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Curating National Renewal: The Significance of Arts and Crafts in the Construction of Soviet Identity at the 1925 *Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes* in Paris

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Abstract

At the *Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes* in Paris in 1925, the newly recognised Soviet Union was given a platform to present its ideology through art. It constructed an official narrative of national renewal through a sophisticated exhibition concept that complemented contemporary art (particularly constructivism) with arts and crafts. This article sheds light on why the Soviet officials chose this specific approach and how their strategy was rooted in the earlier exhibition experience of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. Focusing on the two sections of arts and crafts presented in Paris – the Kustar goods of Soviet Russia and folk art from other Soviet Republics – the article examines their significance for the carefully constructed Soviet identity of the time. Furthermore, it analyses the contributions of individual organisers to these sections in light of their statements and writings, their professional positions and their prior experience. By illuminating the human factor behind the official narrative, the article exposes a parallel level of interpretation in order to further a more nuanced understanding of the Soviet contribution.

Keywords

Arts and Crafts; Exposition des Arts Décoratifs; Kustar art; Paris; World's Fair; Soviet identity

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Curating National Renewal: The Significance of Arts and Crafts in the Construction of Soviet Identity at the 1925 *Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes* in Paris

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Introduction

In October 1924, the Soviet Union was recognised by the French government and subsequently invited to participate in the *Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes*, which took place in Paris the following year. Despite receiving the invitation only five months before the grand opening on 28 April 1925, Soviet officials readily accepted. In an article for *Paris-Soir* titled ‘Pourquoi les Soviets ont exposé’, Pyotr Kogan (1872–1932), *commissaire général* of the exhibition committee, summarised the reason for their willingness to participate, even at short notice, as a desire to show the French public ‘proof of the creative activity of the [Soviet] peoples’ which has awakened with renewed vigour and was developing rapidly ‘under the aegis of the Soviet power’.

Recognizing the significance of this platform, considerable efforts were made to ensure a successful appearance. The multifaceted Soviet exhibition strategy sought to paint a picture of a politically, economically and socially successful country. Contributions were carefully selected according to their ability to showcase cultural achievements of the ‘Great experiment’ – despite revolutions, civil war and political repression. In the introduction to the exhibition catalogue, Boris Ternovets (1884–1941), one of the leading members of the exhibition committee and the director of the Museum of Modern Art in Moscow, reiterated the effort of the exhibition organisers ‘to show the true face of a country whose life is organised on new grounds, according to principles of labour, simplicity and perfect adaptation to its task’.¹ Given the political backdrop, the success of the participation was equated to the success of the political endeavour. Being well received was seen as proof that the Soviet Union could compete on an equal footing with other participating countries.

Art historical studies on the Soviet contribution to the *Exposition des arts décoratifs* have focused primarily on avant-garde architecture, interiors, theatre designs, posters, prints, textiles and porcelain. These exhibits have been discussed in the context of stylistic developments in Soviet art and architecture or in the broader socio-political context of

1) B[oris] T[ernovets], ‘En guise d’introduction’, *Catalogue des œuvres d’art décoratif et d’industrie artistique exposées dans le pavillon de l’URSS au Grand Palais et dans les Galeries de l’Esplanade des Invalides*, Paris: n. p., 1925, 20: ‘Notre dessein a été de montrer le vrai visage d’un pays dont la vie est organisée sur de nouvelles bases, selon des principes du travail, de simplicité et de parfaite adaptation à sa tâche’.

Soviet cultural diplomacy.² Building on previous research, this article proposes to look at further significant components of the Soviet contribution to the *Exposition des Arts Décoratifs* in its entirety. In so doing, it argues that folk art was positioned no less prominently and stood in contrast to the avant-garde (primarily Constructivist) contribution both visually and conceptually. Contrary to Constructivism, which spread through most (if not all) Soviet sections and represented cutting-edge contemporary art, the arts and crafts symbolised the continuity of certain artistic traditions. Such an interplay of forward- and backward-looking approaches, of modernity and tradition, reflects the contradictory Soviet cultural politics of the time. Evidently, the benefits expected from creating an image of artistic continuity outweighed the disadvantages, even if this meant a continuation of the imperial legacy.

This article retraces, first, the different sections of the Soviet contribution and highlights the implications of the political context. In tracing the roots of the exhibition conception, it draws parallels with imperial Russian strategies employed at previous World's Fairs, most notably, the 1900 *Exposition universelle* in Paris. It then examines the extent to which the presentation of arts and crafts was articulated as a continuity or a break with imperial practices by looking more closely at two sections: 'Peasant Art of the Kustari',³ representing artisans from Central Russia, and 'National Ensembles', showcasing the material culture of the indigenous peoples of Russia as well as other nations of the European, Central Asian and Transcaucasian Soviet Republics, such as Belarus, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. By examining both displays and conceptions behind them, the article unravels their mutually complementary messages as well as their significance for the carefully constructed Soviet identity of the time. It addresses the following questions: To what extent did the art of the *kustari* allude to cultural continuity and rootedness in tradition? How is it to be evaluated in relation to the official aim of demonstrating national and cultural renewal? How did the Soviet Union present its ethnocultural diversity and multinationality? In what way did it attempt to distance itself from imperial cultural policy and colonial claims?

Yakov Tugendhol'd (1882–1928), another prominent member of the 1925 exhibition committee who was in charge of propaganda work, expressed in a letter to Pyotr Kogan that it would be 'criminal to experiment' with the selection of people involved and their tasks.⁴ Instead, Tugendhol'd pleaded for organisers who would not only have the 'sense of the vernacular, native, specific character of Russia' but also knowledge of Western

2) See, for example, Yvonne Brunhammer, *1925, Paris: Les Presses de la Connaissance*, 1976, 185; Anna Petrova and Nelli Podgorskaya, 'Rabochii i kolchoznitsa' [Worker and Peasant], in Petrova and Podgorskaya, eds, *Pavil'ony SSSR na mezhdunarodnykh vystavkakh* [USSR Pavilions at the international exhibitions], Moscow: Pareto-Print, 2013, 9–41. For more on the socio-political context see Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment. Cultural Diplomacy and Western Visitors to the Soviet Union, 1921–1941*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, 61–97; Aleksandr Golubev and Vladimir Nevezhin, *Formirovanie obraza Sovetskoi Rossii v okruzhayushchem mire sredstvami kul'turnoi diplomatii, 1920-e–pervaia polovina 1940-kh* [Forming the Image of Soviet Russia in the Surrounding World through Cultural Diplomacy, 1920s–the First Half of the 1940s], Moscow: Tsentr gumanitarnykh initsiativ, 2016, 57–126.

3) The Russian term *kustar* (pl. *kustari*) describes a handicraft worker. It received a specific connotation during the revival of the folk art in nineteenth century. Originally objects of everyday use, *kustar* goods took on the character of decorative souvenir in the course of the revival.

4) He was specifically concerned about appointing Alexander Rodchenko as the head decorator of the whole exhibition, arguing that he did not have sufficient prior experience. See the letter from Yakov Tugendhol'd to Pyotr Kogan of 7 January 1925, in RGALI, fonds 237, op. 1, it. 126, f. 1, 2, published in: Natalia Volkova, Sergei Shumikhin et al., eds, *Vstrechi s proshlym* [Encounters with the Past], Moscow: RGALI, 1996, 8, 400–401.

cultural contexts. A closer look at the individual positions and backgrounds as well as professional experiences of the respective section organisers reveals a new dimension of interpretation. Illuminating the human factor behind the official narrative is therefore an important shift in perspective leading to a more nuanced understanding of the Soviet contribution.

