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# Experts and Artisans at the 1937 Paris World's Fair: the Case of the Soviet Pavilion

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## Abstract

In 1937, at the *International Exposition of Art and Technology in Modern Life* in Paris, the Soviet pavilion featured a rich variety of arts, including handicrafts. This article explores the endeavors of the Scientific Research Institute of Art Industry to arrange a collection of Soviet crafts for international display. Throughout the article, the preparation work is contextualized in relation to the other cultural and political processes of the mid-1930s. It further highlights the role of the Institute's experts in translating the ideological guidelines of the Fair Committee into the language of artistic practice. Based on analysis of archival documents, the article argues that in addition to the short-term goals of preparing for the exhibition, the Institute used this opportunity to expand its network of contacts and establish closer links with artisans all around the Soviet Union. The co-operation of experts and the artisans during the preparatory phase helped to build a common ground for planning further reforms in the industry. Finally, the article seeks to determine how the motivations of the collectives and individuals corresponded to the official goals and state narratives of the Soviet participation in the 1937 Paris World's Fair.

## Keywords

1937 Paris World's Fair; Soviet pavilion; Soviet crafts; Soviet cultural canon; Scientific Research Institute of Art Industry; experts; artisans

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# Experts and Artisans at the 1937 Paris World's Fair: the Case of the Soviet Pavilion

**Elizaveta Berezina**

## Introduction

From a modern historiographical perspective, *the International Exposition of Art and Technology in Modern Life*, which was held in Paris between 25 May and 25 November 1937, stands out as an emblematic international event of the interwar period. A photograph of the juxtaposed Soviet and German pavilions, and the Eiffel Tower between them, was reproduced multiple times in historical publications to visualize the tensions in the air as the world stood on the cusp of a new spiral of the global war. The truly spectacular skyline it created in Paris in 1937 has often been seen as an 'allegory of the times', since it makes visible the symbolic confrontation of the competing ideologies of Soviet Stalinism, National Socialism, and Western industrial capitalism.<sup>1</sup> In the historiography of world's fairs, exhibition architecture is often considered as one of the main mediums for communicating political and ideological statements and for presenting national ideas of progress and modernity.<sup>2</sup> The case of the Soviet pavilion is particularly notable in this regard: both Boris Iofan's architectural project and Vera Muchina's sculpture of *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman* on its roof have been well researched and analyzed in the context of the architectural and ideological competitions of the interwar period.<sup>3</sup>

To a certain extent, the colossal construction of the Soviet pavilion and its appealing architecture drew scholars' attention away from other aspects of exhibition planning: its alternatives and failures, the internal zoning of its exhibition halls, the selection of exhibits, and its display strategies. One notable exception is an article by Tatiana Trankvillitskaia, which discusses some of the financial and organizational challenges of Soviet participation in the 1937 Paris World's Fair in relation to the examples of the most expensive commissioned artworks – the large-scale decorative wall frescoes.<sup>4</sup> Analyzing organizational efforts of the Fair Committee and the participation of the artists, Trankvillitskaia concludes that it was the human factor, namely diligence, flexibility, and willingness to adapt to unexpected changes,

1) Ulf Strohmayer, 'Pictorial Symbolism in the Age of Innocence: Material Geographies at the Paris World's Fair of 1937', *Ecumene* 3: 3, July 1996, 282–304.

2) Rika Devos, Alexander Ortenberg, and Vladimir Papernyi, eds, *Architecture of Great Expositions 1937–1959: Messages of Peace Images of War*, New York: Routledge, 2015.

3) Danilo Udovički-Selb, 'Facing Hitler's Pavilion: The Uses of Modernity in the Soviet Pavilion at the 1937 Paris International Exhibition', *Journal of Contemporary History* 47: 1, January 2012, 13–47; Evgeniya Konysheva, 'Superiority Complex: The Pavilion of the USSR at the Exposition Internationale in Paris and the Soviet Cultural Diplomacy', *Quaestio Rossica* 6: 1, April 2018, 161–182; Dzhemma Manukyan, 'Expo1937: Exhibition of the Three Dictatorships', *Articult* 2: 14, 2014, 23–32.

4) Tatiana Trankvillitskaia, 'Le Pavillon Soviétique de l'Exposition de 1937 à Paris: Aspect Financier et Problèmes d'Organisation', *Studia Litterarum* 5: 4, December 2020, 444–471.

that often compensated for Soviet officials' mismanagement of the preparation for the Fair.<sup>5</sup> Her research demonstrates that by concentrating on the initial stages of exhibition planning, researchers can uncover the competing and converging interests of the various individuals and groups engaged in the preparation of the national section of the Fair. This approach also enables identification of the unintended outcomes that arose out of the collaboration of different actors and which outlasted the initial event.

This article provides an overview of the preparations undertaken to display a collection of Soviet handicrafts at the 1937 Paris World's Fair. Although artistic crafts occupied a rather modest place in the Soviet pavilion, considerable efforts and resources were invested in getting the exhibits ready for the show. Curating even a small collection of exhibits involved engaging various actors who were involved in negotiations about every object at different stages of its journey, from the workshops to the showcases of the Soviet pavilion. By focusing on the preparation phase, this article explores whether the official narrative of Soviet participation in 1937 Exposition reflected the motivation of artisans, experts of overseeing institutions, and other cultural authorities. It also examines whether the networks and practices developed during the preparatory period caused any transformations in the way supervisors from the capital communicated and collaborated with the artisans in the local workshops.

