

Не то дорого, что красного золота,
а дорого, что доброго мастерства.



The Folk Art Of Russia

Sarah P. Burke

This month an extraordinary exhibition of ancient and modern arts and crafts from the Soviet Union opens at Field Museum. The exhibition brings together folk arts and crafts from all of the fifteen republics of the Soviet Union. Each of the republics has its own rich traditions of folk art.

Among the richest and most varied are the folk art traditions of the cultural and geographic area traditionally called Russia, which comprises most of the European part of the U.S.S.R. This discussion is limited to that area, although the objects in the exhibition represent the whole of the Soviet Union. Hence, the term "Russian" as used here should not be understood as all-inclusive.

The first motifs of Russian folk art were the ancient pre-Christian ones: for instance, the solar symbols, the swastika, horses, roosters, flowers, and grasses. They served as the basic motifs of this art until the eighteenth century, the time of the westernizing reforms of Peter the Great. When writers and artists became aware of the peasant arts in the twentieth century, they looked back with nostalgia to the pre-Petrine period as a time of pure folk art, unadulterated by Western European ideas and art forms. These earlier peasant art objects—most of what has survived dating only since the seventeenth century—are characterized by simplicity and grace in their designs. The designs varied from item to item but were primarily floral and covered the entire surface of the object. Their grace results, perhaps, from the fact that the artistic energy of the folk master was directed not to overcoming the material but to fashioning an object which closely tied together the possibilities of the material, the utility of the finished item, and the decoration.

After the seventeenth century, though the old forms and motifs are preserved, they appear in conjunction with new ones and take on a more purely decorative character. In the eighteenth century Peter the Great's reforms deepened the split between city and village. For all of the arts it was a time of infusion of Western European schools and styles. While these trends primarily affected the

cities, they also reached the villages and influenced the peasant art. Under the influence of the baroque style, for example, the traditional plant designs that decorated folk objects became more complex and ornamented and the plants depicted became more realistic. Scenes from contemporary life began to appear on some objects but the depiction did not yet go beyond ornament; that is, the scenes still blended in naturally with the overall decoration. On many objects these newer motifs, in conjunction with the older ones, resulted in an engaging blending of fantasy and reality, a blend so characteristic of other forms of peasant art, such as the folk and epic tales. As new motifs came into Russian folk art they were manifest first in those things made by the folk masters for city dwellers, such as majolica, large copper bowls, and silver objects. Things made by the peasants for their own use retained the more traditional patterns.

The first half of the nineteenth century was marked by a flowering of Russian folk art, but the latter half was a period of crisis. With the rapid industrialization of the country, many of the peasant-made items were replaced by cheaper factory-made ones, and the country markets began to be flooded by factory-manufactured dishware, fabrics, and household implements. Art by the peasant for the peasant was gradually disappearing, and with it the rhythmic sense of design which had resulted from the craftsman's sense of balance between utility and decoration. Only in the most isolated regions of the Russian north was peasant art able to continue its natural development.

Whereas peasant art for the villages was disappearing, peasant art for the cities was thriving. It is ironic that city dwellers should have taken an interest in the folk tradesmen at this time, yet it is also understandable. At the end of the nineteenth century in Russia there was a reaction against the extreme rationalism and materialism of the preceding decades. People longed for the irrational, the primitive, the Rousseauistic type of existence. Ethnologists were just beginning to bring peasant art to the attention of society, which naturally seized upon it, however idealistically, for its qualities of naiveté and directness. This widened city market had important consequences for folk art, for now the design of an object was dictated by the tastes of the city buyer rather than by the craftsman's sense of an

organic relationship to its function. The products of peasant workmanship were becoming souvenirs.

During this period one trend in design, noted in the eighteenth century, continued and was strengthened—the trend toward more realistic depictions of subjects. On certain objects, such as the painted papier-maché boxes, the designs were no longer part of the overall decorative pattern; they became sophisticated paintings with three-dimensional perspective which were valued independently of the object itself. Another trend in decoration at this time was to make the traditional designs more "folksy." Often the old folk designs did not correspond to the city dweller's image of peasant art, and the tradesmen therefore exaggerated the fantastic elements and accentuated the ornamental patterns, with a resultant stylization and even caricature of the original.

