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A Matter of Give and Take: Peasant Crafts and Their Revival in Late Imperial Russia

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As we watch the end of our century loom closer on the horizon, the discovery of broad historical and psychological parallels with the last generation to undergo such an experience has become both a comfort and an object lesson. Among the ways in which our contemporary *fin-de-siècle* angst echoes that of ca. 1900 is a shared forboding that the world as we know it is about to disappear, and that a frustrating ambivalence as to what we can do about it. This sense of *déjà vu* is particularly strong when we compare our present unabated enthusiasm for ethnic or folk crafts in this increasingly homogeneous world with the arts and crafts revivals of the late nineteenth century.[1]

Revivals are almost, by definition, one-sided affairs, whereby the living make their own selective use of the past and its artifacts (e.g., neoclassicism, Gothic Revival). But the folk or vernacular craft revivals that emerged throughout Europe, Great Britain, and the United States at the end of the nineteenth century were exceptions in that they depended on the conjunction of two *living* cultures—an educated, cosmopolitan intelligentsia (artists, philanthropists, entrepreneurs) and a romanticized but very much alive "folk" (peasantry, indigenous peoples). As the heirs to cultural traditions threatened with extinction by the modern age, the latter were enlisted by the former as partners in innumerable campaigns to save and resuscitate crafts that might otherwise have quietly disappeared onto the dustheap of history. At once grandly utopian and eminently pragmatic in scope, such revivals went far beyond the confines of borrowing design motifs from bygone eras and exotic peoples. Rooted in a belief that folk culture was a dynamic organism capable of growth and adaptation, rather than a dead style, they operated on quite a different model—one of give and take and mutual self-interest. The process might begin, as in other revivals, with artists borrowing raw material from "the folk" (usually in the form of ornament) for their own design experiments, but it rarely stopped there. Having passed these precious elements of a potential national design vocabulary through the purifying filter of their own taste—informed by a professional art education and a familiarity with European trends—artists and craft reformers felt morally bound to reinvest these borrowed cultural riches back into their source communities, by employing modern-day "folk" as the producers of

1 For a panoramic view of craft revivals, see Nicola Gordon Bowe, ed., *Art and the National Dream: The Search for Vernacular Expression in Turn-of-the-Century Design* (Dublin, University of Dublin Press, 1993).

their neo-vernacular designs. The benefits were several. In an industrializing age, when national distinctiveness was at a premium, each nation could maintain a clear cultural identity by preserving ethnic traditions in a carefully husbanded and marketable form. No less important, a small but symbolically significant sector of the population would be induced by clear economic self-interest to maintain the handcraft traditions of their ancestors, and with them a much prized social and cultural stability in the face of often terrifying social change. To mix several of the agricultural and biological metaphors then popular with proponents of this process, new wood would be grafted onto the dying tree of folk culture, fresh seed sewn in its exhausted soil, and a new cycle of growth generated in an aging organism through cellular division.

I want to briefly look in this essay at one of the most far-reaching and ambitious of the previous *fin-de-siècle's* craft revivals, the movement to revive peasant crafts in Russia during the last decades of the empire.[2] Just a few vignettes will be enough, I hope, to show how this model of give and take operated in one specific national context, and to consider some of the consequences inherent in attempts to resuscitate cultural practices by benign intervention "from above." The future of peasant crafts had a particular resonance in nineteenth-century Russia, a nation whose overwhelmingly peasant population made the pangs of modernization particularly acute and whose sense of national identity was complicated by its geographical position between Europe and Asia and by the historical extremism of the Petrine reforms. As a symbol of benighted resistance to western ideas of progress, peasant culture had been the object of upper-class contempt in Russia since the early 18th century; but the discovery of spiritual and aesthetic value in peasant life began to manifest itself as early as the mid-nineteenth century, in response to the international rise of patriotic sentiment and, more specifically, to the new sympathy for Russia's peasantry that emerged from the Emancipation of the Serfs in 1861. Painters of the socially engaged Wanderers group (or Peredvizhniki, founded in 1870) left no detail unobserved in their ethnographic genre scenes of folk customs. Architects in search of novel ways to satisfy public demand for whimsical gingerbread buildings in an Old Russian style repeatedly went back to the peasant *izba*, or log hut, for inspiration. Even the Imperial Porcelain Factory was not averse to borrowing motifs from peasant cross-stitch embroidery to decorate tea sets *a la russe*. In short, there seemed to be no end to the uses to which the raw material of peasant life could be put.

