

Russian to paint icon for church

by Sylvia Brooks
Dispatch Religion Reporter

In 1989, Russian artist and iconographer Nikolai Mukhin listened to the sounds of a revolution which had not yet occurred.

The sounds, either presentiment or intuition, became a painting called *City on Sand*, which represented his feelings about his relationship to his own government.

A brooding piece with brooding figures, its

lines suggest an hourglass with time running out.

Today, after the revolution which toppled the Soviet Union, Mukhin, 41, considers something once unthinkable. He will paint icons and frescoes for a church in the United States.

This week he accepted a commission to paint icons for St. Gregory of Nyssa Orthodox Church, 2219 Summit St., an Eastern Orthodox church in communion with Russian Orthodoxy.

He met the church's rector, the Rev. Dan Rentel, when the local priest traveled to Russia last summer. Rentel invited Mukhin and he arrived this week, camera and measuring tape in hand.

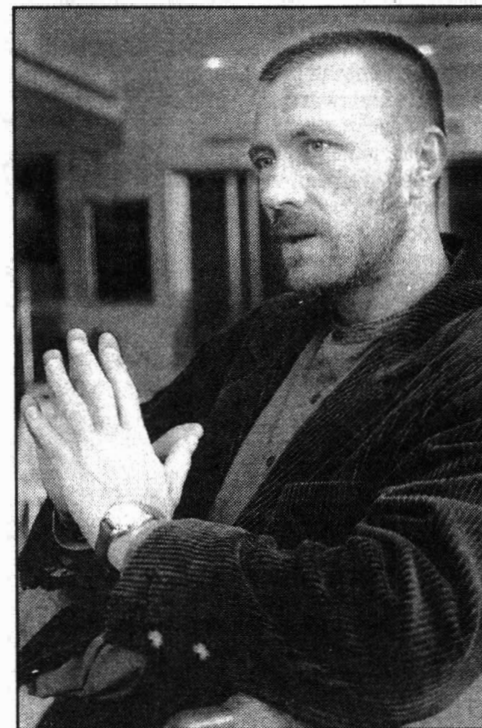
Since his country became more democratic, the artist has found life more interesting. He also has become famous.

"To live and work in freedom is what every artist dreams of," he said in an interview before he left Columbus.

Before the fall of communism, the artist did secular works and taught himself the skills of iconography, which is the painting of icons or pictures of the Holy Family or saints. He did religious paintings secretly.

Since 1991, he has had art exhibits in Germany, Japan, the Netherlands, Italy, Mexico and Bulgaria. Currently he has an exhibit at Princeton, N.J.

He founded an art school, began restoring a 700-year-old monastery, painted frescoes and icons for a chapel in Japan, built a memorial museum on the site of his hometown's oldest cathedral, and was chosen by the Patriarch Aleksei II, spiritual leader of Russian Or-



Fred Squillante/D

Nikolai Mukhin finds life interesting.

thodox Christians, to paint major sections of a large cathedral in Moscow.

A documentary on his life and work was presented on Russian national television last year. Mukhin has formed a spiritual understanding and connection with Rentel and his family.

"The most important element in this work is Father Dan," Mukhin said. The priest, he said, envisioned the work ahead. The artist sees the work through the prism of the priest's artistic understanding.

The completed work for the church will include 20 icons of various sizes and a 40-sq-ft fresco depicting scenes of the life of Christ and church holidays. It may take several years to complete.

Some of the work on the icons will be done in Russia, he said, although art students from the State University eventually will help as the work is assembled here.

Mukhin's mother remained religious even after the face of communism. She was a believer and never stopped going to church and took her children with her.

His hometown is Yaroslavl, 200 miles north of Moscow. More churches survive there than in many other cities, so he was exposed to religious architecture and art at an early age.



City on Sand by Nikolai Mukhin