



**The Church of the Holy Trinity (Kulich & Paskha), (1785-87)**  
N.A. Lvov, St.Petersburg, Russia

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## SCHOOL ESSAY IN HISTORY OF ART

**“Exploring the ideology of Nikolay Lvov's Palladian church architecture  
and its influence on the identity formation of the Russian élite  
during the reign of Empress Catherine II.”**



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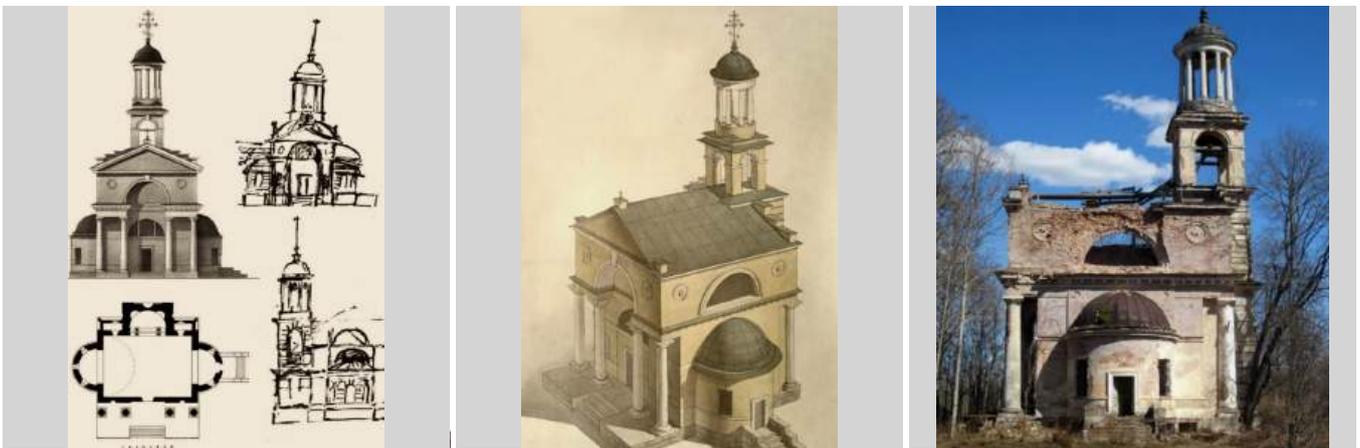
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*PAUL OSTROVERHY*

CONGRATULATIONS

## Exploring the ideology of Nikolay Lvov's Palladian church architecture and its influence on the identity formation of the Russian élite during the reign of empress Catherine II

This essay argues that the Palladian style found in the religious works of Nikolay Lvov was used as an ideological tool to project a new vision of Russia, one that fundamentally aligned with the state's effort to westernise both the country and its élite on a cultural level. If we are to take Umberto Eco's semiotics of architecture, each building communicates meaning, and therefore, even buildings that were not consciously envisioned as buildings that emanate ideology, nonetheless, once placed within the sociopolitical context, reflect certain trends in the formation of Russian identities. Many of Nikolay Lvov's works in fact did serve as ideological platforms that redefined the relationship between Russia and Europe, and further reflected the Russian élite's desire to westernise and associate themselves with Europe. Nikolay Lvov's estate architecture is omitted from this study, for lack of space, but it is nonetheless important to note that Lvov has arguably been called the key factor in popularising the form of the *usadba* primarily thanks to the significant amount of country estates that he built throughout his lifetime.<sup>1</sup> This essay will primarily cover Lvov's church architecture. The Church of Vladimir in Gornitsy, St Catherine's Church in Murino, the Church of St Peter and Paul in Pereslegino, the Rotundal Church at Nikolskoye-Cherenchitsy, are intimately tied to the unique phenomenon of the Russian *usadba*, as much as they were built on Russian country estates. The *usadba* significantly influenced the formation of a new Russian noble identity, a pattern explored by Priscilla Roosevelt in her chapter "Russian Estate Architecture and Noble Identity." Therefore, if we are to attribute Lvov as being the key factor in popularising the Palladian villa, which in turn generated the *usadba* phenomenon, then without realising, he is arguably a very important figure that influenced the identity formation of the Russian nobility.



