

Shifting Roles

The Imperial Folk Arts and Crafts Revival's Narratives at the Second All-Russian Kustar' Exhibition (1913)

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Abstract The essay investigates the role of the imperial revival of folk arts and crafts, and its development, at the October Revolution's threshold. On the occasion of the celebrations for the Romanov's 300th anniversary (1913), Tsar Nicholas II organized a series of events. Among these was the Second All-Russian Kustar' Exhibition held in Saint Petersburg. Despite its economic and public success, the exhibition raises increasingly pressing questions regarding both the progressive disconnection among the concepts of "nation" and "empire" and the ever-changing relationship between national identity and folk visual and material culture.

Keywords Kustar. Exhibition. Russian style. National image. Russian Empire. Visual identity. Arts and crafts. Folklore.

Summary 1 Appropriating the Folk and Rural Element. – 2 The Russian Arts and Crafts 'Movement' and the 'Russian Style'. – 3. Pictures at an Exhibition: the Second All-Russian Kustar' Exhibition (1913). – 4 Towards the End of an Era. – 5 Conclusion.

1 Appropriating the Folk and Rural Element

The article aims to investigate the role of the Russian imperial revival of folk art and crafts, and its development, at the threshold of the October Revolution. In 1913, on the occasion of the celebrations for the Romanov family's 300th anniversary, Tsar Nicholas II decided

to organize a series of events to strengthen his relationship with the Russian people and, consequently, the imperial image. Among these events was the *Second All-Russian Kustar' Exhibition [Vtoraja Vserossijskaja Kustarnaja Vystavka]*¹ held in Saint Petersburg. Although the exhibition had been organized under the strict control of the State, it turned out to be a clear indicator of the failure of the hegemonic imperial narrative, that the appropriated and reinvented folk tradition had helped to maintain.

Identified since the last third of the 19th century as a crucial element in defining and strengthening national identity and unity, folk art production, inspired by peasant crafts, and its display became, over time, a powerful tool of imperial propaganda. At the *Second All-Russian*, indeed, both the role and perception of folk and rural art underwent a marked shift: from an instrumentalized monolithic category to a plural concept. The complexity of the transition is better understood if other cultural factors are also taken into account: on one hand, and from an artistic point of view, the meanings that the Abramtsevo circle and the early avant-garde attributed to the rural and folk traditions and, on the other, the multi-ethical dimension of the empire, that threatened its unity.

Before exploring the context of development and the significance of the exhibition under consideration, it becomes necessary to understand what is meant by folk-rural art and how it came to play such an important role, not only in the economy of the Empire but also, and especially, in the power relationship between tsar and people. The discourse on the 'nation', on the constitutive and peculiar characteristics of each, began in Europe and reached Russia where it led to the rediscovery of a common national past on which to build its identity as a modern state. Russia was, however, a vast and composite empire, whose economy was mainly based on agriculture.

Since the 1830s, based on historical, archaeological, and ethnographic approaches, the discovery of 'Old Russia', with its wooden architecture, ornate manuscripts, myths and legends, and peasant artifact production, started to contribute to a reappraisal of its own history and laid the groundwork for the construction of a new visual identity in close connection with its past.

Consequently, if by the 1880s it was commonplace for educated Russians to believe that Peter the Great's 18th reforms had deprived educated classes of any defined Russian identity,² «the identification

1 The Russian name of the *Vtoraja Vserossiiskaia Kustarnaia Vystavka* in English has been also translated as *Second All-Russian Exhibition of Handicraft* or *Second All-Russian Exhibition of Cottage Industries*. Unless otherwise stated, in the translations are by the author.

