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Sipovskaya Natalia V.

D.Sc. (in Art History), Director of the State Institute for Art Studies, 5 Kozitsky Lane, Moscow, 125375, Russia

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-0578-3687

sipovskaya@sias.ru

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Sipovskaya Natalia V.

Matryoshka: Studio Art and Folk Tradition



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Сиповская Наталья Владимировна

Доктор искусствоведения, директор Государственного института искусствознания, 125375, Россия, Москва, Козицкий пер., 5

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-0578-3687

sipovskaya@sias.ru

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Сиповская Наталья Владимировна

Матрешка – студийное творчество и народная традиция

Abstract. The anti-globalization movement, increasingly evident in the cultures of various countries, is reviving a wide range of themes related to the evaluation of various national phenomena. Russian culture is no exception as it offers a broad field of study — in terms of both research and creativity — from the search for hallmarks of ‘Russianness’ in assessing past achievements to the possibility of their relevant interpretation in contemporary artistic practice. A separate topic is the genesis of artifacts that have become iconic features of national culture such as the Matryoshka doll, whose birth is the subject of lively, and sometimes heated, debate. This article attempts to reconstruct the circumstances of the emergence of the most famous Russian doll, which happily interweaved the search for a new national expression by outstanding artists of the turn of the 20th century, the work of enthusiasts studying folk culture, and the skills of traditional handicrafts.

Аннотация. Антиглобалистское движение, все отчетливее заявляющее о себе в культурах разных стран, актуализирует широкий круг сюжетов, связанных с оценкой различных явлений национального свойства. Русская культура не является исключением, предоставляя широкое проблемное поле как в исследовательском, так и в творческом плане — от поиска примет «русскости» в оценке достижений прошлого до возможности их релевантной интерпретации в современном художественном процессе. Отдельная тема — генезис артефактов, ставших знаковыми приметами национальной культуры. Таких как матрешка, рождение которой является темой ярких и подчас горячих дискуссий. В статье предпринята попытка реконструировать обстоятельства появления самой известной русской куклы-укладки, в которой счастливым образом переплелись поиски новой национальной выразительности выдающимися художниками рубежа XIX–XX веков, деятельность энтузиастов по изучению народной культуры и навыки традиционных кустарных производств.

Introduction

In March 2020, the Unicode Consortium endorsed as a registered sign of the global language network a new emoji proposed by the American designer Jef Gray [Gray, Sunne, 2019] as a non-religious and non-political symbol of Eastern European culture in the Emoji 13.0 list under the “U+1FA86 nesting dolls” point [Emoji Recently Added]. In this way, Matryoshka, the most famous Russian wooden nesting doll that has become firmly rooted in the public mind as a national symbol over the past 75 years or so has made it to digital reality. This fact is evidenced, in particular, by a study, which the Russian Public Opinion Research Center undertook for “The Soul of Russia” festival within the framework of the 2025 St. Petersburg International Economic Forum (SPIEF) and which covered a broad range of topics. Souvenirs predominated among things embodying “the soul of Russia”, with Matryoshka emerging as the undisputed leader far ahead of the balalaika, bear, valenki felt boots and samovar [Bogomazova, 2025]⁽¹⁾. Despite nationwide affection and international recognition Matryoshka is still one of the most enigmatic figures of traditional national culture and a subject of debate, which is further intensified by the doll’s popularity and demanding status of a national symbol. The understandable reasons for this situation stem from the abundant mythologemes that are to compensate for the obvious dearth of verifiable documentary material.

The Children’s Education store and the Mamontovs Circle

It is known for a fact that Matryona (that was how the doll was originally called) appeared in the workshops of the Children’s Education store opened in Moscow, 1873 on the initiative of Maria Alexandrovna Mamontova (1847–1908), wife of the well-known publisher Anatoly Ivanovich Mamontov (1839–1905). The store initially specialized in children’s books but soon added educational toys (board games and so on) and all sorts of dolls to its stock-in-trade. The idea proved fruitful: Maria Mamontova’s store supplied its goods to the Polyakov House at the corner of Neglinnaya Street and Petrovskiye Linii (19 Neglinnaya where Mamontov’s publishing