The Church of Vladimir in Gornitsy, (1790-95), by N.A. Lvov

The aim of this study is to fill a gap in existing scholarship surrounding the architectural works of Nikolay Lvov. The aesthetic and functional aspects of his neo-Palladian architecture have been already researched, with Federica Rossi's monograph on Nikolay Lvov worth reading for a

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<sup>1</sup> Ревзина, Ю., & Швидковский, Д. (2016). *Палладианство в России при Екатерине Великой и Александре I. Часть II. Искусствознание, (1-2), 358-377.*

general overview of the man's architectural ensemble, yet many have failed to analyse the ideological and symbolic dimension that manifested itself, whether implicitly or explicitly, in his architecture. Whilst Ilya Putyatin has published many works exploring the Christian symbolism of Lvov's church architecture, he has not touched upon the way Lvov's church architecture reflects broader cultural and secular patterns during that period. As such, this essay wishes to link Catherine the Great's nationalistic propaganda, and the Russian élite's westernisation within a broader cultural context of the Russian Enlightenment, and how these ideas reflect themselves in Nikolay Lvov's church architecture.



The Church of Saint Peter and Paul in the village of Pereslegino, (1785-1802), by N.A. Lvov

Scholarship, notably Roosevelt, has acknowledged the importance of the rural estate post-1762 in the formation of a group identity for the Russian élite, by which estate ownership conveyed membership in a privileged group, along individuals' adoption of Western cultural norms.<sup>2</sup> The study was a general overview of Russian estates, and this essay, rather than focusing on Nikolay Lvov's estate architecture to reinforce Roosevelt's hypothesis, wishes to analyze the architect's provincial church architecture, notably examples in Mogilev, Pereslegino, Murino, Gornitsy, and Nikolskoye-Cherenchitsy. As many were built on estates, adjacent to the main mansion, for each nobleman had to have access to a church by virtue of being a member of the established Russian Orthodox Church, this essay argues that Roosevelt's view can equally be applied to religious architecture. In other words, Lvov's provincial church architecture is also reflective of if not membership to the élite per se, very much still embodying Enlightenment ideals and acting as a visual platform by which the nobility could visually associate themselves with the West, in itself another factor key to being a member of the Russian élite.

Dmitry Shvidkovsky traces the arrival of Palladianism in Russia under Catherine the Great in his book "Russian Architecture and the West". Whilst art historians have identified earlier traces of Palladianism in Russian architecture, notably in Petrine Russia, Palladianism became popular under Catherine the Great after she started to take preference on a Palladian-inspired classicism that, in Shvidkovsky's words, showed a sensual appreciation of ancient forms. Eager to appear as an enlightened sovereign, the empress was not afraid of adopting the latest architectural trends

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<sup>2</sup> Roosevelt, P. (2003). *Russian Estate Architecture and Noble Identity*. In J. Cracraft & D. Rowland (Eds.), *Architectures of Russian Identity, 1500 to the Present: 1500 to the Present* (pp. 66–79). Cornell University Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctv3s8r1n.9>

that were popular in Europe and replicating them at home. Shvidkovsky argues that the popularity of Palladianism in Russia can be attributed to Catherine the Great, who saw in Palladianism the best architectural embodiment of Russian enlightenment values. Whatever the empress built was by extension replicated by her courtiers and later on by most of the Russian aristocracy. Whilst questions are raised to what extent Russian aristocrats shared Catherine II's passionate love for the architectural style, one of them, Nikolay Lvov, can certainly be called the most avid native follower of Palladio in Russia during the 1770s, 1780s and 1790s.<sup>3</sup> Tired of French architects, Catherine the Great invited Charles Cameron and Giacomo Quarenghi, two avid Palladianists, to Russia. The aforementioned architects were pivotal in influencing Nikolay Lvov's architectural worldview.<sup>4</sup> Nikolay Lvov became the first native Russian to actively call himself a follower of Palladio. Ilya Putyatin suggests that it was Quarenghi who instilled in Lvov a greater appreciation for classical antiquity, and that it was he who advised Lvov on his 1781 trip to Italy.<sup>5</sup> However, Lvov also discovered Palladio for himself after he acquired a rare 1616 copy of Palladio's *I Quattro Architettura* at an auction house in Venice whilst on his Italian "grand tour." and being fluent in Italian, was able to study the sources in the original.<sup>6</sup>

