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Wendy Salmond

Chapman University, salmond@chapman.edu

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Comments

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The Origins of Modernism in Russian Architecture. By William Craft Brumfield. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991. xxv, 343 pp. Plates. Maps. Figures. \$75.00, hard bound.

In *The Origins of Modernism in Russian Architecture*, William Brumfield has produced a worthy successor to his earlier *Gold in Azure: One Thousand Years of Russian Architecture*

(1983). Moving from the vast scale of centuries to the concentrated focus of a few crucial decades, the author sets out to chronicle “the transformation of Russian architecture from the 1880s to the 1917 revolution,” a period that witnessed the advent, in rapid succession, of the Russian Style, the style moderne (art nouveau) and neo-classicism.

This is not the first attempt to examine the development of modernism in Russian architecture. Evgeniia Kirichenko’s pioneering *Rusaskaia arkhitektura 1830–1910-kh godov* (1978) dealt with the same chronological period and more recently a number of deluxe albums by Soviet scholars have appeared in English, devoted to aspects of Russian art nouveau and the search for a national style (Sternin and Borisova, *Russian Art Nouveau*, 1990; Kirichenko, *Russian Design and the Fine Arts*, 1991). This book, however, is the first by a western scholar to examine thoroughly a period hitherto dominated by Soviet historians.

On the face of it, it is the visual aspects of this book that will perhaps attract the widest audience, for it is generously illustrated with both the author’s own excellent photographs (40 of them in color) and with photographs from contemporary architectural periodicals (primarily *Ezhgodnik obschestva khudozhnikov-arkhitekturov*). While many of the monuments illustrated have been reproduced before, in the work of Kirichenko, Borisova and Kazhdan, there are also fresh discoveries, notably in the section on neo-classicism. No other book in English offers such a well balanced and thorough visual survey of the search for an architectural style both modern and national in late Imperial Russia.

The accompanying text will appeal, first and foremost, to architectural historians. The author examines, not only the questions of style and technology and the interaction between them, but also grapples with the problem of “the meaning of style” as a question that was debated on the pages of Russian architectural journals. Such journals form the principal source material for the author’s discussions and conclusions, so that the overall impression is of an objective, reportorial stance rather than the more ideological approaches of Soviet scholars. But the text’s real strength lies in forging an essential link between the specific problems and developments of late Imperial Russian architecture and the broader context of European modernism—a context that has been conspicuously absent from the Soviet literature to date.

The result is an extremely useful source of reliable factual data on specific monuments discussed within the context of ideas that lie at the heart of European modernism. It would appeal most directly to the architectural historian and the specialist in European modernism, but also to all those interested in Russian cultural history.