house and printshop were located) and to Anatoly Mamontov’s own house in Leontievsky Lane (no. 19) designed by Viktor Hartmann in Russian style and built in 1872. By the mid-1890s the store had become a sort of information center that promoted latest innovations in Russian teaching practice and offered virtually everything children need. A clear idea of the above is provided by the 1896 Catalogue of Publications and Goods of the Children’s Education Store, which has eight sections [Catalogue of Publications, 1896]. In addition to books (25 items, about 200 titles) and toys, it listed children’s underwear and clothes, perambulators, and furniture; the latter including changing tables, basins and bathtubs, baby cribs and small beds, desks, chalkboards, tables, chairs, and bookcases. In the section ‘Games and Activities’ one could find all sorts of educational devices from cardboard squares ‘for making shapes according to Froebel system’ and sets for weaving, embroidery, sewing, modelling, porcelain and wood painting to educational sets on ‘Dairy Husbandry’, ‘Laundries’, ‘Housekeeping’ and ‘Jam Making’, or a huge ‘City Building’ kit [Catalogue of Publications, pp. 25–29]. The ‘Games’ section contained all sorts of lottos (with numbers, ‘pictures in four languages’, etc.), spillikins, draughts, indoor crickets, tennis, Chinese billiard and cooperative (group) board games [Catalogue of Publications, pp. 30–31]. The ‘Summer Games and Gymnastics’ section listed hula hoops, tents, garden tools, sets for making entomology collections, herbariums and so on [Catalogue of Publications, pp. 32–36].

The largest section of ‘Toys’ included everything imaginable: soft balls and wood balls for kids, sets of turned figurines and boxes, joiner’s tool and military gear kits for children, children’s carts and buggies, toy carriages and horses, dolls house furniture, dollhouse crockery and other ‘hope chest’ things, little houses with a miniature peasant hut, rural school and toyshop among them, and of course dolls per se — mechanical, with porcelain heads, dressed à la mode and in boyar’s (seignorial) clothes, etc. [Catalogue of Publications, pp. 13–24]. Especially noteworthy was a series of 20 dolls in Russian national costumes made in three sizes — 4.5, 6 and 8 *vershoks* (approximately 7.8, 10.5, and 14 inches) [Catalogue of Publications, p. 17, no. 68]. To this day considered a major accomplishment of the store, the project was initiated by Maria Mamontova, who had long turned from an unwelcome daughter-in-law (the family at first disapproved of Anatoly

(1) The survey held on June 8, 2025 covered 1600 residents of Russia aged 18+ [VTSIOM, 2025].

Mamontov's hasty marriage to a singer) into a full-fledged member of the family that fully shared its interests.

It will not be an exaggeration to say that a passion for revivalism or rather the creation of a new national style set the trend in Russian culture of that period, which was embodied in a broad-based and fruitful artistic movement. Later on, it would be referred to as national romanticism and interpreted as a forerunner and/or branch of Russian Art Nouveau. As is known, one of its centers was the Abramtsevo country estate outside Moscow, which Savva Ivanovich Mamontov (1841–1918), Anatoly's brother and well-known industrialist and patron of arts, bought owing to the untiring activity of his wife — Yelizaveta Grigorievna Mamontova-Sapozhnikova (1847–1908). In 1876, she organized joiner's, ceramics and needle craft workshops at Abramtsevo where enlisted craftsmen collaborated with leading artists in doing commission art. With the participation of Vasily Polenov, Viktor Vasnetsov and Ilya Repin, Yelizaveta Mamontova started a folk-art collection in 1881 and opened one of Russia's first museums of folk art in Abramtsevo in 1885. Thus, Maria Mamontova's initiative to set up workshops affiliated with the Children's Education store and to involve craftsmen in collaboration quite agreed with the priorities of both the family and the artistic milieu as a whole. Understandably enough, due to close family ties the workshops were bound to cooperate and co-create: the artists who worked on commissions from Anatoly Mamontov's printshop belonged to the Abramtsevo circle.