An artistic display with political implications

The Soviet section was inaugurated on 5 June, with a delay of over a month after the grand opening. The official program contained three inaugural speeches held at the Grand Palais. Leonid Krasin, the first Soviet ambassador to France, declared that the art presented reflected the Revolution of 1917 and was still in its formative stages. His address was followed by Kogan, who, in addition to being head of the exhibition committee, was founder and president of the Soviet Academy of Sciences and professor at Moscow University. Kogan emphasised that the art on display was by no means merely ‘l’art pour l’art’. Instead, it sought to embody real life and to adapt the object to its purpose.⁵ In the final speech, Anatole de Monzie, French Minister of Education and Fine Arts, showed particular interest in seeing ‘how Marxism had impacted on art’.⁶

The first part of the Soviet contribution was located on the first floor of the Grand Palais. The display occupied six rooms covering a total area of over 500 square meters and presented twelve art categories including architecture, graphic design, photography, and – one of the contributions most appraised by French art critics – decorative theatre art. It could be reached by the southern staircase that led straight to a bust of Lenin on a Constructivist pedestal, centred in front of a wooden construction resembling a door frame, crowned from above by a large-sized poster reading ‘URSS’ (**Figure 1**). This somewhat provocative display seemingly prepared the visitor for the challenging combination of political message and formal experimentation that awaited them throughout most of the Soviet contributions.

Directly in front of the Grand Palais was the Soviet pavilion, designed by Konstantin Mel’nikov. This bold Constructivist building made of wood and glass became one of the most noted architectural contributions to the exhibition. A lightweight two-story construction, its unconventional forms, unusual height and bright colours stood out from other pavilions at the Cours-la-Reine. Its ‘extreme simplicity’ was even ‘shocking’ for some.⁷ From an artistic point of view, it reflected the advanced state of Soviet architectural concepts with El Lissitzky going as far as calling it ‘the first small building’ that embodied the ‘new spirit’.⁸ Emphasising the message of Soviet progress that was to be conveyed rather than its purely artistic value, Kogan

5) He expressed the same sentiment in a special publication for the exhibition, stating: ‘C’est en effet notre Révolution qui a accentué cette idée que l’art doit avant toute chose incarner la vie réelle, qu’il doit construire la réalité et que la vraie beauté consiste dans l’adaptation de l’objet à sa destination’. Pierre Cogan [Pyotr Kogan], ‘Préface’, *L’art décoratif et industriel de l’URSS. Edition du comité de la section de l’URSS à l’exposition internationale des arts décoratifs Paris 1925*, Moscow: Gosznak, 1925, 5.

6) Anonymous, ‘M. de Monzie’, 1: ‘comment le marxisme avait réagi sur l’art’.

7) Bernard Lecache, ‘Défense et illustration du Pavillon des Soviets’, *Paris-soir*, 609, 6 June 1925, 3.

8) El Lissitzky, *Russland. Die Rekonstruktion der Architektur in der Sowjetunion* (Neues Bauen in der Welt), 1.1, 1930, 35 ff.



Figure 1: Henri Manuel, View of the Entrance to the Soviet Sections in the Grand Palais of the *Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes, Paris (1925)*.

Source: A. N. Lavrentiev.

described it as the ‘symbol of our [Soviet] obstinacy as constructors, of our revolutionary simplicity and austerity’.⁹

The ground floor of the pavilion accommodated the Section of National Ensembles with the material culture of the various peoples of the vast Soviet Union, which will be examined in more detail below. Its upper floor showcased the Section of the State Publishing House, Gosizdat, which was prepared by Isaac Rabinovitch. Finally, there was the room of the Commercial Sector, ‘Gostorg’, with a presentation of the State Export-Import Office, installed by Alexander Rodchenko. His interiors of a workers’ club were located – together with the *Izba* (reading room) designed by Anton Lavinsky, a student of Vkhutemas – across the Seine in the Galerie de l’Esplanade des Invalides, the third and last location of the official Soviet section.¹⁰

Mel’nikov’s pavilion and Rodchenko’s worker’s club attracted a lot of attention and quickly became emblems of the Soviet section. These ‘agitation machines’ seemed to embody progress

9) P[yotr] Kogan, ‘... symbole de notre opiniâtreté de constructeurs, de notre simplicité et de notre austérité révolutionnaires’. ‘Pourquoi les Soviétiques ont exposé’, 1.

10) These two displays proposed recreation spaces for self-education and cultural leisure activities. See Elitza Dulguerova, ‘L’art et le paysan. Fantômes, débats, pratiques en Russie/URSS’, in Neil McWilliam, Catherine Méneux and Julie Ramos, eds, *L’art social en France: De la Révolution à la Grande Guerre*, Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2014, 397–412, especially 401–405.

and the success of the Bolshevik endeavour.¹¹ The demonstrative political message was not lost on the French public. However, the entanglement of art and politics affected the Soviet contribution to the Paris exhibition as well as its perception and reception, often obscuring the artistic value of the artworks on display and leaving the public with the impression of seeing ‘nothing but a political propaganda section’.¹²

Learning from past experiences

Based on previous experiences at international exhibitions, Soviet officials were able to make a likely assessment of what would be well received by the Western public. It stands to reason that both Constructivism and folk art were considered to be a fairly safe choice: David Shterenberg (1881–1948), the artistic director of the Soviet Section in Paris as well as head of the Department of Fine Arts (IZO) at the People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment (Narkompros), had already gained valuable experience by organising the *First Russian Art Exhibition* at the Gallery van Diemen in Berlin 1922. Its reception made clear that among the various heterogeneous movements of avant-garde art of Soviet Russia, Constructivism received most recognition.¹³ *Kustar* art, on the other hand, was already widely popular in Europe long before the October Revolution, and the World’s Fairs played a crucial role in its popularity in France.¹⁴ The post-revolutionary exhibition experience of the Soviet Union verified its enduring popularity. The Soviet participation at the Venice Biennale of 1924 provided important experience when preparing for the Paris exhibition the following year.¹⁵ For Kogan, who had been entrusted with the preparation of the Soviet participation in Venice, the display showed leading

11) Yakov Tugendhol’d, ‘Stil 1925 goda (Mezhdunarodnaia vystavka v Parizhe)’ [The style of 1925 (The International exhibition in Paris)], *Pechat’ i revoliutsiia* 7, 1925, 35. The demonstratively ephemeral character of the pavilion, expressed among other things in the use of cheap materials, was emblematic of the entire Soviet exhibition. In many ways, it was more about showcasing ideas and future potential than already realised achievements.

12) Maurice de Waleffe, ‘À propos de l’exposition des arts décoratifs. Une bataille pour la beauté’, *Les Modes*, 1 June 1925, 2.

