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# Sculptural images of St. Isaac's cathedral in St. Petersburg: porticoes and doors

## *Imágenes escultóricas de la catedral de San Isaac en San Petersburgo: pórticos y puertas*

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**Abstract:** The article introduces the reader into the history of St. Isaac's cathedral in St. Petersburg. It describes the subjects of the high reliefs on the pediments of its four porticoes and three main doors, the ones related to the life of St. Isaac of Dalmatia, Christ and the Blessed Virgin Mary. These subjects as well as the statues of the apostles on the pediments' corners and saints on the door folds are discussed in the context of significance of these personages for the Orthodox tradition in Russia. The article also discusses the ruling dynasty's vision of the relationship between secular and clerical powers.

The article deals with the builders of the cathedral of which the leading role belongs to the architect and artist Auguste Monferrand and the sculptor Ivan Vitali. The author discusses their contribution to the construction of the cathedral which is an example of late Classicism.

St. Isaac's cathedral is represented in the article as an embodiment of Russia's union with the traditions of European culture.

**Keywords:** cathedral, Orthodoxy, absolutism, patriotism, religious faith, spiritual values, history of culture, architecture, high relief, sculpture

**Resumen:** El artículo introduce en la historia de la Catedral de San Isaac. Describe los temas de los altorrelieves en los frontones de los cuatro pórticos y de las tres puertas principales que se refieren, respectivamente, a la vida de San Isaac de Dalmacia, Cristo y la Virgen María. Estos temas, igual que las estatuas de los apóstoles en las esquinas de los frontones y los santos en los paneles de las puertas se consideran en el contexto del significado que tienen estos personajes para la tradición Ortodoxa en Rusia. El artículo trata también de la visión que tiene la dinastía reinante acerca de la relación entre el poder secular y el clerical.

Se informa, además, sobre los constructores de la catedral, entre los cuales desempeñan un papel principal el arquitecto y artista Auguste Monferrand y el escultor Ivan Vitali, y se expone su contribución a la construcción de la catedral, que es un ejemplo del clasicismo tardío.

La catedral de San Isaac se considera en este artículo como la expresión plástica de la unión de Rusia con las tradiciones de la cultura europea.

**Palabras clave:** catedral, Ortodoxia, absolutismo, patriotismo, fe religiosa, valores espirituales, historia de la cultura, arquitectura, altorrelieve, escultura.



St. Isaac's cathedral was begun as the biggest of its kind in Russia and fourth in size after St. Peter's cathedral in Rome, St. Paul's in London and Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence, its dome being 101.5 meters high<sup>1</sup>. The cathedral was built on the site of churches which had eventually gone in disrepair. The first of them, a small and unpretentious structure, was built and consecrated in 1707 in commemoration of Peter I's birthday who was born on 30 May, 1672. A few years later, Peter I was wed there to Catherine I. Since the church calendar lists May 30 as the day of Reverend Isaac of Dalmatia, the cathedral was dedicated to this saint and got his name. The choice of the name was more dictated by the dates in the czar's life than religious motifs. St. Isaac's personality, though, and the facts of his religious devotion have

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<sup>1</sup> The Church of Christ the Savior, built in Moscow in 1883 by Konstantin Ton, superseded it by 3.5 meters.

become the subjects of a constant quest into the significance of Christian virtues in the life of man and society as well as into the essence of relationship between the state and the church.

Isaac of Dalmatia, a 4<sup>th</sup> century monk, came to Constantinople to give his word of consolation to Christians victimized by Emperor Valens who plunged into heretic Arianism. The monk cautioned the Emperor against persecution of Christians predicting him defeat and death at the hands of heathens. Valens paid no heed to Isaac's prophecies and incarcerated him. The prediction was to come true and Emperor Theodosius, who succeeded to the throne after Valens, set Reverend Isaac free giving him due credit. The rest of his life Isaac spent as Father-Superior in a monastery. In his old age he handed over this post to Reverend Dalmatius. This monastery went down in church history as Dalmatian, and this epithet was added to the name of its founder, Isaac of Dalmatia.

