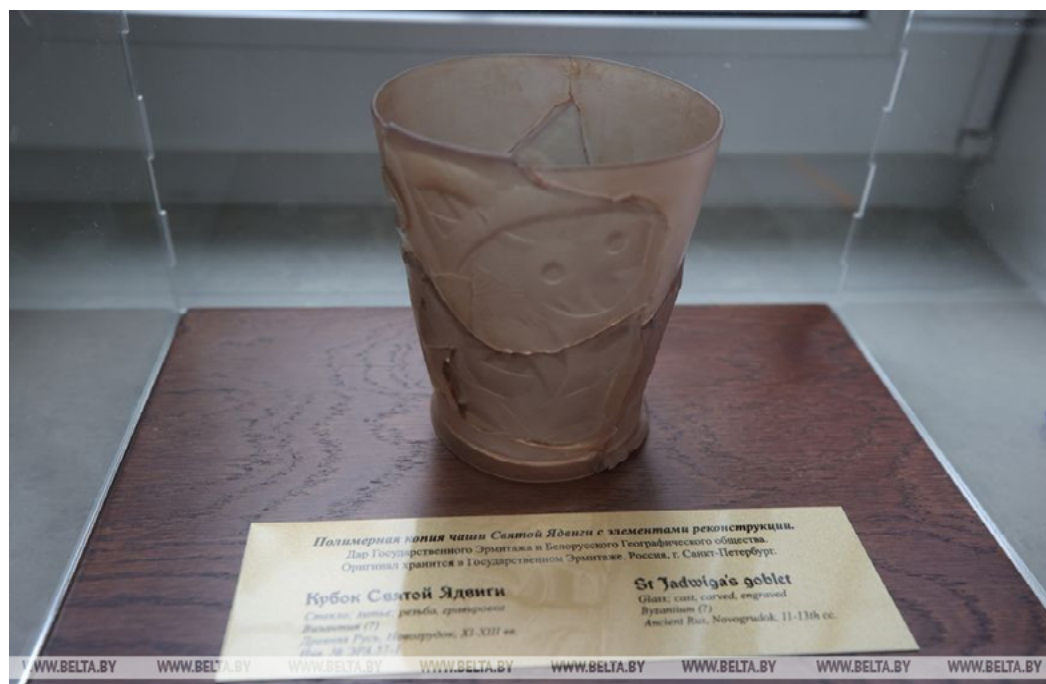


Figure 1. Polymer copy of the Hedwig glass from Navahrudak: Navahrudak 2022.  
Photograph by: Леонид Щеглов [translation: 'Leonid Shcheglov'] (www.belta.by).

This case raises another problem. Should the local community and Belarusian scientists be satisfied with the return of a polymer copy instead of the original artifact? Ironically, the inscription on the polymer copy emphasizes that it is a 'gift of the State Hermitage and the Belarusian Geographical Society', while the original is kept in St. Petersburg. Shouldn't the copies remain in the Hermitage, and the original artifact be returned to Navahrudak, which has had its museum since 1992? These issues are also highlighted by the restoration work at Navahrudak Castle, which should lead to the partial museumification of one of the castle towers. A polymer copy certainly gives an idea of the uniqueness of the artifact, but the presence of the original would significantly increase the significance of the museum and the interest of visitors.

### Privileged Estates

When Belarus acquired state sovereignty, the necessity of displaying previously almost forbidden topics in the museum space became urgent. One of the topics that came to be in demand by the Belarusian society and museum workers was the culture of privileged estates. Conveying this great romantic history in museums necessitated exhibiting castle and palace interiors, weapons, and works of art. All of this required moulages, models, copies, and reconstructions.

One of the first restored castles in the sovereign period of Belarus' history was the Mir Castle (16th century). After the end of World War II, the castle complex fell into complete disrepair and was a ruin until restoration work began in 1987.

Already in 1992, the first museum exhibition was opened in the South-West Tower. In December 2000, the Mir Castle Complex was inscribed in the UNESCO World Heritage List. In 2010, the restoration work was completed and a year later the museum received an independent status ('Агульная Гісторыя' [translation: '*General History*']). As of 2024, the main collection of the museum contains almost 2,500 items, and the auxiliary scientific collection holds more than 2,600 items ('Фонды' [translation: '*Collections*']). A significant part of the museum's collections was formed from copies.

At the moment, both original museum objects and copies are exhibited. It is quite difficult for an untrained visitor to understand which of the objects have historical value, and which are created only to supplement the exhibition of the ensemble.



Figure 2 shows one of the exhibition complexes of Mir Castle, represented by an original tapestry from the 17th century and three reconstructions of armor from the same period. In museum labels, the armor is correctly attributed to reconstruction, but the desire of visitors to check each museum exhibit for originality seems unlikely. This can lead to the visitor's perception of the exhibition as completely original, from a specific historical era.