By and large, this raw material was still there for the taking in the last decades of the nineteenth century, and take it the growing ranks of folk art enthusiasts did, filling public museums and private collections with whole pieces of carving detached from peasant buildings and barges, embroidered articles of clothing bought right off the wearer's back, and choice old bits of lace picked out of bridal

2 For a more detailed account of the movement to revive Russia's peasant crafts—the so-called *kustar* art industries—see Wendy R. Salmond, *Arts and Crafts in Late Imperial Russia. Reviving the Kustar Art Industries, 1870–1917* (New York and Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996).

dowry chests. It was only after several decades of passionate collecting had passed that the realization began to dawn that this seemingly inexhaustible spring of national culture, pride, and identity would not be replenished. It was not so much that the preservation of "dead" or classic peasant culture for future generations meant systematically stripping the living peasant's world of its visual links to the past, although the rapaciousness of collectors was undoubtedly making its effects felt on the visual culture of rural Russia. The real problem was that the heirs to all these museum artifacts—the peasants of modern-day Russia—seemed perfectly ready to relinquish their patrimony, and showed little inclination to continue the unprofitable, passé ways of their forefathers.

A certain sector of educated Russian society felt implicated in this rapid breakdown of traditional culture among the peasantry, most notably those members of the growing merchant class who were helping to turn Russia, by the end of the century, into a significant world power. It was they, after all, who had grown rich off the rapid modernization of a country that had preserved its medieval way of life more successfully than almost any other in Europe. In particular, blame was directed at the railway, which made it easier for people, information, and goods to move about, and the factory, which not only lured peasants away from the land with the promise of good-paying jobs, but seduced them into abandoning traditional dress with cheaper and brighter cotton prints. Almost as lethal for traditional culture were the benevolent efforts of educated Russians to enlighten those less privileged through temperance societies, literacy campaigns, societies for fallen women, and exhibitions of "high art," (i.e., painting). Small wonder, then, that women such as Elizaveta Mamontova and Maria F. Iakunchikova from prominent merchant families felt torn between preserving and improving folk art, between rescuing it from the peasants' indifference and giving it back to them with strings attached, between telling them what to do and dreaming of a day when they would do it without being told.

It was women like these who first tackled this daunting moral and social dilemma by adopting a solution of stunning simplicity. Beginning in the 1870s, a handful of gentry women whose husbands owned estates in the provinces undertook to resurrect the handicrafts of local peasant women in a small but very practical way. Seeing with dismay how the increasing incidence of crop failure was driving peasant women to jobs loading freight wagons, cutting peat, and operating factory looms, landowners offered them an alternative. If they would agree to stay home on the farm, so to speak, and take up their spinning wheels, needles, looms, and lace pillows, and if they would be guided by their benefactresses in the selection of the goods they made, they would be rewarded with a secure income and guaranteed markets. Two birds were killed with this one stone: first, the fabric of peasant economic and social life,

which depended so much on the labor of women, would be shored up, and second, the best traditions of women's handicrafts would be cleverly grafted back onto the dying trunk of folk culture—not for their personal use, however, but as a profitable industry that targeted foreign markets in particular.[3]