Sergey Kavtaradze mentions that whilst an important style, Palladianism should be considered as part of a broader cultural trend. It arrived through multiple channels to Russia, and thereby emerged not as a rigid doctrine but as a flexible, evolving language. This led to the emergence of what Kavtaradze dubbed "Romantic Palladianism", embodied by Lvov rather than Cameron and Quarenghi, due to the new emotional and cultural contexts that it was placed in.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, Nikolay Lvov was a true dilettante, an amateur enthusiast which enabled him to innovate freely, thereby following the English Palladian tradition exemplified by Inigo Jones who passed his skills down to such gentlemen-artists as Kent and Burlington. In her insightful article about problems scholars face when researching about Nikolay Lvov's architecture, Miliugina puts forward the proposition that Lvov was not an art theorist. His aesthetics are, in her own words, of a living, spontaneous, moving nature, and therefore does not correspond to the ideas about traditional theories and treaties. This, according to Miliugina, reveals itself in the Italian Diaries and other published works by the "Russian Leonardo".<sup>8</sup> This corresponds to Palladio's own architectural treatise, which lacks heavy dogmatism and instructs its readers to creatively interpret the classical tradition, adapting it to modern needs if necessary.

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<sup>3</sup> Shvidkovsky, D. (2003). *Catherine the Great's Field of Dreams: Architecture and Landscape in the Russian Enlightenment*. In J. Cracraft & D. Rowland (Eds.), *Architectures of Russian Identity, 1500 to the Present: 1500 to the Present* (pp. 51–65). Cornell University Press.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctv3s8r1n.8>

<sup>4</sup> Глузов А. Н. Львов. М., 1980, с. 37

<sup>5</sup> Путятин И. Е. Кваренги и Львов: «Паломничество к итальянским святыням», или Рождение образа храма русского ампира. Часть 2 // *Искусствознание*. № 1-2/10. М., 2010. С. 275-309. (1,7 а.л.)

<sup>6</sup> Ревзина, Ю., & Швидковский, Д. (2016). *Палладианство в России при Екатерине Великой и Александре I. Часть II. Искусствознание*, (1-2), 358-377.

<sup>7</sup> *Палладианство в России*. Сергей Кавтарадзе. Лекция. (2022, January 27). [Video]. YouTube. Retrieved May 12, 2025, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FMba1t36vIg>

<sup>8</sup> Милюгина, Е. Г., & Строганов, М. В. (2008). *Гений вкуса: НА Львов. Итоги и проблемы изучения*.



### St Joseph's Cathedral, Mogilev, (1785-1796), by N.A. Lvov

Lvov's first major commission happened to be St Joseph's Cathedral (1780), built in Mogilev, present-day Belarus, named after the Austrian Emperor Joseph to commemorate the military alliance made between Russia and Austria against the Ottoman Empire. Built between 1785-1798, the cathedral embodied the geopolitical "Greek Project" that Catherine II had vis-à-vis Ottoman Turkey, in which Russia dreamt of conquering Constantinople and establishing a new Russian-ruled Byzantine Empire. Greek architecture, as seen with the use of the Greek Doric, coupled with a dome inspired from the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, reflected Catherine's desire to visually showcase her geopolitical ambitions to cultured viewers. Hence, the architectural motifs acquired a specific function: nationalistic propaganda.<sup>9</sup> Nikolay Lvov was a true interpreter to the classical tradition. Inspired by the Roman pantheon yet unable to replicate a dome open to the sky, Lvov adapts the architecture to the Russian climate, creating an innovative "double-oculus" system design.<sup>10</sup> As Nashokina rightfully points out, Nikolay Lvov was the most consistent Palladian of the 18th century. Most of his works have Palladian associations, yet in her view, the end result of almost each case is highly original. Nashokina has summarised the essence of Lvov's creative method, which can be summarised as follows: employing the typical techniques inherent in Palladio, yet innovating by creating his own solutions, mostly tied around the need to reconcile Palladian architecture with the Russian climate and local tradition.<sup>11</sup> Nikolay Lvov created another architectural work, the Church of Saint Peter and Paul in the village of Pereslegino (1785-1802), which Alter and Petrov, in their study for UNESCO, concisely analyzed. They have stated Pereslegino as a revisitation of St Joseph's cathedral, yet in my opinion the ideological function has been lost for the fact that the building has been replicated for its aesthetic value and not for the political symbolism that the Mogilev church represented. Nonetheless, Pereslegino is described as more refined in form, with a number of "remarkable and unique features" reflecting the architect's innovative treatment of form and surface: "a façade with two bell towers; a canteen with a half-cylinder arched roof and

<sup>9</sup> Shvidkovsky D. *The Empress and the Architect. British Architecture and Gardens at the Court of Catherine the Great.* New Haven & London, 1997.

<sup>10</sup> Глумов А. Н. Львов. М., 1980, с. 39.

