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# The Solomenko Embroidery Workshops

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## **Comments**

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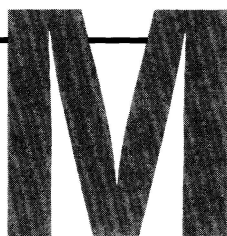
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# The Solomenko Embroidery Workshops

By Wendy Salmond

Born in New Zealand in 1956, Wendy Salmond is a specialist in nineteenth and twentieth century Russian art, particularly applied art of the 1880s and 1890s. She is now writing her doctoral dissertation on Russia's *kustar* Art Revival 1880–1914 for the University of Texas at Austin.



Many achievements of the Russian decorative and applied arts from the so-called Silver Age of Russian culture now enjoy international recognition. The designers who worked for Sergei Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes* such as Lev Bakst and Alexandre Benois or who created the avant-garde books of the 1910s–20s such as Natalia Goncharova, Mikhail Larionov, and Kazimir Malevich are familiar names in the history of modern art. But it is important to realize that this upsurge of decorative and illustrative vigor in Russia just before and after 1900 was a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, and that the return to the handmade object expressed itself in many disciplines and on many levels, just as it did in England, France, and Germany of the same period.

The late nineteenth century in Russia saw the rapid establishment of a sequence of art colonies and centers, often patronized by wealthy aristocrats or businessmen, both near the metropolitan areas and in the remote provinces. The basic aim of these enterprises was to restore strength to the dying cottage or handicraft industries practiced by the *kustar* (plural *kustary*) who for centuries had produced masterpieces of embroidery, woodwork, carpets, prints, et cetera. Two of these retreats are now well known, i.e., Abramtsevo near Moscow founded by Savva and Elizaveta Mamontov in the 1870s, and Talashkino near Smolensk founded by Princess Mariia Tenisheva in the 1890s; and both of them have received considerable attention on the part of Soviet and western scholars. However, there still remain a number of Russian art colonies, overshadowed by the more prominent accomplishment of Abramtsevo and Talashkino, that need to be reexamined and reassessed. The goal of this article is to attempt such a reevaluation of one of them, namely, Solomenko.

Today, the *kustar* embroidery workshops which once operated in the village of Solomenko in Tambov Province are all but forgotten. Despite their long and influential life (1891–1917) and their close association with Elena Dmitrievna Polenova (1850–98) (fig. 1) and other stars of the so-called neonationalist movement, the workshops at Solomenko have yet to find a place in the rather simplistic picture we have created of Russian artistic life in the late nineteenth century.

An obvious reason for their neglect, in contrast to the status now enjoyed by contemporary *kustar* workshops at Abramtsevo and Talashkino, is the lack of any convenient monograph that would neatly encapsulate their achievement

►  
Fig. 1. Elena Polenova, in the 1880s.



for posterity.<sup>1</sup> But the real reason, probably, is that the vital connection that once existed between the neonationalist movement in the decorative arts and the government sponsored movement to revive Russia's traditional *kustar* industries has been forgotten, or ignored as beyond the scope of "art."

Such workshops as those at Solomenko, Abramtsevo, and Talashkino, to name just a few, were intended first and foremost as model *kustar* training workshops; that is, as centers fostering the revival of a particular craft industry among the peasant population. The *kustar* industries had been an integral part of Russia's social and economic life for centuries. By the 1870s, when their decline first came to the notice of the government, they were generally defined as a form of cottage industry pursued by the individual peasant and his family in the long winter months as a supplement to agriculture. Though the numbers of *kustary* at the end of the century numbered some seven million, Russia's rapid industrialization made many *kustar* industries redundant in the face of mechanization, while factory goods forced existing crafts to produce cheaper and cheaper products to remain competitive. Entire industries were held hostage by a middleman system that provided their only contact with the consumer and that enjoyed a monopoly on raw materials and credit. It had become laughable for *kustary* to take pride in decorating their goods or to take time to build them well, since the middleman made such efforts economically pointless.

Exhaustive statistical studies undertaken in the 1870s and 1880s showed, however, that some *kustar* industries had great potential for revival and assistance. The *kustar* art industries in particular, (wood carving, toy making, icon painting, embroidery, lace making, and weaving), had the advantage of being luxury goods in little danger of being supplanted by the machine, since their hand-made appeal and their dependence on ornament guaranteed them markets outside the village or market town. First under the aegis of the Ministry of Finance and then, from 1888, the Ministry of Agriculture and State Domains, the provincial *zemstva* (or local government bodies) instituted programs to revive the best of their province's *kustar* industries. The platform on which they operated consisted of opening up new markets, providing raw materials and credit, organizing exhibitions and museums of exemplary models for imitation, and installing technical experts to improve the quality of production.