The crisis in Russian folk art did not go unnoticed, and there were attempts to revive and sustain the native traditions. Two of the most interesting and unique attempts were carried out at the art colonies Abramtsevo, outside of Moscow, and Talashkino, near Smolensk. The most creative artists of the time lived at these colonies and created works which were imitative of folk art. As artists they were interested primarily in design and looked back to the pre-Petrine period for their models. The results of their efforts were engagingly ornate, stylized art objects based on native art. Certain items of furniture, for example, had so much ornament that they were uncomfortable and nonfunctional. Some of the artists, especially at Talashkino, did strive for authenticity. Nevertheless, the importance of these colonies was not in their attempts to revive folk art but rather in the tremendous influence that native art through their works had on twentieth century Russian avant-garde art.

More practical attempts to sustain the folk tradition were made by local government organizations, which founded trade schools to teach and propagate the ancient designs and forms. One shortcoming of these institutions was that too often the directors of the schools and not the folk masters determined the designs to be followed. While these schools helped the folk artists to get through the difficult first decades of the twentieth century, they actually were neither creating nor continuing a tradition in a lasting sense.

Russian proverb: *An object made by the hand of a master craftsman is more valuable than one of precious gold.*

Photo: A mythological bird-siren (*alkonost*), symbol of joy, in facade decoration of a peasant cottage; 19th century carved wood; Gorkii Region; State History Museum, Moscow.

Perhaps the most serious consequence of the industrialization of Russia was that peasants in increasing numbers were moving to the cities to work, and thanks to better forms of communication, the city was also moving more and more into the country. In Russia the distinction between city and country life was rapidly disappearing, so that after the beginning of the twentieth century only in a few remote areas did authentic folk culture and its distinctive art survive.

I will attempt now to give a general survey of the four main divisions of Russian folk art: woodworking (carving and painting), ceramics, metalworking, and decorative work on fabrics. All items of folk art cannot be covered, so I will limit my discussion by concentrating almost exclusively on those objects which were made by the folk masters for their own use as opposed to those made for the city markets. All the objects described were used in peasant households, and all, with few exceptions, died out in the first decades of the twentieth century, for reasons already suggested.

One of the oldest and most conservative forms of Russian folk art is wood carving. Wood was the most abundant natural resource in Russia. It was used for houses, churches, and household implements, and the Russian peasant decorated this wooden environment with carvings. His house, sleigh, furniture, grave marker, even his locks, were beautifully carved and sculpted.

The most impressive type of carving was the deep relief which decorated the exterior of peasant houses. Unfortunately, few of these carvings older than from the nineteenth century are extant. The peasant houses had a high pointed roof and the carving typically followed the contour of the roof just under the eaves at both ends and ran along the sides, thus encircling the house. Wooden cornices placed above the windows were also deeply carved, as were gateposts and fence posts. These carvings varied little in their basic design, which was a mythological creature looking out from between a floral pattern of curving leaves and buds. The figure, which always holds onto or is hooked onto the floral design, is an integral part of the design as a whole. A mythological bird-siren (in Russian, *alkonost*), the symbol of joy, is one of the most popular motifs. Other creatures commonly represented in this type of carving are the lion, often with a human mask, the horse, sometimes with a