<sup>11</sup> Нащокина М.В. Палладианские виллы в русских усадебных интерпретациях: Конец XVIII - первая треть XIX века.. *Искусствознание*, N. 1-2 /2010:

double-filed colonnades along the sides; and, most notably, a double dome where the outer layer bears frescoes of the apostles that can be seen through the inner layer."



Borisoglebsky Cathedral, Torzhok, (1785-1796), by N.A. Lvov

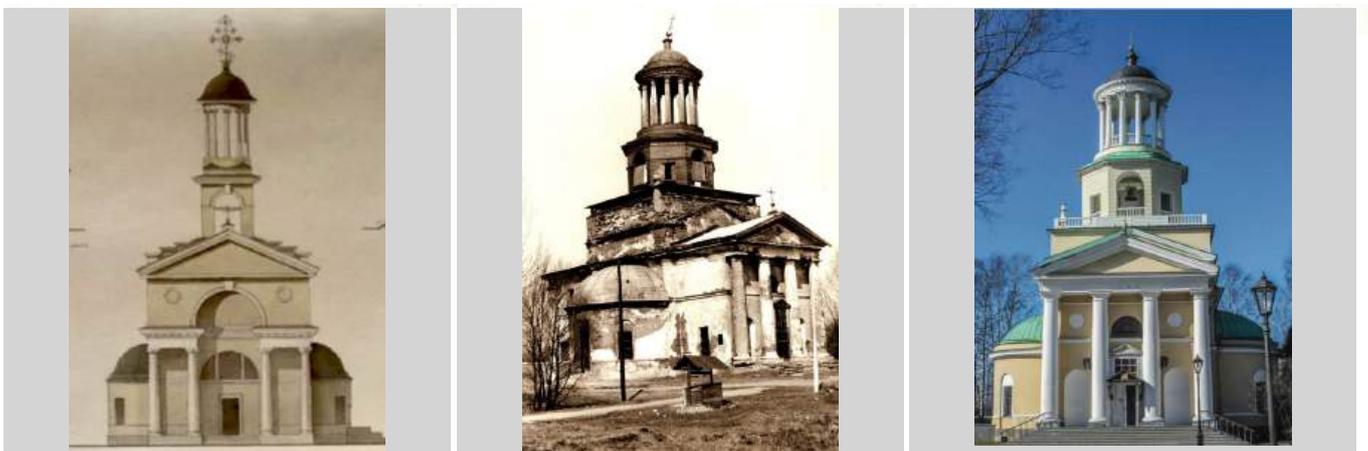
Arguably the architectural chef d'œuvre of Nikolay Lvov, the Borisoglebsky Cathedral is stylistically anchored in a neo-Palladian and strict classical style, revealed by its compact, laconic form, with well-found proportions, strict Doric porticos, which all influence in creating an overall sense of completeness and harmony.<sup>12</sup> According to the art historian Vasily Uspensky, the Borisoglebsky Cathedral, arguably Lvov's architectural masterpiece, reconciled Rus' with Europe under the Palladian portico and marks the definite entry of Palladianism in Russian culture.<sup>13</sup> Built within the walls of an ancient monastery, the cathedral, directly inspired by Palladio's iconic Villa Capra, as well as layouts by Sebastiano Serliano, imposed itself on the town landscape. Palladio praised the Villa Capra for its location atop of a hill, rendering it visually pleasant, which is what we have here with the Borisoglebsky Cathedral.<sup>14</sup> It has all the characteristics of a Palladian building, marked by the symmetrical, cubic layout, with four porticos and a centric dome. The central dome shares many similarities with Lord Burlington's house in Chiswick: octagonally-shaped, with Diocletian windows on the sides. The porticos have Roman Doric columns, probably chosen for their elegant simplicity. The first two, faced opposite each other, have six columns, whilst the remaining two porticos only have two, as it is built inward, similar to the façade of Palladio's Villa Nanni Mocenigo, although this design is also reminiscent of the Athenian Treasury in Delphi. Personally, the choice for such a design over an open loggia is potentially due to the fact that it shields the faithful from the harsh Russian winters. The Borisoglebsky Cathedral has several elements of traditional Byzantine-inspired Russian church architecture. Firstly, the building has five domes, four low cylindrical drums adorning the central dome, typical of Orthodox architecture, with the Orthodox Christian crosses atop the domes rendering the religious connotations very clear. Here, the fusion of neo-Palladianism with traditional Russian church architecture by Nikolay Lvov arguably serves as an

<sup>12</sup> Никулина Н. И. Николай Львов. Л.: Лениздат, 1971. с. 89

<sup>13</sup> Успенский, Василий Михайлович. Палладианская Россия. Николай Львов и миф русской усадьбы / Василий Успенский. - (Художник). - Текст : непосредственный // Русское искусство. - 2015. - № 2. - С. 74-83 : ил. - Примеч. - ISSN 1729-9063.