If this mutually beneficial give-and-take between peasant women and their gentler-born counterparts had gone no further than this, it is doubtful that a Russian arts and crafts movement comparable with those in other countries would have materialized. For while philanthropic, economic, and political motives created the ideal conditions for such a movement, without the injection of a personal aesthetic vision from the artistic community, none of these impulses was enough to metamorphose traditional peasant art into a new school of Russian decorative art comparable to Art Nouveau, Jugendstil, etc. This critical shift happened in 1885 at Abramtsevo, the estate of the Mamontov family located about forty miles northeast of Moscow. The summer home of railway magnate Savva Mamontov and his wife, Elizaveta, Abramtsevo became headquarters in the 1880s for a community of Russian artists seeking their way back to a more authentic, subjective experience of Russian history, landscape, and culture. Thanks to Elizaveta Mamontova, who set up a school and carpentry workshop for local peasant children there in the 1870s, it also typified the deep vein of social conscience that still ran through large sectors of educated society, a legacy from the reform-minded 1860s. Like other women landowners, Mamontova was looking for an economic incentive that would keep the children of local peasants from going off to the city and the factory in search of the good life. Knowing full well that a decorative appearance and a folky flavor would attract customers with money to spend on such things, she enlisted the artist Elena Polenova in 1885 to become artistic director of the modest little carpentry workshop at Abramtsevo.

3 See my article, "The Solomenko Embroidery Workshops," *Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts*, 5 (Summer 1987), 126-43, for further discussion of this process and for illustrations of the so-called neo-Russian style, or *style russe moderne*, it engendered.

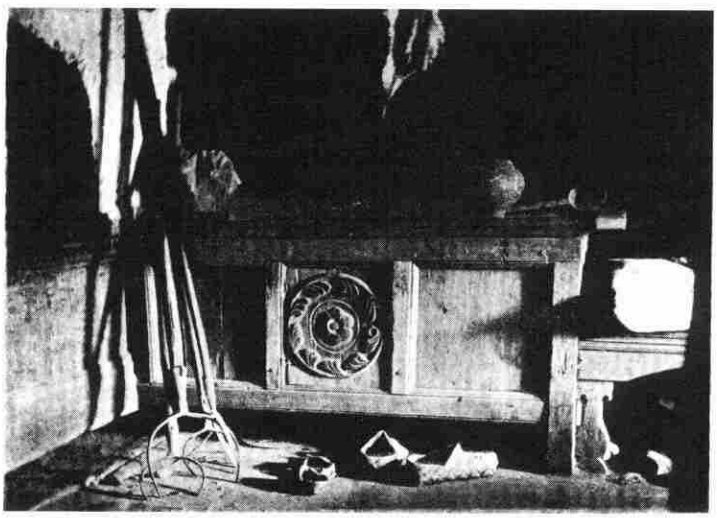

Figure 1
Interior of a peasant hut photograph probably taken by Elena Polenova in the 1880s (Reprinted from N. V. Polenova, *Abramtsevo. Vospominaniia* [Moscow, 1922]).

With an industrial arts school training that perhaps made her ego bridle less at the prospect of designing functional objects than did those of her male counterparts, Polenova set to work with enthusiasm to reform the workshop's production. Her first step was to gather as much raw material as possible from the natural milieu of the boys in her charge, going with Mamontova into peasant huts and sketching, photographing, and buying pieces that could be fodder for new designs (figure 1). Salvaging usable shapes, such as hinged hanging cupboards and settle-like benches from the humble lives of local peasants, and isolating ornamental motifs for future use, Polenova was able to compile an entire repertoire of new furniture designs for the workshop; some elegantly simple transcriptions (figure 2), and others quite complex layerings of motifs from diverse sources (a carousel, a window frame, a distaff). Of the more than one hundred designs she made for the Abramtsevo workshop between 1885 and 1893, nearly all reflect her desire to restrain her own imagination and personality in the name of giving back to the workshop boys the best of their own traditions, cleansed of all but the purest ornamental elements. As in other restoration projects that aimed to reveal the first authentic layer beneath inferior later additions, this process relied on Polenova's knowledge of peasant art, on her biases (against all "western" influences, for example, however legitimate their presence), and ultimately on her own taste and sense of beauty.