13) Cf. Éva Forgács, ‘16 Responses to the First Russian Art Exhibition’, in Isabel Wünsche and Miriam Leimer, eds, *100 Years On. Revisiting the First Russian Art Exhibition of 1922*, Vienna/Cologne: Böhlau, 2022, 105–112. Shterenberg and Anatolii Lunatcharsky were initially very interested in bringing the Berlin exhibition to Paris and were encouraged to do so from the French side as well. However, it could not be realised and the exhibition traveled instead to Amsterdam, where it was shown at the Stedelijk Museum in 1923. It would be of special interest to take this original idea into account and to analyse in what sense the *Exposition des Arts Décoratifs* can be seen as the successor of the 1922 Berlin exhibition.

14) The Russian Empire took part in the Paris World’s Fairs of 1867, 1889 and 1900. The *Exposition des Arts Décoratifs* was technically not a World’s Fair, as it focused exclusively on the applied arts, but it stood in the same tradition and was organised in a very similar manner, showcasing twenty-one nations side by side. See also Nathanaëlle Tressol, ‘The Reception of Russian Arts and Crafts in French Art Journals’, *Experiment* 25, 2019, 346–362.

15) Two further large-scale exhibitions took place in New York: the *Russian Painting and Sculpture* exhibition in the Brooklyn Museum in 1923 and the *Russian Art Exhibition* at the Grand Central Palace in 1924. These exhibitions are of little relevance in the present context: The Brooklyn Museum exhibition was prepared by the American art critic Christian Brinton without the involvement of Soviet officials, whereas the exhibition at the Grand Central Palace did not include arts and crafts items. See Roann Barris, ‘Exhibiting Russia. Revisiting, Reframing, and Reinterpreting the Russian Avant-Garde’, *Experiment* 23, 2017, 142–157. See, too, Christina Lodder, ‘Exhibitions of Russian Art after 1922’, in Annelly and David Juda, eds, *The 1st Russian Show: A Commemoration of the Van Diemen Exhibition Berlin 1922*, London: Annelly Juda Fine Art, 1983, 80–83.

artistic trends of contemporary Russia complemented by a wide range of arts and crafts.¹⁶ The overall approach, combining modernist and traditional art tendencies, was similar to that of the *Exposition des Arts Décoratifs*, which is not surprising given the number of shared members of the organising committee between the two exhibitions.¹⁷ Although the display of folk art cannot be reconstructed in detail, Soviet officials underlined that it was an important part of the contribution at both international exhibitions.¹⁸

The arts and crafts were represented so prominently not least because they were a popular commodity for the Western public, attracting remarkable attention. In the additional catalogue for the *Exposition des Arts Décoratifs*, Kogan highlighted their ‘succès extraordinaire’¹⁹ in Venice, confirming moreover the interest of Soviet officials in the financial side of these exhibitions. In Paris, they pursued the same hope for success, coupled with a desire to expand the established range of export items. As part of the unofficial Soviet contribution, twelve Gostorg kiosks were placed on the left bank of the Seine, near the Galerie de l’Esplanade des Invalides. They were built after Mel’nikov’s design, painted by artists Alexandra Exter and Victor Bart and sold a variety of handicrafts, in particular *kustar* goods and toys, but also carpets, scarves, embroidery, lace, porcelain and books.

It is important to point out that *kustar* export was certainly not a Soviet novelty. Stores with arts and crafts of the Russian Empire had already been in existence throughout Europe before World War I.²⁰ The Russian Empire thus presented arts and crafts on a large scale early on, but it was the resounding success at the *Exposition Universelle* of 1900 that transformed their popularity into a strong export market. Curiously, from the very beginning, arts and crafts played a decisive role in the construction of imperial Russian identity, while the empire’s self-presentation was oriented towards its perception and success abroad.²¹ In this sense, its emphasis on folk art can be compared with the popularity of ethnographic presentations at World’s Fairs. In France, in particular, ethnographic exhibitions played an important role in highlighting the country’s colonial successes.²² The participation of the Russian Empire

16) Interview with Pyotr Kogan, *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 6 June 1924, cited after Vivian Endicott Barnett, ‘Der russische Beitrag zur Biennale von Venedig 1924. Eine Rekonstruktion’, in Bettina-Martine Wolter and Bernhart Schwenk, eds, *Die grosse Utopie: Die russische Avantgarde 1915–1932*, Frankfurt: Schirn, 1992, 165.

17) Boris Ternovets acted as the general secretary in Venice, both exhibitions shared professors Abram Efros, Yakov Tugendhol’d and others as members of the committee.

18) In a French article from 1925, Ternovets mentioned a few *kustar* items (including items by Golikov) and pointed out that other regions of the USSR, such as Armenia and Ukraine, were also exhibited. See Boris Ternovets, ‘La Section russe à l’Exposition internationale de Venise’, *La Renaissance de l’art français et des industries de luxe*, 7/10, October 1924, 535–547; See also Endicott Barnett, ‘Der russische Beitrag’, 164.

19) Cogan [Kogan], ‘Préface’, *L’art décoratif et industriel de l’URSS*, 5 ff.

20) In Paris, there was the *kustar* store of V.I. Borutskii and S.T. Morozov on the Avenue d’Opéra and another store on the Place du Théâtre. The Soviet government continued to support the export of arts and crafts as a welcome source of foreign currency and, by the mid-1920s, *kustar* goods were among the most sought-after export items from Soviet Russia.

21) Supposedly, in preparation for the London World’s Fair of 1862, the Russian ambassador to Great Britain, Filip Brunov, had sought advice of the ‘Russophile English geologist’ Roderick Murchison. He received a strong recommendation to contribute objects that were particularly characteristic of Russia and distinguished the country from Western Europe. Russian officials apparently took this advice to heart and followed it at subsequent international exhibitions as well. See Mirjam Voerkelius, ‘Russland und die Sowjetunion auf den Weltausstellungen’, in Martin Aust, ed., *Globalisierung imperial und sozialistisch: Russland und die Sowjetunion in der Globalgeschichte, 1851–1991*, Frankfurt and New York: Campus Verlag, 2013, 211.

22) The *Exposition Universelle* of 1867 delivered the collections for the *Muséum Ethnographique des Missions*

in the international exhibitions had an important peculiarity: it played on the attraction of presenting exotic goods and at the same time aimed at underpinning its status as an imperial power.

The skilful presentation of an *izba* (log house) at the Paris *Exposition Universelle* in 1867 led to the international fame of the ‘Russian style’. While imperial Russian contributions to the *Expositions Universelles* of 1878 and 1889 followed similar strategies, the exhibition of 1900 is to be understood as an important turning point.²³ While imperial Russia itself was considered an exotic curiosity and was represented as ‘peuples étrangers à l’Europe’ in the nineteenth century, its participation in the 1900 *Exposition Universelle* established its position as a Great Power.²⁴ It still pleased the French public with its exotic character, but at the same time presented itself as a technically and industrially advanced empire with its own colonial power. Specifically, the contribution included the ‘Village russe’, consisting of a wooden church, an ‘*izba des koustary*’ a boyarina’s *terem* and a bazaar, and was supervised by women such as Princess Maria Tenisheva, Princess Maria Shabelskaia, Princess Aleksandra Naryshkina, Elizaveta Mamontova and Maria Iakunchikova.²⁵ The section displayed *kustar* handicrafts such as furniture, toys, instruments and further smaller goods, as well as folk-inspired neo-Russian works by contemporary artists, originating mostly from the artistic colonies in Abramcevo and Talashkino, two emblematic places for the development of this style.²⁶ These exhibits would typically stylise folklore themes with new, non-historicising forms, while keeping the traditional motifs recognisable.²⁷ This installation was highly praised by the French public which emphasised the ‘rich roots of the Russian people and the vitality of a long-lived identity’.²⁸ The *kustar* goods were judged as ‘chefs-d’oeuvres d’art et de goût’²⁹ and made a lasting impact on the perception of Russian art in France. These objects corresponded well to widespread clichés of the Tsarist Empire as exotic, mystical and Byzantine.³⁰ At the same time, the *kustar* and neo-Russian contributions were complemented

Scientifiques. Starting with the *Exposition Universelle* of 1878, ethnographic displays became a special feature of World’s Fairs. See Polina Matveeva, ‘Vsemirnye vystavki kak prototipy etnograficheskikh museev’ [World’s Fairs as Prototypes of Ethnographic Museums], in *Evropeiskoe kul’turnoe prostranstvo v kollektivykh MAE* [European cultural space in the collections of the MAE], St. Petersburg: MAE RAN, 2013, 61–74.