In addition to such officially sponsored and funded efforts, a significant contribution was made by private citizens, the vast majority of them women from the gentry and nobility who established training workshops on their estates. With few exceptions, such private enterprises specialized in the women's *kustar* arts of embroidery, lace making, weaving, and spinning. What motivated the instigators was a mixture of philanthropy, common sense, and a thirst to enlighten the common people. The Princesses Lvovy, desirous of keeping local girls from working on the railroad where they might fall into loose living, lured them to train in their embroidery workshops with artificially high wages and the prospect of secure employment. Others, like Madame S.P. Kaznachayeva and the Princesses N.N. Shakhovskaia and S.P. Dolgorukova, opened *kustar* workshops to alleviate local poverty resulting from fire or crop failure. Others again, like Princess Urusova, were motivated by a desire to reestablish an industry which

1. The information for this article is gleaned from a number of sources, none of them substantial. For their invaluable help and generosity in providing information on Maria Fedorovna and Maria Vasiliyevna Yakunchikova, I wish to thank Mrs. Irina Tamara, Mme. Marina Kelepovskaia, the Herrera family, and especially Nicole and Alexandre Liapin.

**Fig. 2. Maria F. Yakunchikova  
and Natalia Ya. Davydova in  
peasant costume.**



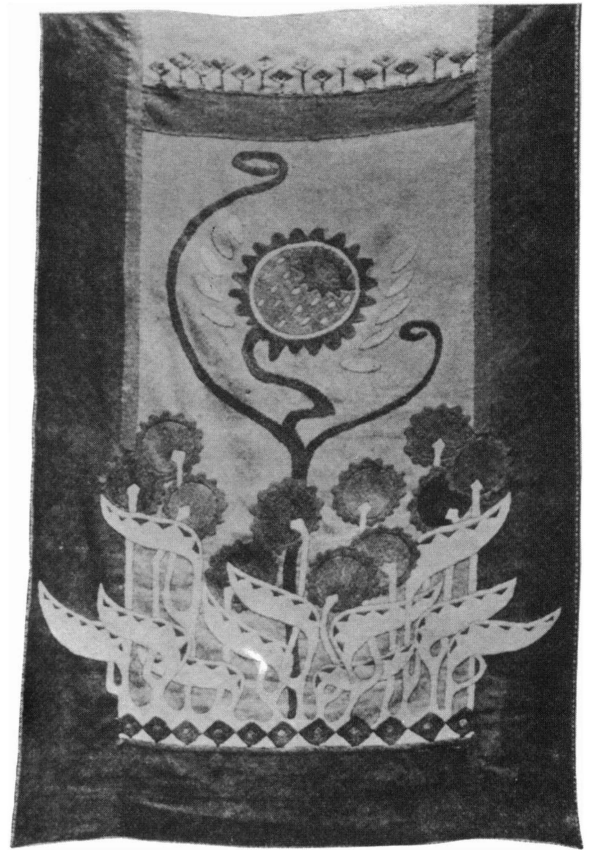
had once been the pride and principal income of the district.<sup>2</sup> Following the general guidelines of the official movement, such women used their ingenuity, their connections, and their finances to find new markets, improve techniques and quality, and introduce patterns and objects that might conceivably tempt the wealthy consumer in Moscow or St. Petersburg.

It was in this context that Maria Fedorovna Yakunchikova set up her *kustar* embroidery workshops at Solomenko in 1891, the year of the great famine (fig. 2). Maria Yakunchikova, née Mamontova, (1864–1952) was even at this time a figure of standing in the Moscow art world. As Masha Mamontova and the niece of the great art patron Savva Mamontov, she had the dubious distinction of having been a wretchedly poor Snegurochka in an 1883 Mamontov home production of the opera of the same name. She was a childhood friend of the painter

2. A detailed account of the women's *kustar* industries can be found in N. Kablukov, "Obshche-ekonomicheskoe znachenie zhenskikh kustarnykh promyslov i sposoby sodeistviia im," in *Novoe slovo*, Moscow, 1986, no. 5, pp. 55–86.



**Fig. 3. Natalia Ya. Davydova,**  
embroidery design, 1890s.



**Fig. 4. Natalia Ya. Davydova,**  
embroidery design, 1890s.

Valentin Serov, and by 1890 had been painted twice by him.<sup>3</sup> When she married into the wealthy Moscow merchant dynasty of the Yakunchikov family, she multiplied her interests and consolidated her contacts, as well as acquiring a considerable fortune which would later subsidize her Solomenko enterprise. She and her husband Vladimir were enthusiastic patrons of the arts, financing trips by artists to Italy to copy Renaissance paintings for the Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow, and compiling a fine art library. Maria Fedorovna's marriage also meant that she was now related to two women who were to contribute in no small measure to the success of the workshops. They were Elena Polenova, art director of the *kustar* workshops at Abramtsevo from 1885 until 1893, and Maria Vasilievna Yakunchikova, a gifted painter and Polenova's close friend.<sup>4</sup> Understandably, the existence of two Maria Yakunchikovas involved in the same circle and activities has led to much confusion. Typical of the mistakes perpetuated about their identity was Princess M.K. Tenisheva's composite M.F. Yakunchikova-Weber.<sup>5</sup>

No doubt, Maria Fedorovna's forceful personality and entrepreneurial flare made the major task of establishing the Solomenko workshops an appealing

3. Serov portrayed her in 1884 as an amazon and in 1888 dressed in white.

4. Elena Polenova's brother Vasilii married Maria Fedorovna's sister-in-law Natalia Vasilievna Yakunchikova, who became the first biographer of the Abramtsevo workshops; Maria Vasilievna was the half-sister of Maria Fedorovna's husband, V.V. Yakunchikov; she later married a Dr. Weber and spent her last years in Switzerland with tuberculosis.