<sup>14</sup> Tavernor, R. (2005). *Palladio and palladianism*. Thames and Hudson, p. 78.

implicit message in which Russia wanted to become more European yet retain its distinct identity, most obvious on a religious dimension in which Russia's Orthodox Christianity sets it apart from Western Europe. As Uspensky suggests, symbolically this stylistic syncretism sends a clear message to the viewer: aspects of European culture, in this instance reflected in the cathedral's resemblance to the Villa Capra, can co-exist with traditional Russian culture. In a sense, the choice of Palladianism here also reflects the state's westernising, and by extension modernising, efforts, in that arguably the building's geometry, symmetry and laconic form, personifies the values of the Russian Enlightenment: reason triumphant and divine order. Hence, the Borisoglebsky Cathedral embodies the successful assimilation of Palladianism into Russian culture, serving as a visual platform to project state ideology. Whilst Russia has had a long tradition of absorbing Western influences to formulate a native architectural idiom, the choice of Palladianism sends a clear ideological message: both the state and the Russian noble élite desired to culturally associate themselves with Europe, by imposing in the heart of an ancient monastery, arguably the quintessence of Russianness, a monumental monument built in pure Palladian style.



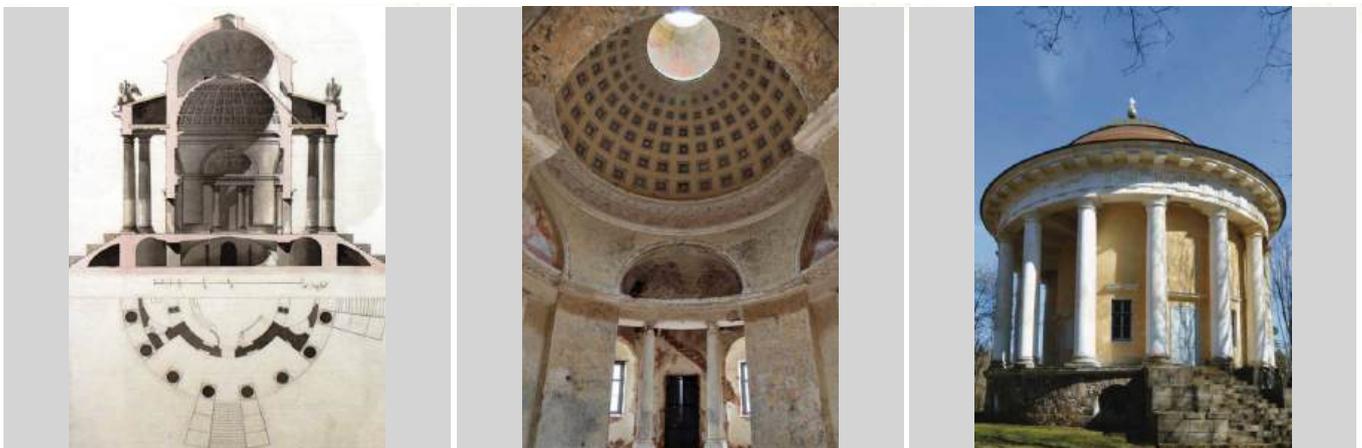
Church of Saint Catherine's, Murino (1786-1790), by N.A. Lvov

Situated in the suburbs of St-Petersburg, the Murino Church built on the Vorontsov's estate, exemplifies the distinctiveness of Russian Palladianism. Firstly, Lvov differs from Palladianism in that he experiments with pure geometric forms.<sup>15</sup> As Uspensky explains, the compositional layout was initially designed to become a private church, but in the process it was decided that it would become a parish church. Therefore, an octagonal belfry topped by a rotunda belvedere was added, placed directly above the building. This echoes typical traits of XVII-XVIII Russian religious architecture, called "иже под колоколы" (under the bells).<sup>16</sup> This tradition stipulates that the belltower must be placed directly on top of the church, contrary to the usual church layouts found in the West. The Murino church thus exemplifies the skillful, innovative approach employed by Nikolay Lvov, in which a typical Russian parish church's functionality remains in place, whilst being rebranded with a European neoclassical façade. The religious essence