Figure 2. *Fragment of the exhibition of the Mir Castle. The originals stand side by side with reconstructions: Mir 2024.* Photograph by: Dzianis Filipchuk and Anton Petrukhin.



Figure 3. *Reconstruction of a Manifer: Mir 2024.* Photograph by: Dzianis Filipchuk and Anton Petrukhin.

“In the Belarusian case, the museum specialists faced not just the task of rediscovery, but the creation of a new national and cultural identity.”



One might assume that these copies are meant to contribute not so much to educating visitors as to confirming the existential authenticity of the entire complex (Penrose 2020).

Moreover, reconstructions for the museum were ordered not only during the period of its formation but also with the acquisition of independent status (2011). Thus, in 2012, a manifer<sup>2</sup> from the set of armor of Mikołaj ‘the Black’ Radziwiłł (bel. Мікалай Радзівіл Чорны) was reconstructed (figure 3). The armor of the representative of the most important noble family in the history of Belarus (the Radziwiłłs) was created in the middle of the 16th century, but not a single element of it has survived in the territory of Belarus. The main part of the armor is in Vienna, the rest is in Paris and New York (Весьялуха [translation: ‘Viesialucha’] 2015).

Most of the items presented in the exhibition are replicas unrelated to the history and owners of the castle itself. They have a completely different origin and serve to reproduce a possible image of the castle interiors, to reconstruct the material culture of a certain period.

The active use of reconstructions and copies concerns not only the main exhibition but also the temporary exhibitions of the Mir Castle. Thus, in 2015, the exhibition *Battle Helmets and Heraldic Flags of the Belarusian Lands of the 11th–17th centuries* was organized in the castle complex. Of the 30 items on display, more than half (19) were replicas (Весьялуха [translation: ‘Viesialucha’] 2015).

The creators of the exposition of another castle complex of the 16th century faced a similar problem. This is the Radziwiłłs' palace and park complex in Niasviž, which is now part of the Niasviž Historical and Cultural Museum-Reserve. The property was inscribed in the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2005.

The castle, which later was transformed into a palace and park complex, was the residence of the Radziwiłł family until 1939. Part of the Radziwiłł collection was taken from Niasviž already after the partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the 18th century (as discussed above), and part of the collection was sold by the owners themselves in the interwar period. In 1939 the palace and park complex was occupied by the Red Army, and the collections were taken to Minsk and given to various institutions. After World War II, the palace housed a sanatorium, which operated until 2001. Restoration works then began at the site, after which a new museum exhibition appeared in 2012. To build the exhibition, the developers chose an ensemble method, which was supposed to reflect the life of the castle owners and historical interiors.

To restore the historical interiors and reflect the history of the Radziwiłł family, the exhibition designers had to resort to the use of authentic items from the same epoch and copies. The institution acquired furniture, dishes, clocks, and other original items that had no connection with the Niasviž Palace, but allowed them to recreate the lifestyle of the era.

The task of revealing the history of the family was more difficult since the museum collections of Belarus did not have a sufficient number of originals. A striking case is the Radziwiłł portrait gallery. This collection survived the Second World War and was kept in museum collections on the territory of the BSSR. However, according to the decision of the head of the Soviet Union M.S. Khrushchev in 1954, a collection of original portraits from Niasviž was transferred to Poland, which was under the rule of the communist government and ally of the USSR. The legacy of the Radziwiłł family, representatives of the privileged class, did not fit into the Soviet paradigm. Therefore, the collection, valuable for Belarusian history, was easily transported to another country.

When work began on the museumification of the Niasviž Palace, where these portraits were originally located, the question arose about the need to exhibit them. In 2009, and only with the help of representatives of the Radziwiłł family, 48 digital copies of portraits printed on canvas were transferred from the National Museum in Warsaw to the palace in Niasviž. After completion of the restoration work, they were exhibited in the halls of the Niasviž Palace and park complex (figure 4). Although the Radziwiłł family advocated for the return of the originals to Niasviž, and despite the fact that the portraits are not on display in Warsaw, but held in museum depots, the originals remain outside Belarus (Гурневіч [translation: 'Hurnievič'] 2009).

The example of the museumification of the Niasviž Palace also shows that Belarusian curators have to resort to copying original items not only in cases where cultural properties have been taken out of the country. For instance, copies of the candelabra for the fireplace hall in the exposition were made from the 18th-century candelabra kept in the Church of Corpus Christi in Niasviž. Also, the National Art Museum in Minsk did not share the original portraits of the Radziwiłłs, as it would have significantly impoverished its section of the permanent exhibition dedicated to ancient Belarusian art. As a result, it was decided to send copies to the Niasviž Palace.