5. M.K. Tenisheva, *Vpechatleniia moei zhizni* (Paris: Russkoe Istoriko-Genealogicheskoe Obshchestvo vo Frantsii, 1933), p. 285.

challenge—according to Igor Grabar she was “always caught up in some artistic idea, had abundant energy and was always organizing something or other.”<sup>6</sup> But this specific venture was by this time something of a family specialty. In 1885, her aunt, Elizaveta Grigorievna Mamontova (1847–1908) had established a *kustar* carpentry workshop on her Abramtsevo estate to the north of Moscow, employing Elena Polenova to act as artistic director and to steer the workshop’s output along such artistic lines as would appeal to a cultivated clientèle. At about the same time, Mamontova had begun a similar workshop at Abramtsevo for local women, teaching them traditional stitches and patterns for lace and embroidery, using as models antique pieces from the Abramtsevo museum. This experiment lasted only a year or so before it was abandoned for lack of time and skilled supervision.

Six years later at Solomenko, Maria Fedorovna picked up where her aunt had left off. True to the spirit of the *kustar* revival, she set about helping peasant women help themselves in this year of famine and cholera epidemics:

She began by encouraging them to copy the old designs from their chemises onto squares of linen which could be used for table covers or onto lengths which could be made into curtains. They wove their own linen, spun their own thread, coloring them with vegetable dyes, principally indigo and marena red...<sup>7</sup>

By the end of 1891 she had enlisted the help of Natalia Yakovlevna Davydova (1873–1926), a graduate of the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture.<sup>8</sup> Following the example of Polenova at Abramtsevo, Davydova took over the direction of the new workshops at Solomenko, designing portières, panels, and reticules for the peasant women to execute (figs. 3 and 4). These were then sold through the Abramtsevo outlet in Moscow, the Store of Russian Works.

As the immediate impact of the famine subsided in the press and the public consciousness, the advantages of such artistic novelty were apparent. The market had become glutted with the goods of scores of *kustar* workshops, most of them the product of the famine and reliant on the public’s softened and charitable mood for sales. Anything that might make a particular workshop stand out from its fellows meant commercial survival, and the services of a professionally trained artist attuned to the latest tastes of the upper classes was a priceless asset.<sup>9</sup> The note of modernity that Davydova introduced necessitated a new range of colors—all obtained from vegetable dyes—and the revival of many stitches that had fallen into disuse. But like the early Abramtsevo repertoire, these extremely innovative goods remained for the most part within the framework and machinery of the general *kustar* movement.

6. Igor Grabar, *Automonografiia* (Moscow-Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1937), p. 150.

7. Netta Peacock, “The New Movement in Russian Decorative Art,” *The Studio*, London, May, vol. 13, (1901), p. 274.

8. Natalia Davydova remains a mysterious and underrated figure. Like her patron and friend M.F. Yakunchikova, she may have suffered a case of mistaken identity, being easily confused with N.M. Davydova who operated *kustar* workshops at Verbovka in the Ukraine. On this confusion, see Natalia Adaskina’s article in this issue.

9. This does not mean, of course, that the workshop’s output consisted entirely of art embroideries and appliqué pictures. In fact, these should be considered simply an enhancement of the highly traditional weavings, laces, and embroideries for which Solomenko was justly famous. The same is true of the embroidery workshops at Talashkino, which almost certainly owed a great deal to the Solomenko model since Davydova is said to have worked there at one time.

**Fig. 5. Elena Polenova, design  
for embroidery, watercolor,  
early 1890s.**



It was not until 1896 that Solomenko reached a wider market, a move that coincided with, or perhaps was engineered to coincide with, Elena Polevona's first designs for the workshop (fig. 5). Already, in 1894, Polenova had turned down a commission from Maria Fedorovna to design an embroidered *panneau* "in a Russian style." Since 1893, she had stopped working for the Abramtsevo carpentry workshop and, anxious to return to unfinished projects, was perhaps unwilling to commit herself to a similar residency at Solomenko. After her mother's death at the end of 1895, however, her straitened financial situation forced her to reconsider, and she soon found that the subject she chose, the fairy tale *Firebird*, made the project an interesting extension of her own fairy-tale illustrations:

I show a dark night with clouds above, and through them the moon and stars are visible. In the middle is a tree with golden fruits. On a branch a fiery bird trembles. Around the tree there coil and intertwine fantastic flowers and grasses. Beneath, in the roots of the tree, hares hide and lower still there are swamp grasses, pebbles and algae—all highly stylized.<sup>10</sup>

The completed *panneau*, measuring 12 feet high and 7 feet wide, was part of the Solomenko exhibit at the All-Russian Exhibition held in Nizhnii-Novgorod in 1896. There are at least two versions of such a *panneau*, neither of which exactly fits Polenova's description, one being the wrong size and shape, the other lacking most of the details. Nevertheless, they are representative of the approach to ornament and to design in a Russian style which Polenova brought to Solomenko, and which resulted in the formation of a recognizable "Polenova school" in applied art design<sup>11</sup> (figs. 5–9).