<sup>15</sup> Shvidkovsky, D. O. (2007). *Russian architecture and the West*. Yale University Press. (pp. 263-265)

<sup>16</sup> Успенский, Василий Михайлович. *Палладианская Россия. Николай Львов и миф русской усадьбы / Василий Успенский. - (Художник). - Текст : непосредственный // Русское искусство. - 2015. - № 2. - С. 74-83 : ил. - Примеч. - ISSN 1729-9063.*

remains intact, yet in appearance it has seemingly become more westernised, which in turn reflects the contradictions in Russia's westernisation processes. On the surface, it became more European, yet the extent to which it truly became European remains contested. Finally, it is worth stating the Murino church served as a prototype, centric church with bell tower on one vertical axis, for other religious monuments constructed by Lvov, notably the Church of the Vladimir Icon of the Mother of God, in the village of Gornitsy (1789-1795), and the Gate Tower in the Borisoglebsky monastery situated in Torzhok. The former is another church built on a former noble estate, in this instance it was commissioned by the estate owner Pyotr Beklemishev. Per Alter, another example of Lvov's bold experimentation with composition., as seen with Lvov's willingness to not only fuse western classical architecture with Orthodox architecture, but simultaneously alter traditional church architecture. For example, the apse, traditionally reserved for the altar, has been placed on both sides. Palladian, the entryway is a four-column portico, with the "иже под колоколы" motif reappearing, essentially a bell tower that is topped by a belvedere right above the altar area.<sup>17</sup>



Rotunda Church-Mausoleum, Nikolskoye-Cherenchitsy, (1789-1802), by N.A. Lvov

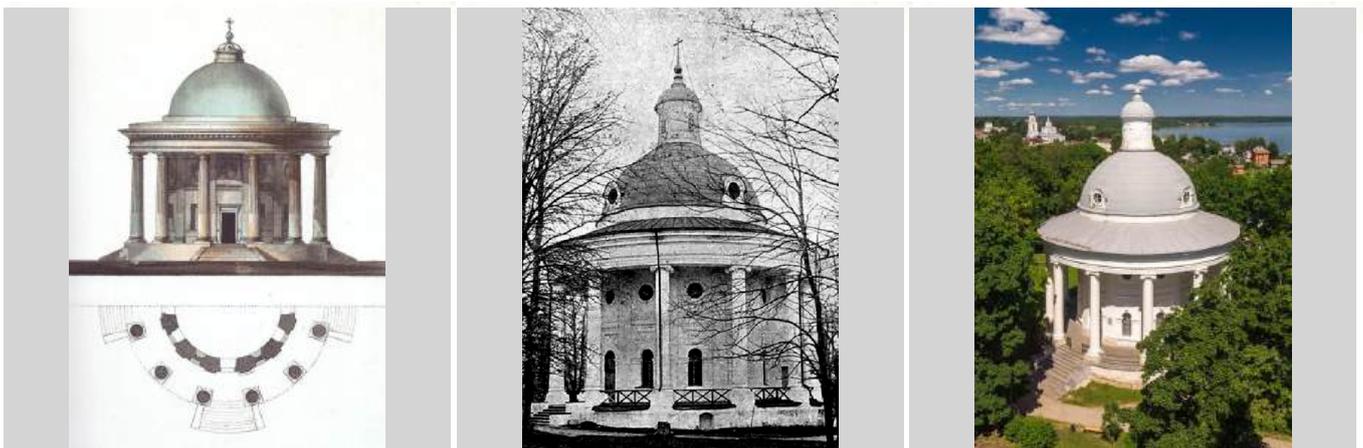
Finally, the last prototype worth visiting is the Rotundal Church-Mausoleum that Nikolay Lvov constructed at Nikolskoye-Cherenchitsy, his home estate in the Tver province. As a mausoleum, the Church is the site where the architect was buried following his death in 1804. The architectural influences of the design are several, from Cameron's Temple of Friendship at Pavlovsk, itself inspired by William Chambers' Temple of Pan at Stowe, to, inevitably, Bramante's Tempietto, and by extension, the ancient temple at Tivoli. Proportionally, it fulfills Vitruvian requirements.<sup>18</sup> The rotundal form was considered as the ideal for a Christian Church during the Renaissance, both from its sacred meaning, and from the point of view of its strength and durability. Notably, Palladio supported this view, calling for churches to be built in the forms of rotundas.<sup>19</sup> According to Putyatin, the Rotundal Church at Nikolskoye-Cherenchitsy embodied

<sup>17</sup> Альтер, О. С., & Петров, А. С. (2022). Новая номинация UNESCO "Исторический центр Торжка и усадебная архитектура Николая Львова". Первоочередные задачи и пути решения. Журнал Института Наследия.

