

Strand 1: Art Nouveau Cities: between cosmopolitanism and local tradition

**Art Nouveau in Late Imperial Russia: Cosmopolitanism, Europeanization and
“National Revival” in the Art Periodical the *World of Art* (*Mir Iskusstva*, 1898-1904)**

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Art Nouveau was launched in Europe in the early 1890s; several years after it penetrated late Imperial Russia and became legitimated there in various art forms in the first decade of the twentieth century. Serge Diaghilev was one of those art entrepreneurs, who “imported” the visual language of European Art Nouveau. He organized his famous exhibits in the late 1890s after his grand tour to Europe and showed in Russia the contemporary artworks by European artists Giovanni Boldini, Frank Brangwyn, Charles Conder, Max Lieberman, James Abbott McNeill Whistler, Gustave Moreau, Lucien Simon, Eugène Carrière, Jean-Louis Forain, Edgar Degas, Pierre Puvis de Chavannes and others. However, despite their novelty and European acknowledgement, Diaghilev’s art shows were not easily accepted by the public and established art critics. Moreover, the contemporary Russian art presented at the shows, which reflected new European tendencies and influence, was heavily criticized. The critics considered the new Russian art harmful and “decadent” and proclaimed the “national revival” and Realism as the only right direction for the visual arts. Nevertheless, Art Nouveau gradually became a part of Russian visual culture of the early twentieth century and was employed in architecture, sculpture, painting, interior design and the graphic arts.

Elena Chernevich and Mikhail Anikst claim that in Russian graphic design Art Nouveau took hold only after 1900¹. It can be acclaimed as true, but only in regards to the direct “quotations” of “imported” European Art Nouveau features such as curvilinear forms and twisting lines, and use of shapes of nature, such as roots and plant stems and flowers for inspiration. These typical Art Nouveau references saturated mostly commercial graphics and posters in the 1900-1910. It seems, however, that the

¹Elena Chernevich and Mikhail Anikst, *Russian Graphic Design 1880-1917*, New York, Abbeville Press, 1990, p. 39.

first local variants of Art Nouveau in graphic design, where Art Nouveau was explored creatively by the artists, appeared earlier and were associated with the art periodical the *World of Art*.

The *World of Art* (*Mir Iskusstva*), Diaghilev's famous initiative, which became a "rehearsal" before he conquered Western Europe with his Russian Seasons in 1909, was founded in St Petersburg in 1898 and was published from 1899 till 1904 (Fig. 1). Its first issues came out concurrently with *Art and Art Industry* (*Iskusstvo i khudozhestvennaya promyshlennost'*, 1898-1902), the monthly, initiated in St Petersburg by the Society for Encouragement of the Arts (*Obshchestvo pooshchrenii khudozhestv*) and closely associated with the Realist movement and "national revival". To better understand the *World of Art* it is necessary to see it in the context of the contemporary art-periodical press of Late Imperial Russia, especially *Art and Art Industry* and the *World of Art* represented two opposite camps that had a complicated relationship. It is important to make note of this rivalry because the *World of Art* sought to oppose itself to *Art and Art Industry*. In the artistic context of reign of the officially prescribed "national style", the *World of Art* aggressively announced the new direction for arts – divorce with the Realism and Academism – and articulated the necessity to Europeanize the Russian arts to make national art competitive and marketable in Europe.

Art and Art Industry was initiated in St Petersburg by the Society for Encouragement of the Arts (*Obshchestvo pooshchrenii khudozhestv*),² it was a folio-sized monthly that was edited by the art historian Nikolai Sobko (1851-1906), the Secretary of the Society. Sobko's views were highly influenced by Vladimir Stasov (1824-1906), one of the most influential critics in Late Imperial Russia at the time, was an advocate of the aesthetics of Realism and the Wanderers.

² The Society for the Encouragement of the Arts was established in 1821. It was a progressive society that helped serf artists to obtain freedom and supported them with stipends to enter the Academy of Arts. See P.N. Stolpianski, *Staryi Peterburgi Obshchestvo pooshchrenii khudozhestv*, Leningrad, Izdanie komiteta populiariizatsii khudozhestvennykh izdaniy, 1928.