Polenova's very pragmatic, hands-on association with the Abramtsevo workshop stopped quite abruptly around 1893 for reasons that are not entirely clear. It seems likely, though, that after eight years of suppressing her own personality in deference to the goals of the workshop, the power of ornamental fragments borrowed from a fundamentally alien experience to express her own increasingly introspective concerns no longer satisfied her. Until her death in 1898, she turned away from this borrowed raw

Figure 2
Bedside table with rosette motif, designed by Elena Polenova and made at the Abramtsevo Carpentry Workshop in the late 1880s (Reprinted from N. V. Polenova, *Abramtsevo. Vospominaniia* [Moscow, 1922]).

material and created her own ornamental motifs from local flora and fauna, perhaps in a tacit admission that the complexities of the modern psyche could not adequately be expressed through the language of folk art and required a more subtle vehicle. At the same time, the practical success of her experiment in reseeding peasant creativity with carefully chosen and easily reproduced motifs was absolute, as can be seen from the fact that peasants from the Abramtsevo area (and further afield) continued to make her designs well into the Soviet period.

Both as an approach to peasant-inspired design and as a viable production model, this Abramtsevo experiment quickly caught on in the 1890s. The quintessential symbol of what was to become a national craft revival movement was the matreshka doll, designed in 1891 by artist Sergei Maliutin (figure 3). The matreshka was, in fact, commissioned by the owner of a Moscow toy store who wanted to launch a new toy based on a nesting doll she had been brought from Japan, but with a visibly Russian flavor. Maliutin readily obliged by superimposing the stereotypical image of Mother Russia—a jolly peasant woman with children in tow. Throughout the 1890s, the matreshka was just another toy *about* the Russian peasant. But by the end of the decade, both its meaning and its value were greatly enriched when its production was entrusted to real flesh-and-blood peasants who were being taught to improve their skills and their income as toymakers in a training workshop run by the Moscow provincial government or *zemstvo*. This fortuitous event automatically placed the matreshka in a new and growing class of objects that customers knew were *by* as well as *about* the simple Russian folk, yet with the rough edges of unmediated peasant work smoothed out by the intervening taste of the artist-

Figure 3
Matreshka doll, designed by Sergei Maliutin, 1891 (Reprinted from *Matreshka* [Moscow, 1969]).

designer. This knowledge, which the consumer acquired along with the toy's more tangible reference to peasant culture, added an aura of value, authenticity, and uniqueness to an object that was actually mass-produced in workshops run on a division-of-labor system. Though certainly the product of peasant hands, the toys, embroideries, laces, and woodcarvings that began to spill out of countless workshops throughout the Russian Empire were increasingly the product of consultations between artists, administrators, and marketing specialists. Marketed and sold as "folk art," the products of Russia's peasant craft revival were, more properly speaking, the beginning of a profitable souvenir industry.

Thanks to the size of Russia's peasant population and the immensity of the empire, it was virtually impossible to institute a single, centralized control over all those isolated individuals and organizations wishing to try their hand at resuscitating some local craft. Consequently, a broad spectrum of approaches toward craft revival in Russia developed in the years leading up to World War I, some private, utopian, and philanthropic, others government-sponsored and committed to the most efficient production and marketing of peasant crafts.

Among private initiatives to foster specific crafts, the most idealistic was Princess Maria Tenisheva's complex of workshops at Talashkino, her estate in Smolensk province. In operation for a bare five years (ca. 1900–1905), the Talashkino production was less an economically viable center of local peasant economy than a fairy-tale kingdom, removed from the realities of market forces (the princess's wealth subsidized the whole operation) and oblivious to the peasant population's increasingly hostile attitude toward the landowning class on the eve of the 1905 Revolution. Here, Tenisheva presided over a supposedly idyllic community of visiting artists (Sergei Maliutin, Ilya Repin, Nikolai Roerich, and Mikhail Vrubel) and peasants—both children educated in the Talashkino school and adults from surrounding villages doing piecework for the princess. The resulting embroideries and furnishings could be bought in a special Talashkino store in Moscow, The Source, and read about in magazines such as *The Craftsman*, *Studio*, and *Art et décoration*.[4] But although the high proportion of well-known professional artists who designed for the workshops made Talashkino goods the most original and varied to come out of any Russian enterprise, this very richness of creative talent may well have contributed to Talashkino's unusually short career as an incubator for *peasant* creativity and initiative. Dominated by a handful of clearly defined artistic personalities, Talashkino was not so much a model farm, where ancient traditions were patiently reseeded in the younger peasant generation, as a hothouse where enthusiastic artists came from the city to try their hand at inventing a national style for the modern age, based not on the *letter* of folk traditions (recycling recognizable ornamental motifs) but on its *spirit*—usually