**Fig. 6. Elena Polenova, design  
for *Firebird panneau*, mid-1890s.**

10. Quoted in A. Sementsov, *E.D. Polenova* (Moscow: Momontov, 1902), p. 44.

11. For a full account of the *kustar* industries at the Nizhnii-Novgorod exhibition see A. Pogosskaia, "Kustary na vsersossiiskoi vystavke," *Novoe slovo*, 1896, no. 1, pp. 1–19; 1896, no. 2, pp. 1–19. For a conflicting and more skeptical layman's view, see M. Gorky, "Kustarnaia promyshlennost'," *Iskusstvo*, Moscow, 1936, no. 5, pp. 142–3. There is evidence to suggest that the panel reproduced in Fig. 7 is, in fact, by Alexander Georgievich Yakimchenko (1878–1928), rather than by Polenova. See the illustration in *Ezhegodnik Obschestva arkhitektov khudozhnikov* (Moscow, 1909), p. 149.





**Fig. 7. Elena Polenova (?), design  
for Firebird *panneau*, mid-1890s.  
Collection of Mr. and Mrs.  
Nikita D. Lobanov-Rostovsky,  
London.**

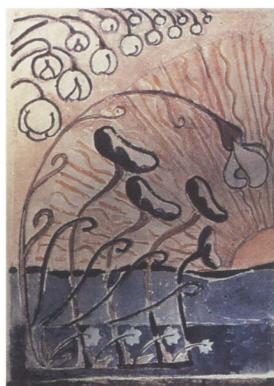
By the mid-1890s, Polenova was working almost exclusively on the problem of stylized plant and animal motifs. This was a long-standing interest that went back to her painstaking sketches of plants in nature and especially to her work with the Abramtsevo *kustary*. As she amassed a collection of carved and painted *kustar* objects as raw material for her furniture designs, she divided them into three types: abstract, geometric incised carving, lush high-relief “baroque” carving, and stylized plant and animal motifs (found usually in conjunction with the geometric type), “steeped in impressions from nature.” It was this last category that Polenova singled out as the most fertile basis on which to build a modern *kustar* style that would capture the imagined world view and esthetic sensibility of the ideal *kustar* artist, while imbuing it with a heightened expressive power.

Infinitely receptive to pattern making and subjective interpretation, plant designs became perhaps the most expressive, the most profoundly personal of all Polenova’s work. They are undoubtedly the source of that reputation for “decadence” which the workshops at Abramtsevo and Talashkino have until quite recently enjoyed among Soviet critics. A close parallel can be drawn here between Polenova and her exact contemporary Mikhail Vrubel, both of them widely regarded as protosymbolists for their formal experimentation in the cause of increased expressiveness. Both earned the disapproval of the critic Vladimir Stasov, that self-appointed guardian of healthy realism and national purity in Russian art. And both were highly regarded by the younger generation ushered in by the *Mir iskusstva* (The World of Art) magazine in 1898, not only for their art but for their lives. Something of a Polenova myth began to circulate when it became known after her death that she composed her ornamental designs along very symbolist lines. For one thing, she possessed the gift of synesthesia, so that when she lay listening to music, and “experienced the sounds, patterns came to her very clearly,” patterns that contained “mysterious thoughts.”<sup>12</sup> Moreover, we are told, many of her designs came to her in dreams:

Elena Dmitrievna set herself the task of seeking in nature forms by which to convey internal sensations—the desire for symbolic depiction. Day and night her head worked. After the impressions of the day she would often dream of fantastic combinations of flowers imbued with life, and on waking would rush to put them down on paper.<sup>13</sup>