The Wanderers (*Peredvizhniki*), members of the Association of Wandering Exhibits (*Tovarishchestvoperedvizhnykhvystavok*), had been organized in 1870. Influenced by Nikolai Chernyshevskii's (1828-1889) views, the Wanderers, opposing themselves to the Academicism and official Classicism prescribed by the Academy of Arts, announced the new aesthetic of Realism and devoted their artworks to social equality and justice. The heyday of their activity was the period from the 1870s to the 1890s; they dominated Russian art life at the moment the *World of Art* appeared.³

The anonymously created cover page of *Art and Art Industry*(Fig. 2) was meant to resemble an old manuscript's decorated leather cover with imitations of ancient fasteners and a seal on the back (the reproduction shows the cover and back bound together). The illuminated initials and vignettes represented colourful reproductions from old hand-written books with their rich use of gilding. These replicas clearly implied the "national idea" proclaimed by the aforementioned Stasov, who was the main champion of a "national revival"⁴ in the Russian arts.

³For more about the Wanderers see: Elizabeth Valkenier, *Russian Realist Art. State and Society: The Peredvizhniki and Their Tradition*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1989.

⁴The terms "national style", "Russian style", "neo-Russian style", and "pseudo-Russian" (the latter appears mostly in Soviet and post-Soviet publications) are usually used to describe the specific styles of the visual arts in late nineteenth-century Russia, which aim to express national identity. These terms usually refer to the tendency of nineteenth-century art to reflect or re-interpret traditional forms of authentic ethnic decoration that was common in pre-Petrine Russia or speak of the late-nineteenth-century artistic reinterpretation of Russian folk arts and crafts. For more on the terminology see Karen Kettering: "Decoration and Disconnection: The *Ruskiistil'* and Russian Decorative Arts at Nineteenth-Century American World's Fair," in Rosalind P. Blakesley and Susan E. Reid (Eds.): *Russian Art and the West. A Century of Dialogue in Painting, Architecture, and the Decorative Arts*, Chicago, The Northern Illinois University Press, 2007, p. 61-85; also see the details of terms usage in Evgenia Kirichenko and Mikhail Anikst, *Russian Design and the Fine Arts 1750-1917*, New York, Harry N. Abrams, Inc. Publishers, 1991; see also use of the term "the Style Russe" and visual examples in E. Chernevich, *Russian Graphic Design*, p. 15-37.

A mood of “national revival” had reigned in the Russian arts since 1834, when Nicholas I (r.1825-1855) announced Official Nationality, which declared that “Autocracy, Orthodoxy and Nationality” were the embodiments of Russia’s uniqueness. It resulted in the employment of visual references to pre-Petrine ornamentality in architecture, dress, and painting, and became essential for the development of design. On the cultural scene of the 1830s – 1850s, the Slavophiles⁵ became influential in the development of “cultural nationalism” and its visual expressions.⁶ They elevated pre-Petrine Medieval Russia and praised Russia’s allegedly unique communal lifestyle (*obshchina*). Arguing against Westernization, they expressed interest in folk customs, and collected and published folklore.⁷ Being engaged with the Slavophile ideas, the Wanderers employed folklore, national history and representations of the peasantry, the bearers of the idea of the “communal” nature (*sobornost*) of the Russians, visible in Wanderers’ artwork of the 1870s-1890s.⁸

During the 1870s the Wanderers became frequent guests at Abramtsevo, the future benefactor of the *World of Art* Savva Mamontov’s estate. In the 1870s-1890s, Abramtsevo’s artist colony (or “Mamontov’s Circle”) united three generations of

⁵ The Slavophile movement was formed in the 1840s by Aleksei Khomiakov, 1804-1860; Konstantin Kireevskii, 1806-1856; the Aksakov brothers, Konstantin, 1817-1860 and Ivan, 1823-1886; Iurii Samarin, 1819-1876 and others. The Slavophiles based their thoughts on the Orthodox Church theology and the idea of Russia’s uniqueness. Their philosophy was opposed to the Westerners, who thought that Russia should follow European development.