Museums in Mir and Niasviž demonstrate the experience of using copies in the expositions of major museums and UNESCO World Heritage sites. The situation in local museums is often worse. For example, in the house-museum of Michał Kleofas Ogiński [bel. Міхал Клеафас Агінскі] in



Figure 4. *Digital copies of portraits of the Radziwiłłs and a copy of a candelabra on display at the Niasviž Palace: Niasviž 2024.*  
Photograph by: Dzianis Filipchik and Anton Petrukhin.



Figure 5. *Fragment of the exhibition in the house-museum of M.K. Ogiński in Zaliessie: Zaliessie 2024.* Photograph by: Dzianis Filipchik and Anton Petrukhin.

Zaliessie (Smarhoń District, Hrodna Region), a significant part of the exposition is built with the help of copies. A public and political figure, the famous composer M.K. Ogiński lived in the manor for many years, turning it into the center of local cultural life. Over the 20th century, the estate fell into disrepair, and only in 2015, after the completion of restoration work in the estate, the museum began its work (figure 5).

The 13 halls of the museum depict the life and creative path of the composer and show the household activities of the 19th century. Most of the items are authentic, but although they are original, they have no connection with the history of the estate. The portraits and documents in the exposition, representing the history of the Ogiński family and the development of the estate itself, are copies and reproductions. An indicative example of this approach is the placement in the exhibition space of a copy of a wineglass, which probably belonged to the Ogiński family. The original is located in the Hrodna Museum of History and Archaeology, and the copy is in the exposition of the Zaliessie Museum. The text of the museum label explains that such copies are sold by the museum as souvenirs (figure 6).



Figure 6. *The wineglass copy of M.K. Ogiński in the house-museum in Zaliessie:* Zaliessie 2024. Photograph by: Dzianis Filipchuk and Anton Petrukhin.

## Lost artists

After Belarus gained independence in 1991, the issue of returning the names of famous natives, cultural figures and artists to the Belarusian cultural context became topical. During the Soviet period, their creative work was either recognized as the heritage of other nations or simply ignored.

One of the first examples of such a return of a cultural figure is the museum ‘*House of Vankovich. Culture and Art of the 1st half of the 19th century*’, which opened in 2000 as a branch of the National Art Museum of the Republic of Belarus. The manor house of the famous noble family of Wańkowicz was restored at the 200th anniversary of the birth of the famous artist Walenty Wańkowicz [bel. ‘*Валянцін Ваньковіч*’], who lived in this building for several years. However, even the memorial status of the building itself is in question. During the 20th century, the mansion fell into complete disrepair and was used as communal apartments before the restoration. The restorers had to rebuild the building from scratch using new materials on the historical foundation. As for the paintings of Walenty Wańkowicz, there is not a single original work in state collections, so to depict the artist’s heritage it was necessary to use either copies or reproductions of paintings (figure 7).





Figure 7. Part of the exhibition of the Vankovich Museum in Minsk with reproductions of his works: Minsk 2024. Photograph by: Dzianis Filipchuk and Anton Petrukhin.

A similar situation, when original items in the exposition are represented only by substitute materials, is typical for Ilya Repin's house-museum 'Zdraŭniova' (Viciebsk district). The estate of the famous 19th century artist was destroyed during a fire and was rebuilt in 2000. The current exhibition presents mainly reproductions of the artist's works and items that are authentic but were used at other estates in the same historical period.

The residence of the 19th-century artist Napoleon Orda [bel. 'Напалеон Орда'] in the Ivanava district was also fully reconstructed, including two manor houses and an art gallery. The exhibition does not include original works by Napoleon Orda, so the halls are filled with copies or works by modern artists.

The above cases show that the practice of using replicas is quite widespread. The use of copies makes it possible to actualize the cultural heritage that links Belarus with the European and Russian cultural context. New collections are formed around replicas, which become an important factor in the development of the local communities.

The creators of the Museum of the History of the Viciebsk People's Art School, which opened its doors in 2018, took a different path ('Музей Гісторыі Віцебскага Народнага Мастацкага Вучылішча' [translation:

*'Museum of the History of the Viciebsk People's Art School'*). The museum promotes the heritage of the art school, organized in 1918 by the world-famous artist Marc Chagall, a native of Viciebsk. In 1919, on Chagall's initiative, the Museum of Modern Art was opened on the premises of the art school (Гужалоўскі [translation: 'Hužaloŭski'] 2002, 16). There were about 80 works in the museum, among which were the works of Chagall, Kazimir Malevich, and Yudel Pen (Chagall's teacher). After the founder of the museum left Viciebsk, most of the paintings were moved outside the territory of modern Belarus (to Moscow).

The modern museum was opened in the historical building where the art school and the first museum operated. Chagall, Malevich, and El Lissitzky worked as teachers at the school. The building also housed the teachers' apartments, which significantly increases its historical value.