4 See, for instance, K. R. Cain, "Talashkino: A Home for Russian Folk Art," *The Craftsman*, 27, no. 1 (October 1914), 92–6; "Talashkino: Princess Tenisheva's School of Russian Applied Art," *International Studio*, 32, no. 126 (August 1907), 135-9; and Gabriel Mourey, "L'Art populaire russe," *Art et décoration*, 14 (August 1903), 237–46.

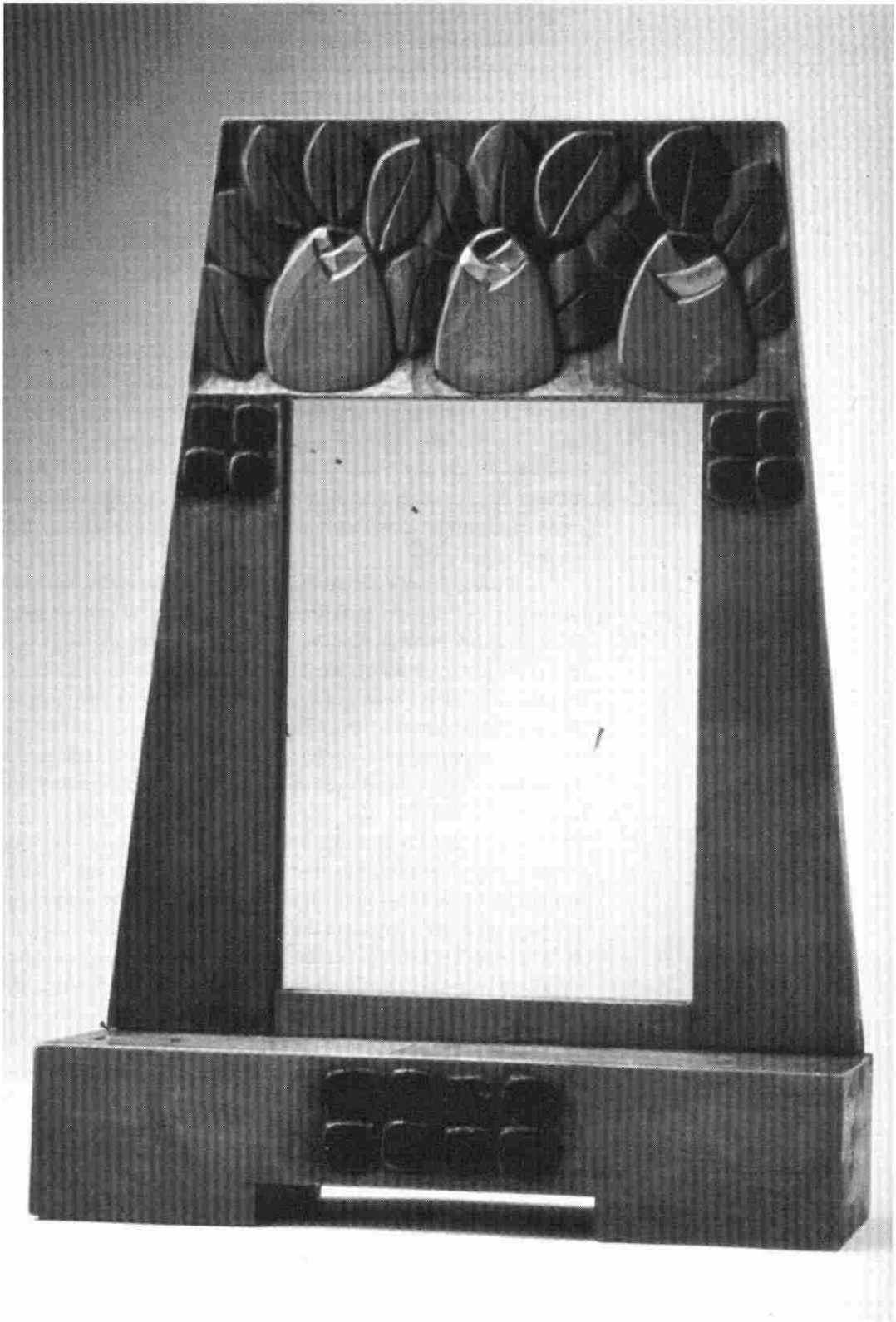

Figure 4 (left)
Mirror made at the Talashkino workshops, 1903 (Courtesy of the Wolfsonian)

Figure 5 (right)
Pupils at the School of Folk Art, St. Petersburg (Reprinted from *Solntse Rossii* [1916].

expressed in slightly hyperbolic forms, in a mannered crudeness of design, and in the invention of archaizing ornament. All of these elements are visible in a polychrome mirror carved with stylized flowers, probably designed by Sergei Maliutin, made at Talashkino in 1903, and now in the Wolfsonian collection (figure 4).

At the other end of the spectrum were government-sponsored institutions like the School of Folk Art, which opened with great fanfare in St. Petersburg in 1911. Funded by the Chief Administration of Land Tenure, the body responsible for all peasant crafts, and patronized by the imperial family, the school brought peasant girls from all over the empire to enroll in its rigorous curriculum of drawing and every kind of traditional women's handwork. A 1913 photo shows three pupils dressed in their distinctive uniform—a peasant sarafan and embroidered chemise—faithfully copying ornamental motifs from fragments of wood carving in the school's collection (figure 5). Nothing could be more contrary to the Talashkino ethos than the School of Folk Art's very literal commitment to folk art as a definable body of information, patterns, and skills, a language with its own grammar and vocabulary to be learned as art students traditionally learned their ABCs of form. On completion of the course, each graduate was expected to return to her province to disseminate her knowledge out into the community, either reviving crafts that had become dormant or setting up new ones where none had existed before.