The 1937 Paris World's Fair challenged the common perception of handmade crafts as old-fashioned remnants of the past and illuminated their role in shaping national images and public opinion about the modern countries and their nations. Various national expositions showcased their crafts, each reflecting a unique approach of fitting the crafts into a modernized image of their respective countries. For example, as a host country, France displayed provincial crafts in the pavilions of the Regional Centre and invited artisans to demonstrate their mastership in the Artisanal Centre. This deliberate inclusion of crafts as a living part of the national culture and industry contributed to the projection of the image of a 'balanced society', which aimed to counter the adverse effects of excessive industrialization by fostering a harmonious growth of industrial and rural areas of the country.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, artisans from overseas colonies performed their crafts in front of the public at the Colonial Centre, upholding France's image as a colonial power.<sup>7</sup>

The incorporation of crafts into the exhibition design of the pavilions of newly established states and their nations could hold additional symbolic meanings. Czechoslovakia, for example, created as a political entity in 1918, turned to folk arts and crafts to map the cultural features of national groups within the country and to reproduce the hierarchy between the regions on the symbolic level. In the interwar exhibitions, for instance, Slovakia was mostly represented by the regional folk arts, which contributed to the image of its territories as rural and economically backward in comparison to Bohemia. Simultaneously, certain notable similarities between Czech and Slovak folk cultures, manifested through artistic crafts, were showcased as evidence of the strong interconnections between the two Slavic nations, which

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5) Trankvillitskaia, 'Le Pavillon Soviétique de l'Exposition de 1937 à Paris', 452.

6) Shanny Peer, *France on Display: Peasants, Provincials, and Folklore in the 1937 Paris World's Fair*, New York: State University of New York Press, 1998.

7) Peer, *France on Display*, 42–43.

supposedly provided the solid foundation for their unity.<sup>8</sup> Hence, at the 1937 Paris World's Fair, the Soviet Union was no exception when it came to curating the collection of craft exhibits to refine its international image. By examining the Soviet case, therefore, this article contributes to our understanding of how the display of artistic crafts might reinforce the construction of national narrative through the means of expositional design and planning. Recognition of the significance of crafts within national representations at the World's Fairs provides deeper insights into the dynamics of cultural policy in relation to folk arts and crafts across different countries during the interwar period.

## Without a margin of error: cultural mobilization in the years of political terror

The initial arrangements for *the International Exposition of Art and Technology in Modern Life* began in spring 1935, when Soviet officials confirmed their participation in the Fair to the French minister of Foreign Affairs.<sup>9</sup> The planning of the Soviet pavilion was entrusted to the Fair Committee, which was headed by Ivan Mezhlauk (1891–1938) and comprised of the exhibition departments of the All-Union Chamber of Commerce (*Vsesoiuznaia torgovaia palata*) and the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (*Vsesoiuznoe obshchestvo kul'turnykh svyazei s zagranitsei*, VOKS).<sup>10</sup> The organization of an event on such a scale and significance required the mobilization of numerous administrative entities, which in turn were responsible for providing materials and exhibits to be showcased in the Soviet pavilion. The task of organizing the collection of crafts was assigned to the All-Union Council of Industrial Cooperation (*Vsesoiuznyi sovet promyslovoi kooperatsii* or 'Vsekopromsovet'), which oversaw the Soviet art industry. In January 1936, the Vsekopromsovet delegated the task of selecting the exhibits to the Scientific Research Institute of Art Industry (*Nauchno-issledovatel'skii institut khudozhestvennoi promyshlennosti*). Therefore, the Institute was the most important link in communicating with workshops and artisans and translating the vague ideological guidance of the Fair Committee into practical recommendations and instructions for the artists involved.<sup>11</sup>

The Institute originated in research departments of the Moscow Kustar Museum, a multipurpose organization that had been working to reform, support, and promote artistic crafts since its foundation in 1882.<sup>12</sup> Before the Institute was officially established in 1932,

8) Marta Filipová, "Highly Civilized, yet Very Simple": Images of the Czechoslovak State and Nation at Interwar World's Fairs', *Nationalities Papers* 50: 1, 2022, 145–165.

9) Trankvillitskaia, 'Le Pavillon Soviétique de l'Exposition de 1937 à Paris', 449.

10) Aleksandr Sokolov, 'Rossiia i SSSR na vseмирnykh vystavkakh XX-XXI vekov' [Russia and the USSR at the World Exhibitions of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries], *Novaia i noveishaia istoriia* 2, 2018, 130.

11) GARF (State Archive of the Russian Federation), f. A-643 (Scientific Research Institute of Art Industry), op. 1, d. 74 (Documents on the participation of industrial cooperation in the international exhibition in Paris), l. 11–14.

12) Konstantin Narvoit, ed, *Znamenityi 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; N. N. Ivanova, 'O sozdanii muzeia narodnogo iskusstva' [On the foundation of the Museum of Folk Art] in *Muzei narodnogo iskusstva i khudozhestvennye promysly* [The Museum of the Folk Art and artistic crafts], Moscow: Izobrazitel'noe iskusstvo, 1972, 7–19.

the museum had undergone several reorganizations and eventually became a subsection of the Institute. During the 1930s, the museum's exhibition bureau was responsible for selecting exhibits, which belonged to the category of artistic crafts, for regional, all-Union, and international exhibitions.<sup>13</sup> The combination of factors, such as strongly established ties with regional and republican workshops, as well as the experience of the Institute's members in selecting craft objects for international display, enabled it to respond effectively to the mission it had been assigned. Its involvement in the Fair was to supposed ensure that the exhibits were created in a timely manner and that they met quality, artistic, and ideological standards.