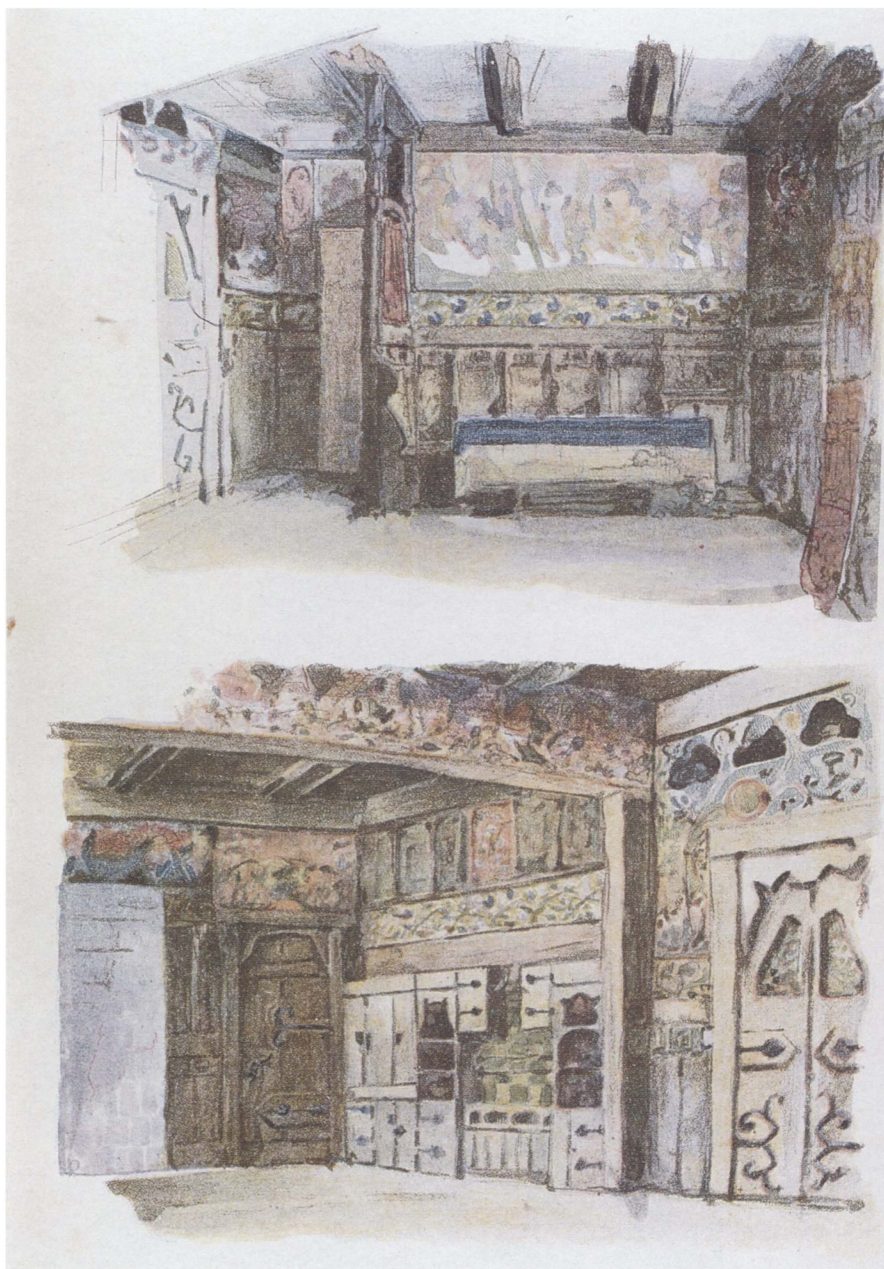
12. Quoted in E.D. Sakharova: *Vasilii Dmitrievich Polenov, Elena Dmitrievna Polenova. Khronika spmii Khudozhnikov* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1964), p. 768. From E.M. Tatevosian’s memoirs of Polenova.

13. Sementsov, op. cit., p. 45.



**Fig. 8. Elena Polenova, design  
for embroidery, 1897.**

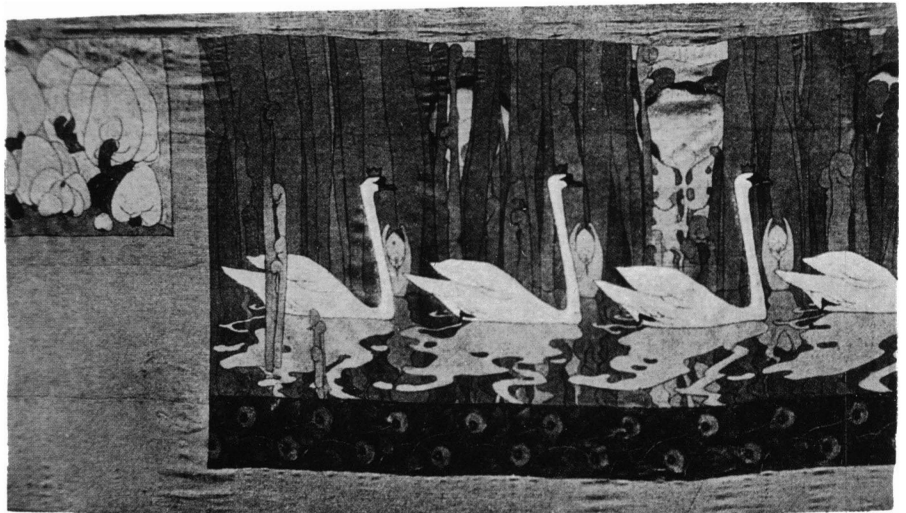
**Fig. 9. Elena Polenova,  
sketches for Maria F.  
Yakunchikova's Russian dining  
room, 1897.**



In the last few years of her life, this preoccupation with finding expression for inner experience became uppermost in Polenova's art. It showed itself in her correspondence with Maria Vasilievna Yakunchikova, in her overtly symbolic pictures, and even in projected works for a planned Popular Travelling Exhibition of Biblical and Historical Paintings. But the ornamental designs she produced for Solomenko were perhaps most successful. Nor was there any conflict in her mind that a style so intensely subjective and personal could at the same time express that "Russian spirit" which she felt in the best of *kustar* art. Her conviction that the modern Russian artist could, through direct subjective intuition, attain access to the world view of the Russian peasant and capture that essence in new forms—that her art was old wine in new skins—became the real cornerstone of the so-called neonationalist movement.