23) Olga Kazakova, ‘Les Pavillons russes aux Expositions Universelles du XIXe siècle. Expression de l’identité qui n’a jamais existé’, *Diacronie* 18/2, 2014, document 6. URL: <https://doi.org/10.4000/diacronie.1411> (last accessed 6 July 2023).

24) For example, the Russian contribution to the *Exposition Universelle* of 1889 was still reviewed in ethnographic contexts. See, Alexandre Tausserat, ‘Notes et enquêtes. Musique populaire russe’, *Revue des traditions populaires* 4/10, October 1889, 550.

25) For more on women’s contribution to the *Village russe* see Louise Hardiman, ‘Invisible women. Re-examining the Arts and Crafts of Maria V. Iakunchikova at the Paris “Exposition universelle” of 1900’, *Experiment* 25, 2019, 295–309.

26) Jelena Tschernewitsch, ‘Ausdruck eines neuen Russlands. Der neorussische Stil im Spannungsfeld von Folklore und nationaler Identität’, in Ralf Beil, ed., *Russland 1900. Kunst und Kultur im Reich des letzten Zaren*, Cologne: Dumont, 2008, 147–165.

27) Netta Peacock, ‘The New Movement in Russian Decorative Art’, *International Studio* 13, May 1901, 268–276; Jewgenia Kritschenko, *Zwischen Byzanz und Moskau. Der Nationalstil in der russischen Kunst*, Munich: Klinkhardt & Biermann, 1991.

28) Gianni Cariani, ‘La découverte de l’art russe en France, 1879–1914’, *Revue des études slaves* 71: 2, 1999, 400.

29) *1900 Paris Exposition. Guide pratique du visiteur de Paris et de l’exposition*, Paris: Hachette, 1900, 294.

30) Voerkelius, ‘Russland und Sowjetunion auf den Weltausstellungen’, 213.

with works by contemporary artists from the Russian Empire who could fit into the current European art scene,³¹ reflecting thus an image of the Russian identity as a ‘singulier mélange de l’Orient et de l’Occident, de la civilisation et de la barbarie’.³² The image of Russian identity that this presented was, however, only a construct for the Western public. It corresponded neither to the official ideology of the Empire, nor to the mentality of its Europeanised cultural elite, nor to the way of life of its diverse peoples.³³

Furthermore, imperial Russia positioned itself as a Western-style empire, presenting its central pavilion entitled ‘Siberia and Russian Asia’ at the section of the Foreign Colonies. Its stone building in pseudo-Russian style resembled the silhouettes of the Moscow Kremlin and evoked in the eyes of the Western public ‘the history of the growing greatness of the holy Russia’.³⁴ It presented a collection of everyday objects from the regions of Central Asia, Siberia and the Far North. In addition, the sensational presentation of the Trans-Siberian Railway embodied technical progress and vividly demonstrated an ‘ability to master space’.³⁵ The geographical area that was presented was staged as a project of modernisation in which the Russian Empire acted as ‘an imperial power incorporating its colonies and its annexed peripheries’.³⁶

Overall, the 1900 exhibition strategy – with contributions oscillating between tradition and heritage on the one hand and innovation and progress on the other – proved to be an effective formula for success.³⁷ In fact, Sergei Diaghilev applied the same formula for his ‘Saisons russes’, which initially started with the *Exposition Rétrospective de l’Art Russe* presented at the Salon d’Automne in 1906. Although the part of the exhibition devoted to traditional art was mostly represented by icons and the art of previous centuries, Diaghilev was also a zealous advocate for the decorative and industrial arts in Russia and for their international recognition.³⁸ With the subsequent *Ballets Russes* (1909–1929), Diaghilev furthered his intention ‘to groom Russian

31) Contemporary artists of the Russian Empire were exhibited separately, in the Foreign Section of the newly built Grand Palais, and included Mark Antokol’skii, Naum Aronson, Albert Edelfelt, Alexei Kharlamov, Konstantin Korovin and others.

32) Hippolyte Gautier, *Les curiosités de l’expositions universelle de 1867*, Paris: Delagrave, 1867, 115.

33) Olga Kazakova, ‘Les pavillons russes aux Expositions Universelles du XIXe siècle. Expression de l’identité qui n’a jamais existé’, unpaginated.

34) *Exposition universelle de 1900. Les plaisirs et les curiosités de l’Exposition*, Paris: Chaix, 1900, 272.

35) Voerkelius, ‘Russland und Sowjetunion auf den Weltausstellungen’, 215. This installation was a simulated train journey from Samara to Vladivostok. Visitors could enter three carriages, which simulated the movement of a train through shaking and showed the multilayered panorama from the windows, moving at 300 metres per minute. Cf. Valerii Privalikhin, ‘Kartina dlinoi v kilometr’ [‘A kilometre long picture’], *Nauka i zhizn’* [Science and Life], 8, 2010, 84–88.

36) Claudia Weiss, ‘Representing the Empire. The Meaning of Siberia for Russian Imperial Identity’, *National Papers*, 35: 3, 2007, 448.

37) These two factors allowed the integration of the Russian Empire on a par with other nations. The success of this concept was likely due to it being in line with the prevailing idea of ‘civilisation’ in France. Cariani, ‘La découverte de l’art russe’, 399.

38) Not only was he at one point closely involved with the leading figures of folk art revival such as Elena Polenova, Savva Mamontov or Maria Tenisheva, but his interest might also have stemmed from his own family. His elder brother Iurii was one of the leading agents of kустar affairs and politics. Early on he headed a private school for the revival of *naboika* printing in the village of Borovenets in Novgorod province and was later appointed director of the Kустar Museum in St. Petersburg. See Wendy R. Salmond, *Art and Crafts in Late Imperial Russia. Reviving the Kустar Art Industries, 1870–1917*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 72.

painting and bring it to the West, to glorify it in the West'.³⁹ At the same time, he catered to the desire of the Western public for the exotic by initially giving the image of Russia a strong Eastern appeal and quickly turning to Russian folklore and folk-tales in the early 1910s.