<sup>18</sup> Брайцева О.И., Будылина М.В., Харламова А.М. Архитектор Н.А. Львов. М., 1961

<sup>19</sup> Tereshina, O. B. (2018, November). Rotundal temple in Russia: European roots and Russian traditions. In IOP Conference Series: Materials Science and Engineering (Vol. 451, No. 1, p. 012127). IOP Publishing.

the concept of "sacralization" of secular buildings, in which churches did not become secularised but on the contrary secularised forms, borrowed from villas or pavilions, suddenly become imbued with spiritual meaning.<sup>20</sup> This reflects Palladio's own approach and the broader trend in Russian Palladianism to connect secular life with Christian faith through architecture. The Rotundal Church in Nikolskoye is also reflective of the Romanticism found in not only Lvov's architecture but also his poetry, in which the building is, in Ilyin's words, simple in composition, perfect and complete in form. Ilyin further traces the influence the belief of the "natural man" had upon Lvov. Striving to achieve an overall architectural harmony in the ensemble, Lvov strived, very much as Palladio did, to have a built environment, placed in a nature, that enabled the inhabitant, in this case the Russian nobleman, to reveal his inner feelings and bring out the best qualities in man.<sup>21</sup> Such lofty ideals reflect the influence of the Enlightenment upon the architect, and to a lesser extent, implicitly shows the extent to which Lvov's was westernised in as much as he was fully immersed in exploring the ideals of the European enlightenment. Hence, the Rotundal Church definitely serves as another example in which the Palladian-inspired Rotundal Church-Mausoleum shaped the noble identity. As a sentimentalist poet, Lvov was involved in an artistic group of poets associated with the cultural phenomenons of the Russian Enlightenment. His love for nature and belief in the ideal of private life is arguably reflected in his provincial architecture.<sup>22</sup>



The Church of the Great Martyr Catherine, Valdai, (1786-1793), by N.A. Lvov

Following the charter of the nobility signed by Peter III in 1762, most of the Russian nobility was freed from military service, causing the mass influx of noblemen to return to their native estates, to live with their families and domestics.<sup>23</sup> Many were small and dilapidated, and hence the

<sup>20</sup> Путьтин И. Е. Кваренги и Львов: «Паломничество к итальяским святыням», или Рождение образа храма русского ампира. Часть 2 // Искусствознание. № 1-2/10. М., 2010. С. 275-309. (1,7 а.л.)

<sup>21</sup> Ильин М. А. О палладианстве в творчестве Д. Кваренги и Н. Львова // Русское искусство XVIII в. М., 1973. С. 103–108.

<sup>22</sup> Альтер, О. С., & Петров, А. С. (2022). Новая номинация UNESCO " Исторический центр Торжка и усадебная архитектура Николая Львова". Первоочередные задачи и пути решения. Журнал Института Наследия.

<sup>23</sup> SHVIDKOVSKY, D. (2005). *The Founding of Saint Petersburg and the History of Russian Architecture. Studies in the History of Art*, 66, 78–97. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42622378>

1760s onwards saw the emergence of the *usadba*, the Russian word for country estate, in which Russian noblemen built for themselves a country house to retire to, essentially acting as an antithesis to work in the urban capital. The *usadba*, in other words the Russian country estate, as a cultural phenomenon was primarily influenced from the Palladian works of Nikolay Lvov, and inevitably the landscape gardens associated with the country estates. In as much as it was destined to be a place visited by the Russian nobility, the church itself is reflective of broader, cultural trends in Russian élite society, in which, appropriating western architecture to their own environments, the Russian aristocracy imbued their domestic environment with a new, distinctly European flavour. Embedded in their homes was the influence of Palladianism. The Church Mausoleum symbolically reflects that Lvov's ideals were inevitably closely aligned with those of the Russian Enlightenment.



The Transfiguration Cathedral, Vyborg (1781), by N.A. Lvov

To conclude, this paper explored the way in which Nikolay Lvov's architecture represents a unique fusion of Enlightenment ideals and imperial aspirations, all instrumental in shaping a new Europeanised identity amongst the Russian nobility. While prior scholarship has emphasised his stylistic innovations and sources of architectural inspirations, this study has highlighted the implicit, ideological functions and state propaganda, found in Lvov's architecture, positioning him as a pivotal figure whose architectural works helped influence the changing identities of the Russian noble élite. Future research in this yet understudied aspect of Russian architectural history should consider tracing the exact sources of inspiration, whether French classical architecture, Piranesi's engravings or specific Palladian buildings, and identifying them with Lvov's various, architectural works.

