

Space Oddity: Exercises in Art and Philosophy

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Constructing the National Image Identity and Material Culture in Late Imperial Russia Public Museum Practices

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Abstract During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, late imperial Russia began witnessing the so-called phenomenon of 'museomania'. A peculiar example of this process of 'musealisation' was the Commercial and Industrial Museum of Artisanal Products of the Moscow Province Zemstvo, otherwise referred to as the Moscow Kustar' Museum, established in 1885. Created as a focal point for the arts and crafts production in the 'Russian style' that had come into vogue at that time, the museum soon took on the role of a plural and hybrid space for reflection on and reconstruction of the national visual identity through the arts.

Keywords Russian style. National image. Visual identity. Museum. Kustar. Arts and crafts. Folklore. Cultural space. Cultural discourse.

Summary 1 Dealing with your own 'Otherness'. – 2 Building a Public Cultural Space: The Universal Exhibition and the Museum. – 3 From Revival to Musealisation of *Kustar'* Art: The Establishment of the Moscow Kustar' Museum. – 4 Conclusion: National Identity as Constructed Image.

1 Dealing with your own ‘Otherness’

As Mikhail Bakhtin theorises “the spatio-temporal expression of the chronotope allows meanings to take on a sign form and enter our experience” (Bachtin [1975] 1979, 405), thus any reflection on human-kind and its activities need to be developed by first framing their *chronotope*.¹ This article does not intend to separate chronotope’s spatial from its temporal component but it focuses only on the spatial one, and, in particular, on the close semantic relationship between the physical space and the discourse(s) that define and inhabit it.²

The article refers to a moment in Russian history, that falls between the second half of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, in which the function and perception of the physical space of culture were radically changing and evolving. First, the research focuses on defining and contextualising the issue of ‘national identity’ in Russia in the outlined timeframe. Second, it analyses the processes of cultural space-building, of which universal expositions and museums are some of the most significant phenomena. Finally, it considers an emblematic case-study of ‘musealisation’ specifically dedicated to the preservation and enhancement of folk and peasant material culture, so to demonstrate the key role of museums both in the construction and diffusion of a national visual identity.

Throughout the history of its never-linear development process, Russia encountered more than one sudden turning point. During each one of them, patterns were subverted, and each time a radical systemic transformation took place. As a timeframe of profound changes for late imperial Russia, it needs to be presented as the result of an ongoing process started since the political-economic reforms ordered by Peter I. In the eighteenth century, Czar Peter the Great had systematically and coercively imposed a ‘westernisation’ of his empire that, through a historicist gaze, led to a crisis of Russian collective identity and to a reconsideration of existing life and cultural doctrines.

As early as the first quarter of the nineteenth century, these historical and cultural premises ignited a process of self-discovery – and rediscovery – that forced Russia to reexamine its historical path and develop a ‘national consciousness’. In the post-Napoleonic age, Europe and Russia were crossed by a wave of nationalism and saw the flowering of Romanticism. In its own way, each nation questioned and sought to historically justify its origins grounded in each country’s unique history and culture. As brilliantly summarised by Whittaker:

¹ Unless otherwise stated, the translation is by the Author.

² On the *chronotope* in Bakhtin, see Bemong et al. 2010; Diddi 2009.

From London to St. Petersburg, a fascination with the folk and bygone eras prompted an urgent desire to possess a documented history and encouraged new sciences such as archaeology and ethnography. Scientists embarked on expeditions, during which artists produced richly illustrated volumes of antiquities, costumes, monuments, and ornaments, which were instrumental tools for looking at the distant past and reflected the ongoing nationalistic fervor of the times. (Whittaker 2010, 3)

How to define ‘Russianness’? In what terms this concept brought Russians to compare themselves to the Western and Oriental ‘Others’? In order to provide an answer to these questions, we can turn to the words of Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay:

Precisely because identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies. (Hall, du Gay 1996, 4)

In view of the fact that, since the eighteenth century, Russia has been self-identifying in opposition to the ‘West’, the above statement allows us to emphasise that when it comes to Russia, the matter somehow goes always back to a ‘question of identity’. An ancient and deeply rooted issue in Russian history, in our context, ‘identity’ configures as a discursive and cultural construct, endowed with a non-hereditary memory, by which a people and its territory identify themselves and/or are identified with. Although a common speculative context, in Russia the ‘question’ becomes more urgent. In comparison to Europe, Russia was still a “peripheral country in terms of industrialization and technological advancement, but it was also a great power and multi-ethnic empire” (Swift 2021, 109). The country’s instability was caused by a variety of factors – e.g., the proto-industrial development, the urbanisation processes, and the subsequent and sudden socio-economic transformations – and prompted late nineteenth-century Russia to assume an ambivalent attitude towards modernity (Siegelbaum 1998, 37-8).