On the death of Peter I, the cathedral's reconstruction was under close surveillance of Catherine II, Paul I, Alexander I and Nicholas I who wanted to demonstrate traditional deference of the ruling dynasty to St. Isaac of Dalmatia. The existing cathedral was begun in 1818 by the French architect Auguste Montferrand on the order of Alexander I and finished in 1858 during the reign of Nicholas I. Interestingly, both emperors showed their vivid interest in the architectural design of the cathedral and its interior and exterior decoration. The project submitted by Montferrand was carried out after a thorough study of the domes of St. Peter's cathedral finished by Michelangelo and Santa Maria del Fiore by Brunelleschi. Montferrand gathered around him a group of brilliant sculptors of the time – Ivan Vitali, Philippe Henri Lemaire, Pyotr Klodt, Nikolai Pimenov, Joseph German, Alexander Loganovsky and some others – who executed sculptures from his drawings. The leading role in this team belonged to the Russian sculptor of Italian origin Ivan Vitali who had been brought to Russia in his young years. Vitali executed over three hundred statues and reliefs as well as the designs of two pediments, plastic imagery of the inner and outer doors, the drum and the dome.

All details related to the cathedral's decoration were subjects of discussions and approval by the Synod and the *ad hoc* government committee consisting of the professors of the Academy of Fine Arts. The subject matter of sculptural images on the doors and porticoes was first and foremost to convey the idea of the redeeming mission of Christ. St. Isaac's image was to be a symbol and acknowledgement of the unconditional priority of ecclesiastical power over political, while the cathedral itself was to assert the union of the church and the state.

St. Isaac's cathedral is placed near the Neva in the vicinity of the Senate and the Synod close to the imperial residence, the Winter Palace. It is a cross in plan whose axes point strictly at the West and East, North and South. There are four porticoes placed on the ends of each of the axes. The subjects of the imagery of the southern and northern pediments are the Nativity and the Resurrection of

Christ, while the pediments facing the East and the West represent the main events in the life of St. Isaac. The pediments of the porticoes bear bronze figures of the four Evangelists, while the corners of each portico bear two figures of the apostles.

*The subject of the eastern pediment* adjoining the altar is «Isaac of Dalmatia Before Emperor Valens» showing the latter setting off to fight off the Goths. It was sculpted by Philippe Henri Lemaire. The mighty figure of the monk appears abruptly in the way of the Emperor so that his horse rears up. The monk raises his arm to heaven foretelling death to Valens. Behind the monk there are Christian women and children seeking his protection. But the other arm of the monk is seized by the soldier of the Emperor. He is surrounded by the warriors and is doomed to be jailed. The image of the reverend monk is imbued with spiritual power against which the figure of the rider visually shrinks and loses its force. On top of the pediment there is the figure of St. Luke with a winged calf holding the New Testament and two apostles on the sides of the pediment – Apostle James with the New Testament and Apostle Simon with a saw by which he took his death as a martyr. Below are the gilded letters with an inscription in Old Slavonic, «In you, Lord, I have found refuge, let me never be put to shame».



*The pediment of the western portico* produced by Vitali shows the meeting of Emperor Theodosius with Isaac of Dalmatia. The central group is made up of Emperor Theodosius, his wife Flaxilla and Isaac just freed from jail. The emperor and his wife piously bow their heads before the reverend monk who blesses them. Beside the regal couple one can see the figures of Saturnin and Victorius, courtiers and major church benefactors. Theodosius' face bears a certain resemblance to that of Nicholas I as well as Flaxilla's to Nicholas' spouse Alexandra Fyodorovna.