Although the Scientific Research Institute of Art Industry was gradually gaining authority as a center for studying, collecting, and supervising the production of artistic crafts in the Soviet republics, during the 1930s, it was regularly attacked by other cultural organizations as part of the ongoing process of restructuring the cultural field under increasing state control.<sup>14</sup> The Institute's contribution to the Soviet pavilion was one of its significant reputational projects, which helped to secure its position as a leading research and supervisory authority in the Soviet art industry. At the same time, the Institute's administrators were concerned not only with meeting the urgent challenges of preparing for the exhibitions but also with building bridges and maintaining regular contact with workshops as a central component of their regular working agenda.

The Institute's mediation during the preparation phase was especially critical amid the intensification of politically and ideologically motivated repressions. While the meticulously planned Soviet pavilion maintain the semblance of 'the friendship of peoples' in the multinational state, several diaspora minorities were forcibly displaced or targeted in the course of national operations.<sup>15</sup> In exhibition halls, state-approved folk artistic crafts were chosen to showcase the cultural progress and creativity of Soviet nations, even while the material culture and everyday life (*byt*) of other ethnic groups were being eliminated as a result of the deportations. When it came to the selection of exhibits for the pavilion, the objects on display were supposed to represent the rich cultural landscape of the official Soviet nations in accordance with Soviet nationality policy.<sup>16</sup> The Fair Committee and associated commissions were therefore required to identify and follow plenty of unwritten rules regarding what it was acceptable to demonstrate for an event of such magnitude and significance.

Indeed, in the year of the twentieth anniversary of the October Revolution, the Soviet authorities aimed to put on display the achievements of recent years. The preparations for the exhibition in Paris were thus taking place amidst an unprecedented cultural mobilization,

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13) Natalia Vedernikova, Raliia Musina, ed, *Institut na Vorovskogo (ne sostoivshiiia iubilei): Sbornik statei k 85-letiiu nauchno-issledovatel'skogo instituta khudozhestvennoi promyshlennosti* [The Institution on Vorovsky Street (The Failed Anniversary): Collected papers dedicated the 85-years anniversary of the Scientific Research Institute of Art Industry], Moscow: Association NKhp Rossii, 2017, 26.

14) Galina Yankovskaya and Rebecca Mitchell, 'The Economic Dimensions of Art in the Stalinist Era: Artists' Cooperatives in the Grip of Ideology and the Plan', *Slavic Review* 65: 4, 2006, 780–81.

15) Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001, 311–393.

16) On displaying material culture and ethnographic exhibit as a tool to educate masses and shape representation of the Soviet nations see: Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005, 187–227.

when numerous cultural institutions, as well as artists, musicians, writers, and filmmakers, were expected to produce new creative and ideologically impeccable works celebrating the revolution and the transformation of all spheres of public life during the past twenty years.<sup>17</sup> On the one hand, the enthusiastic drive of the anniversary facilitated preparation for the Paris exhibition and allowed the fair committee to choose from a greater number of works of different quality and genres, which granted some flexibility with planning and designing of the exhibit. On the other hand, as Karen Petrone has noted, due to ‘the constantly shifting rhetoric and tense political atmosphere of the mid-1930s’ many creators experienced ‘writer’s block’, or a crisis of creativity stemming from the fear of making mistakes in their artistic interpretations of past and present events.<sup>18</sup>

Simultaneous planning for various cultural events and celebrations on different scales contributed to the adaptation of a preparation strategy that I would describe as an ‘economy of display’. Once commissioned and approved by cultural officials, the same artwork or collection would be displayed multiple times on different occasions. By making use of the same objects or exhibition complexes, the Soviet cultural authorities could save time and limited resources while responding to rapidly changing requests to organize yet another celebration or exhibition.<sup>19</sup>

An example of another major cultural campaign of the mid-1930s was the commemoration of the centenary of the death of Aleksandr Pushkin.<sup>20</sup> From the very announcement of the campaign, Soviet artists and the cultural intelligentsia were reinterpreting Pushkin themes in different media, including arts and crafts. In February 1937, a collection of exhibits on Pushkin’s themes was demonstrated at the *All-Union Pushkin Exhibition* in Moscow: among them were decorative boxes and panels by lacquer painting workshops in the villages of Palekh, Mstera, and Kholui, wood carving from the villages of Bogorodskoe, Abramtsevo, and town of Zagorsk, decorative wooden ware from Semenov and Kaliazin, silverwork, bone carving, ceramics, embroidery, and other examples of popular crafts.<sup>21</sup> Although Soviet art critics claimed that artisans no longer needed to depict fairy tales in their works because ‘everyday life had become fabulous’ and would outshine any fantasy, the fairy-tale scenes based on Pushkin’s literary works remained a favorite subject in artistic crafts.<sup>22</sup>

Several artworks from the *All-Union Pushkin Exhibition* were selected for display at the Soviet Pavilion in Paris, including, for example, a cutlery set in niello technique with decorative

17) On the celebration of the twentieth anniversary of the October Revolution see Karen Petrone, *Life Has Become More Joyous, Comrades: Celebrations in the Time of Stalin*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000, 149–174; David Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism: Stalinist Mass Culture and the Formation of Modern Russian National Identity, 1931–1956*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002; Karl Schlögel, *Terror und Traum. Moskau 1937*, Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2008.

18) Petrone, *Life Has Become More Joyous, Comrades*, 170.

19) For a discussion of the cost-saving strategies employed during the arrangements for the 1937 Soviet Pavilion, see: Trankvillitskaia, ‘Le Pavillon Soviétique de l’Exposition de 1937 à Paris’, 461–62.

20) Jonathan Brooks Platt, *Greetings, Pushkin!: Stalinist Cultural Politics and the Russian National Bard*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016.