⁶ On Slavophile thought, see Susanna Rabow-Edling, *Slavophile Thought and the Politics of Cultural Nationalism*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006.

⁷ See Linda Ivanits: “Folklore in the Debates of the Westernizers and Slavophiles,” *Folklorica: Journal of the Slavic and East European Folklore Association*, XVI, 2011: 87-115.

⁸ Some examples include Vasilii Maksimov’s *Grandmother’s Folktales (Babushkinyskazki*, 1867), Vasilii Perov’s *The Sorcerer’s Arrival to the Peasant Wedding (Prikhodkoldunanakrestianskuiusvad’bu*, 1875), Il’ia Repin’s *Sadko*, 1876), Vasilii Surikov’s *The Morning of Execution the Rebellious Streltsy (Utrostreletskoikazni)*, 1881. For the Wanderers’ main art themes consult Chapter IV in E. Valkenier, *Russian Realist Art*, p. 76-97.

prominent Russian artists.⁹ The estate became a marker of development of a new stage of evolution in Russian arts, which represented a revival of vernacular art and the stylization of folk art. This was in defiance of the officially prescribed canons that were expressed by the architecture and interior design of church and institutional buildings. Abramtsevo involved the contemporary artistic avant-garde, which searched for new sources of inspiration and expressed a modern desire for the search for beauty. It also signified the beginning of the Russian Arts and Crafts movement, which was started with the building of a workshop and a peasant hospital designed by the architect Viktor Hartman (1834-1873) and a bathhouse designed by Ivan Ropot (Ivan Petrov, 1845-1908).¹⁰ These buildings were designed in a “folk” style with specific woodcarving décor adopted from local vernacular architecture: the estate was located in an area famous for its woodcarving. Mamontov’s wife, Elizaveta Mamontova (1858-?) and Elena Polenova (1858-1898) organized handicraft (*kustarnyi*) workshops for the peasants to produce embroidery, ceramics, and carved wooden furniture with local motifs, the customers for which were, at first, the artists themselves and their friends; later, these items were sold in Moscow.¹¹

⁹ See Olga Haldey, *Mamontov’s Private Opera. The Search for Modernism in Russian Theatre*, Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010, p. 71-72; about Abramtsevo see: O.I Arzumanova et al., *Muzei-zapovednik ‘Abramtsevo’*, Moskva, Izobrazitel’noe iskusstvo, 1989; Grigorii Sternin, et al., *Abramtsevo*, Leningrad, Khudozhnik RSFSR, 1988; Rosalind Gray: “Questions of Identity at Abramtsevo,” in Laura Morowitz and William Vaughan (Ed.s) *Artistic Brotherhoods in the Nineteenth Century*, Burlington: Ashgate, 2000, p. 105-121; the chapter “Abramtsevo: ot ‘usad’by’ k ‘dache’,” in Grigorii Sternin, *Russkaiakhudozhestvennaiakul’turavtoroipoloviny XIX – nachala XX veka*, Moskva: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1984, p. 184-208; E. Kirichenko and M. Anikst, *Russian Design...* p. 141-170.

¹⁰ See the section “Artistic Renewal” in Alison Hilton, *Russian Folk Art*, Bloomington & Indianapolis, Indiana UP, 1995, p. 228.

¹¹ Wendy Salmond, *Arts and Crafts in Late Imperial Russia*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1996, p. 23-39.

The peasant arts and crafts inspired many members of Mamontov's circle, who employed folkloric motifs in their artwork. According to Wendy Salmond, this new sympathy for the peasantry was a result of the emancipation of serfs in 1861.¹² The artists' motivation was a combination of philanthropic, socio-economic, aesthetic and nationalist ideas that formed the Russian revival of folk arts and crafts.