**Fig. 10. Alexander Golovin, design for a carpet, late 1890s.**



**Fig. 11. Alexander Golovin, Swan Princess *panneau*, 1897–8.**

Such was the rationale behind the last commission she was to design for Maria Fedorovna, a dining room “in the Russian style” for the latter’s estate called Nara. All that we know of this project, in which Polenova collaborated with her protégé and intimate companion Alexander Golovin (fig. 10), is supplied by a Miss Netta Peacock, an Englishwoman who met Polenova during this period (1897–98) and who published detailed descriptions in the American journal *The Artist*.<sup>14</sup>

14. Netta Peacock, “A Log House Dining Room in Russia,” *The Artist*, New York, vol. 25, January–April (1899), pp. 1–7.

The entire surface of the walls in the long, narrow room was to be covered with alternating bands and panels of ornament, painted or embroidered on linen spun, woven, and dyed by the Solomenko *kustary*. Many of the unidentified ornamental designs by Polenova which have been published were intended for this room, among them an embroidered panel of “Flowers saluting the rising sun” above one of the doors. As Miss Peacock described it:

This panel is to be worked on strips of linen of three different colors joined together; the deep top strip being of faded pink, the center strip of blue-grey, and the bottom strip of green. The rising sun is vermilion with golden rays, all the flowers so gracefully bending forward are of a creamy tint, with calyces, leaves and stems in petunia, dark-blue and yellowish-green.<sup>15</sup>

For a recess at the other end of the room, Golovin designed a *panneau* depicting the Swan Maidens (daughters of the Sea King and a favourite motif of both Maria Vasiliievna Yakunchikova and Mikhail Vrubel), in “an exquisite blending of delicate mauves, greens and blues” (fig. 11). To the left of this, hidden in an obscure corner, was a Firebird *panneau* by Polenova:

The grey-green mist drifting across the somber leafless tree with its mauve flowers and golden fruit, the intense blue sky and grouping of dark trees in the background, the grey stone wall with its overhanging wild flowers, and the brilliant blaze of color concentrated in the bird, which glows as with an inward furnace, produce a pictorial expression full of magical influences at work.<sup>16</sup>

The remaining areas were filled with friezes of stylized dandelions, crocus, harebells, and other flowers, interspersed with carved wooden panels inspired, curiously enough, by early Russian manuscript illuminations.

In its completed state, with tile stoves and furniture from the Abramtsevo ceramic and furniture workshops, the dining room would have been much more than a rich patroness’s whimsical extravagance, a fairy-tale playroom. It was surely intended both as a showroom for the combined talents of the several *kustar* workshops in which the Mamontov clan was directly or indirectly involved and as a statement of faith in the future of modernized *kustar* art in the homes of cultivated Russians. As one of the very few ensembles completely decorated in a unified, modern Russian style and implemented by *kustar* craftsmen, the Yakunchikova dining room was an important precedent for such ideal-home exhibitions as the Exhibition of Architecture and Industrial Art in the New Style (Moscow, 1902–3) and the Contemporary Art Exhibition (St. Petersburg, 1903).<sup>17</sup> The project also intrigued Walter Crane and other exponents of the arts and crafts movement in England, as a “genuinely national project, where legend and fairy tale were so felicitously and ably applied to the decoration of flat surfaces.”<sup>18</sup>

Polenova never saw the dining room completed. On 7 November 1898, she died of a brain tumor, leaving Golovin to finish the paintings. This was to prove

15. Ibid., p. 4.

16. Ibid., p. 5–6.

17. For detailed illustrations of these two exhibitions, see *Mir iskusstva*, St. Petersburg, nos. 5–6 (1903), pp. 220–246 on “Contemporary Art”; and *Mir iskusstva*, no. 3 (1903), pp. 97–136, on the “Exhibition of Architecture and Industrial Art in the New Style.”

18. N. Pikok, “Dan pamiati Elene Polenovoi,” *Iskusstvo i khudozhestvennaia promyshlennost*, St. Petersburg, no. 18 (1900), p. 412.