21) P. Popov, ‘Vsesoiuznaia Pushkinskaia vystavka’ [The All-Union Pushkin exhibition] in *Pushkin: Vremennik Pushkinskoi komissii* [Pushkin: Annals of the Pushkin Committee], Leningrad: Publishing House of the USSR Academy of Sciences, 1937, 524.

22) A. P. Korablev, ed, *Narodnoe iskusstvo SSSR v narodnykh promyslakh* [Folk art of the USSR in folk crafts], Vol. 1, Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1940, 5–8; German Zhidkov, *Pushkin v iskusstve Palekha* [Pushkin in Palekh Art], Leningrad: OGIZ, 1937.



engravings with motifs from Pushkin's fairy tales (**Figure 1**).<sup>23</sup> The set was a collaborative project by artisans of the Northern Niello (Severnaia chern) workshop from Veliky Ustyug in the Vologda Oblast. The preparation of semi-finished blank items was supervised by a young silversmith, Rafail Govorov; the sketches and compositions of engraving were created by the artist Evstafii Shil'nikovskii; female artisans Pavla Uglovskaja, M. Khokhlova, and M. Melent'eva executed the engravings on silver, Mariia Uglovskaja oversaw the niello process and final refinements, while Georgii Korsakov applied gilding. The table set comprised 42 items, including spoons in various sizes, forks, knives, shot glasses, and napkin rings. Notably, the workshop was awarded a gold medal at the 1937 Fair. The exhibits related to Pushkin not only paid tribute to the poet but also showcased the widespread admiration for him, elevating the author to the status of a cultural icon of the Soviet people. It also served as a means to irritate Russian emigrants and the diaspora abroad, who cherished Pushkin's image and resisted his appropriation and integration into the official Soviet cultural canon.<sup>24</sup>

## Sovietizing Crafts: the New Place of Artistic Crafts in Soviet Culture

Despite all the challenges of the lengthy preparation and transportation of exhibits to Paris, the Soviet pavilion was opened on time. The interior was structured as a multi-level enfilade with wide ceremonial staircases and a spectacular view through multiple halls, which allowed the visitor to experience the 'intensification of impressions'.<sup>25</sup> The first hall of the pavilion was dedicated to the 1936 Constitution of the Soviet Union, also known as the Stalin Constitution. The hall was dominated by a porphyry obelisk, designed by Nikolai Suetin (1897–1954), which featured inscriptions of five articles from the Constitution. These articles, along with accompanying diagrams, documents, and photographs, narrated the story of people's accomplishments in building socialism, highlighting the freedoms and rights of the nations in the USSR. One of the pavilion's most remarkable exhibits was located in the same hall—a map of the USSR crafted from precious and semi-precious stones. The second hall, focused on science and technology, was located on three flights of a wide staircase. In the third hall, which is of primary interest for the following discussion, visitors encountered a display dedicated to the arts—painting, sculpture, artistic crafts, and theater. The next hall displayed exhibits featuring air, railroad, and water transportation in the USSR. The fifth hall revolved around architecture, encompassing construction projects, city reconstruction, and urban planning. The visitors' journey reached its culmination upon entering the sixth hall, where they were greeted by a three-and-a-half-meter marble statue of Joseph Stalin against a backdrop of three panels showcasing the triumphant procession of the people of the USSR.

23) Svetlana Romashkina, ed., *Narodnyi khudozhestvennyi promysel Severnaia Chern* [Folk artistic craft of northern niello], Vologda: Izdatel'skii dom Vologzhanin, 2008, 52.

24) Vadim Perel'muter, *Pushkin v emigratsii: 1937* [Pushkin in emigration: 1937], Moscow: Progress-Tradicija, 1999, 7–42; Greta N. Slobin, 'Introduction: The October Split and Its Consequences', in *Russians Abroad: Literary and Cultural Politics of Diaspora (1919–1939)*, ed. Katerina Clark et al., Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2013, 14–36.

25) Boris Iofan, 'Arkhitekturnaia ideia i ee osushchestvlenie' [The architectural idea and its implementation], in *Pavil'on SSSR na vsemirnoi vystavke v Parizhe. Arkhitektura i skul'ptura* [The Soviet pavilion at the World Exhibition in Paris. Architecture and sculpture], Moscow: Izdatel'stvo vsesoiuznoi akademii arkhitektury, 1938, 27.





Figure 1: Spoons from a silver table set decorated with motifs of Pushkin's Fairy Tales, Veliky Ustyug (1936–1937).

Source: S. Romashkina, ed. *Narodnyi khudozhestvennyi promysel Severnaia chern* (Vologda, 2008).

Upon closer examination of the hall of arts (**Figure 2**) one can observe that the craft exhibits were predominantly placed in showcases positioned between partitions that held paintings and other flat objects. The decision to display various art forms within a single space aligned with the broader approach of Soviet cultural policy of the late 1930s, which aimed to promote the synthesis of arts, particularly within the realms of architecture and the design of public spaces. All paintings, sculptures, graphics, and crafts in the hall were coordinated in their 'ideological orientation (*ideinaia napravlennost*) and realistic representation of the Soviet reality'.<sup>26</sup> Handicrafts echoed the themes and subjects of Soviet fine arts, adding to

26) Ia. Boiarskii, 'Iskusstvo SSSR' [Art of the USSR], *Pravda* 142, 25 May 1937, 4.

the endless gallery of portraits of the party leaders, classic authors, and scenes of glorious Soviet daily life. For example, an enamel workshop in Rostov bearing the name 'Renaissance' (Vozrozhdenie) contributed to the exhibition with enamels featuring portraits of Lenin, Voroshilov, Stalin, Gorky, and Gogol.<sup>27</sup> However, this approach to exhibiting artistic crafts was not immediately obvious. When the Vsekopromsovet submitted the third version of the program for the display of artistic crafts to the Fair Committee for approval, it explicitly emphasized a persistent stance: firm advocacy of the consolidation of all exhibits of cottage ('kustar') industries, including artistic crafts, in a single section of the pavilion, opposing any division across thematic zones.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, showing handicrafts in the hall of arts was not the only approach to be discussed.