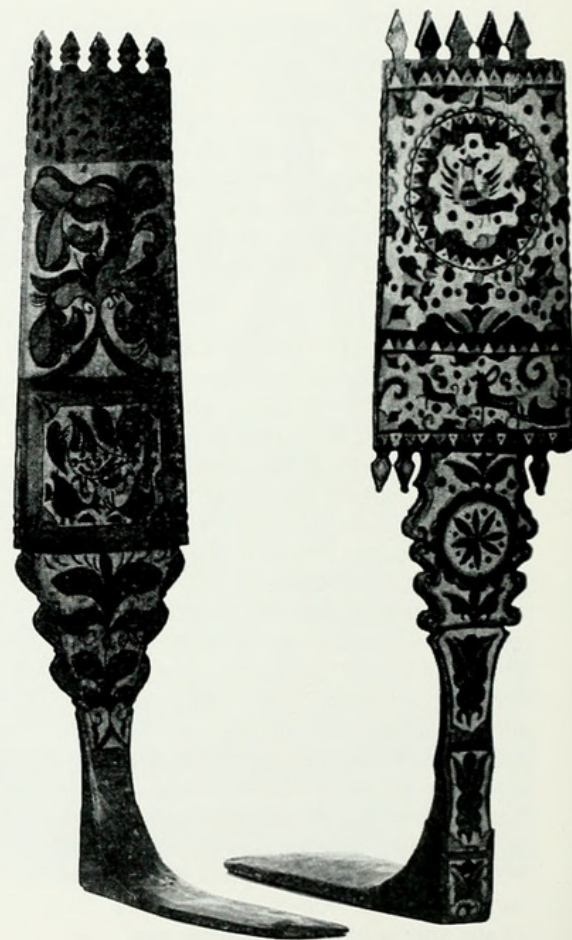
lion mask, the unicorn, and the siren-mermaid, which was an especially popular motif of house carvers along the Volga River. The Volga carvers were ship builders, and therefore adapted the dominant motif of ship decoration to their homes, a mermaid looking out from between waves.

While this carving remained basically the same throughout the centuries, in the eighteenth century it did become more ornate under the influence of the luxuriant baroque interiors of city homes. It is sometimes forgotten that the village carving masters were the ones who worked on the construction of these interiors. The carvers both incorporated some of their own motifs into the interiors and adapted some of the baroque designs to their village carvings.

In the monumental carving, deep, coarse relief was characteristic, but on smaller items, flatness rather than relief was emphasized. The designs, which are often the same as on the houses, are much tighter and more geometrical than the larger carvings.

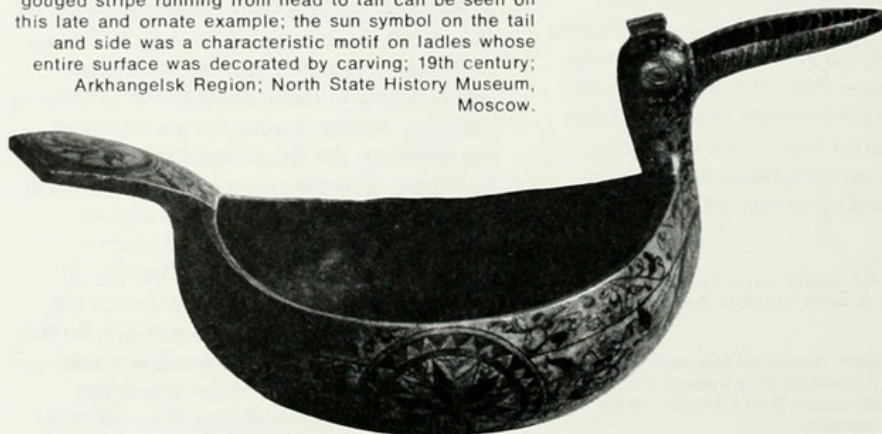
Some of the most ornately carved of the household objects were distaffs, or hand spindles. Spindles played an important role in peasant life and often two were kept in the house, one fancy and one plain, the former being handed down from generation to generation. The spinner would place the working spindle at her side with the bottom curved portion steadied under her leg. The wool or flax was loosely tied around the top paddle-like portion of the spindle, and the spinner pulled pieces of the raw material with one hand while spinning the thread onto a small top with the other.

Three basic styles are found among the carved spindles. The most traditional was characterized by geometrical motifs which covered the entire surface of the object. The ancient symbol of the sun, a circle with a rosette form within, is the dominant



Distaffs, or hand spindles, of carved and painted wood; 19th century; Vologda Region and Zaonezhie Region; North State History Museum, Moscow.