Between the second half of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, Russia’s artistic self-presentation reflects the country’s tensions and contradictions between the desire to demonstrate its distinctive national identity – both at home and to its Western counterpart and the need to establish itself as a socially and economically leading country (cf. Swift 2021). Russia’s troubled situation was further complicated by the 1861 post-reform environment, that decreed the end of peasant slavery, not only disrupting the economic system’s pillars but also leading rural and folklore traditions to slowly disappear.

2 Building a Public Cultural Space: The Universal Exhibition and the Museum

To reconstruct and spread the Russian national image, the attention turns to the rediscovery of the country's history and the sources of what could visually represent the 'true national spirit'. Here the rural and folkloric artistic production of the pre-Petrine tradition comes into play. From a visual point of view, this self-discovery process demanded to unequivocally identify 'Russian' elements and to create a distinctive and coherent national artistic image. To build this domestic image to export even abroad, it was urgent to select a set of motifs and the creation of a recognisable style.³ On this account, the fading traditional heritage of rural-folkloric arts and crafts was interpreted as one of the key sources of national identity and originality. Hence, the 'Russian style' was its main visual language. A highly decorative and ornamental style derived from medieval as well as peasant architecture and folk arts (Swift 2021, 118), the 'Russian style', or *style russe*, constitutes one of the most striking phenomena of Russian art of the nineteenth and early twenty centuries.⁴ In analysing the concept of 'style', Lotman's insight comes to aid:

What interests us is not what general traits enable us to ascribe certain paintings, statues, poetic texts, furniture, clothing, to the manifestations of a style, but why it is characteristic of a certain style to manifest itself in phenomena of different kinds. (Lotman 2022, 178-9)

As the investigation turns to the 'spatialisation' of this narrative, thus to the process of building and organising the cultural space, the 'exhibition device' assumes a central role as we learn from a journalist's comment from 1861: "After politics, exhibitions play the most important role these days" (Dianina 2012, 173). As forms of spatialisation of a constructed memory and socio-cultural texts, the exhibitions, with their venue, organisation, 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 a signature style. In this space, the construction and development of a cultural discourse were addressed and fuelled by newspapers and specialised printed magazines, whose production, and influence, increase exponentially in the historical period under consideration.⁵ Within the ongoing

³ For a comprehensive overview of the reception of Russian art abroad, see Burini 2019.

⁴ In this respect, see also Kirichenko 1991.

⁵ The key role of newspapers and journals, both in establishing and strengthening public exhibitions as valuable and familiar institutions of visual culture and as a herit-

cultural discourse, not only Russian intellectuals but the society at large became increasingly interested in the critical debate that was developing around national art, questioning national identity, Russian folklore, and arts and crafts.

In the process of re-defining the country's image, two phenomena came to play a key role as exhibition spaces in Russian cultural discourse: the world fairs and the so-called 'museomania'.⁶

Although in Russia industrial exhibitions, intended to boost the national industry, were organised by the government since the 1820s, the tradition of organising universal expositions began in 1851 with the Great Exhibition hosted at the Crystal Palace in London. On that occasion and at later world fairs,

Russia's displays of decorative and fine arts, opulent jewelry, and peasant handicrafts often received far more attention than its raw materials, manufactured goods, or agricultural products, and commentators sometimes described Russia as oriental or barbaric" (Swift 2021, 110)

The 'universal' exhibition - as well as the Russian or All-Russian ones - was configured as an encyclopedic attempt at self-representation. Promoting a partial representation and a fictitious narrative, these types of exhibitions were characterised by a strong contrast between a dimension of national brotherhood and nationalism led by principles of comparison and competition. During the nineteenth century, the existence of the exhibition serves the main purpose of presenting a certain range of products to as wide an audience as possible, in order to enlarge the market, and to assert the level of economic and technological development achieved by the nation.

Between the 1851 and 1913, an increasing number of Russian industrial exhibits began to forge the image of a rapidly developing country. Every area of human production could ideally contribute to the shaping of the discourse around nation and nationality. But the cultural one was configured as the main. In order to assert its uniqueness, Russia necessarily had to stand in opposition to the other nations. Especially from 1867 onwards, the use of national vernacular architecture became widespread at world fairs, and the 'Russian style' began to establish itself as a striking element of distinction.

The other pivotal phenomenon, concurrently shaping Russian cultural space and national discourse, was the opening of a substantial and growing number of public museums.

age of common knowledge and popular curiosity, will not be the subject of the present discussion. See Dianina 2013.

⁶ In this regard, see Dianina 2012, 173-95.