The Scientific Research Institute of Art Industry, directly responsible for overseeing exhibit preparation under the guidance of the Vsekopromsovet, also certainly considered the experience gained from previous international exhibitions. One of the important references for their work was the 1925 Paris International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts.<sup>29</sup> The majority of the organizers of the Kustar and National crafts sections of the 1925 Paris exhibition had already passed away, and the exhibits that had been displayed there became a part of the Kustar Museum collection and were studied by the Institute's research fellows. However, the lessons learned by their predecessors could barely serve as a ground for building a new strategy for selecting exhibits to represent the national and folk art of the Soviet Republics.<sup>30</sup> In 1925, the organizing committee had to strike a balance between showcasing the new face of the country through the arts and meeting the Parisian public's expectations for the then-popular 'exotic' Russian crafts.<sup>31</sup> In 1937 the Soviet participation in the International Exposition of Art and Technology in Modern Life presented new challenges for the experts.

First, the exhibits were meant to provide convincing evidence of progress in the field of arts and crafts, and its transformation from the practice of banal decoration and ornamentation of everyday objects ('byt') into an integral part of the Soviet art system.<sup>32</sup> The high quality and exquisite artistic execution of the things on display were meant to demonstrate that, under Soviet cultural policy and supervision, crafts were no longer merely a means for peasants to make ends meet and earn money during the low agricultural season, but a deliberately

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27) Vera Pak, 'Rostovskaia finift' vo vtoroi polovine 1930-kh gg. Po materialam otcheta V.M. Vasilenko o komandirovke v Rostov' [Rostov's enamels in the second half of the 1930s. Based on V. M. Vasilenko's report on his business trip to Rostov] in *Nauchnue chtenia pamiati V. M. Vasilenko. Sbornik statei*. [Scientific readings in memory of V. M. Vasilenko], ed. Vladimir Gyliaev and Elena Tomashevskaiia, Moscow: VMDPNI, 2012, 93.

28) GARF, f. A-643, op. 1, d. 74, l. 53.

29) Mira Kozhanova, 'Curating National Renewal: The Significance of Arts and Crafts in the Construction of Soviet Identity at the *Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes* in Paris 1925', *Art East Central* 3, 2023, 37–57.

30) On the declared rationale of participation in the 1925 Paris exhibition, see Boris Ternovets, 'En guise d'introduction', in *Catalogue des oeuvres d'art décoratif et d'industrie artistique exposées dans le pavillon de l'U.R.S.S. au Grand Palais et dans les Galerie de l'Esplanade des Invalides*, Paris: n.p., 1925, 20.

31) Iakov Tugendkhoid, 'K izucheniiu izobrazitel'nogo iskusstva SSSR' [To the study of the fine arts of the USSR] in *Iskusstvo narodov SSSR* [Art of the people of the USSR], Vol. 1, Moscow: Gosudarstvennaia akademiia khudozhestvennykh nauk, 1927, 43–44.

32) GARF, f. A-643, op. 1, d. 73 (Institute report on the participation of kustar artistic crafts in the Paris exhibition of 1937), l. 1.



**Figure 2: Interior of the Soviet Pavilion, the Third Hall.**

Source: *Livre d'Or Officiel De L'Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne* (Paris, 1937).

chosen professional occupation that gave an opportunity to talented artisans to express themselves and improve their artistic skills. By the end of the 1930s, in the experts' narrative, the term 'kustar crafts' was gradually replaced by the idiom 'folk arts and crafts' ('narodnye khudozhestvennye promysly'). The admission of kustar crafts into the canon of Soviet arts was meant to confirm the benefits of the socialist way of life for the liberation of popular 'folk' creativity.

Secondly, by displaying folk arts and crafts, the Fair Commission sought to demonstrate that there was mass support for the Soviet regime. Therefore, successful mastery of Soviet themes and motifs in the design and decoration of objects was a central criterion for its approval as an exhibit.<sup>33</sup> In 1925, most of the objects with Soviet motifs sent to Paris were designed by professional artists contracted by the Kustar Museum and were produced in the museum's workshops. The exhibition catalogue mentioned such artists as Z. D. Kashkarova (1888–1961), B. N. Lange (1888–1969), E. G. Teliakovskii (1887–1976), P. I. Spasskii (1889–1964), V. M. Golitsyn (1902–1943), and others, many of whom graduated from the Imperial Stroganov School of Technical Drawing and were well-educated professionals and, most importantly, were not of peasant background. Vladimir Golitsyn, for example, whose works received a gold medal at the exhibition, was a descendant of the princely family of the Golitsyns. Being displayed along with mundane peasant furnishing objects, exhibits with Soviet motifs conveyed an impression of the penetration of the new themes into kustar crafts and popular support of the Revolution.

However, in 1937, the Fair Committee could not approve of risking such a trick. The adoption of Soviet administrative policy in the realm of artistic production was intended to further reforms in arts and crafts. Among other things, Soviet modernization of crafts was expected to increase the cultural and political consciousness of the artisans that allowed

33) GARF, f. A-643, op. 1, d. 73, l. 1.

them to create new compositions independently. Even though the Institute's experts were still designing samples and patterns for replicating in regional workshops, their declared long-term goal was to support the creative initiative of the artisans. Therefore, artworks on Soviet themes based on craftspeople's sketches were regarded as especially valuable, since they testified both to the development of their artistic skills and the rising of their political awareness.