Kovsh-skopkar, carved and painted wooden ladle, in traditional bird shape, used for drinking beer or kvas or for wine-tasting; a remnant of the simple traditional gouged stripe running from head to tail can be seen on this late and ornate example; the sun symbol on the tail and side was a characteristic motif on ladles whose entire surface was decorated by carving; 19th century; Arkhangelsk Region; North State History Museum, Moscow.



geometrical motif and is frequently repeated on each section of the spindle. Spindles characteristic of the Iaroslavl-Kostroma region also used geometrical motifs, but as secondary elements of the decoration. The primary elements are scenes from contemporary life, tea drinking being one of the most common. Depiction of such scenes became popular in the eighteenth and especially the nineteenth centuries. In the Nizhni-Novgorod (now Gorkii) region of Russia, spindles received quite a different treatment, under the influence of city life. In addition to the traditional carving, pieces of darker wood were inlaid to add variety to the designs and scenes from folk tales and noble life.

More traditionally decorated and one of the oldest of peasant household implements was the chiseled and carved ladle (in Russian, *kovsh*). Traditionally it was a bird-shape, but others evolved, such as a horse-shape, which often had multiple heads. The tail and bill were used as handles for drinking beer or *kvas* or, in the cities, for wine tasting. Such ladles were often richly decorated since they served as traditional gifts as well as decorations for holiday tables. A typical seventeenth century ladle was characterized by a simple design such as a flowing, broad, shallowly gouged stripe which ran from the head to the tail.

Another common carved item of Russian folk art was the fantastic gingerbread or cake board. These boards resemble rectangular trays which are covered with relief designs of emblems and contemporary and fairy-tale scenes. They were pressed onto cakes which were then given as special holiday or birthday gifts. The decorated cakes were often quite large, one of the largest being the gingerbread weighing around 150 pounds given Peter the Great when he was born. Although such boards were used in the country, they were carved primarily for the city dwellers, a fact which would explain the breadth of subjects depicted and the use of such emblems as the two-headed eagle.

Russian folk art was as rich in wooden sculpture as in carving. In the form of wooden toys, this sculpture flowered especially at the end of the nineteenth century and is one of the arts which has survived in the twentieth century. Folk-tale creatures and fairy-tale scenes are depicted, as are such real-life figures as barons and baronesses, soldiers, and wet nurses. A degree of irony can be noted in the expressions and dress of the real-life figures. The most famous toys are made even today, in Bogorodskoe village in the Moscow region. The masters of this village had long been known for their carving of

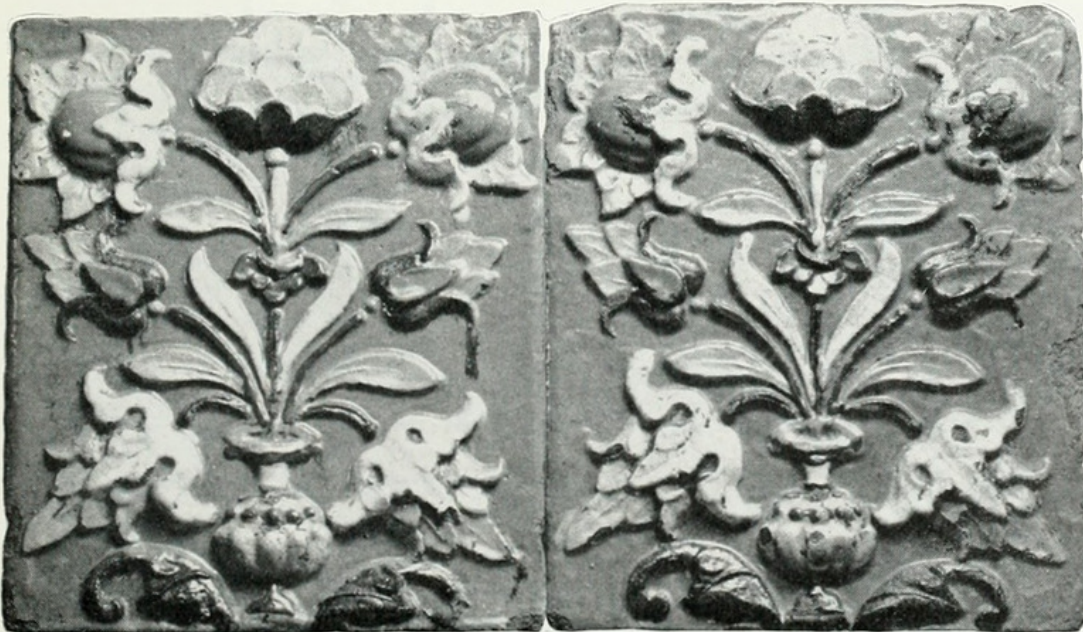
bears and other animals; then at the end of the nineteenth century they began making the toys movable, which caused them to be even more well known. The toys from this village—bears dancing or beating a drum, squirrels playing basketball—are currently exported from the Soviet Union and can be found in stores in the United States.