Princess Mariia Tenisheva, another future patron of the *World of Art*, was also deeply involved in the folk art revival. Her most celebrated act of patronage resulted in the foundation of the Talashkino arts and crafts workshops and artist colony, closely modeled on Abramtsevo, which lasted from about 1898 to 1905. Tenisheva intended to surpass Mamontov's endeavours. In 1898 she founded the Museum of Russian Antiquities and Folk Art in Talashkino to exhibit the artifacts collected throughout the Russian provinces; in 1905, a folk art museum was also established in Smolensk and a store, the Source (*Rodnik*), was opened in Moscow.

The graphic arts of the turn of the century also responded to the newly re-invented "national style", with "Primitivism" as one of its main characteristics. Inspired by Abramtsevo and Talashkino artistic initiatives, the new generation of turn-of-the-century Russian artists went away from copying medieval and ancient designs toward artistic interpretations of indigenous décor and vernacular arts and used it as a starting point to create unique examples of modern graphic art. If *Art and Art Industry* copied ornaments from ancient manuscripts, the *World of Art* graphic designers, the followers of the Russian Arts and Crafts movement, created their own visual versions of the "national style" as a regional variation of Art Nouveau or the Modern Style – *stil' modern* – in Russia.¹³

¹² Wendy Salmond: "A Matter of Give and Take: Peasant Crafts and Their Revival in Late Imperial Russia," *Design Issues* 13.1, 1997: 6.

¹³Alla Rosenfeld: "The Search for National Identity in Turn-of-the-Century Russian Graphic Design," in Alla Rosenfeld (Ed.) *Defining Russian Graphic Arts. From Diaghilev to Stalin*, New Brunswick, New Jersey and London, Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, 1999, p. 21.

Diaghilev conceived the *World of Art* after his grand tour of Europe, which led to his close knowledge of, and acquaintance with, European artists, art reproduction and publication on art themes. It is not surprising that he envisioned the new journal as an equal to the European art periodicals of the day, such as *Pan*, *Jugend*, *Simplicissimus*, *Studio*, *Ver Sacrum*, *La Revue Blanche* and others. These European art journals could be subscribed to (and they likely were) by art lovers in Russia interested in the newest European art. Also the periodicals came from Europe with visitors. Travellers who visited Europe would return home and show the art journals in art circles to provoke discussion about the newest art trends. These portable “art-shows” presented as art objects stimulated interest in European art and art reproduction. As Alexandre Benois would recall in his memoirs: “We instinctively wanted to get away from the backwardness of Russian art life. We sought to get rid of our provincialism and become closer to the culturally-developed West. We desired to be closer to the purely artistic quest of foreign art schools and escape from the ‘low-brow narrativity’ (*literaturshchina*) and tendentiousness of the Wanderers, as far as possible from quasi-innovators and decadent Academicism.”¹⁴ Both Benois and Diaghilev wanted to promote Russian art abroad. Since the Russian “début in Europe had been unsuccessful”,¹⁵ the new periodical, crafted according to examples of Western-European art periodicals of the day, would both promote Russian art in Europe and teach the Russians about European art.

On the 20th of June, 1898 Diaghilev wrote a letter addressed to several people: Bakst, Benois, Vrubel, Aleksandr Golovin (1863-1930), Korovin, Lanceray, Maliutin, Polenova, Somov and Iakunchikova. These artists were invited to participate in a competition to design the cover of the *World of Art*. He announced the exact dimensions (33 x 26 cm), said that the drawing should be made on coloured paper, and that the title

¹⁴Alexandre Benois, *Vozniknovenie ‘Mira Iskusstva’*, Moskva, Iskusstvo, 1998, p.21.

¹⁵I.S. Zil’bershtein and V.A. Samkov (Eds. and comps.), *Sergei Diaghilev i russkoe iskusstvo. Stat’i, otkrytye pis’m, interv’iu. Perepiska. Sovremenniki o Diaghileve*, 2 vols., Moskva, Izobrazitel’noe iskusstvo, 1982, vol. 2, p. 76.