2 Among the major reforms were the introduction of European educational institutions, dress, social customs, and of both the Russian language and the Orthodox church.

of pre-Petrine culture with authentic Russianness was an idea with its own distinct intellectual history»(Warren 2009, 747). Although, throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, official imperial culture regarded Peter I as the founder of the Russian nation, at the same time, however, several leading figures in Russian culture began to doubt the effectiveness of his reforms. This negative reassessment, coupled with the consequent belief that only the peasantry had preserved Russia's native traditions and sensibilities, was expressed in the revival of folk art.³

Hence, beginning the 1860s to the October Revolution, we witness the gradual appropriation by different social actors of folkloric and rural production and the transformation of its role and meaning accordingly. Specifically, the subjects alluded to here are, on the one hand, artists along with representatives of the *intelligentsia* and merchant class, and on the other hand, imperial power. The differentiated appropriation contributed to an overall change in public taste, the establishment and development of economic enterprises, and a shift in its symbolic meanings. A more or less conscious and respectful process of recovery, enhancement, and modernization of the artistic heritage of this newly discovered Russian 'tradition'.⁴

2 The Russian Arts and Crafts 'Movement' and the 'Russian Style'

At the beginning of the twentieth century, radical economic changes and social instability were shaking the foundations of the empire. The period between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century witnessed one of the most dramatic consequences of the development of mechanized industry: the decline of rural and folk artisanal production linked to manual labor and, consequently, of the material culture associated with it, with its system of values and symbols.⁵ Traditional crafts such as woodworking, lace-making, embroidery, and pottery, and the labor system that supported them, were disrupted by this crisis. In the 1870s and 1880s, prominent figures in the Russian cultural milieu - later acknowledged as among the founders of the folk revival - such as the music and art critic Vladimir

³ Nevertheless, opinions around the role and future of *kustar'* art were ambivalent. On this issue, cf. Salmond 1996.

⁴ On the problem of tradition and its invention, cf. Hobsbawm and Ranger (eds) (1983). For an in-depth look at the issues of art revivals and tradition building in relation to folk and rural production, cf. Dmitrieva 2020, 83-108.

⁵ In this respect, see Warren 2009, 743-65.

Stasov⁶ and the artist Elena Polenova⁷ warned that these arts were in serious danger of permanent extinction. In the process of rediscovering pre-Petrine Russia, the physical objects and evidences of this culture - belonging to a past considered untouched by modernity and Westernizing influences - came to reify the concept of nation.

The Russian arts and crafts revival, an expression of its folk and rural traditions, was not an isolated phenomenon. As in other European countries, it was a response to the collective identity crisis resulting from rapid industrialization. From the 1870s, thanks to Savva Mamantov - a merchant who belonged to the new entrepreneurial elite and was an eminent patron of the arts - the Russian revival became a key cultural factor in the process of rebuilding national identity. The Abramtsevo estate, located about 60 km from Moscow, became its epicenter. Purchased in 1873 by Mamantov and his wife, Elizaveta Mamontova, the estate soon became a meeting place for some of the most important artists of the time⁸ and a center for the rediscovery and development of traditional crafts.⁹ It represented the origin of a new movement, later referred to by Netta Peacock, as the New Russian Decorative Art,¹⁰ characterized by and based on the rediscovery

6 In the introduction to the text *Russian Folk Ornament*, the critic expresses concern about the foreseeable and gradual disappearance of systems and patterns of life-related to the rural world and folkloric traditions and, consequently, of the associated modes of artistic-cultural production and expression: "With each passing year, not only are the vestiges of traditional folk life disappearing from use, but also from memory, giving way to newer and more modern objects that correspond to the demands of life and have lost the qualities inherited from earlier eras of folklore: originality, naive beauty, and folk soul" (Stasov 1872, 3).

7 In her approach to rural and folkloric heritage, the pioneer revival artist, Elena Polenova, states how it was necessary to: "[...] seize hold of folk art that is still living and give it a chance to develop". Letter from E. Polenova to V. Polenov, quoted in Salmond 1996, 28.

8 The group of artists who worked there became known as the 'Mamontov Circle'. Among the most prominent names were: Konstantin Korovin, Valentin Serov, Mark Antokolsky, Mikhail Vrubel, Ilya Repin, Vasily Polenov, Elena Polenova, Viktor and Apollinary Vasnetsov, and Isaak Levitan.