Painting of objects arose much later in Russia than carving and sculpture, but it soon became a popular art form, reaching its height in the nineteenth century. The painted articles were originally done by the same craftsmen who decorated the cathedrals and icons, and on certain articles the influence of icon painting is evident. Painting allowed much more freedom of line and design than carving, and its introduction broadened the circle of themes which fed peasant art. In its most conservative form it reworked all the old symbolic motifs but with less conservatism than wood carving. At the same time, painting took new themes from everyday life, often combining them with the older motifs. As painting gained in popularity, it began to replace carving on many wooden articles, such as hand spindles, ladles, dishes, and boxes. The traditional colors used on these objects were mainly darker reds, greens, and browns. The paints were applied directly, without shading or mixing. As new pigments were developed, the color spectrum widened and much brighter colors were used in more subtle ways. But in spite of the striking colors, in Russian folk art the graphic element always dominates the color.

As in wood carving, the treatment of the graphic element on painted objects varied, and three main styles of painting can be distinguished. All three styles are well represented on painted spindles but can be found in other types of painted folk objects also.

The oldest and most conservative style kept to the more traditional designs. Of the two painted spindles pictured here, the one on the left is representative of this graphic style with its strong decorative cast. The motifs on this spindle are all ancient ones—the symbol of the tree of life at the bottom, the rooster in the middle, the flowering plant motif on the upper third. The spindle on the right is typical of a more subtle and refined type of painting which combines the older motifs with scenes from contemporary life. The sleigh scene in the middle third of the spindle is representative of this newer tendency in folk painting to show miniature

Glazed facade tiles for exterior decoration; design was carved into wooden blocks, which were pressed into the soft clay; 17th century; State History Museum, Moscow.



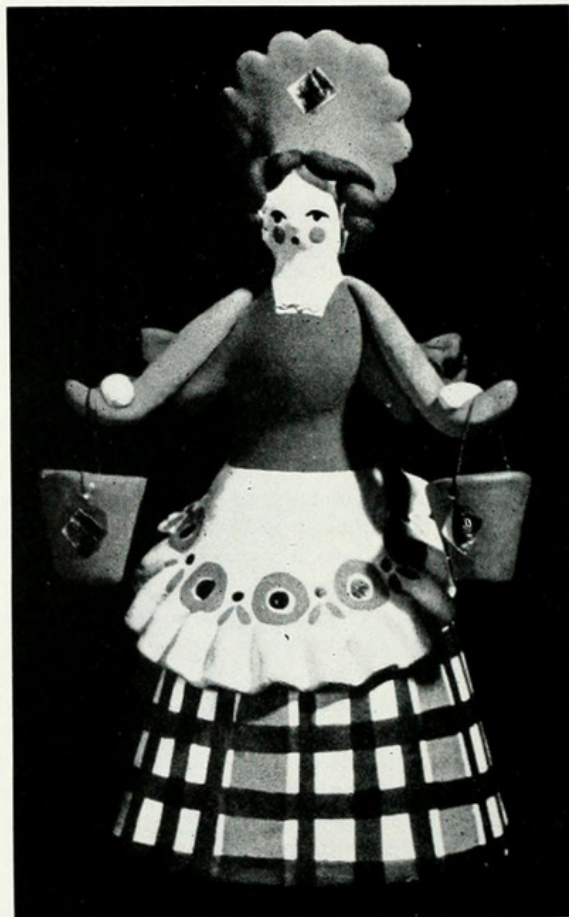
and realistic depictions, while in the upper and lower thirds are, respectively, the ancient bird-siren and sun symbols. The "realistic" portion is still part of the overall design and is in no way freestanding.