Perhaps this explains the opinion about Matryoshka appearing in part owing to Yelizaveta Mamontova, who was inspired by the Japanese nesting doll that had been gifted to her [Matryoshka: Photo Album, 1969; Bromley, Podolny, 1984]. There is no documentary evidence either in favour or against the premise. However, the reasons for this view are understandable: from the 1880s and up to the mid-1900s Japanese art was not merely all the rage in Russia the same as throughout the Old World. Artists were carried away by it and drew from it new artistic techniques attracted by their laconism, elegance, closeness to natural forms and, more importantly, loyalty to the national tradition. Many stylistic devices and phenomena of European Art Nouveau appeared under the spell of Japanese art. Some of them became national brands, for instance, Danish underglaze porcelain, French Belle Époque lithographic posters, English ornamentation and lithography of William Morris workshops, etc. The

stylistic impact of Japanese woodblock prints is also evident in Russian Art Nouveau graphic works, for example, those of Maria Yakunchikova. It can be surmised that during that period the theory of the 'Japanese origin' of Matryoshka might have been prompted by the understandable desire to attribute higher ancestry and fashionable chic to the newborn doll.

The theme of Japanese involvement in the genesis of Russian Matryoshka provokes undue controversial fervour in present-day publications by either 'exposing' the Russian doll as a Japanese invention or, conversely, fiercely denying the idea. Two circumstances should be borne in mind, however. First, there is nothing unusual or "secondary" in the existence of the Japanese model in that period. Second, it is a matter of principle rather than copying. Russian history knows no other nesting dolls similar to Matryoshka, whereas they are well known in India and China. The latter believes that such toys were made circa 1000 in the Song dynasty period (960–1279) while the earliest surviving specimens of figured wood nesting dolls date from the 18th century. The appearance of this fancy form is in line with adherence of traditional Chinese culture to the 'thing inside a thing' concept (of which the better-known example is the Chinese puzzle ball consisting of spheres carved from ivory or bone to fit within each other). Such products, including nesting dolls, became known in Europe and Russia in the 18th century during infatuation with Chinese art that brought into being European chinoiserie. European and Russian artworks based on this principle are known in jewellery making, gold and silver smithery, stone cutting, bone carving, turnery and carpentry. This tradition is thought to have struck root in Japan at the same time. However, early examples of Japanese dolls based on the principle of 'figure within a figure' are unknown (the opinion shared in particular by the Japanese scholar Genqui Numata [see: Numata, 2010]). Ritual and votive Naruko *kokeshi* dolls and *shichi-Fukurokuju* figurines are cited as parallels, although they are composed of separate elements that are not fitted one into another. On the contrary, cases are known when the Russian toy influenced the Japanese tradition. In 1916, the Japanese artist and educator Yamamoto Kanae brought a big collection of wooden toys from Russia. Upon his return, he organized in Nagano Prefecture, northern Japan, handicraft workshops that started producing for sale 'purely Japanese' toys with quite Russian roots [Lecture, 2017]. Matryoshka's influence on the shape of *Fukurokuju* figurines is strongly exemplified by a specimen found in the collection of

the Sergiev Posad Toy Museum. Judging by the ‘Made in Japan’ inscription, the vintage souvenir, presented by the Japanese ambassador in 1932 could hardly have been produced before 1921.

In this context it is noteworthy that the aforementioned catalogue of the Children’s Education store listed in the toys section ‘turned multicoloured wooden’ nesting boxes of 24 and 12 pieces [Catalog of Publications, 1896, p. 13, no. 44, 46]. So, the idea of a nesting doll could have arisen ‘on the spot’. It is a fact that the first Matryoshka nesting doll set was turned by the craftsman Vasily Petrovich Zvyozdochkin (1876–1956), who was born in the village of Shubino, Podolsk uyezd, in 1876. He worked in the Children’s Education store workshop from 1898. He wrote in his autobiography: “In 1900 I invented the 3-piece and 6-piece Matryoshkas and sent them to an exhibition in Parazh” [as spelt in the source. — N.S.] [Blyum]. This is how the birth date of the famous doll was determined. As for inventing Matryoshka and sending it to the Paris Exposition Universelle, the story was obviously ‘straightened’. The Imperially Established Committee headed by director of the Commerce and Manufacturing Department V.I. Kovalevsky and Commissioner-General Prince V.N. Tenishev, prominent entrepreneur, ethnographer, sociologist and educator⁽²⁾, approved the exhibitors of the Russian section at the 1900 Exposition Universelle. Russia spent 5 226 895 rubles on taking part in the fair, of which the government allocated 2 226 895 rubles and institutions and exhibitors funded another 3 000 000 rubles. These sums make it possible to imagine the fees paid by exhibitors capable of ‘sending’ anything to the exposition.