The change in Moscow's cultural landscape in the 1860s was so radical that one witness described it succinctly as "*museomania*", defined as an unruly passion that drove the city to establish more and more museums (Ts-a). (Dianina 2012, 177)

Nowadays almost considered a sempiternal institution, which preserves and enhances its collections, destined to last and represent a country's legacy, the museum, at its beginning, was a place of constant transformation, reflection, and debate. The Russian museum boom of the 1860s and 1890s was part of "a broader quest for a secular cultural identity" (Dianina 2012, 177). The panorama of public cultural institutions in the first half of the nineteenth century Russia was rather narrow and had its centre in Saint Petersburg. Despite being the capital, the city could boast only a few private museums and galleries. There were, naturally, exhibitions open to the public, particularly those organised by the Imperial Academy of Arts, but they were not frequent enough and their subjects were of little interest to a wide audience. From 1862, several cultural events took place in Moscow and led to the role shift, so that, while Saint Petersburg continued to be associated with foreign influences, the former capital acquired the role of centre of national culture. Among these events, the transfer of the Rumiantsev Museum from the imperial capital to Moscow, the *Ethnographic Exhibition* (1867) and the *Polytechnical Exhibition* openings (1872), with the two institutions it engendered (the Polytechnical and the History Museum), and the Tretyakov Gallery made accessible to the public from 1881, appeared to be particularly significant.⁷

For the duration of the nineteenth century, the modern Russian nation was largely a discursive construct, fashioned first in fictional literature and later increasingly in the popular press and the visual arts [...] It was in the sphere of culture that the Russian idea [...] took shape. The museum age was one positive landmark on Russia's uncertain road to modernity. (Dianina 2012, 177)

3 From Revival to Musealisation of *Kustar'* Art: The Establishment of the Moscow *Kustar'* Museum

The beginning of the twentieth century bears witness to one of the most dramatic consequences of the development of mechanised industry: the decline of rural and folkloric craft production, connected to manual labour, and, consequently, of the related material culture,

⁷ For an in-depth look at the context in which the 1872 Polytechnical Exposition was developed, see Bradley 2008.

with its system of values and symbols.⁸ In the process of rediscovering pre-Petrine Russia, objects and evidence of this culture – belonging to a past considered untainted by modernity and westernizing influences – came to reify the concept of nation.

Like other European countries, the *revival* of arts and crafts, expression of the Russian folk and rural world, responded to the collective identity crisis deriving from the rapid industrialization. The Russian *revival* became an integral part of the culture-building practice from the 1870s thanks to Savva Mamantov, a merchant belonging to the new entrepreneurial élite who also was one of the most influential art patrons of the time. The epicenter of the *revival* was the Abramtsevo estate, located about 60 km from Moscow. Acquired 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 time and a hub for traditional craftsmanship revival and development.⁹

Within the outlined context, the word *kustar'* is a Russian word that refers to a home or cottage worker engaged in cottage, artisanal, industry to earn an income, usually in combination with agricultural production. This term did not enter the common lexicon until 1861, when it came to denote a “fashionable issue” [*modnyj vopros*] (Siegelbaum 1998, 39).¹⁰ From the moment the preservation and development of *kustar'* production became a public issue, a massive intervention of financial and social welfare was implemented, involving both public and private resources.¹¹

A variant of the European arts and crafts museums and an illustrative example of the Russian ‘musealisation’ is represented by the Commercial and Industrial Museum of Artisanal Products of the Moscow Province Zemstvo (Torgovo-promyšlennyj muzej kustarnykh izdelij Moskovskogo gubernskogo zemstva), also known as the Moscow *Kustar'* Museum (Moskovskij Kustarnyj muzej), established in 1882.¹² Due to its distinctive features, the museum became a repre-

⁸ In this respect, see Warren 2009.

⁹ For more on the topic of Russian revival of arts and crafts and private workshop activities, see Hilton 2019; Salmond 2009.

¹⁰ *Kustar'* art included a wide range of products, from embroidery to wood carving. Its popularity can be regarded in the light of the arts and crafts revival of the nineteenth century.

¹¹ A manner of supporting such production takes the form of exhibitions with designated sections. Between 1882 and 1913, indeed, 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)*. See Siegelbaum 1998.

¹² The museum’s legacy is still practically unexplored and unpublished. Recent scientific publications on the subject emphasise the need and the interest in investigating and deepening the role of *kustar'* art as material evidence of the processes of producing an organic image of Russia. See Narvojt 2021, 7.

sentative cultural institution in a delicate and complex period of historical transition.

As remarked by Narvojt, although preliminary ideas for the museum realisation blossomed in Saint Petersburg already in the 1870s, the Kustar' Museum was concretely designed after the *All-Russian Industrial and Art Exhibition (Vserossijskaja chudožestvenno-promyšlennaja vystavka)* held in Moscow in 1882, where *kustar'* objects from the Moscow and Central Russia provinces were exhibited for the first time.