The third style of painting can be seen on hand spindles from the Nizhni-Novgorod region. Scenes from daily life are the main subjects and occupy the foremost place on the spindle—the larger, upper third. The painting is much more like easel painting than on the other two types, and, in fact, was influenced by nineteenth century easel painting. The most characteristic scene depicted, tea drinking, shows a table with two or more fashionably dressed persons seated behind it with drapery serving as a backdrop for the entire scene. Such two-dimensional depiction and drapery backdrop are reminiscent of icon painting. The influence of easel painting is represented by the painter's choice of subjects and use of color.

The Khokhloma wooden tableware, so well known in the West thanks to the revival of this craft in the Soviet Union, also comes from the Nizhni-Novgorod region. Although the designs found on the contemporary tableware are different and have a mechanical character, the basic plant motif and the traditional colors, red and black on gold, have been retained throughout the centuries. The process used to achieve the colors is an interesting one. After the object was carved it was coated with loam and then bathed in linseed oil. The next step was to give it several coats of varnish and cover the surface with a powdered silver metal suspended in water. Onto this silver surface the black and red design was painted, more varnish was applied, and then the object was fired. During the firing the silver background turns into a bright gold color. Present-day examples of this folk art can be widely found in the West.

Although ceramics was not so varied as woodworking, it was also a highly developed Russian folk art. On churches and on peasant houses could be found brightly colored ceramic relief tiles depicting folk-tale creatures, scenes from real life, or the traditional floral designs. The designs for such tiles were carved into wooden blocks, which were pressed into the soft red clay before it was glazed and fired. Another common type of ceramic tile, not in relief, was used to decorate peasant stoves. The stove was the most important part of the peasant house and usually stretched along