Among the participants in the exposition was Anatoly Mamontov or rather his printshop Partnership listed in the third group of exhibitors (‘Aids and Technology in Literature, Science and Art’) simultaneously in two classes: 11 (‘Printing Business. Lithography. Zincography’) and 14 (‘Book Craft, Music Industry and Periodical Publications’), which won eleven gold and fourteen silver medals [Russia, 1900, pp. 142, 147, 184, 185]. Maria Mamontova added a bronze medal to the family treasury. She

(2) In 1898, Prince Tenishev organized in St. Petersburg a private Ethnographic Bureau that in fact became the first sociological institute in the country. Its major objective was to organize and carry out the large-scale collection of information about the Russian peasants based on a special programme. The scientific data obtained by him were highly appreciated abroad: Tenishev was elected member of the International Institute of Sociology and the Paris Sociological Society.

was not listed among the participants and most likely exhibited under the aegis of the Partnership. However, she was mentioned separately as a bronze medal winner in class 100 (‘Toys Manufacturing Business’) [Russia, 1900, p. 169]⁽³⁾. Neither the Russian section catalogue nor the extended description of the exposition composed of illustrated supplements to *Vestnik inostrannoi literatury* (Foreign Literature Gazette), which kept track of the main events of the Paris EXPO [see: Catalogue of the Russian Section, 1900; Paris 1900 Exposition Universelle, 1900], contained any specific commentaries on Matryoshka as such. Furthermore, the Children’s Education store owner could hardly have been awarded the bronze medal for Matryoshka alone: the catalogue mentioned above clearly demonstrates that she had something else to show. Yet the 5-inch wooden toy was noticed and appreciated. The *Novosti dnya* (Daily News) newspaper of April 10 (March 28), 1901 wrote: “Londoners showed interest in Russian toys, and the zemstvo handicraft school of Sergiev Posad has now been commissioned to make a large batch of toys known under the name of Matryoshka for the London public. These toys consist of a big turned doll, in which a number of smaller dolls representing female types of Russian peoples are nested” [cit.: Novikova, 2024]. It is clear from this text that the author still had a vague idea of what it was all about. Another thing is noteworthy: the Sergiev Posad handicraft school was mentioned as the doll maker. The future of Matryoshka would be connected with this school after Anatoly Mamontov went bankrupt due to the general economic crisis in Russia and, in no small measure, due to financial expenditures on taking part in the Paris fair.

(3) Alongside the Anatoly Mamontov Printshop Partnersip, other members of the family were also bestowed high awards. Ye.G. Mamontova was entered into class 98 (‘Small woodworks’) [Russia, 1900, p. 217] but received gold in class 69 (‘Ordinary and art furniture’) and silver in class 98 (‘Brushware, turnery ware and basketry’) [Russia, 1900, pp. 158, 168]. A.S. Mamontova was entered into class 72 (‘Majolica and tiles’) [Russia, 1900, p. 206] and won a gold medal [Russia, 1900, p. 160]. Thus, Savva Mamontov’s wife and youngest daughter presented Abramtsevo workshop products. The brothers A. and N. Mamontov, cousins of Anatoly and Savva who owned the Paint-and-lacquer Industry and Trade Company, also won gold medals. The Paris EXPO was the most successful in the history of Russian representation on the international scene. Russia reaped a total of 1 589 awards, including 370 gold medals.