Saturnin's image is a portrait of Prince Volkonsky who chaired the government committee for the construction of the cathedral. Victorius is a portrait of Alexei Olenin who was President of the Academy of Fine Arts. Both of them facilitated the construction of the cathedral. St. Isaac bears semblance to Metropolitan Serafim (Glagolevsky) from the Synod. In the corner of the pediment there is a figure of a reclining Byzantine architect whose head is a sculptural portrait of Auguste Montferrand. The architect is intently watching the encounter of the Emperor with the reverend monk. This idea of endowing sculptural images with portrait likeness was suggested to Vitali by the artist Karl Briullov, an acknowledged portrait painter of the time. In the foreground on the right, the Emperor's warriors bow before the monk; one of them lays fasces before him in a gesture of recognition of his power to administer justice.

The center of the pediment is topped with the statue of St. Mark with a lion flanked on the sides by St. Thomas with five spears and St. Luke carrying on the back a crucifix, the size of a human figure. The gilded inscription below reads, «To the King of the Rulers».

*The pediment of the northern portico* depicts the Resurrection of Christ produced by Philippe Henri Lemaire. In the center of the composition, the figure of Christ in an upward movement as if at the beginning of his ascension, is surrounded by the angels. The message of this sculptural group is to testify to the truth of the Resurrection. The pediment at the center is topped with a figure of St. John the Evangelist with an eagle flanked by St. Peter with the keys and St. Paul with a double-edged

sword. The northern portico faces the Neva and the Bronze Horseman, the monument to Peter I by Etienne Falconet. The inscription under the pediment in gilded bronze letters reads, «May the Lord answer you when you are in distress». These words addressed to the reigning czar Nicholas I are also a blessing to the whole dynasty starting from Peter the Great and forth.



*The southern portico* faces the square with an equestrian monument to Nicholas I in the center of it (sculptor Pyotr Klodt). Across the square there is the Mariinsky palace built in 1839-1844 by the architect Andrey Shtakenshneider for Nicholas' daughter Maria Nikolayevna. The theme of the pediment is far from being randomly chosen – it is an interplay of religious and secular meanings: the image of the Virgin Mary with the Christ Child interlaces with the idea of motherhood. «The Adoration of the Magi» made by Vitali represents the wise men of the Orient who brought their gifts to Mary and the newly-born child who is to become the Savior. Apart from the shepherds, there are many other figures on the pediment. Their different postures are to demonstrate their deference to Christ and faithfulness to the truth he preached. Over the pediment, there is a statue of St. Matthew with an angel. On either side of the statue there are two more apostles: Andrew the Firstcalled and Philip. Andrew the Firstcalled, St. Peter's brother, can be seen over the northern pediment. Of Philip's many deeds one of the best known was bringing a child back to life in the arms of the inconsolable mother. The gilded bronze inscription under the pediment reads, «My house shall be called a house of prayer».



The apexes of all four porticoes are at the level of the attic with the statues of the apostles being the connecting pieces of the building's main bloc with the upper structure which is formed by the central dome and four subordinate domes. To achieve smooth transition from the lower to the upper levels and to render wholeness to the structure, the architect placed two genuflect angels with lanterns decorated with garlands of flowers on each corner of the attic and two angels on the corner pilasters (caryatides). The central dome is placed on a high drum surrounded by twenty-four columns. The balustrade over the colonnade carries rhythmically placed statues of twenty four angels with slightly raised wings and slightly bowed heads (these were cast of bronze by Pyotr Klodt after the model by Joseph German). The angels praying for the salvation of the humankind and the apostles high above the parish, bless the space around the cathedral.

Below the pediments behind the columns of the portico there are *three doors* leading into the cathedral from the west, north and south. Their initial design was prompted by the doors of the Baptistery in the Florence Cathedral executed by Lorenzo Ghiberti. His «Gates of Paradise» which inspired Russian artists were repeated in the doors of the Cazan cathedral in St. Petersburg built by Andrey Voronikhin. However Montferrand who made drawings of the doors and Vitali who executed bronze elements for all of them borrowed only the idea of placing the reliefs changing their subjects and emphasizing the principal idea of the doors – to be the gates of Christian faith. The resulting doors represent the main events in the life of Jesus and the most significant ones for the Russian faithful ones.