9 Although the Abramtsevo colony was the first private enterprise of its kind, other private *kustar'* training workshops, opened a few years later. Two examples well-known from the literature are Solomenko's Embroidery workshops set up by Maria Fedorovna Yakunchikova in 1891 and Princess Maria Tenisheva's Talashkino estate near Smolensk, which was opened in 1900. During the 1870s, among the actions the imperial power undertook to safeguard and enhance the folk and rural heritage, it established dedicated schools, such as the School of Folk Art [Škola narodnogo iskusstva] in Saint Petersburg, and museums, like the Moscow Kustar' Museum [Moskovskij kustarnyj muzej].

10 At the beginning of the 20th century, Peacock describes as follows the attitude of the artists in the Abramtsevo circle towards the folk-inspired production: "So thoroughly have they impregnated themselves with the spirit of legend and fairy-tale as still told by the poet peasant, so genuinely do they feel the absorbing charm of that atmosphere of old-world simplicity, with all that it contains of dream-like and weird

of folkloric and peasant cultural heritage, as well as ancient Russian architecture and mythology. In this context, as brilliantly pointed out by Alison Hilton, folk art objects started to be seen as:

authentic manifestations of a shared cultural identity [...]. The intensity of feeling about Russian folk art was reflected in the overlapping concepts of *national*, *folk* and *popular* in the term '*narodnoe iskusstvo*', folk art. The word *narod*,¹¹ *people*, is closer to the German *Volk* than to English approximations of this idea. It connotes a sense of nationhood and national traditions. (Hilton 2011, XVI)

Another important term - inherently connected to the Abramtsevo practices and which is found in the exhibition title - is '*kustar*'.¹² It was a Russian word for a peasant engaged in cottage, artisanal, industry to earn an income, usually in combination with agricultural production.¹³ As Wendy Salmond underlines the word '*kustar*' had first come into use in the early 18th century (and was thought to be a corruption of the German word *Kunstler*) thus originally implying a skilled craftsman. Many '*kustar*' crafts had their origins in the natural economy of Muscovite Russia when households produced only what they needed for their own use. However, the term did not enter the common lexicon until 1861, when it came to denote a 'fashionable issue' [*modnyj vopros*] (Siegelbaum 1998, 39). From that time forward, the study, conservation, and development of '*kustar*' production turned into a public issue, and a massive financial and social intervention involving public and private resources was implemented.¹⁴

In the context of the identity crisis of late imperial Russian history and in the course of the process of developing national consciousness, ornament and ornamentation take shape as a semantic device underlying the construction of what is called the 'Russian Style'. In its various manifestations, this deeply pervasive style served as a

reality - its mingled fancy and belief - that their designs are distinctly national both in feeling and colour. This new movement is, in fact, an exaltation of the popular genius; and the designs of the artists are so perfectly executed because they answer to the in-born esthetic sense of the village artisan" (Peacock 1901, 270-1).

11 On the terminological and semantic issue of the words '*natsiia*', '*narod*', '*narodnost*', cf. Miller 2008.

12 For an overview of '*kustar*' aesthetics, see Hilton, 1989, 10-29.

13 As reported by Netta Peacock: "millions of Russian peasants are driven by the conditions of their life to divide their year between work in the field and the special craft peculiar to the village or district to which they belong" (Peacock 1916, 30).

14 A manner of supporting such production takes the form of exhibitions with designated sections. Between 1882 and 1913 in Russia were held four major '*kustar*' exhibitions. Before these exhibitions, a section specifically dedicated '*kustar*' was presented for the first time in 1872 at the *Polytechnical Exhibition [Politehničeskaja vystavka]*. For more on this matter, cf. Siegelbaum 1998, 37-63.

connective between an ideal Russia, that of the pre-Petrine past, and a modern Russia on the path to industrialization, as well as a tool for the construction and affirmation of the new national visual identity.