The exhibition's creators discovered fragments of old plaster, carried out soundings, and preserved the original remains of the interiors. But in this case, the previous paradigm of an exhibition filled with copies of the originals was not implemented. The Museum of the History of the Viciebsk People's Art School actively used modern information technologies, lighting equipment, decorations, and installations. These techniques do not mislead the visitor and do not create the impression of authenticity of the interior and exhibits. Instead, visitors are immersed in the ideas, philosophical concepts, and creative endeavors of artists.

This example was realized in the museumification of the avant-garde heritage of the early twentieth century, which made it possible to move away from the decades-old paradigm of using copies in a museum exhibition.

Another promising strategy that currently is not available in Belarusian museums could be using higher-quality and cheaper digital reproductions that are becoming widely available on the internet. It is also promising to create virtual reconstructions that enable demonstration of the variability of scientific approaches to reconstruction and can easily adapt to the addition of new data.

## Conclusions

During the years of the country's independence (after 1991) Belarusian museums have used and continue to use museum copies for creating new and updating existing museum exhibitions. The practice of resorting to copies is motivated not exclusively by the need to preserve authentic objects, but by the extremely small size of the museum collections. These collections suffered significant losses during the absence of Belarusian statehood, wars, revolutions, and the illegal export of valuables abroad.

“The search for the Golden Age of prosperity led to the need to reflect this period in museum exhibitions. However, there were very few medieval artifacts in the collections of Belarusian museums.”



Creators of museum exhibitions after the collapse of the USSR searched for new themes that have become relevant to society. The main theme was the national Belarusian history, distinctiveness, and new, non-Soviet identity. The museums that were created during this period had to reflect a new approach to understanding the country's history at the national and local levels.

During the Soviet period, several important aspects of Belarusian history and culture were either forbidden or significantly neglected in state museum collections. One such topic was the history of Belarusian lands during the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period, when these territories developed independently of the Russian state. As a result, museums lack authentic artifacts from these epochs, forcing museum staff to rely heavily on copies and replicas to represent this historical period.

Another subject that was ideologically suppressed was the culture of the privileged social class. Soviet ideology labeled this stratum as hostile, alien, and fundamentally non-Belarusian. Consequently, few artifacts from this segment of society were preserved in Belarusian museums. Some valuable items, such as portraits from the Radziwiłłs' collection in Niasviž, were even gifted to 'friendly countries' in 1954. The restoration of historical sites like the Mir and Niasviž palace complexes, which are now UNESCO World Heritage Sites, has brought the issue of reconstructing their interiors into focus. Since many of the original artifacts were lost or destroyed, replicas continue to be used to furnish these sites. This challenge persists as new projects aimed at restoring aristocratic estates and their associated heritage emerge.

A third area of neglect in Soviet-era museums was the religious history of Belarusian lands. Religious topics were approached strictly from the perspective of the state's anti-religious agenda. However, in the post-Soviet period, religious history has gained a prominent place in museum exhibitions, reflecting a more nuanced and comprehensive approach to Belarusian heritage.

Additionally, the Soviet regime downplayed or ignored the contributions of famous natives of Belarus who gained international recognition, especially artists like Wańkowicz, Orda, and Chagall. This has since changed, and museums now strive to showcase the work and legacy of these individuals.

As these themes have been reintroduced into the national discourse, Belarusian museums have had to compensate for the lack of original objects by turning to replicas. They have employed several strategies in this regard. One approach involves creating reproductions of Belarusian artifacts that

are currently housed abroad, such as the Hedwig glass or the works of Wańkowicz, and even Radziwiłłs' armor. Another strategy has been producing replicas of items from major Belarusian museum collections for display in smaller or regional institutions, such as reproductions of Radziwiłłs' ceremonial portraits, originally from the National Art Museum in Minsk, now displayed at the Niasviž residence.

Museums have also engaged in the scientific reconstruction of lost artifacts, such as the cross of Euphrosyne of Polack, though some reconstructions, like the Turaŭ Cross, remain controversial. Furthermore, in efforts to restore historical interiors, particularly in castles and palaces, museums have sourced original items from neighboring countries, as seen with the printing press used in the Museum of Belarusian Book Printing.

It can be assumed that the paradigm of creating copies and reconstructions to fill museum exhibitions in Belarus will continue. Some hope for overcoming this trend is given by the Museum of the History of the Viciebsk People's Art School, which abandoned copies and with the help of installations and modern information technologies returned the names of Chagall, Malevich, and Lissitzky to the Belarusian cultural context. However, new major museum projects (like the exposition of the old castle in Hrodna) continue to demonstrate adherence to the old approaches.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The majority of names of Belarusian historical figures are given in transliteration from the Belarusian Cyrillic alphabet to the Belarusian Latin alphabet. However, some names are given in Polish transliteration where these are more established in the scientific literature.

<sup>2</sup> A ‘manifer’ is a gauntlet for protecting the left hand when holding the reins of a horse.