The School of Folk Art and others like it undoubtedly played a key role in preserving peasant crafts from extinction in Russia prior to the 1917 Revolution but, as its name suggests, its very existence was a perplexing contradiction in terms, for how could folk art be taught? Was not the very concept of a school of folk art an oxymoron, an opposition of values, traditions, and cultures? Was it even possible to teach modern-day peasants the traditions of their forebears, without destroying the value of those traditions in the process? Were the positivist parallels with rational agriculture—

grafting, seeding, and cellular division—really applicable to the cultivation of craft traditions, or might not less comforting analogies drawn from our present *fin-de-siècle* apply, such as the raising of battery hens or the industrial-scale forcing of roses and tomatoes, with the inevitable loss of "natural flavor"? Already, on the eve of World War I, critics of Russia's craft revival were beginning to ask these questions, criticizing the standardized art education and westernized tastes being foisted on the next generation of peasant craftsmen and women, and rejecting the lucrative output of model training workshops from Moscow to Kiev as *russerie*—an ersatz Russian culture epitomized by the perennially popular matreshka doll and fit only for export and souvenirs.

The same questions can still usefully be asked of contemporary, well-intentioned efforts to help specific ethnic groups help themselves by marketing their traditional crafts. The difficulties of reviving Hmong needlework among immigrant communities in America, for example, exactly parallel the challenges that faced Russian landowners as they sought to steer peasant embroidresses towards more tasteful and salable colors and materials. And if we want to recreate the *fin-de-siècle* experience of visiting Russian craft outlets like Anna Pogosskaia's Bond Street store in London, we need only step into any Pier One store with its regimented displays of decorative knickknacks made in India and Africa. As long as such concepts as "First World" and "Third World" have currency, as long as "ethnic" cultures continue to attract an increasingly globalized population, the history of last century's craft revivals will make absorbing and relevant reading, as a cautionary tale (*The Golden Goose* comes to mind) that reminds us where grand experiments in social and cultural engineering can lead.