◀  
**Fig. 12. Participants in the *kustar* pavilion in the Russian section of the 1900 Paris Exposition Universelle, with Maria F. and Maria V. Yakunchikova seated, Natalia Ya. Davydova standing, Konstantin Korovin behind her, and Alexander Golovin to the right with cap in hand. Shown with *kustary* from the Troitse *kustar* workshops who built the "Russian Village."**

one of very few commissions he did for Solomenko, judging by the scarcity of embroidery designs available. But as principal heir to Polenova's work, he went on to develop her stylistic methods to the point of caricature, creating strange ceramics shaped like monstrous birds and fantastically encrusted fairy-tale furniture for the Abramtsevo ceramic and furniture workshops. Despite the fact that these excesses were widely criticized for their unnecessary crudeness and primitivism, they were also experiments in exploiting the formal and structural, as well as ornamental, hallmarks of *kustar* art.

If the Yakunchikova dining room was Polenova's swan song, then the *kustar* pavilion attached to the Russian section at the 1900 Paris Exposition Universelle was a group tribute to her achievements and to those of her followers (fig. 12). Maria Fedorovna, in her role as vice-president of the Kustar Committee, was the principal organizer of the *kustar* exhibit, which was housed in the "Russian Village" designed by Konstantin Korovin. A group portrait taken against the foil of the village offers a rare glimpse of the main contributors to the project: seated in the center are the two Yakunchikovas with Natalia Davydova standing behind. Behind her again is Korovin, the project architect, and to the right with cap in hand, Golovin, who was responsible for the interior decoration of the *kustar* halls. In the back rows are the *kustar* carvers and carpenters brought up from yet another Mamontov-affiliated workshop, that at Troitse Monastery (now Zagorsk) not far from Abramtsevo. The photo is a reminder that the great success which Russia's *kustar* industries enjoyed at the Exposition was due in large part to Maria Fedorovna's careful selection and presentation of "the best and most modern in Russian decorative art," for the most part the combined products of the Abramtsevo, Troitse, and Solomenko *kustar* workshops.

◀  
**Fig. 13. A corner of the *kustar* pavilion at the 1900 Paris Exposition Universelle, showing a display of Solomenko art embroideries and a carved cupboard designed by Maria V. Yakunchikova.**

Inside the pavilion, furniture and ceramics from the Abramtsevo workshops predominated, while in one corner, a huge cupboard resting on carved animal feet and designed by Maria V. Yakunchikova, held a collection of both antique and improved *kustar* art, including Yakunchikova's own toy model of a Russian town. Both cupboard and model were the work of the Troitse workshops. Draped over balustrades and lining entire walls were Solomenko embroideries designed by Davydova, and little purses decorated with Polenova's plant motifs.

A perfect instance of the old and new brought into harmonious existence was the display of *naboika* prints—repeat block prints from old traditional boards and new designs by Davydova. Both cheap and beautiful, meter upon meter was bought up by Parisian dressmakers. One of these traditional *naboikas* served as the model for a watercolor sketch by Maria V. Yakunchikova, and was intended perhaps for a carpet or wall hanging. Such traditional work was not typical of Yakunchikova, however, and her primary allegiance to painting and fine art shows clearly in the enormous appliqué *panneau* which she designed, cut, and pieced for the exhibition, showing a little girl wandering in a wood haunted by forest spirits (figs. 14–17).

After this extraordinary success in Paris, the Solomenko workshops were feted at home for a time. The *Mir iskusstva* magazine was lavish in its praise and its reproductions, and Solomenko hangings featured prominently at World of Art exhibitions. By about 1902, however, the first signs of a reaction appeared among the arbiters of the progressive in art, that is, the artists of the World of Art group. Alexandre Benois, in particular, condemned the entire neonationalist movement both for its esthetic excesses and its negative impact on the

**Fig. 14. Maria V. Yakunchikova**  
at work on the design for an  
appliqué *panneau* depicting a  
little girl in a forest, frightened  
by wood spirits. Photograph  
courtesy of the family of the  
late M. Stephane Weber,  
Switzerland.



**Fig. 15. Maria V. Yakunchikova,**  
detail of a *panneau*. Photo-  
graph courtesy of the family of  
the late M. Stephane Weber,  
Switzerland.