The success of Diaghilev's enterprise had an equally lasting effect on the perception of Russian art in France, as well as Russian life and culture in general.⁴⁰ So, when Kogan spoke out in his inaugural speech against exhibiting 'l'art pour l'art' – alluding to Diaghilev's former group *World of Art* that put this principle at the centre of their creative pursuits –, he wanted to set Soviet art apart from preconceived Western notions of 'Russian art'. It was to be associated neither with the achievements of pre-revolutionary times nor with those of the *émigrés* from the former Russian Empire.⁴¹ French art critics sensed this message and stated regretfully that 'the Red Revolution drowned the *Firebird*' and with it any hopes for Russian art 'raised by the famous Russian ballets'.⁴² Despite this official stance and the corresponding public reception in regard to the renewal of Soviet art, however, it is still possible to trace a clear continuation of the imperial exhibition strategy, as will be shown below. A closer look at the individual agents involved in the preparation of the Soviet contribution in 1925 allows a better understanding of this incoherence.

Peasant art of the *kustari*

At the *Expositions des Arts Décoratifs*, the arts and crafts were employed as an elaborate device not only to symbolise the revival of popular labour according to the new ideology, but also to maintain a bridge to certain artistic traditions. The notion of peasants as the 'keepers of national identity'⁴³ played an important role in preserving a continuity between imperial Russian (in the supranational sense) and Soviet identities. Therefore, folk art was entrusted with the mission of conveying this image of continuity despite political transformation, and of reassuring the Western public that the Soviets were not making a *tabula rasa* of their entire cultural heritage, and they were building on certain traditions.

In contrast to the 1900 *Exposition Universelle*, the Soviet display of arts and crafts in 1925 eschewed neo-Russian works, which were too closely associated with their aristocratic patrons. Instead, they aimed to showcase 'authentic' Russian handicrafts that would reflect the popularity and success of the new government. In the absence of other established mass production (peasant or industrial), organisers had to rely on traditional *kustar* goods. Existing

39) See Diaghilev's letter to Alexander Benois, in I. S. Zil'bershtein and V. A. Samkov, eds, *Sergei Diaghilev i russkoe iskusstvo* [Sergei Diaghilev and Russian Art], 2, Moscow: Izobrazitel'noe Iskusstvo, 1982, 26.

40) See, for example, Gleb Pospelov, 'Rossiia glazami diaghilevskikh sezonov' [Russia through the eyes of Diaghilev's seasons], *Pinakoteka*, 13/14, 2002, 215–224.

41) The Soviet participation in the *Exposition des Arts Décoratifs* actually led to a major split within the artistic émigré community in Paris, as was the case with the *Union des artistes russe*. Some of the artists of the (former) Russian Empire ended up working with the Soviet delegation, others participated in French sections, still others held back from participation altogether.

42) De Waleffe, 'Une bataille pour la beauté', 2: 'Du pavillon bolchevick on peut craindre qu'il ne défende assez mal les espoirs que firent naître, vers 1910, les fameux ballets russes. L'art russe semblait alors parti pour métamorphoser notre sens des lignes et des couleurs. La révolution rouge a noyé l'*Oiseau de feu*'.

43) Salmond, *Art and Crafts in Late Imperial Russia*, 7.



Figure 2: View of the *kustar* section in the Grand Palais (1925).

Source: *Catalogue général officiel: Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes* (Paris, 1925).

handicrafts in the pre-revolutionary style were not excluded from display, but they were accompanied by variations with new Soviet decorative elements.

The Section of Peasant Art of the *Kustari* in the Grand Palais consisted of six stands and was supposed to shed light on the reformed *kustar* industry, which counted, by the mid-1920s, about 400,000 artisans (**Figure 2**). It showcased toys, carved wood, pottery, embroidery, lace, objects in papier-mâché and many more goods from a large number of schools in, among others, Palekh (some 350 km east of Moscow), Sergiev Posad (to the north-east of Moscow), Bogorodskoe (now a north-eastern suburb of Moscow) and Torzhok (some 240 km north-west of Moscow). A certain renewal was visualised through new, Soviet, motifs with interpretations of the life of the Red Army and a ‘new social symbolism’.⁴⁴ One specific ornament became distinctive for works made for this exposition: the image of the sickle, hammer and red star surrounded by a waving red ribbon, corn ears and the inscription ‘USSR’ (**Figure 3**).⁴⁵ It was to be found on a variety of applied and *kustar* art objects, such as porcelain, iron trays, lacquer

44) Vétrov, ‘Section des “Koustari”’, *Catalogue de la Section URSS*, Paris 1925, 81.

45) Ol’ga Briuzgina and Natalia Proskuriakova, ‘Vserossiiskii muzei dekorativno-prikladnogo i narodnogo iskusstva’ [The All-Russian museum of decorative, applied and folk art], in Vladimir Ziakin, ed., *Istoriia i kultura Rostovskoi zemli* [History and culture of the Rostov land], Rostov: n.p., 2007, 284.



Figure 3: ‘Finift’ Enamel Brooch shown at the *Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes, Paris (1925)*.

Source: Ol’ga Briuzgina and Natalia Proskuriakova, ‘Vserossiiskii muzei dekorativno-prikladnogo i narodnogo iskusstva’ [All-Russian museum of decorative-applied and folk art], in Vladimir Ziakin, ed., *Istoriia i kultura Rostovskoi zemli* [History and culture of the Rostov land] (Rostov, 2007).

miniatures, embroidery, silverware and more. To the less informed observer, the frequency of this decorative element could have given the impression that it reflected the popularity of the Soviet ideology among the peasant population. This portrayal of *kustar* production as a mouthpiece of popular sentiment and a direct expression of people’s creativity was, however, misleading and played on the widespread misconception in the Western public that this production was independent and, in this sense, authentic.⁴⁶ In reality, *kustar* art underwent significant modernisation, especially after the reforms of 1905, a movement that led to a division of labour into ‘supervisors’ and workers and, ultimately, to commercialisation of the *kustar* industry. In this system of labour division, the creative direction was given by an artistic expert ‘from above’, whose designs were then carried out by the *kustari* (who were allowed a certain degree of artistic freedom in their execution). This *kustar* reform movement created a gulf between the local patterns of *kustari* and ornaments designed by artists in contemporary style, which became evident already in the 1900s. By the 1910s, the gulf between the two steadily widened, producing a polarisation between the artistic and the utilitarian, the decorative and the functional, the rural and the urban.⁴⁷ The turmoil around the Revolution of 1917 brought *kustar* activities to a halt and led to major reorganisations of its workshops and institutions, but the general structure of the *kustar* industry remained intact even after the Civil War.

46) Interview with Kogan, *Il Popolo d’Italia*, 165.

47) Salmond, *Art and Crafts in Imperial Russia*, 153 and 165 ff.