The doors made of bronze are flanked by marble pilasters with the bases and capitals of the Corinthian order and various ornaments.

*The bas-reliefs of the southern doors* continue the theme of the pediment of the southern portico – Christ's young years. The upmost high relief over the two doors depicts «The Presentation of Jesus at the Temple». Its central figure is the just and devout Simeon who translated the Holy Scripture into Greek. This pious old man had a revelation: he will not die until he meets Christ. The elder is depicted with the Christ Child in his arms brought to the temple by Mary and Joseph on the fortieth day after his birth as it was required by the tradition prescribed by the Old Testament. Simeon pronounces his prophecy of the messianic role of Christ, while people gathered at the temple attentively listen to his words and are ready to kneel down before the child. The kneeling and prayerful Virgin Mary with Christ is the nearest to Simeon. The name of this scene comes from the Old Testament and it means 'an encounter', i.e. the encounter of Simeon, the guardian of the tradition, with the new faith brought about by Christ as God in flesh. That explains why Simeon's other name is the Godreceiver. This high relief symbolizes the union of the Old and the New Testament. At the same time this is a new rendition of motherhood. Mary's father, Joachim, had been excommunicated from the Temple for he and his wife Anne had been childless which according to the teachings of the Torah was considered to be a sign of God's displeasure. The birth of a child, on the contrary, was God's blessing which aroused in parents reverential love. This attitude toward the child is supplemented in the New Testament by the consecration of mother's sacrificial (Christian!) love of the son epitomized by the image of the Virgin Mary.

The inscription below the high-reliefs reads, «Great is the mystery of godliness: He was revealed in the flesh».

Both door folds are divided into three parts. The subjects of the top ones are from the childhood of Christ. The left fold shows «The Flight into Egypt». In the foreground, the half-size figure of Mary with the Christ Child stands out, while Joseph is seen a little behind. Unseen by Mary and Jesus, the angel who had told Joseph about the mortal danger which was in store for Christ at the hands of Herod, crosses and blesses them. The high-relief of the right door shows «The Conversation of the Twelve-Year-Old Christ with the Pharisees». This image seems to be bathing in the light radiating from the loving and devout eyes of Mary who at Pass-over came to Jerusalem with her son and suddenly saw him in the Temple amidst aged and wise men marveling at the boy's answers to their questions. In the center of the high relief, we see young Jesus gesticulating as if he were a teacher explaining something to his pupils, and the reaction of the elderly men clearly evidences that they have got to know a truth unknown to them before.

In the niches on either side of the doors, there are two high-reliefs made to the subjects of «The Annunciation to the Shepherds of the Savior's Nativity» and «The Massacre of the Innocent».

The central rectangular part of the door is twice as big as the upper and lower parts. They bear two full-size figures of the Angel and a man playing a special part in





The bas-reliefs of the southern doors.

the Orthodox tradition of Russia. On the left door we see «St. Alexander Nevsky, the Great and Faithful Prince» as the caption reads. Alexander, the Prince of Novgorod and Vladimir and the son of the great Prince Yaroslav, defeated in 1240 the Swedes on the Neva who were on their way to conquer Novgorod. For this victory Alexander was given the name of Nevsky. Later, he often had to defend Russia either by sword or wise words from various enemies, including the Tatars. In 1380 he was consecrated by the church. In 1724 Peter I ordered that his remains be moved from the town of Vladimir to St. Petersburg to the Alexander Nevsky monastery specially built for this occasion on the site of his victorious battle. The right arm of the saint, resting on his heart, attests to the epithet «faithful» given to the Prince. There is a shield in the left hand. For the general Russian public Alexander Nevsky epitomized Russia's guardian. For St. Petersburg's citizens he was a patron-warrior, and this belief was strengthened by the fact that czar Alexander I who had defeated Napoleon, had the same name as St. Alexander Nevsky. When Leningrad was besieged by the Nazi troops, it was St. Alexander and Archangel Michael that the city's residents addressed their prayers of protection.