“Mir Iskusstva” had to be present.¹⁶ The winner of the competition was the Impressionist painter and theatre set designer Konstantin Korovin,¹⁷ who created a watercolour on a light ivory background. The journal was printed with Korovin’s inaugural cover for the first half of the year (Fig.1).

The space of Korovin’s page was visually divided into three parts: the upper part was a symmetrical frieze with the stylized image of an archetypal Northern Russian village with log houses and references to local agriculture. The grey and rose-coloured sky, with a possible reference to “white nights”, and the sparse northern nature were the main features of the decorative frieze. The stylized curvilinear clouds alluded to Scandinavian landscapes of the Finnish artists such as Gallen-Kallela or VainöBlomstedt. Gallen-Kallela collaborated with Diaghilev during preparation of the first issue of the *World of Art* and was the model “national artist” for Diaghilev and Filosofov. They valued him as a formidable “portraitist” of Finnish northern nature and

¹⁶I. Zil’bershtein and V. Samkov, *Sergei Diaghilev...* vol. 2, p. 32.

¹⁷ Konstantin Korovin, a graduate of the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture (*Moskovskoeuchilishchezhipovisi, vaianiiiaizodchestva*), was a student of the Wanderer Aleksei Savrasov (1830-1897), the eminent Realist landscapist painter, and Vasilii Perov (1834-1882), the master of critical Realism in genre painting. His student years (1875-1882) coincided with the golden age of the Wanderers’ movement. Korovin studied together with Levitan, Nesterov, Riabushkin, Abram Arkhipov, Aleksandr Golovin, and Maliutin, the future artists who in a few years’ time would define the direction of the Russian arts, and who would become the leading figures and followers of the “national style” development. In 1885, Korovin became acquainted with Mamontov, joined the Abramtsevo circle, and participated in the theatrical production as the set designer for Mamontov’s private opera. By the 1890s, he had become a well-established artist. In 1886, 1892 and 1893, Korovin travelled to Paris and became an advocate of Impressionism. The details of Korovin’s biography see in Vladimir Kruglov, *Konstantin Alekseevich Korovin*, Sankt-Peterburg: KhudozhnikRossii, 2000, p. 7-20.

its spirit.¹⁸ Gallen-Kallela's art works would be reproduced in the following issues. Korovin's frieze echoed Gallen-Kallela's evocative mysticism of simplicity, which in Korovin's image was expressed in the linear rendering of trees, log houses and a heavy cold sky. In the empty space of the middle part was the title of the journal, done in a type style known as *poluustav* (semi-ustav), which had been used for Old Slavic printed books. The plant motif with kernels of grain that embellished the title was repeated in the frieze, creating visual unity. The lower part of the cover was a vignette (a "stamp" as Benois called it¹⁹) set into the left corner with two fish on an empty grey background. The use of a vast, empty space in the background was groundbreaking and represented something contrasting to the ornate and embellished cover of *Art and Art Industry*. Korovin may well have known the equally "empty" covers of the recently published *Ver Sacrum*. This emptiness represented a radical approach to graphic design and provoked scepticism, criticism and debate from both Korovin's friends and his enemies.

Benois was overtly ironic and very critical. As Benois reported, the look of the *World of Art* was Diaghilev's doing. Diaghilev was concerned about the format, refined printing and the journal's "provocative" (*drazniashchii*) visual expression. As Benois noted in his memoirs, he disliked the "pretentious emptiness" of the cover. He described Korovin's work as "naïve",²⁰ and a "drawing made as if for a glazed tile".²¹ He sarcastically noted that perhaps "this naivety was intended to signify the progressive character of the journal".²² Benois also claimed that Korovin had not worked hard enough to create the title page, since the cover page gave the impression that the design was merely a sketch.²³ In fact, the image of the fish likely had a "glazed tile" prototype:

¹⁸DariuszKonstantynow: "Light from the North. The Reception of Scandinavian Art in the Circle of Russian Modernists," *Totenmesse: Modernism in the Culture of Northern and Central Europe*, Warsaw, Institute of Art, Polish Academy of Sciences, 1996: 178.