It is therefore somewhat surprising that, despite the official narrative of radical new beginnings, the agents involved with the *kustar* section actually belonged to the leading representatives of the pre-revolutionary movements. The section at the 1925 exhibition was realised by the artist Alexander Durnovo (1873–?).⁴⁸ He typified a generation of decorative artists of the 1900s who made their career as part of the *kustar* reform movement. As a graduate of the St. Petersburg Stieglitz School of Design, he joined the *kustar* reform movement when he became involved in preparations for the *Exposition universelle* of 1900, where he assisted the artist Konstantin Korovin in the construction of the Russian village displayed there. Between 1902 and 1910 he directed the St. Petersburg Kustar Museum.⁴⁹ Among the many similar institutions could be found in other provinces, the *kustar* museums in St. Petersburg and Moscow had the widest reach. Their main tasks were not only to preserve and exhibit folk art, but also ‘to familiarise the public with the *kustar* industries and to disseminate improved models and designs among *kustari* in the various provinces’. As an integral part of the *kustar* industry the museum, furthermore, ‘acted as middleman between *kustar* and customer, and employed artists to design for the jewelry, ceramic, enamel, metalwork, mosaic, and furniture industries’.⁵⁰

Durnovo’s designs in neo-Russian Style became a household name, so that in 1910 he was invited to ‘Russia’s oldest woodworking center’, Semenovskii uezd in the Nizhnii Novgorod province. He was appointed to take charge of the artistic affairs of this workshop and to improve the production of painted woodware and furniture. In an evaluation report from 1896 for the Ministry of Agriculture and State Domains, the production was criticised for the dull designs and their monotonous use, which led to the identical appearance of the items produced and thus to the loss of their unique character.⁵¹ Durnovo aimed at ‘reinstating traditional designs and improving quality, with the goal of transforming Semenov ware from low grade items (*deshevka*) fit only for the local market into art goods for export’⁵² (Figure 4).

Durnovo’s activities not only exemplified the *kustar* reform movement, they were also instrumental in its further development. Agents of this movement were closely interlinked with the paradox of folk art revival ‘from above’ and were now trying, in the same manner, to adapt the material culture of peasants to the needs of industrialised Soviet Russia. This approach was somewhat at odds with the Soviet ideology that aimed to enable the peasant population and the urban proletariat to gain agency over their lives. However, even though Durnovo’s approach represented the complete opposite of that Soviet programme, his earlier exhibiting experience was too valuable not to involve him in the preparation for the 1925 exhibition. As director of the St. Petersburg Kustar Museum, he had been involved in the organisation of all major exhibitions of *kustar* goods in the Russian Empire and abroad, such

48) David Shterenberg was involved with the installation as well. Evgeniia Prilbyl’skaia (1887–1947) played an important role in the design of the section. However, in the official publications for the exhibition, she is mentioned solely as a jury member of the exhibition committee in four categories: toys, leather goods, costume and small artistic products. The contributions of these ‘invisible organisers’ have yet to be examined in detail.

49) Iurii Diaghilev replaced him in his post as director.

50) Salmond, *Art and Crafts in Imperial Russia*, 226, note 79.

51) M.Z.i.G.I., *Obzor deiatel’nosti pravitel’stva na pol’zu kustarnoi promyshlennosti, 1888–1903*, St. Petersburg, 1902, 105, cited in Salmond, *Art and Crafts in Imperial Russia*, 154.

52) Salmond, *Art and Crafts in Imperial Russia*, 154.



Figure 4: Oak furniture in the Russian style designed by Alexander Durnovo and made by the *kustari* of the village of Lyskova, Nizhnii Novgorod province.

Source: *Russkoe narodnoe iskusstvo* (Petrograd, 1914).

as the 1906 *Milan International Exhibition* and the 1913 *Ideal Home Exhibition* in London. In this context, the *Exposition des Arts Décoratifs* can be seen as a continuation of an imperial tradition of exhibiting *kustar* art in the West, and Durnovo was perfectly skilled to estimate and satisfy the taste and demand of the Western European public.

Further leading organisers involved in the preparation of the *kustar* section included Nikolai Bartram (1873–1931) and Alexei Vol'ter (1889–1973). Vol'ter received an artistic education first in Nizhnii Novgorod and later in St. Petersburg.⁵³ In 1923, he headed the reorganised *kustar* industry, where masters of Palekh, Mstera and Kholuya (both to the west of (near Nizhnii Novgorod) created products with new 'Soviet' themes based on his designs. Parallel to his artistic activities, he directed the Moscow Kustar Museum between 1920 and 1928. His task was to restore and coordinate the museum's collaboration with the *kustar* industry and independent artisans, which had been interrupted by the revolution.⁵⁴ Bartram, on his part,

53) In Nizhnii Novgorod he attended classes in Andrei Karelin's studio (1900–1906); in St. Petersburg he attended courses by Nikolai Rerikh and Arkadii Rylov at the Imperial Society for the Encouragement of the Arts (1913) and classes of Pavel Chistiakov (1913–1915).

54) The Moscow Kustar Museum was not only the sole *kustar* museum of a province to survive the revolution and continue its activities in the Soviet times. It was also, in a way, the cradle of the *kustar* reform movement. Since its foundation in 1882, the museum had played a decisive role in firmly intertwining the 'connection between artistic improvement and increased profits', with the result that 'the *kustar* art industries had almost completely metamorphosed into a highly regulated form of industrial art' before the revolution (Salmond, *Arts and Crafts in Imperial Russia*, 169). In fact, the leaders of the museum, and above all its co-founder Sergei Timofeyevich Morozov,

was the leading toy designer for the same museum during the 1900s and its director from 1907 until 1917. After the revolution he worked in *Narkompros*, the People's Commissariat of Education, as a member of the Glavmuzei and president of the Commission on the Decorative Arts.⁵⁵ In 1918, he initiated the opening of the Moscow Toy Museum where he worked as director at the time of the exhibition. Bartram's display of *Le monde de l'enfant* at the Kustar section with more than four hundred toy models, wooden models and dolls came largely from the collections of the Moscow Toy Museum.⁵⁶

Vol'ter and Bartram's involvement with the Moscow Kustar Museum was evident in the fact that most of the exhibited items came from its collections. The selection was largely based on the exhibition *The Kustar and the Revolution* that had taken place in the museum in September 1924, with the slogan 'Everyday peasant art is the healthy blood for industrial art'.⁵⁷ The works on display in 1924 were made specifically for this exhibition by the artists of the museum and selected by the museum's artistic council, which included among others Vol'ter, Bartram and Durnovo.⁵⁸ It becomes apparent that the three organisers of the *kustar* section at the *Exposition des Arts Décoratifs* were central figures of the *kustar* revival movement and continued to devote themselves to the *kustar* reforms with their pre-revolutionary zeal. Despite their connection to imperial times, Soviet officials had no objections to their involvement in the Paris exhibition. It becomes evident that although the official narrative tried to paint a clean break with the bourgeois past (and *kustar* revival was heavily influenced by wealthy individuals in the private sector), in 1925 they were still heavily dependent on the very individuals who had been strongly associated with these pre-revolutionary developments.⁵⁹

The section of national ensembles as a laboratory of future tendencies

The arts and crafts of the vast territory of the Soviet Union were not exhibited all together but divided by geographical origin. *Kustar* goods of West and Central Russia were displayed separately from the handicrafts of Russia's rural regions and of further Soviet Republics. The latter were showcased not in the Grand Palais but at the very heart of the Soviet contribution, in Mel'nikov's pavilion (**Figure 5**). The Section of National Ensembles was prepared by

developed the strategy of interaction between the museum and the creative industries. See Konstantin Narvoit, ed., *Znamenitii i neizvestnyi Kustarnyi Muzei. Iz sobraniia Vserossiiskogo muzeia dekorativnogo iskusstva* [The Famous and unknown Kustar Museum. From the collection of the All-Russian museum of decorative art], Moscow: Muzeon, 2021, 10–14.