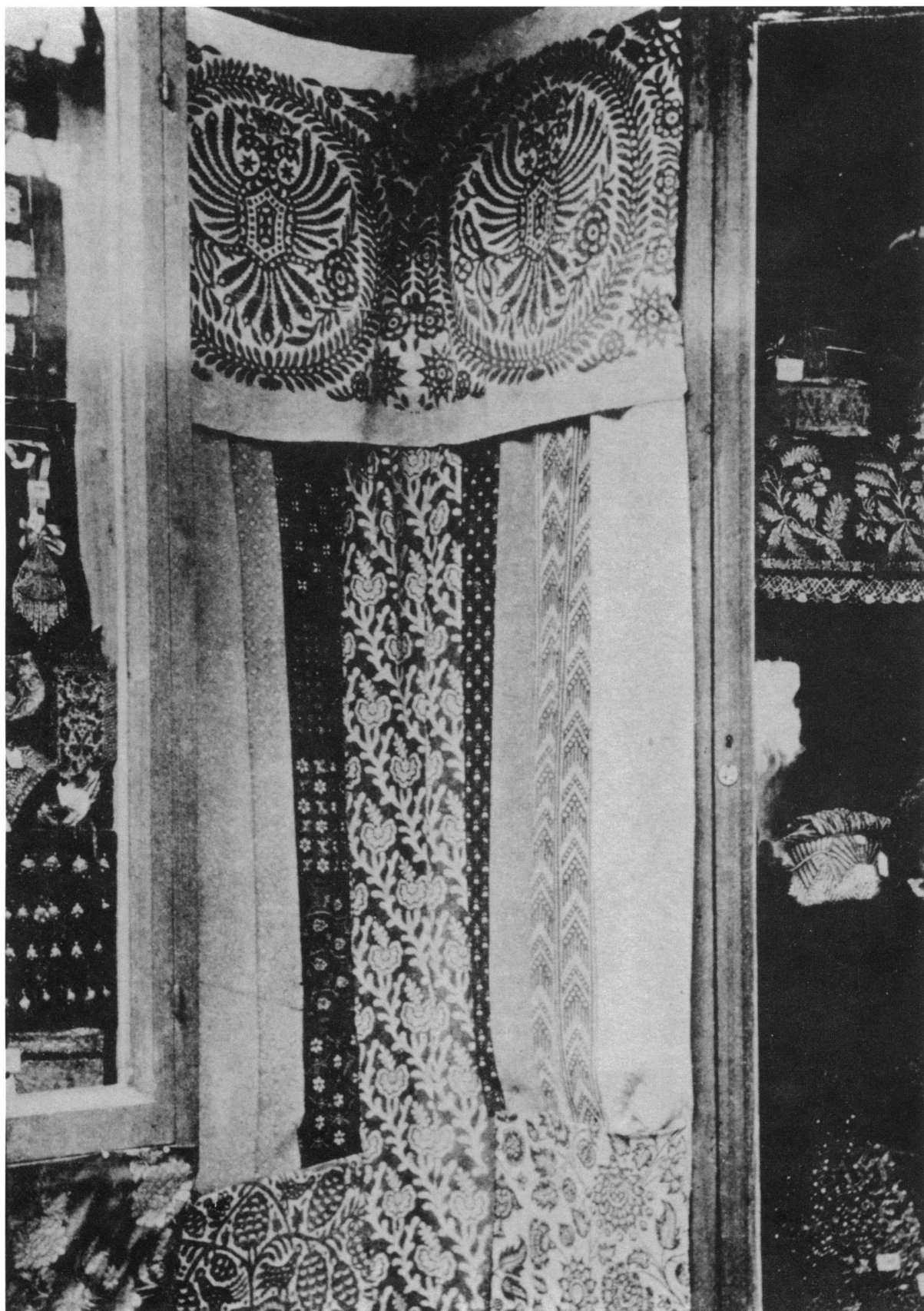
►  
**Fig. 16. Maria V. Yakunchikova,**  
ornamental design inspired by  
a *naboika* print. Photograph  
courtesy of the family of the  
late M. Stephane Weber,  
Switzerland.



*kustar* industries. As the taste for the *kustar* esthetic gave way to that of the neo-classical style, the majority of artists who had dabbled in the *kustar* industries left it behind them as yet another stage in their personal development.

Maria Fedorovna Yakunchikova and Natalia Davydova were exceptions, remaining committed to the idea of *kustar* reform well into the Soviet period. Throughout the 1900s, their obligations multiplied: Davydova worked as a designer for both the Moscow *Zemstvo*, which operated the Kustar Museum in Moscow as well as the Troitse workshops, for the Abramtsevo workshop after Polenova's death, and even for Princess Tenisheva when she set up her workshops at Talashkino near Smolensk. Maria Fedorovna was active in organizing the First All-Russian Kustar Exhibition which took place in 1902 in Moscow; together with Davydova she assumed full responsibility for Abramtsevo in 1908 after Elizaveta Mamontova's death; and the following year opened a carpet weaving workshop at Solomenko which trained sixty girls.





After about 1902, Solomenko lost its distinctiveness and became just another thread in the fabric of the burgeoning *kustar* art revival. With Davydova increasingly preoccupied with important iconostasis and furniture commissions at Abramtsevo, embroidery design drew her less to Solomenko. As far as we can tell, the bulk of the workshop's output was traditional in design and execution, in line with the growing distaste for the "symbolism" and extravagance of the neonationalist style. Both Davydova and Yakunchikova maintained their association with Solomenko right up until the Revolution of 1917, when the workshops were burned. Even then, the indefatigable Maria Fedorovna returned to her life's work, setting up an Artel of Embroidresses at Tarusa to the south of Moscow.

If Solomenko deserves a mention in the history of modern Russian art, then it is thanks to its association with Elena Polenova and her school. But the details of that association should be told in full if we are to understand how little romanticism and how much commercialism is associated with the movement known as neonationalism. □

◀  
**Fig. 17. Display of *naboika*  
prints at the 1900 Paris  
Exposition Universelle.**