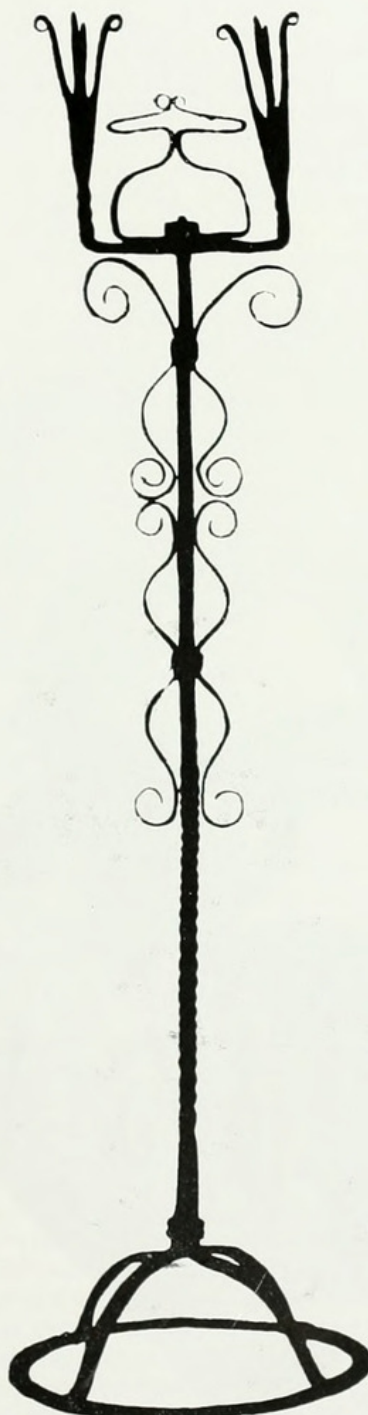
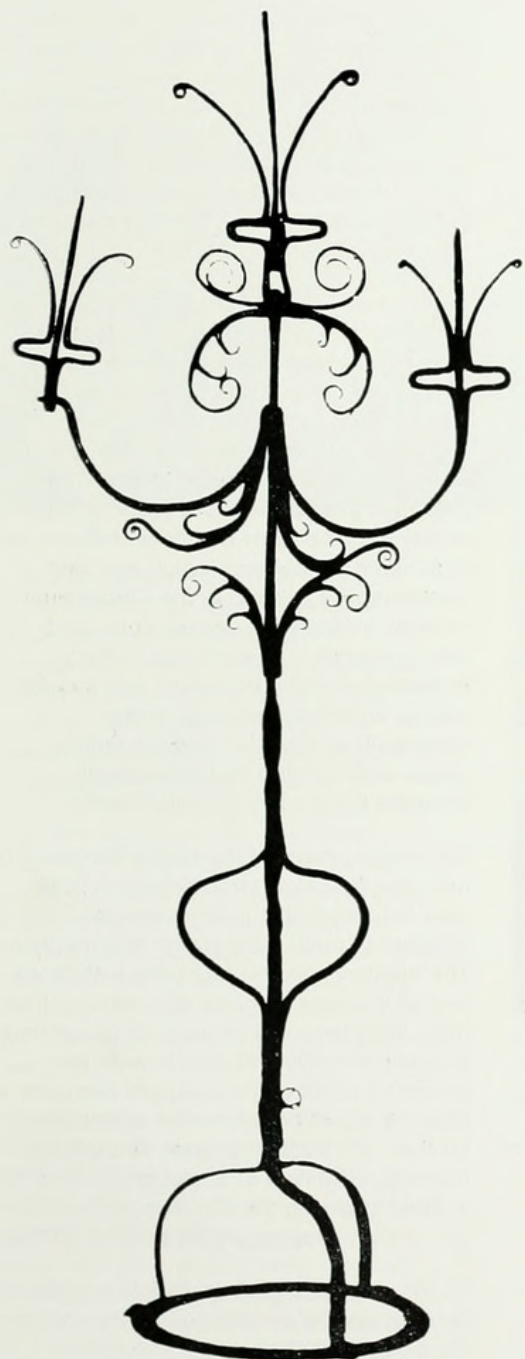
Ceramic toy, a peasant woman carrying buckets; clay is baked and then painted with tempera and gold leaf; contemporary; Dymkova Village, Kirov Region.



Drum-shaped bucket with cover, of painted birchbark; used for carrying such things as sour cream home from market; 19th century; Arkhangelsk Region; North State History Museum, Moscow.

Typical large ceramic stove tiles, with fairy-tale motif; 17th-18th century; State History Museum, Moscow.





Wrought iron candleholders, 47.4 and 49 inches high; 17th-18th century.

one wall like a long countertop. Such stoves were large enough to serve as sleeping quarters for some member of the household during the winter months. Large ceramic tiles with brightly colored designs and pictures painted under the glaze in the two-dimensional folk style decorated the sides of the stove.

Equally fanciful and colorful is the ceramic sculpture in the form of make-believe animals, ladies, soldiers, and other figures. These ceramic toys were made in a number of regions, but the most famous and most captivating ones came from the Viatskaia (now Kirov) region, from the village of Dymkova. This form of folk art survived the first decades of this century through the efforts of one craftswoman who preserved the tradition and passed it on to others. As a result, the production of these toys is now flourishing in the Soviet Union. The usual subjects of the toys are the traditional peasant figures: the wet nurse; a *skomorokh* (an old Russian traveling musician-dancer-juggler) riding a goat with trousers or a pig; a peasant woman carrying buckets. The figures are made of red clay which is first fired and then covered with a white wash on which the final colors are painted. In the nineteenth century the white background was achieved by dipping the fired object in a solution of chalk and milk.