Handicraft Museum – methodical center for the institutionalization of crafts

The school in question was the Moscow Provincial Zemstvo Demonstration Workshop of Sergiev Posad, at whose disposal the Children's Education store workshops had been placed. It received the earliest export commissions from London in 1901 and from Paris in 1904. Ever since that time the Sergiev Posad Workshop became the main center of Matryoshka doll manufacturing. Incidentally, the workshop was listed as the top bronze medal winner in the same 'Toys' group of the Paris exposition [Russia, 1900, p. 169]. Not surprisingly, this workshop established in the traditional center of toy making craftsmen served as the major experimental base for the Moscow Provincial Zemstvo Handicraft Industry and Commerce Museum (hereinafter Handicraft Museum). The activities of this legendary museum were of paramount importance for the formulation of the so-called Moscow approach of interacting with handicrafts, which institutionalized the mechanics of the preservation and development of the handicrafts, the mechanics that determined the birth of Matryoshka and many other phenomena known now as folk crafts. The Handicraft Museum upheld this approach throughout its pre-revolutionary and Soviet history⁽⁴⁾.

(4) Between 1920 and 1926 the museum was named the Central Handicraft Museum of the Supreme Soviet of the National Economy, and when experimental workshops were founded in 1927, it got the name of the Central Research and Development Station (TsNOPS). In 1931, the Experimental Research Handicraft Institute (NEKIN) was established on the basis of TsNOPS and in 1932 it was reorganized into the Research Institute of Art Industry (NIIKhP), which included the Handicraft Museum and Shop. In 1946, the museum was renamed the NIIKhP Museum of Folk Art. In 1999, the Institute's art, library and archival stocks were used to create the Sergei Morozov Museum of Folk Art, which was incorporated in the All-Russian Decorative, Applied and Folk Arts Museum (VMDPNI) as its subsidiary, with its collections transferred to the VMDPNI building at 3 Delegatskaya Street. The house in Leontievsky Lane remained in the custody of the museum until 2006. The highly reputed exposition staged by the Sergei Morozov Museum of Folk Art was the Matryoshka Museum that fittingly occurred at Matryoshka's birthplace and stayed there for about five years (2001–2006). From 2012 and to the present moment the Matryoshka Museum exposition forms part of the Konny Dvor branch of the Sergiev Posad State History and Art Museum-Preserve.

The idea of establishing the Handicraft Museum as a center for preserving folk culture originated in St. Petersburg, but the Moscow Provincial Zemstvo proved more efficient. The All-Russia Artistic and Industrial Exhibition held in Moscow in 1882 turned out to be a pivotal event: its crafts section impressed the visitors most. Sergei Timofeyevich Morozov (1863–1944) bought a large number of craft items to display them, as part of his collection, in the Museum that he established the same year. In 1885, the museum located in a mansion specially rented for this purpose at Nikitsky Boulevard opened its doors to the general public (in parallel with the opening of the Abramtsevo museum). In 1903, the Handicraft Museum was relocated to the house in Leontievsky Lane (that previously accommodated the Children's Education store). When Anatoly Mamontov went bankrupt, the house was bought by Sergei Morozov, the museum director from 1890, and later its trustee from 1897. The mansion was rebuilt (architect S.U. Solovyov) and expanded to suit the museum purposes and later gifted by Morozov to the Museum, of which he was patron.

However, the mission of the Handicraft Museum was not to demonstrate the achievements but to provide financial, administrative and artistic support to the handicraft industry⁽⁵⁾. In 1888, the Handicraft Commission was set up under the Moscow Provincial Zemstvo and, in accordance with its decisions, the museum developed a new form of interaction with craftsmen as regards direct purchases and artistic guidance. No less important was establishing the Sergiev Posad Demonstration Workshop that would serve as a training center for adult craftsmen to ensure high quality standards for crafts production. It also aimed at helping artisans and craftsmen develop their individual style and avoid 'kitschy pastiche' coming from the onslaught of mass production devoid of any artistic merit [Dain, 2011, pp. 10, 11]. After the