In 1991, in one of the very first scholarly works produced in the West specifically devoted to the subject, as well as one of the most relevant and comprehensive studies on the subject, Evgenia Kirichénko defined the phenomenon of ‘Russian Style’ with these words:

The term ‘Russian style’ – or *style russe* – normally refers to a style of architecture and of the applied arts which flourished in the second half of the nineteenth century and which revived the traditions of Russian folk and medieval culture. In a larger sense, however, the term may be applied to the whole movement to express the Russian character and spirit in art – a movement that began around the middle of the eighteenth century and reached the end of its development only with the October Revolution. (Kirichenko 1991, 11)

The scholar emphasizes how the style did not coincide with Russian art in its entirety, but it as a manifestation of it that could find full expression, particularly, in architecture and the decorative-applied arts. It represents one of the versions of eclecticism, which was formed and developed in the wake of the National-Romantic movement and which, in the course of time, will take a multiplicity of forms. Among the other key functions assumed by the style is that of an instrument of socio-political self-representation. Therefore, if the ‘Russian Style’ is inseparable from this politico-social dimension, its practice and use makes it possible to identify two directions within it: an official one, considered a ‘state’ version of the style, and an unofficial one, that may be considered ‘democratic’.¹⁵ In analyzing the *Second All-Russian*, we will focus on the appropriation, use and display of folk and rural art by the imperial power implemented through the official version of the ‘Russian Style’.

3 Pictures at an Exhibition: the Second All-Russian Kustar’ Exhibition (1913)

Among the main cultural spaces in which the ‘Russian Style’ formal and expressive potential is unfolded are: on one hand, the textual sources, such as ornamental grammars, and printed art journals;

15 For a detailed and comprehensive overview of the ‘Russian Style’, see Kirichenko 1991. A critical reading of the double register that characterizes this style, can be found in Pechenkin 2021.

and, on the other, the exhibitions, domestic and international ones.¹⁶ In the context of this analysis the exhibition ‘device’ assumes a central role.¹⁷ Through the study of domestic and universal public exhibitions organized from the mid-19th century until the October Revolution (1917), it is possible to investigate the processes of construction of the official image of late imperial Russia, its constituent elements, as well as the perception and dissemination of that image both nationally and internationally. The exhibitions, – with their venue, organization, and exhibited objects – became the place for the national visual identity-building process *par excellence*; a process in which the ‘Russian style’ is assumed as signature style. Although since the 1870s other exhibitions had highlighted the importance assumed by rural and folk art, the 1913 exhibition showed unmistakably how its *revival* was marked by internal contradictions.¹⁸

In 1913, Nikolai II presided over numerous lavish events planned to celebrate the Romanov dynasty 300th. One such event, the *Second All-Russian Kustar’ Exhibition*¹⁹ opened on March 10, under the patronage of Empress Alexandra Fedorovna. The designated site was the new building for the herbarium and the library of the Imperial Botanical Garden on Aptekarskii Island in St. Petersburg.

Almost 6,000 exhibitors were chosen for the exhibition area with their *kustar’* goods. The exhibition committee mainly selected schools and workshops already supported by the government. However, committee members also travelled to provinces at the edges of the empire and invited individual *kustari* (handicraft or handicraft worker) to participate, so as to broaden the variety of the displays. Following the principles of presentation at other all-Russian and international exhibitions, exhibits in the *Second All-Russian* were displayed in sections decorated in local styles and organized according to the Russian provinces. All of the exhibits were divided into four