The right fold of the doors bears the relief «Archangel Michael». The name of Archangel Michael who led the host of angels and who defeated the Satan, has a few meanings for Russians. The principal one is that St. Michael symbolizes the triumph of the true faith over its foes, the triumph of ultimate justice over sins and temptations. On the door fold Archangel Michael with the fiery sword tramples on the Satan disguised as a snake. Russian Orthodox believers see in this image both the angel heralding with a trumpet the advent of the Doom's Day and the judge of the sinful. Christ entrusted him to protect the souls of the forebear Abraham and the Virgin Mary.

The Orthodox church in Russia particularly honors the appearance of Archangel Michael before Archimandrite Joseph in 1608 when Polish troops laid siege to the St. Trinity Monastery and threatened death to its monks. St. Michael predicted that the siege would be raised and the invaders would flee. This prediction came true very soon. In 1621 the first czar of the Romanov dynasty Mikhail Fyodorovich ordered to ornate one of the helmets in the Armory Chamber with an image of Archangel Michael made of enamel. Later this emblem was included into the coat-of-arms of Russia. In 1812 after Napoleon's defeat, Alexander I donated «the miraculous icon of St. Michael to the monastery for a constant and thankful prayer». Russian people prayed to Archangel Michael for the protection of the throne, the state and salvation of Russia.

Each of the two bottom parts of the door folds is a high relief representing two kneeling angels bending their heads before the beaming cross. The cross on the left door fold bears an inscription «You will be my force, my fortress and my power, my savior and protector from those warring against me, my shield and guardian, forever guarding me and protecting».

The cross on the right door fold bears an inscription, «The all-immaculate saw Your Son, how his body was mutilated by weapons, and she exclaimed like all sobbing in sickness, but she glorified the might of the Cross».

*The western doors* of the cathedral are of a particular importance, since from this place the visitor can sweep with a glance the altar and its opulent decoration. The theme of the topmost high relief over the doors is «The Sermon on the Mount». In the center of it there is seated Christ slightly above his listeners; his right arm is raised as if he were convincing people around him that the moral truths he was preaching, despite their difference from the Judaic morals, are also heaven sent. People differently react to his words: three old men standing close to Christ, perceive his words with profound seriousness and attention. The woman with a child looks at him with hope while the two commentators of the Torah discuss the new teaching with doubt. The inscription below the high relief reads, «Blessed are those who hear the word of God, and observe it».

The upper parts of the door folds represent the events of the life of Jesus attesting to the healing powers of his spirit. The left fold represents «The Awakening of Lazarus». Jesus came to Lazarus' house on the fourth day after his death when the signs of decay were already in evidence. The figure of the Savior in the high relief stands out against the background, his arm points at Lazarus as he says: «Stand up and go!». The expression of Lazarus' face and those of the lamenting women clearly show that they are witnesses to a miracle. In the history of Christianity, this episode is known as Lazarus Saturday which is revered as the sign of all-mighty God and, at the same time, as the sign of difference in the teachings of the Talmud and the teaching of Christ: reproached by the Talmudists that on a Sabbath instead of praying Christ occupies himself with healing, he responded with the words which were to become the cornerstone of Christianity, «The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath».

The subject of the right door fold is «Jesus Heals the Man with Palsy». It shows the episode when Jesus healed the man who had been bed-ridden for thirty-eight years. Again, with the upward movement of his arm, Christ raises the man with the words, «Arise, take up your pallet and walk». The faces and gestures of those represented in the high-relief also suggest that they are witnessing a miracle. Now the healed one replies to the Pharisees who reproach him of carrying his pallet on the Sabbath: «He listened to the one who made him well».

These three themes on the western doors represent Christ in his mission of the Savior of body and soul and are permeated with the idea of salvation of the humankind.