55) Narkompros was a Soviet agency in charge of the administration of public education and cultural issues.

56) For more on Bartram's conception of peasant art as a reconciliation of tradition and originality as well as his position in regard to the post-revolutionary Soviet context, see Elitza Dulguerova, 'Potentialité du jouet dans la pensée de Nikolai Bartram', *Strenæ* 17, 2021. URL: <https://doi.org/10.4000/strenae.6183> (last accessed 6 July 2023).

57) To my knowledge, there is neither an exhibition catalogue nor a detailed list of the exhibited objects. The All-Russian Decorative Art Museum in Moscow possesses albums with photographs of this exhibition, as well as a number of objects that were displayed there. They might give an idea of the creative work done by the museum in 1924 and thus also an important clue to better understand the selection for the *Exposition des Arts Décoratifs* in Paris.

58) Narvoit, *The Famous and unknown Kustar Museum*, 10.

59) At the same time, it must be noted that in some respects this structure of *kustar* industry played into the hands of Soviet ideology, such as the suppression of individual initiative in favour of collectivisation, as well as the centralisation of regional affairs in Moscow.



Figure 5: View of the National Ensembles in the Soviet pavilion (1925).

Source: Archive Pyotr Dul'skii, National Museum of the Republic of Tatarstan, KPPI-120181 / 3330-16.

the aforementioned art critic and art historian Yacov Tugendhol'd and Professor Alexander Miller (1875–1935?). Tugendhol'd acted at the time as head of the Fine Arts Department of the *Glavpolitprosvet* (Main Political and Educational Committee of *Narkompos*), with the task to direct political, educational and propaganda work. He had become involved in politics already as a student, and spent almost the entire year of 1902 under arrest due to his activities. Afterwards, his family migrated first to Munich (1903) and later to Paris (1905), where he studied art at the Académie Ranson and the studio of Théophile Steinlen. After his return to Moscow in 1913, Tugendhol'd continued to be not only well informed about the latest French art developments, but also contributed significantly to the lively exchange between artists of Russia and France.

Professor Miller, on the other hand, brought expertise and experience in mounting ethnological displays. He was an internationally renowned archaeologist and had also close ties with France: After retiring from an initial military career, he went to Paris to study at the *École Russe des Hautes Etudes Sociales*. Pursuing an artistic career on the side, he additionally attended the Académie Julien, exhibited in the Parisian salons, and received recognition by

publications and sales to prominent collectors. At the same time, he discovered his passion for archaeology, to which he devoted himself fully since 1903. In 1907 he started working as head of the Department of the Caucasus for the Russian Museum in St. Petersburg, where he created an ethnographic department shortly before the revolution.⁶⁰ Despite his return to Russia, his ties with Paris remained strong, and between 1908 and 1910 he was even elected a full member of the Geographical, Archaeological and Prehistoric Societies of France.

The Section of National Ensembles included displays of thirty-three ethnic groups of different regions: Regions belonging to Soviet Russia – with the indigenous peoples of Finland, Siberia and the Far East –, autonomous Republics of Crimea, Dagestan, Kirgыз and Tartarstan, and further Republics of the Soviet Union including Belarus, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and the Transcaucasian Union (consisting of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan). Their placement in the Soviet pavilion is indicative of the indispensable and instrumental value attributed to the section. In describing the Soviet contribution in its entirety, Kogan emphasised that, indeed, its ‘primary interest lies in the brightly coloured and variegated compartments of our various nationalities, grouped together in this slender building’.⁶¹ The large-scale windows of the pavilion made it possible to see this display even from the outside, reaching an even bigger audience. Mel’nikov acknowledged this advantage as well, saying that: ‘Not everyone who walks past the pavilion will go inside it. But everyone will know what is inside my building: its walls are made of glass, and the staircase [...] allows a view from above’.⁶²

The traditional works of folk art on display stood in stark contrast to the ultra-modern style of the building (**Figure 6**). Moreover, they did not quite fit the general concept of the *Exposition des Arts Décoratifs* which required that the works of art and industry of the Section of National Ensembles should demonstrate ‘une inspiration nouvelle et [...] une originalité réelle’.⁶³ The French critics reacted accordingly, as they observed somewhat astonished that the ‘USSR [...] has stuck to its fundamentally national production and has not been afraid to offer us a retrospective exhibition of the picturesque costumes used in the various regions of its immense territory’.⁶⁴ Indeed, whereas ‘the majority of Russian *kustari* were now working primarily for others, for the market, for sale’, these handicrafts ‘were still for the most part goods made by peasants for their own use’.⁶⁵ It represented the seemingly ‘genuine folk art that had passed through no factory or manufactory, and was quite ignorant of compasses,

60) In 1918, he was elected the director of the Russian Museum but resigned two years later to return to his scientific activities as head of the department of the Caucasus. In 1923, he was additionally elected professor and head of the Department of Archaeology at Leningrad University and became a full member of the State Academy of the History of Material Culture.

61) Kogan, ‘Pourquoi les Soviets ont exposé’, 1: ‘Ce qui est en fait l’intérêt principal, ce sont, vivement colorés, bariolés, les compartiments de nos diverses nationalités, groupés dans cet édifice aux formes élancées’.

62) Interview with Konstantin Mel’nikov, *Le Bulletin de la vie artistique*, 11, 1 June 1925, 232 ff: ‘Toutes les personnes qui passent devant une boutique n’y entrent pas. Toutes pourtant sauront ce qu’il y a dans la mienne: ses murs sont de verre, et un escalier accueillant aux foules et pratiqué de part en part permet, en outre, une vue plongeante’.

63) See ‘Conditions générales d’admission’, *Catalogue général officiel: Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes*, Paris: Ministère du Commerce et de l’industrie, 1925, 18.

64) Léon, *Rapport général*, vol. 9: *Parure (classes 20 à 24)*, 31: ‘L’URSS [...] s’en est tenue à sa production foncièrement nationale & n’a pas craint de nous offrir une exposition rétrospective des costumes pittoresques en usage dans les diverses régions de son immense territoire [...]’.

65) Salmond, *Art and Crafts in Imperial Russia*, 173.



Figure 6: Rural crafts of the Evens and Sakha (formerly Lamuts and Yakuts), photographed by Henri Ernst (1925).

Source: Henri Ernst, *Ornements de Perles des Peuples Finnois et Sibériens* (Paris, 1925).

sketches, art classes, or professors'⁶⁶ and was thus still untouched by the *kustar* reform movement, with its process of industrialisation and commercialisation.

The apparent incongruity of this section within the overall exhibition raises the question of why it was exhibited at all, and so prominently at that. One of the reasons was likely related to the French public: On the one hand, it was intended to serve the public's interest in the exotic as well as to create a reassuring association with tradition, as already shown in the case of *kustar* goods. On the other hand, visitors were seen as potential consumers who should be made aware of the existence of these handicrafts in order to create a profitable market for their export. Furthermore, the present article proposes to read the striking inclusion of arts and crafts indicating their instrumental significance in enhancing the appeal of the Soviet *Union*. Firstly, the inclusion of handicrafts with 'Soviet' motifs and symbols advanced the narrative of the spread of cultural and national renewal, which implied, too, the success and acceptance of social and political transformations beyond Soviet Russia. In addition, it was arguably an attempt to radically dissociate the Soviet Union from the Russian Empire,

66) Vladimir Stasov, 'Na vystavke v Moskve' [On the exhibition in Moscow], *Izbrannye sochineniia*, 2, Moscow 1952, 125, cited in Salmond, *Art and Crafts in Imperial Russia*, 82.

its imperial narratives and national politics, as had been demonstrated at the previous World's Fair.