In addition to pursuing short-term organizational goals for the Paris Exposition 1937, the Vseknopromsovet and the Institute were concerned with strategic planning for the handicraft industry. Up until the mid-1930s, *kustar* crafts had been primarily produced for export, but the Institute was striving to remodel the industry for the domestic market and Soviet customers. For experts from the capital, preparatory work for the exhibition was an opportunity to expand contacts with regional workshops and artisans, and to map the industry and study its capacity. In a letter to the chairs of republican and provincial industrial councils, the Vseknopromsovet announced to its representatives that 'the preparation of fair exhibits should serve as a training ground for producing goods of high quality and artistic designs for mass distribution on the Soviet market.'<sup>34</sup> Regional administrators were tasked with identifying both 'stalled' (*zaglokhshie*) crafts and new crafts, which emerged after the Revolution, as well as individuals who could be brought together and organize a workshop. Thus, further reforms would be based on the revision and assessment of the arts and crafts industry which took place in advance of the exhibition. The following section elaborates on the working program and concrete steps that were shaped by the above-mentioned ideological determinants.

## From Moscow to the regions: the Institute's preparation program

When the Vseknopromsovet authorized the Institute's selection of exhibits in January 1936, associated fellows immediately formed a local exhibition committee and started developing a preparation plan. In comparison with the exhibition of 1925, where the arrangements were limited to a few months, the Soviet cultural and diplomatic officials had much more time to work on the display strategy and distribute the commissions.<sup>35</sup> Even so, the time allotted was not sufficient for the Institute, which supervised workshops throughout the Soviet Union, from Chukotka in the east to Ukraine in the west, and from Arkhangel in the north to Uzbekistan in the south. Its global reach meant that its experts could not visit all workshops in person in a short period of time. Consequently, the Institute relied heavily on those workshops with which it already had a 'living connection' (*zhivaia sviaz'*), such as: lacquer painting workshops in the villages of Fedoskino (just north of Moscow), Mstera (between Moscow and Nizhnii Novgorod) and Kholui (near Moscow); workshops specializing in lacquer painted metal trays in Zhostovo (on the outskirts of Moscow), Akhtyrskaya (now Okhtyrka in eastern Ukraine) and Bogorodskaya (near Kirov); woodcarving workshops; artisans from Dagestan and Uzbekistan, and bone carving workshops in Kholmogory (near Arkhangel), Tobol'sk (in

34) GARF, f. A-643, op. 1, d. 74, l. 11.

35) Trankvillitskaia, 'Le Pavillon Soviétique de l'Exposition de 1937 à Paris', 449; Kozhanova, 'Curating National Renewal'.



central Siberia) and Chukotka (in far eastern Russia), to name just a few examples. 'Exhaustive explanations' were given to these artisans about what was expected from them, in what quantity and within what time.<sup>36</sup>

To make sure that the intended plan would be carried out, experts from the Institute inspected the workshops on site. During such visits, they articulated and explained the exhibition guidelines, examined samples, and collected proposed items to ship them to the Institute for further evaluation by the committee.<sup>37</sup> For each visit, a program was drawn up in accordance with the production and exhibition plans. The Institute's employees were assigned a wide range of tasks, from testing production prototypes created by the Institute's laboratories in real conditions of production to instructing artisans on technical and artistic issues.

Perhaps, from an ideological perspective, the most important part of the interventions of the Institute's experts in the workshop routine consisted of the discussions with the artisans about the compositions on 'Soviet themes'. For example, when, in May 1936, the art historian and research fellow of the Institute, Victor Vasilenko (1905–1991), visited a lacquer painting workshop in Fedoskino, near Moscow, he recommended the painters focus on the following topics: 'Chapayev, Chapayev's tachanka (a horse-drawn machine gun), history and everyday life of the Red Army, scenes from everyday life on collective farms'. Artists were also encouraged to take the initiative and suggest their own ideas about the Soviet theme in miniature painting. Vasilenko approved of copying paintings by Soviet artists, such as Aleksandr Gerasimov, Fedor Bogorodskii, Georgii Riazhskii, and paintings of 'old Russian artists' (from the collection of the Tretyakov gallery) as well.<sup>38</sup> Together with Professor Anatolii Bakushinskii (1883–1939), who was the Institute's academic advisor and closely collaborated with the department of lacquer painting, he stressed that artisans should learn to interpret the copied paintings and adapt them to their media. Yet for artists, copying was a safe and beneficial practice, since it was less likely to lead to ideological mistakes. Moreover, by 'turning art into an accessible consumer good', copying reinforced and promoted the norms of the Soviet visual and cultural canon and thus was cultivated and rewarded.<sup>39</sup>

A part of the Institute's regular working program was also carried out during the visits to the workshops. For example, experts gave lectures on art history: a two-hour lecture, dedicated to Russian artists of the late nineteenth century, delivered by Vasilenko in Fedoskino was just the sixth in a series.<sup>40</sup> These lectures could be considered as a part of the Institute's educational endeavors aimed at the artisans. To enhance the 'acculturation' of artisans, the Institute invited the most active artisans to visit exhibitions and museums in Moscow during the organized tours to the capital. In addition to their educational value, these excursions were also practical in nature. While visiting the museums, the artisans sketched

36) GARF, f. A-643, op. 1, d. 27 (Progress report to the administration of Vseknopromsovet on the preparation of exhibits for the Paris International Exhibition), l. 1–12

37) GARF, f. A-643, op. 1, d. 27, l. 1.

38) GARF, f. A-643, op. 1, d. 37 (Reports on expeditions of the Institute's fellows on the survey of papier-mâché workshops), l. 20; GARF, f. A-643, op. 1, d. 27, l. 1.