¹⁹Alexandre Benua, *Moivospominaniia*, 2 vols., Moskva, Nauka, 1980, vol.2, p. 231.

²⁰A. Benua, *Vozniknovenie...* p.41.

²¹A. Benua, *Vozniknovenie...* p.45.

²²A. Benua, *Moivospominaniia*, vol. 2, p. 230-231.

²³A. Benua, *Moivospominaniia*, vol. 2, p. 231.

it is quite possible that Korovin derived his “stamp” from Vrubel’s *Fish (Rybki)*, created in Abramtsevo in the 1890s. Korovin, a member of the Abramtsevo circle, knew Vrubel’s work very well, as it was created in the colony when he himself worked in the Abramtsevo ceramic workshop.²⁴ He needed only to turn one of Vrubel’s fish upside-down to create a new design.

The image of the fish on the cover, in this way, created a visual connection to the Abramtsevo arts and crafts revival. The frieze with the village was another indirect reference to the Abramtsevo lifestyle. Benois would likely have disapproved of this particular reference because he envisioned Russian art as something to be Europeanized. In addition, the cover page could have evoked Moscow more than St Petersburg, the city where the journal was conceived. Korovin was a Muscovite, and the “national style” was Moscow’s patrimony in contrast to the “European” St Petersburg and its legacy as the “window on Europe”.²⁵

Stasov, an eager supporter of the “national style”, was another who criticized the cover page, responding to its “primitivist” simplicity. He asserted that he was quite disappointed with his cover:

If he [Korovin] have been commissioned to compose anything according to the “decadent taste”, he is awful. Thus, the image of the “village” (most likely a Russian one), which is depicted on Korovin’s cover, consists of such houses, such bushes and such linear perspective and such a sky as could be painted by a three-year-old child who takes a pencil for the first time in his life and awkwardly soils the paper. On the same cover, Korovin put some kind of a “stamp” with two fishes, which could be appropriate for the Japanese or for a package designed for

²⁴ V.A. Nevskii: “Abramtsevskaiakeramicheskaiamasterskaia. Maiolika M.A. Vrubelia,” in Grigorii Sternin et al., *Abramtsevo*, Leningrad: Khudozhnik RSFSR, 1988: 175.

²⁵ The idiom “to hew the window on Europe” (*v Evropuprorubit’ okno*) is the famous phrase from Pushkin’s poem *The Bronze Horseman*, 1834; it refers to Peter the Great’s construction of St Petersburg, which was meant to be the actual “gate” to Europe.

some product, but in an art periodical (even in a bad periodical) it should be eliminated.²⁶

It is noteworthy that both Stasov and Benois, representatives of opposite camps, accused Korovin of using a primitive style and pointed to its backwardness.²⁷ In this “naivety” (Benois) and “child-like drawing” (Stasov), both critics saw a threat to art journal design. Benois, whose “Europeanism” was Franco-centric, but rather of a traditional dimension, expected less radical execution and more of a Western-European look for the cover, while Stasov saw it as a mockery of the “national style” and graphic design in general.

The flatness and “emptiness” of the cover page caused a furor in the artistic milieu of Russia (which was quite tight in the late nineteenth century). The two concurrent journals – *Art and Art Industry* and the *World of Art* – became embodiments of opposite “worlds of art”; the *World of Art* represented groundbreaking views and a provocative cover design, proclaiming a message of emerging of Primitivism and a move toward flatness and simplicity. The *World of Art*’s publication became an assertive proclamation of Europeanization and cosmopolitanism expressed in words and images, which established the new Modernist tendency in the Russian arts. The graphic design of the art periodical, which began print revival and initiated the revolution in graphic arts in Russia, represented a specific Russian interpretation of Art Nouveau.

²⁶Vladimir Stasov, “Nishchiedukhom,” in V.V. Stasov, *Izbrannyesochineniia v trekhtomakh*, Vol. 3, Moskva, Iskusstvo, 1952: 236.

²⁷ For details on “primitiveness” and “Primitivism” see Chapter 1 in Colin Rhodes, *Primitivism and Modern Art*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1994.