(5) In particular, the Handicraft Museum and specifically Sergei Morozov were in charge of selecting exhibits for the Collective Exposition of Handcrafted Toys that won a silver medal in the 'Toys' group of the Paris EXPO [Russia, 1900, p. 169]

success of the Handicrafts Section at the 1900 Exposition Universelle in Paris, the output was diversified and expanded. A carpentry workshop was established in Sergiev Posad and a Drawing Class of the Stroganov Imperial College of Art and Design was affiliated with the workshops [Dain, 2011, p. 35]. Nikolai Dmitrievich Bartram (1873–1931), an artist of the Moscow Provincial Zemstvo and the Head of the Museum’s artistic department from 1904 to 1917 [Bartram, 1912; N.D. Bartram, 1979; History], made a significant contribution to the preservation of folk toys. He initiated the establishment of the second experimental Bogorodskoye toy workshop (following the one of Sergiev Posad), and its operation effectively saved this folk craft. Bartram’s efforts to preserve and develop the craft of folk toy making threatened by ‘cheap factory products’ was highly praised even by Alexander Benois who was known to be chary of praise. The very first Toy Museum of Moscow was also founded at Bartram’s initiative in 1918⁽⁶⁾.

The Handicraft Museum’s mission was based on merging the best folk-art traditions, skills accumulated by craftsmen and contemporary art practice of the time. The museum actively cooperated with such creative centers promoting Russian style as Abramtsevo, Talashkino, Kudrino and many others. All top artists specializing in Russian style were involved in collaboration. By the early 1910s, the museum was at the forefront of the efforts to preserve and develop crafts in all provinces of Russia. Among these creative initiatives were a lace-making workshop in the town of Alexandrov, the ‘Kustar- khudoznik’ (Artisan-Artist) team of carpenters specializing in pokerwork, a women’s collective sewing doll clothes in Sergiev Posad, a group of wood carvers in Khotkovo (Moscow region) and numerous coppersmith artels in the Podolsk and Vereya uyezds. After 1917, the museum underwent transformations becoming first the Central Experimental Station and then the Experimental Research Handicraft Institute. In this capacity, it contributed to the revival of

crafts, including Khokhloma painting, Rostov enamel, Vologda lace-making, and embroidery traditions of Ryazan and Kaluga. The museum was involved in the revival and further development of Russian centers of lacquer painting on papier-mâché of Palekh, Kholuy, and Mstyora. After the war, starting from 1946, curators and masters of the museum, now affiliated with the Experimental Research Handicraft Institute, helped revive the Gzhel tradition of making ceramics.

The case study of Gzhel ceramics most vividly demonstrates how the ‘Moscow principle’ worked in interaction with craftsmen. Gzhel porcelain, as it is known today, is a far cry from what was to be ‘revived’, i.e., ‘porcelain lubok’ produced by rural works of Gzhel in the 1830s–1900s. The now iconic blue-and-white painting was actually created by professional porcelain artists based on traditional forms, decorative techniques, and plastic solutions. Despite its professional origin, it blossomed into a true folk craft and became one of recognizable brands of Russian ceramics. But this is a drastic example. Usually, a folk craft with its own singular style came from professional analysis of artistic tradition wedded to the creativity of the living bearers of the tradition. In some cases, artists set the pace as it happened with ceramics and furniture workshops of Abramtsevo (artworks by M.A. Vrubel and E.D. Polenova were displayed in the Handicrafts sections of national and international fairs and exhibitions). Sometimes local masters and artisans were trained by professional artists, as it was with Gorodets painting, Palekh lacquerware, etc. It was an intense and highly collaborative creative process.

The birth of Matryoshka

In keeping with the accepted practice, the Matryoshka nesting doll ought to have two parents — a craftsman and an artist. There is an indirect proof of this premise in the autobiography of Vasily Petrovich Zvezdochkin, a woodturner who made the first Matryoshka doll. In 1905, he was employed at the Moscow Provincial Zemstvo workshop of Sergiev Posad. Here is what he wrote in his autobiography: “I worked there with the artist Marsov. We invented different things for the exhibition in Milan, Italy. In 1906, I received a large gold medal from Milan” [Blyum]. The document was published by Igor Blyum on his website “The History of Matryoshka”, the

(6) After the death of its founder in 1931, the Toy Museum moved to Sergiev Posad (Zagorsk in the Soviet time). As of today, it is the only specialized state-run toy museum called N.D. Bartram Artistic and Educational Toy Museum (the local branch of the Sergiev Posad Academy of Folk Arts).