¹⁶ Among the main works – referred to as grammars – regarding the history of Russian ornament, the following can be mentioned: Solncev, F.G. (1849). *Antiquity of the Russian State* [*Drevnosti Rossijskogo gosudarstva*]. Mosca: Semen. Butovskii, V.I. (1870). *History of Russian Ornament from the 10th to the 16th century* [*Istoriia russkogo ornamenta c X po XVI stoletie po drevnym rukopisiam*]. Moscow: [n.p.]. Stasov, V.V. (1872). *Russian Folk Ornament* [*Russkii narodnyi ornament*]. St. Petersburg: Obshchestva pooshchreniia khudozhnikov; Stasov, V.V. (1887). *Slavic and Oriental ornamentation from ancient and modern manuscripts*. Regarding the main printed art journals, which wrote about the exhibition, we can report: *Art and Industrial Design* [*Iskusstvo i khudozhestvennaia promyshlennost*] (1898-1903), *The World of Art* [*Mir iskusstva*] (1898-1904), *Little Fire* [*Ogonek*], *Apollon, Sun of Russia* [*Solntse Rossii*], and *The Contemporary* [*Sovremennik*].

¹⁷ Cf. Dianina 2012.

¹⁸ For in-depth and detailed literature on the history and critical analysis of the *Second All-Russian*, cf. Piters-Hofmann 2019, Warren 2009 and Siegelbaum 1998.

¹⁹ Held in St. Petersburg in 1902, the *First All-Russian Kustar Exhibition* was located in the Tavrishesky Palace. In this occasion, the Ministry of Agriculture and State Property divided the products into 19 thematic groups.

main sections: *kustar'* goods; instruments and machines for *kustar'* production; institutions for the support of the development of the *kustar'* industry; and publications on *kustar'* industry, and within a section 21 classes of different items.²⁰

As Sara Warren points out, by deliberately publicizing the products of rural crafts, the Second All-Russian thus had economic as well as ideological purposes. The economic purpose is, to some extent, self-explanatory. This kind of exposure was necessary because to compete with cheaper factory-made products, handicraft items had to be considered “aesthetically and ethically superior.” (Warren, 2009). In this perspective, the promotion of folk art revival was both a political and economic imperative for the Russian state. Regarding the ideological purpose, as the scholar emphasizes, the importance of the rural aspects of the 1905 revolution should not be overlooked. Although the unrest began with general strikes in large cities such as Moscow and St. Petersburg, the state was, in addition, faced with the concern and anger of the peasantry, plagued by oppressive land management policies and natural disasters. In other words, what was under extreme duress in 1905 was the supposedly sacred bond between Tsar and people. It was this mystical bond that provided the justification for Romanov autocracy.²¹ As brilliantly summed up by Ludmila Piters-Hofmann:

the Tercentenary celebrations could also be used to emphasize the Tsar's and the Imperial family's bond with the common people. An exhibition showing products by peasant workers was a valuable opportunity to confirm the court's interest in the 'real', non-westernized Russian people. Furthermore, in this context the link between the *kustar'* industries and the fashion for a 'neo-Russian' style was interpreted by the Tsar and the organizers as something that captured and revived the atmosphere of the early seventeenth century, and especially 1613, the year that the Romanov dynasty began its reign. (Piters-Hofmann 2019, 315)

In 1905 the state established the Chief Administration of Agriculture and Land Tenure (GUZZ), a section of the Ministry of Agriculture specifically dedicated to supporting peasant handicrafts. Under the regime of Nicholas II, in fact, the creation of the GUZZ and the promotion of rural crafts aimed to eliminate the rift that had ideally been created between the Emperor and the “authentic” Russian people, i.e., the non-Westernized peasantry. In 1913, the GUZZ was the main organizing body of the *Second All-Russian Exhibition*.

²⁰ Cf. Piters-Hofmann 2019, 319.

²¹ See, for instance, Wortman 2014; 1989.

4 Towards the End of an Era

Despite its economic and public success, the *Second All-Russian* was critically reviewed.²² Browsing through the exhibition catalogue,²³ it becomes apparent not only the challenge of sorting out the variety of objects, and the materials, that fell under the broad category of *kustar'*, but also, the difficulty of representing this variety in a timely manner. Furthermore, two other not insignificant problems arose: on the one hand, the professionalism of the *kustar'* craftsman and, on the other, the geographical extent of the Empire.