In the central part of the door folds, there are figures of St. Peter and St. Paul whose role is very special in the Christian tradition in general and in Russian in particular. The inscription on the left fold reads, «Saint and Supreme Apostle Peter». St. Peter, as it is well-known, renounced Christ three times when arrested by the



The western doors.

Romans. But it is St. Peter who has become the pillar of Christianity and the keeper of the keys to it. This is exactly the way he is represented in the high relief. And this is the power of human repentance and the mercy of the Savior who, after his Resurrection, had forgiven the sinner and reinstated him in the apostolic title.

«Saint Supreme Apostle Paul» a Jew by birth, as we known, was a Roman citizen and a violent persecutor of Christians, but the revelation from above opened to him the truth of the Christian faith. He turned into its ardent guardian and protector. This mission he fulfilled by word and by sword with which he is traditionally represented. Both apostles suffered martyrdom for their faith: Peter was crucified, with his head down at his request, and Paul was beheaded. For Christians, they both have epitomized atonement for apostasy and disbelief, and spiritual rebirth of man by the power of faith.

Peter I dedicated the first cathedral to be built at the foundation of St. Petersburg to these apostles; their names were given to the fortress where the Peter-and-Paul cathedral was built. The names of these apostles were given to the heirs to the throne.

The bottom parts of the door folds bear figures of angels like on the other doors. Only the inscriptions are different on the crosses which the angels hold. The left one reads, «The all-honest cross, the four-fold power, apostles' splendor, martyrs' stronghold, the health of the sick, the resurrection of the dead, the exaltation of the fallen». The inscription on the right reads, «The all-power cross, apostles' commendation, the reverends' assertion and the sign of the faithful, the glory of the hierarchs and of the martyrs, the triumph and affirmation of all who praise You».

*The northern doors of the cathedral* thematically represent the Resurrection of Christ which is shown in the tympanum of the portico. The upper part over the doors is devoted to Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. In the center, there is Jesus on a donkey like many others who come to the Holy Land. He is greeted by men, women and children who bow and kneel down. One from the crowd gives some grass to the donkey. Jesus answers and blesses the crowd. The picture is permeated with peace, it foretells a quiet acceptance of Jesus' teachings and affirmation of the new faith. Below the high relief there is the Old Slavonic ligature, «Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord». The upper part of the door folds depicts the end of Jesus' life on Earth: the left fold bears the inscription «Behold the Man» and the right one «Passions of Christ».

The subject of the left door is Christ after Pilate's court: he stands with a wreath of thorns, his arms are tied up and his eyes are downcast. He is flanked by two figures personifying the injustice of Judaic and Roman authorities and disbelief in the messianic role of the Savior. On the right door Christ is shown after flagellation. He stares at the mount as if seeking salvation, but there is not a morsel of hatred at the two tormentors torturing him.

In the niches on either side of the doors there are high reliefs «Bearing the Cross» and «The Entombment». The outcome of the event represented here can be seen in the portico which shows the Resurrection of Christ.



The northern doors.

The big middle parts of the door folds represent St. Nicholas and St. Isaac. It has already been mentioned that Russian monarchs paid special homage to «St. Isaac, the Miracle-Worker of Dalmatia» as the caption says below the high relief on the right fold of the doors. One should also mention a very special status of «St. Nicholas, the Miracle-Maker of Myra in Lycia» in Russian tradition. European Christians worship St. Nicholas primarily as the guardian of sailors and travelers. That explains the fact that his remains had been carried to Venice. This special status of the saint was particularly important for the cathedral in the city which became Russia's maritime capital. For the general public in Muscovy and in the Russian Empire of exceptional importance were the deeds of this saint in the field of conciliating the warring and the protection of the guiltless unjustly convicted.

The feast of carrying the remains of St. Nicholas had been introduced in Russia way back in 1092. Many of his icons were recognized as miraculous and he was nicknamed Nicholas, God's Saint. Until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century he had been unrivaled in the number of churches and icons dedicated to him (second only to the Blessed Virgin Mary). Newly born boys most often had received his name. His name was given to czar Nicholas I during whose reign the cathedral was completed. St. Nicholas' figure was chosen to be placed on a par with the figure of St. Isaac.