39) Yankovskaya and Mitchell, 'The Economic Dimensions of Art in the Stalinist Era', 786–88.

40) GARF, f. A-643, op. 1, d. 37, l. 17.

copies of original paintings in order to transfer them later to the lids of the lacquer boxes.<sup>41</sup> As soon as the works were completed, the Institute's committee evaluated them and prepared the selected items to be shipped to Paris.

During on-site visits, the experts also discussed with workshop administrators, artists, and technicians how to improve and broaden the product assortment. While agitating for the introduction of more utilitarian objects, they attempted to pursue the Institute's long-term strategies of redirecting the art industry to the internal Soviet market. Wood, papier-mâché, metal, bone, and horn-carving workshops were encouraged to design photo frames, cigarette holders, pencil boxes, and decorative handles for paper knives. Being sent to Paris as souvenirs, these household objects could bring in a significant financial profit for the Soviet pavilion that was confirmed by the previous experience of Soviet participation in international exhibitions. Sales of exhibits were anticipated to exceed the cost of their production, which approximately amounted to 739,500 rubles.<sup>42</sup> Despite a lively international interest in Soviet arts and crafts, however, poor marketing and an insufficient quantity of goods limited the potential revenue from this.<sup>43</sup>

The preparatory work contributed to a concomitant revision of the art industry, which involved closer examination of the existing workshops, as well as a search for new resources, including calling for individual artisans, who were sometimes considered the last representatives of fading traditions. The Institute was especially interested in exploring traditional crafts and establishing connections with the workshops in the republics of Central Asia. The onsite survey was delegated to a representative of the Institute, comrade Umnov. Unfortunately, there is no additional biographical information available about Umnov, but an artist with the same surname was mentioned as having collaborated with the Moscow Museum of Oriental Art.<sup>44</sup> To coordinate on-site arrangements and groundwork, he was instructed to contact regional Soviet and party organizations as well as local cooperative councils and unions. Umnov visited cities and districts within the republics and organized local commissioners, who were assigned to collect samples in order to expedite the survey. Umnov inspected all the samples, took photos, and described each selected exhibit in a special document, a passport of an object. This document contained information about the object's name, materials, size, workshop, and artisans who produced it. If the exhibit was made in a collective workshop, Umnov had to fill out a special questionnaire about the artel and sign it by its chairman.<sup>45</sup>

In addition to exhibits, the Institute recommended collecting all available materials related to crafts: reports, descriptions, books, photographs, and everything that 'characterizes the current state and perspectives of development of artistic crafts' in the region.<sup>46</sup> According to the Institute's publishing plan, fellows were expected to write scientific reports and edit books or brochures based on these materials. The photographs that were compiled

41) GARF, f. A-643, op. 1, d. 27, l. 1.

42) GARF, f. A-643, op. 1, d. 74, l. 37–38.

43) Trankvillitskaia, 'Le Pavillon Soviétique de l'Exposition de 1937 à Paris', 465.

44) Natalia Sycheva, *Dekorativnoe iskusstvo Srednei Azii i Kazakhstana* [The decorative art of Central Asia and Kazakhstan], Moscow: Nauka, 1980, 3.

45) GARF, f. A643, op.1, d. 74, l. 10.

46) GARF, f. A643, op.1, d. 74, l. 10

supplemented the Institute's Photographic Collection, which was used to research and design artistic samples. Upon completion of the regional inspections and analysis of the results, the Scientific Council of the Institute planned to publish a two-volume album, *Folk Art in Artistic Crafts of the USSR*.<sup>47</sup> The first volume was dedicated to solid materials (wood, ceramic, metal, bone, papier-mâché), and the second was reserved for textiles. It appears that the publishing plan was disrupted and that only the first volume was printed.<sup>48</sup> Although some drafts and papers were not published, they were preserved in the Institute's Scientific Library, which served as a reference and research library for the Institute's collection. Overall, information, sources, and exhibits accumulated during the preparation phase of the exhibition, if not displayed in the pavilion, became part of the Institute's Museum and scientific collection.

For the 1937 Paris World's Fair, the Scientific Research Institute of Art Industry selected more than 400 exhibits, among them 296 objects and 330 meters of textile handicrafts. The exhibits were provided by forty-one organizations, including workshops, educational institutions, and museums, which were associated with the Vsekopromsovet. The awards and special mentions were given to forty-six organizations and personally to twenty-three artisans.<sup>49</sup> In Soviet press reports on the pavilion, the arts and crafts were regularly mentioned as a success by the international public; the miniature lacquer paintings from Palekh, Mstera, and Kholui, and the bone carvings from Kholmogory and Chukotka were of particular note.<sup>50</sup>

## Creativity beyond routine: exploring the boundaries of artistic autonomy

When one considers what has been outlined above, it might seem that the only motivation for the craftsmen and -women to participate in the exhibition came from state commissions and the Institute's persistent urging. However, it is important to note that regional authorities, collective workshops, and individual artists often took the initiative and showed interest in submitting their works for evaluation by the Fair Committee. For example, Vasiliï Borodkin (1883–1944), from the lacquer painting workshop in Fedoskino, created a composition and painted a papier-mâché panel with a genre scene on Ukrainian motif, which he intended to present as an exhibit for the Paris Fair. His work was discussed and evaluated by the Institute's inspection board, which suggested displaying it rather at *the All-Union Agricultural Exhibition*, also planned for 1937, since the workshops had already provided enough

47) GARF, f. A643, op.1, d. 73, l. 1.