As a matter of fact, according to Warren, from the *kustar'* production point of view, among the most problematic factors of the exhibition, critics reported: the industrialization of *kustar'* goods by the administration, the presence of non-local workshop instructors, and the designs provided by artists rather than those derived from past traditions and the peasants' fantasy and imagination. For most critics, this development went hand in hand with the loss of authenticity, individuality. The very essence of *kustar'* art was at stake. Closely related to this aspect, the inevitable comparison with industrial *kustar'* products available in specialized shops in big Russian and foreign cities often led to the conclusion that goods for sale at the exhibition were of the same low quality, though significantly more expensive and less durable than 'real' *kustar'* items.

On the eve of the Revolution, *kustar'* production was affected by social unrest and rising political tensions concerning the 'nationalities question'. As the intelligentsia and the imperial state 'improved' indigenous Russian folk culture beyond recognition, the suppression of native languages, customs, and educational institutions for non-Russian nationalities led critics to fear that any form of genuine national character - and ethnic representation - was destined to be obliterated by imperial policy (Warren 2009, 756). Official promotion of the so-called 'Great Russian' nationality was thus also understood as repressive of authentic nationality in general, including Russian nationality.

In further contextualising the phenomenon of the revival of *kustar'* production in the arts of late imperial Russia, the presentation of the

²² For a detailed and critical account and for primary sources on this matter, cf. Warren 2009.

²³ *Russian folk art at the Second All-Russian Kustar' Exhibition in Petrograd in 1913* [*Russkoe narodnoe iskusstvo na Vtoroj Vserossijskoj kustarnoj vystavke v Petrograde v 1913 g.*] (1914, Petrograd). <https://electro.nekrasovka.ru/books/6150753>. It should be noted that there are two different words in Russian that can be translated into English as "Russian". The first is "russkii", which relates to the Russian language and Russians as an ethnic group. The second word is "rossiiskii", which describes Russia as a state or governing body. The Second All-Russian Exhibition was a "rossiiskii" (read "imperial") event.

work of Abramtsevo and Solomenko workshops at the *Second All-Russian* as part of the exhibition decreed its appropriation and approval by state power. Kirsty Anson remarks how, by the end of the nineteenth century, the relationship between imperial power and artistic production was taking an increasingly ambiguous and controlling form:

There was a widespread revival of interest in fairytale due to harsh censorship imposed in the wake of the assassination of Alexander II in 1882, making realism challenging throughout the ensuing reigns of Alexander III and Nicholas II. Polenova's Russian fairy tales and landscapes were thus, according to Salmond, 'a tool for promoting concord within an empire of disparate nationalities' and the 'direct emotional link they provided between the present and a vanished past'. (Anson 2013, 22)

In a context where imperial control over artistic production is both still almost totalizing and in a state of crisis, a new art form is taking shape. Since the beginning of the century, avant-garde artists such as Mikhail Larionov and Natalia Goncharova had begun a process of reappropriating and reinterpreting folk and rural art forms, creating alternative narratives to the official ones. Through lubki and icons, artists gradually discovered the dimension of folk art that was considered "primitive," genuine, and authentic. Thus, while the icon becomes the bearer of an otherworldly connection, the lubok unleashes a deeply earthly, satirical, and disruptive force.²⁴

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, the legacy of folk arts and crafts at the turn of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was an ideological, economic, and artistic battleground. Imperial Russia understood well that art was a powerful tool of nation-building. The case study of the *Second All-Russian Kustar' Exhibition* allowed us to address pressing questions about both the progressive dissociation of the concepts of "empire" and "nation" and the ever-shifting relationship between national identity and folk and rural culture. Moreover, the 1913 exhibition demonstrated that the Russian revival was not a monolithic entity. In their plurality, folk arts and crafts also helped to expose the fault lines within the idea of nationality itself. While certain artistic, well-crafted projections of the nation could serve to further imperial hegemony, others, fiercely non-imperial, came into play to rethink the very concept of art and its relationship to nationhood.

²⁴ Cf. Warren 2013 and 2009.

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