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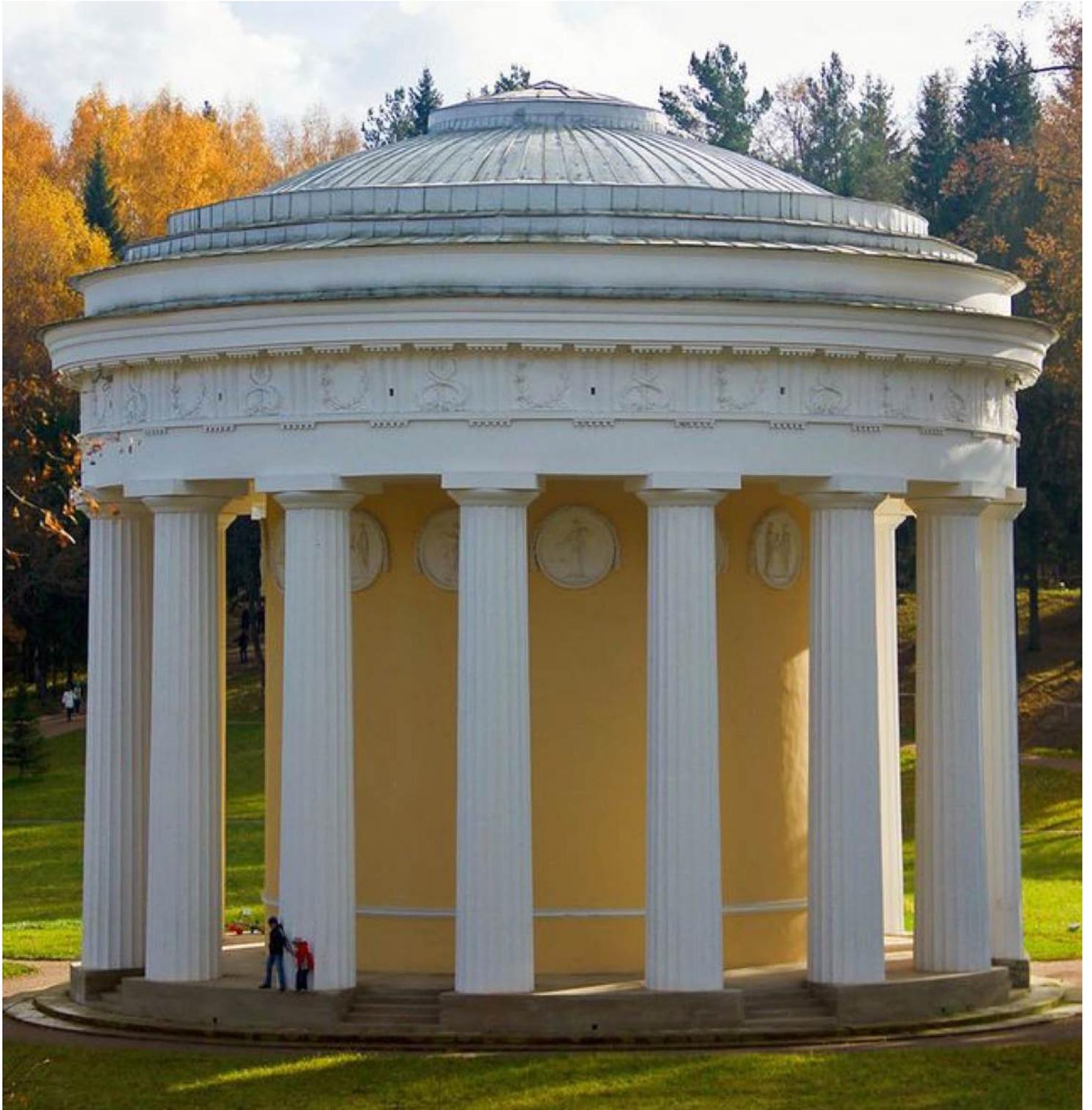
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Church of the Holy Mandylion (Spassky Church), Torzhok, (1804-11), by N.A. Lvov



**Tsarskoe Selo**  
**Temple of Friendship, 1770s**

**Architect: Charles Cameron**  
**St. Petersburg, Russia**