In contrast to the presentation of the Russian Empire at the *Exposition Universelle* of 1900, the Soviet organisers of the 1925 exhibition distanced themselves explicitly from the appearance it gave as an 'internal coloniser' as well as from the imperial politics of its policy of 'russification'.⁶⁷ Instead, as Tugendhol'd declared in the catalogue for the 1925 exhibition, the October Revolution had proclaimed the new concept of 'brotherhood and the equality of nations without dividing them into superior and inferior groups'.⁶⁸ Tugendhol'd furthermore asserted a new narrative of a 'common oriental tradition' among the Soviet countries, a characteristic trait common to their free and autonomous nations and cultures, despite the differences in their artistic expression.⁶⁹ This narrative of a specific unifying feature that distinguished the Soviet countries from the rest of Western Europe is oddly reminiscent of the imperial exhibition strategy at the World's Fairs discussed earlier. Tugendhol'd failed, however, to elaborate on what this common trait consisted of. In the absence of a clear starting point as well as due to lack of time to develop a new curatorial approach, Miller, for his part, resorted to a rather conventional exhibition display, in which cases were arranged separately according to nations.⁷⁰ Information about the social and cultural life of each nation was provided, while the artistic value of the objects themselves was hardly addressed. Miller's ethnographic approach revealed his continued adherence to an imperial gaze and differed little from the approach he had adopted in the pre-revolutionary Russian Museum in St. Petersburg.

The presentation of rural crafts in the Soviet pavilion was a key element of the new Soviet exhibition concept, which, in theory, differed from the exhibitions of the Russian Empire. In practice, however, it did not overcome deeply rooted imperialist tendencies. This is evident in the organisational infrastructure of the exhibition, which was prepared and carried out under centralised control from Moscow. Time constraints as well as logistical and financial circumstances only served to prevent the curators from realising their declared ideals even more. The 'othering' character of the display, expressed at a fundamental level through the division of arts and crafts into Russian (*kustar* art) and non-Russian (crafts of indigenous peoples of Soviet Russia and further nations of the Soviet Union), was symptomatic of the national policy of the new government, which revealed its colonialist tendencies only a few years later.

67) For more on the political and cultural-linguistic aspects of 'russification' in the Russian Empire of the nineteenth century see Andreas Kappeler, *The Russian Empire: A Multiethnic History*, London and New York: Routledge, 2001, 247–282.

68) '[La revolution] qui a proclamé pour la première fois la fraternité et l'égalité des peuples sans les diviser en peuples supérieurs et inférieurs et interdisant le terme d'indigènes'. Jacob Tugendhold, 'L'Élément national dans l'art de l'URSS', *L'art décoratif et industriel de l'URSS*, 32.

69) *Ibid.*, 29.

70) Interestingly enough, the arts and crafts section of the Soviet contribution at the *Exposition universelle* in 1937 was arranged according to the material the object was made of and not its geographical origins. This points to a more successful implementation of the conceptual approach. It should be noted, however, that by that time the political course as well as the nationalities policy of the Soviet Union had already changed drastically.

Conclusion

This article presents a comprehensive analysis of the Soviet Union's participation at the *Exposition des Arts Décoratifs* and its complicated exhibition strategy, highlighting the convergence of old traditions, new aspirations and evolving identities on a global stage. Against the background of the political context, the official Soviet narrative painted a picture of a successfully reformed Russia as well as the promising expansion of the Soviet ideology within the newly formed Soviet Union. The image of national renewal was constructed on the basis of three aspects: (1) contemporary artworks – represented by constructivism – embodying an image of artistic, cultural and technical progress; (2) *kustar* art of Soviet Russia, symbolising renewal of popular labour while at the same time maintaining a bridge to certain artistic traditions of the peasant populations (and thus constructing a continuity of national identity); and (3) rural crafts of further Soviet Republics, asserting that the cultural renewal is spreading to all areas of the Soviet Union. Considering this triad together – which in a nutshell represents a renewed culture, its traditional basis and its future tendencies – provides a more comprehensive picture of Soviet self-presentation on the West European stage in 1925.

Emphasising the value of traditions, even if they stemmed from an imperial era, the display of arts and crafts was intended to comfort the Western public by reassuring it that certain continuities could be maintained. At the same time, the Soviet contribution distanced itself from the preconceived notion of an imperial Russian identity epitomised in the exterior designs *à la russe* of the Russian pavilions at the earlier World's Fairs, in order to construct a new Soviet identity. A clear turning point in the imperial legacy was the section of 'National Ensembles' which proclaimed that the nature of international relations within the Soviet Union had now evolved away from the imperial dynamic of colonial domination towards a 'friendship of nations' on an equal footing. This shift marked the crucial difference in the Soviet exhibition strategy as a whole and could certainly have had a stronger impact if it had been carried out as clearly as it was announced. As this article has demonstrated, however, the execution of certain displays did not necessarily coincide with the ideological concepts of the exhibition, which was due to overlapping interests, immature concepts, lack of preparation, but also due to the individuals behind the implementation.⁷¹ The curators acknowledged the still-evolving character of the art tendencies on display, so, in a sense, the 1925 contribution can be seen as a 'concept show' that presented their ideals, future projects and hopes.

Many of the organisers involved had spent years abroad and therefore had a good knowledge and understanding of Western societies. Their approach stood in contrast to the official narrative of 'revolutionary fundamentalism',⁷² as they tried to remain 'the nerve which, despite all the previous amputations and purges, continued to link intellectual life in Russia with intellectual life in Europe'.⁷³ The fact that some of them were not completely aligned with the new doctrine became even more apparent when their careers and lives took a tragic

71) In a sense, participation in a World's Fair was in itself counter-ideological, since Karl Marx dismissed it as a bourgeois event.

72) Golubev/Nevezhin, *Formirovanie obraza Sovetskoi Rossii*. 63–65.

73) Viktor Kumanev, 'Sud'by sovetskoi intelligentsii (30-e gody)' ['The fate of the Soviet intelligentsia. (30s)'], *Istoriia SSSR [History of USSR]* 1, 1990, 32.

turn by the 1930s. Leading figures of the pre-revolutionary intelligentsia were removed from important positions. While Yakov Tugendhol'd died in 1928, Nikolai Bartram in 1931 and Pyotr Kogan in 1932, other leading pre-revolutionary figures such as David Shterenberg or Alexei Vol'ter were gradually removed from public view and virtually forgotten before their death. Alexander Miller was arrested in 1933 for the ideological nonconformity shown throughout his career and sentenced to five years of exile in Kazakhstan, where he died, presumably in 1935.⁷⁴ Gradually, the pre-revolutionary intellectual elite was replaced by a new generation of cultural leaders educated purely in the Soviet system, resulting in a growing distance between Soviet and Western societies.

74) In none of his works did Miller make ideological references to the Party and Stalin. When asked why he does not mention Marx, Engels, Lenin or Stalin, he answered that he did not know any such scholars among archaeologists.



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