only Internet resource dedicated to the Russian nesting doll. Here, the enthusiastic researcher meticulously gathered and presented a wealth of material on the subject⁽⁷⁾. He also included an article on the origin of Matryoshka written by E.N. Shulgina in 1947 based on her conversations with Zvezdochkin [Dain, 2011, p. 100]. The master recalled how he had seen a “suitable piece of wood” in a magazine and tried to turn on a lathe something like a human figure. The word ‘suitable’ is noteworthy here – ‘suitable for what?’ – and suggests the existence of a draft sketch. The turned wood figurine at first “had a funny look and brought to mind something like a nun”, and it was “blank”. According to Zvezdochkin, the idea to make a doll hollow with several smaller inserts was prompted to him by more experienced craftsmen Belov and Konovalov, who also came from the same Podolsk uyezd, famous for traditional centers of wooden

(7) In addition to his autobiography, a unique certificate verifies that at the Second All-Russia Handicrafts Exhibition of 1913, V.P. Zvezdochkin was awarded a large silver medal for “his perfect turning and polishing of different wooden toys”. This is the only document that testifies to his personal awards after participating in large-scale exhibitions. The gold medal from 1906 Milan exhibition as well as the bronze medal from Paris were given to the exhibitor, that is, the workshops. The autobiography also lists other awards that the master got for his creations: “Next I began making all sorts of turned polished items and sandboxes for the exhibition in St. Petersburg in 1907–1908. From Petersburg, I received a small gold medal. In 1909, I began preparing for the exhibition in Kazan. I made various turned, polished goods. From Kazan, I received a letter of gratitude. In 1913, I worked for the exhibition in St. Petersburg, from where I received a large silver medal. In 1914, a school for toy craft opened in Sergiev Posad. I took on the responsibility of instructor and teacher for the turning workshop. Every year no less than 27 people graduate from my turning workshop. In 1931, I received a letter of commendation from the school collective for honest work and correct vision of the turning workshop. In 1934, I received a letter of commendation for good production work and excellent completion of qualification work” [Blyum]. Despite his status, in 1935 Zvezdochkin was formally disenfranchised for ‘exploiting other people’s labour’. However, the talented master was not deprived of the attention of the new government. On August 4, 1936, the Folk Toys Commission of the People’s Commissariat for Education recommended that the All-Union Soviet of Producers’ Cooperatives “provide Zvezdochkin, a master with nearly 40 years of work experience, with proper conditions for successful professional activity”, which was implemented. From 1949, Vasily Zvezdochkin was in charge of the turning workshop at the Sergiev Posad Art Toy Artel.

toy crafts⁽⁸⁾. It was mentioned further in the interview that the masters showed the piece to Anatoly Mamontov who approved the figurine with inserts and commissioned a group of artists working on Arbat Street to paint it. The author does not report their names.

Traditionally, Sergei Vasilievich Malyutin (1859–1937), a pivotal figure in Russian national romantic style revival of the turn of the 20th century, is believed to be the designer of the first Matryoshka doll. He was equally successful in book design, scenography and decorative and applied arts [see: Style of Life, 2000, p. 247]. However, no documentary evidence confirming the artist’s authorship has been found so far, which gives reasons to put this information into question. Indeed, to judge by the style of the “Matryoshka with a Black Rooster” (N.D. Bartram Artistic and Educational Toy Museum, Sergiev Posad) attributed as an exhibit at the 1900 Exposition Universelle in Paris, where Matryoshka was displayed for the first time ever, it could have been painted by any skilled ornamentalist working in Russian style, including Malyutin⁽⁹⁾. To be fair, it should be noted that any weighty arguments against the theory of Malyutin’s authorship are also absent. The loss of sketches is quite common in applied graphic works as drafts usually became the property of the client and rarely survived if the enterprise closed. Malyutin is no exception, which is evidenced by the absence in his legacy of entire series of draft designs for projects with his documented authorship. The fact that in 1899 he closely collaborated with Mamontov’s publishing house, working on the jubilee edition of *The Tale of Tsar Saltan* by A.S. Pushkin, supports his authorship of the Matryoshka painting.