Among the museums whose history is inextricably linked to the will and activities of art patrons, the Kustarnyj muzej occupies a special place. On this account, the museum's main patron was Sergei Morozov (1860-1944), a representative of the merchant class and a passionate lover of antiquities. While visiting the 1882 *All-Russian Exhibition (Vserossijskaja vystavka)*, Morozov decided to buy the entire collection of handicrafts exhibited, which formed the core of the future museum.¹³

Consistently with the work started by private workshops, such as the Abramtsevo estate, the museum opened its doors in 1885. Since this cultural institution was called to play an active role in the development and improvement of peasant and folk arts and crafts, it not only performed collecting and preserving functions, but also a modernising one.

As atypical as this enterprise might seem, it nevertheless exemplifies an excellent representative of virtuous grafting between public interests and private resources. As reconstructed by Mamantova, the Kustar' Museum's first decades sought to arise interest in forgotten forms, to transfer knowledge to modern artistic practices and to support centres of peasant and folk production. In the early 1880s, the museum's main tasks were related to trade operations (e.g., supporting and assisting artisans in selling their products). Later in that decade, the Moscow Provincial Zemstvo, the organ of rural self-government in the Russian Empire and from which the museum depended, decided to expand the museum's areas of operation. In 1888, the Arts and Crafts Commission, set up under the Zemstvo administration and to which Morozov was invited, advised the museum's reorganisation. In 1890, the muscovite patron was appointed its head and maintained that position until 1897, when he was elected honorary trustee. In line with the project to reorganise the museum's activities, Morozov was also the man behind the museum's educational vocation.

In other words, the museum, exceeding its physical and action space, helped to define and shape the cultural discourse. A refer-

¹³ In this regard, see Mamantova 1996.

ence for the production of furniture and decoration in the ‘Russian style’, the Moscow Kustar’ Museum soon became a plural and hybrid space for reflection and reconstruction of the national visual identity through the arts. Concurrently the museum came to represent a creative enterprise, a space for the collections’ conservation and enhancement, an experimental workshop, and a production, promotion, and sales centre of Russian artisanal goods. Throughout the years, and thanks to Morozov’s work as director, the museum became a place that answered different needs concerning:

- the question of identity, self-reflection and self-representation;
- the preservation and development of traditional artistic handicrafts production;
- the creative quest and the work training for both artists and artisans;
- educational needs;
- last, but not least, the sales and income generation issue.

In the first three decades of the twentieth century, the Kustar’ Museum not only embodied a remarkable, rich collection of folk and rural crafts, but also a cultural hub in its own right. Not only did it become a point of attraction both for artists and artisans, from Moscow and the provinces, and for the general public, but it also promoted brilliant exhibitions of Russian national art, both at home and abroad.¹⁴

Several transformations taking place between the Revolution and the present day, through the Soviet era, brought the Kustar’ Museum core collections to be incorporated into the All-Russian Decorative Art Museum in Moscow. Established in 1981, the latter is an institution today specifically dealing with the preservation, study and display of the arts and crafts production from the second half of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, and even from the contemporary Russian decorative arts and design.

4 Conclusion: National Identity as Constructed Image

In conclusion, through this brief journey, first of all, it is possible to assert that, in an ever-changing and evolving cultural space, the blurry metaphorical boundaries, within which the concept of ‘national identity’ is, are in constant need of rethinking and redefinition. The very concept of national identity – which in this case is mainly considered in its visual dimension – is configured as a discursive cultural construction. During the nineteenth century,

¹⁴ See Narvojt 2021, 8-14.

the modern Russian nation was largely a discursive construct, fashioned first in fictional literature and later increasingly in the popular press and the visual arts [...]. (Dianina 2012, 177)

As observed, in the turbulent transition from the end of the nineteenth to the beginning of the twentieth century, the Russian cultural space was in midst of a complex redefinition process, in which the 'Russian style' came to embody its main visual device.

Second of all, the analysis framed this process, in which the world exhibitions and the newborn national museums are configured as two of the most significant space-building phenomena of the time. Within the 'museomania' context, Russian museums, founded between the 1860s and 1890s, became "one of the most powerful means to attain national consciousness" (Dianina 2012, 173). Through collection and exhibition activities, the museum assumed the fundamental role of helping to 'visualise' and 'shape' the country's national visual identity.

In the last part of the investigation, the Moscow Kustar' Museum, through the preservation and enhancement of the folk and peasant material culture, offered an emblematic example of the processes involved in the construction and diffusion of the national identity as constructed image.

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