The angels in the bottom parts of the doors carry crosses with the inscriptions in Old Slavonic. The left one reads, «The cross is the resurrection for all, the correction of the fallen, mortification of passions and nailing of the flesh, the cross is glory for souls and light eternal». The right fold reads, «The cross is the death of foes, the sore and the capture of the evil-doers, the power and guardian of the faithful and prosecutor of demons».

The inscriptions on the doors are chosen from psalms. The subjects for exterior decoration of St. Isaac's cathedral are immersed in the context of Russian history and linked to its major events and personages.

Realization of religious ideas in the cathedral's decoration was in line with the artistic and technical tasks. First of all, one should note that of many projects submitted for approval by the czar, Alexander I refused the one executed in the tradition of Old Russian church architecture and chose the one in the classical style, more appropriate for the contemporary European styles. The cathedral is an example of opulent sculptural decoration, the thing which made it different from Orthodox architecture which mostly relied on icons – the images of saints displayed in the churches. Moreover, bronze elements are represented not only by bas-reliefs but by high reliefs; principal figures are sculptures separated from the background and partly stepping away from the pediments and the doors.

Each of the Evangelists and Apostles on the corners of the pediments is shown in a peculiar way in order to demonstrate the traits of their characters and distinctive details. The seated Evangelists are represented in a vivid communication with the accompanying angel or calf, lion or eagle. The figures of standing apostles are placed

at the height of thirty meters, so their visual perception from the ground was given special consideration. Vitali made their shoulders broader and elongated their palms. Their garments are in large folds thus enabling to show the movement of the body.

The details of the decoration are harmonious and graceful and are often marked by expression. Nicholas I ordered that the bas-reliefs of the porticoes should be gilded but Montferrand and some other members of the Academy of Fine Arts dissuaded him from this idea. The resulting effect was more in line with the strict style of the cathedral and its facing in dark marble and granite. The sculptural decoration of the cathedral produced by talented Russian, French and German sculptors is an example of the best works of late Classicism.

Technical problems solved at the construction of the cathedral also attested to the engineering talents of its builders. The high reliefs of the pediments, doors and sculptures were cast of bronze or copper by the galvanoplastic technique and were of huge weight. Their mounting involved great problems, since the high reliefs of the pediments, eighty tons in weight each, could damage the cornice supporting them. To avoid this, the high reliefs were encapsulated into reinforced iron fittings attached to the tympanums of each pediment so that they could hang safely over the cornices.

These two-fold doors are made of electroplated or cast panels on a foundation of oak-tree. Each door fold, ten tons in weight each, required a special cogged mechanism to be opened. These mechanisms are inserted deep into the walls.

Montferrand took an unprecedented decision when mounting forty eight columns, each being a monolith of one hundred and fourteen tons. His idea was to raise the columns before building the walls of the cathedral. For this he devised a whole system of collapsible scaffolding, lifting mechanisms, turnplates, trolleys etc. He calculated raising operations so precisely that every column was raised and mounted during forty or forty-five minutes. These operations invariably attracted crowds of marveling citizens. Russian and foreign specialists were unanimous in calling them the biggest advances in building techniques. The latter culminated in the raising of the Alexander Column in the center of Palace Square. The column executed by Montferrand, 47.5 meters high and 600 tons in weight was raised during one hour and forty-five minutes. Nicholas I who watched this operation from the Winter Palace, told Montferrand: «You have made your name immortal!».

The construction of St. Isaac's cathedral in St. Petersburg indicated the Emperor's determination to instill ultimate spiritual principles into government policies. Suffice to say that three years after its construction Alexander II abolished serfdom in Russia. Built in the atmosphere of patriotic feelings after the defeat of Napoleon, the cathedral was to demonstrate the might of Russia and to become a symbol of Russia's unity with the Christian culture of Europe.

[Translated from Russian by Stanislav Silinsky]