(8) In the 19th century, the turned toys production centers were located in Podolsk uyezd (in the villages of Voronovskaya and Krasnaya Pakhra volosts). As early as 1911, an artel of turned-toy makers was formed in the village of Babenki, Podolsk uyezd, which later became the Polirovannaya Igrushka (Polished Toy) factory. In 1934, the Grivnenskaya factory of turned wooden toys opened in the city of Klimovsk. In 1972, the factories merged. OAO KLIMO holding company, organized on this combined basis, received the status of ‘Russian Folk Crafts Enterprise’ in 1995. However, the traditional 19th-century Podolsk turned toys were not hollow but made of solid piece of wood. Of course, hollow turned goods were also produced, including surprise Easter eggs, nested boxes, cups, goblets, tumblers, etc., but examples of figured nesting dolls, following the ‘smaller than the smaller’ principle, were not known prior to the appearance of Matryoshka

(9) I. Blum believes that it was painted by the artist B.V. Zvorykin (1872–1942), however, in 1899 he was too young and only started working for the Mamontov publishing house in 1903.

However, the specific situation of the late 19th — early 20th centuries makes it problematic to authenticate the Matryoshka painting authorship on the basis of indirect data. The circle of people involved in the evolution of the national romantic style and the preservation and development of folk crafts traditions was quite narrow. Practically the same artists worked in the Handicraft Museum, Anatoly Mamontov's printshop and the Children's Education store workshops, as well as Yelizaveta Mamontova's workshops in Abramtsevo. Many of them, supported by art patrons, were closely linked by their public and commercial activities, to say nothing of their close family ties. The Matryoshka doll was born in this unique situation in art created by people who put their efforts into preserving, developing and enriching the content and artistic language of the folk tradition.

Conclusion

This nesting doll has no direct parallels with any traditional handicraft of the 19th century. However, by the 1920s a number of Matryoshka doll production centers, each with recognizable stylistic features, had already been in operation. Folk culture in general has a huge potential for adapting new motifs and forms. The notable examples range from fashionable men and women in Western dress as portrayed in folk lubok to tractors and dirigibles in post-revolutionary Palekh lacquerware. The same is true of the objects produced. This is precisely what keeps folk tradition alive and constantly evolving. This ability to change and adapt ensures its continuity, consistency and vibrant energy.

We must admit that the idea to 'humanize' the traditional nesting doll proved really fruitful, and the trend was picked up by foreign producers and craftsmen. We don't mean here fakes (no doubt, there are enough of these around) but rather new versions and interpretations of the 'Russian doll' by artists worldwide. These include the German Alexander von Salzmann, who studied in Russia and published his vision of Matryoshka in sketches as early as 1904. In the Soviet Union, following a hiatus in the 1930s–1940s — largely due to a sharp decline in exports — the Matryoshka doll saw a new wave of popularity in the late 1950s. The reason was the World Festival of Youth and Students held in Moscow in 1957, when Matryoshka virtually closed the gap in the production of an adequate number of souvenirs with a national charm. Ever since that time Matryoshka has been among Russian

national brands and the source of inspiration for many, be it mural artists in the Chilean city of Valparaiso or the organizers of the Vogue Russia 10th anniversary auction, which had half-a-meter high Matryoshka dolls by leading designers among the lots⁽¹⁰⁾. Finally, it has entered the digital world as a symbol of not only Russian, but Eastern European culture. However, it is worth mentioning that this refers not to Russian culture in the full scope of its age-old heritage, but rather to the souvenir trend. After all, it was precisely in this aspect that the Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VTSIOM) analysts conducted their survey.

(10) The auction was held in 2008. A Ralph Lauren Matryoshka doll dressed in a plaid suit was sold for 55 000 euros, a Prada version featured the face of top model Eva Evangelista and went for 48 000 euros. A Dolce & Gabbana doll looked like a sequined nun (sold for 50 000 euros). However, Valentin Yudashkin's Matryoshka doll, entirely in black, sold for the record \$100,000 [Novikova, 2024].

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