Some of the most interesting examples of Russian folk art are to be found in metal work. Everyday household items made of metal were, not surprisingly, limited in number and use. The most common metal objects were the charming three-dimensional copper locks in the form of ducks, horses, centaurs, and other ancient animal motifs. The same motifs were used for copper combs and adornments for spindles, the most prevalent motif being the heads of two horses in silhouette.

By far the most elegant and strikingly simple of the metal household objects is the tall wrought iron candleholder which stands on the floor. They were forged by the village blacksmith always in the same pattern: a stylized flower supported by a slender stem which has intertwined leaves extending from it. In peasant households they were used to hold splints of wood which were burned instead of candles for light. The village blacksmith also forged ornate lattice-work locks and smaller versions of the candleholders for peasant homes.

Of all the Russian native arts, embroidery and needlework are the most conservative in their preservation of the oldest artistic motifs. Embroidered articles were found in every household and were closely associated with the folk holidays and ceremonies. This fact in part accounts for their traditional nature.

Ornate needlework always decorates the most traditional article of a peasant woman's clothes, her headdress. Headdresses were common to every region of Russia and varied in shape and design according to region. They were prized possessions of women and were handed down from generation to generation. The needlework on these articles resembles tapestry, with floral or geometric designs covering the entire surface. Metallic threads

of silver and gold or silk threads were sewn in a raised pattern onto a background of velvet or silk. The most festive headdresses had river pearls and colored stones sewn onto them for a richer effect.

Embroidery with a basic red thread is the most characteristic and traditional type of stitching found on clothing, tablecloths, bedsheets, and towels. The most characteristic designs are geometrical, the swastika being the dominant motif. Animals, plants, and humans are all geometrically stylized and become part of the overall pattern. The variety found in the red-thread embroidery results from the many types of stitches used by the seamstress in executing the designs. Especially brilliant and fanciful is the red-thread stitching characteristic of the Olonets region, noted

for depictions of fantastic animals onto which tiny pieces of brightly colored silk have been sewn.

Another type of needlework, in direct contrast to the bright colors of the Olonets embroidery, was the white-on-white weaving done in the Vologda region of Russia and found most often on bedsheets. This striking weaving differs from other Russian needlework not only by its use of white but also by its use of newer motifs, such as panorama scenes from country life or folk tales. A border of lace was often attached to these weavings, thus forming a second border on the article.

A discussion of fabrics would not be complete without mention of the type used for everyday clothing, for ordinary tablecloths, for curtains, for book covers, and even for flags. It was made from homespun or linen which was then stamped with carved, inked wooden blocks. The patterns covered the entire fabric and varied widely from the most traditional folklore and floral motifs to patterns which depicted contemporary scenes. In the seventeenth century, for instance, sirens, lions, and unicorns predominated, while in the eighteenth century horsemen and country scenes were more popular. In the nineteenth century the cheaper factory-woven and -printed fabrics gradually crowded out the block-printed ones.

Because so many of the native Russian folk arts, like the block-printed fabrics, have died out, the Soviet government has adopted a broad program for reviving them. The greatest success has been with those arts which were primarily decorative rather than utilitarian in function, such as ceramic and wooden toys and needlework. An important result of this program has been to give the Soviet population an appreciation for their folk traditions. Now, through the traveling exhibition of Soviet arts and crafts at Field Museum, the Chicago public also can see and appreciate these folk traditions.

All the examples of Russian folk art pictured here except the candleholders are among the almost 2,000 objects in the exhibit "Soviet Union: Arts and Crafts in Ancient Times and Today" on display at Field Museum in Halls 18 and 19 from June 17 through July 13.

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A lace-maker in the Vologda Region, which is well known for its lace, both within and outside of the U.S.S.R.; her traditional headdress is embroidered in a geometric design.





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