48) Korablev, ed, *Narodnoe iskusstvo SSSR v narodnykh promyslakh*; It is mentioned that the publication was suspended in 1941 because of the Soviet Union's entry into the war of 1939-1945. In 1941, the Vsekopromsovet was also liquidated, and the Institute was temporarily subordinated to the All-Union Committee on Artistic Affairs that could affect its funding, see: V. M. Vasilenko, 'Anatolii Vasiel'evich Bakushinskii i narodnoe iskusstvo [Anatolii Vasiel'evich Bakushinskii and folk art] in *Muzei narodnogo iskusstva i khudozhestvennye promysly* [The Museum of the Folk Art and artistic crafts], Moscow: Izobrazitel'noe iskusstvo, 1972, 98.

49) GARF, f. A643, op.1, d. 112 (Documents on the participation of artistic crafts in the international exhibition in New York in 1938), l. 75.

50) G. Belkin, 'Nauka i tekhnika. Mezhdunarodnaia vystavka v Parizhe' [Science and technology. International exhibition in Paris], *Novyi Mir* 8, September 1937, 267.



exhibits for the Paris event.<sup>51</sup> While official narratives emphasized the collective nature of Soviet handicrafts, the artists did not miss an opportunity to bring their individual projects forward and used exhibitions to gain recognition and manage personal reputations.<sup>52</sup>

As the preparations for the exhibition were underway, the regional offices and workshops also made the most of the increased interest from the capital they received. The Presidium of the North Caucasus Industrial Council, for example, asked the Institute to send an employee to Dagestan to give on-site briefings to the artisans. They also requested that the most valuable objects of Kubachi silverwork be brought back from the museums to demonstrate to the artisans what could be considered good and high-quality work.<sup>53</sup> Several collectives used the opportunity to report their problems and try to get them resolved by contacting the Institute on the excuse of the importance of the upcoming exhibition and need for extra assistance. The workshops complained about a lack of raw materials, delays in shipping samples, the need to raise additional funds, the fact that artists were overloaded with work from other commissions and a lack of time for 'creative works'.<sup>54</sup>

'Creative works' were defined as those in which artisans developed new themes, compositions, or ornamental motifs. Commissions and special requests in preparation for exhibitions presented a chance for craftsmen and -women to break away from the monotony of workshop routine, which was focused on meeting a production plan, and to explore new themes in their artistic practice. For example, the miniaturists from the Palekh workshop of lacquer painting created several boxes and panels on the themes of French literature especially for the 1937 Paris World's Fair. For a round plate titled *Under Fire*, which illustrated the novel of the same name by Henri Barbusse, and conveyed a strong antimilitaristic message, Nikolai Zinov'ev (1888–1979) was awarded a Grand Prix. His colleague Vasiliï Salabanov created a panel *Gargantua took away the bells from Notre-Dame de Paris*, following the plot of the satirical novel by François Rabelais (**Figure 3**).<sup>55</sup> By expanding the range of themes, the designers were able to step beyond the boundaries of their typical subjects and experiment with new compositions.

While Palekh was the most renowned center for lacquer painting, similar opportunities also emerged for the workshops in Fedoskino, Mstera, and Kholui. Artists from regional workshops appreciated the opportunity to establish closer ties with cultural authorities and supervisors from Moscow. Among them, Aleksandr Briagin (1888–1948) shared the common frustration of artisans resulting from the lack of critical analysis of their work. Although the Mstera workshop *Proletarian Art* received praise in the Soviet media, its works did not sell well, and artisans often faced rejection when they submitted new compositions. Assistance with 'advice and pencil', as the Institute's representatives called it, involved providing artists not only with detailed recommendations on how to improve ornaments or compositions, but also direct corrections to sketches of future works (**Figure 4**).<sup>56</sup>

51) GARF, f. A-643, op. 1, d. 20 (Minutes of meetings of the Institute's administration), l. 31.

52) Galina Iankovskaia, *Iskusstvo, den'gi i politika: khudozhnik v gody pozdnego stalinizma* [Art, money, and politic: an artist in the years of late stalinism], Perm: Permskii gosudarstvennyi universitet, 2007, 104–141.

53) GARF, f. A643, op.1, d. 73, l. 3–6.

54) GARF, f. A643, op.1, d. 37, l. 16; d. 73, l. 3–6.

55) GARF, f. A643, op.1, d. 43 (Minutes of the selection meetings for the Paris exhibition), l. 34.

56) GARF, f. A643, op.1, d. 102 (Reports on the field trips to the papier-mâché workshops), l. 1.



Figure 3: Vasilii Salabanov, *Gargantua Took away the Bells from Notre-Dame de Paris* (1936).  
Palekh (Papier-maché, lacquer, tempera, gold, miniature painting). 22 x 25 cm.

Source: Nikolai Sobolevskii, ed., *Iskusstvo sovetskogo Palekha* (Moscow, 1958).

The practice of intervention in artistic work wasn't unique to Soviet craft policy. A comparable approach was employed by the French Regional Commission overseeing handicraft exhibits at the 1937 Paris World's Fair. The 'interventionist policy of artisanal dirige' that was adopted aimed to assist artisans in creating items suitable for display in the exposition that were both contemporary and tasteful according to the Commission's expertise.<sup>57</sup> The delegates of the Commission inspected the regional workshops; the artisan committee provided designs and drawings of models suited for various crafts, which could then be reproduced in the local workshops using available materials. Artisans who replicated these designs were required to credit the author of the artist in the display catalog and as inscription on the object along with their own name. Additionally, they had to pay the artist a ten percent commission on future sales of the model.<sup>58</sup> We observe a situation similar to that of the Soviet Union, where experts from central institutions dictated to regional artisans what was considered aesthetic,

57) Peer, *France on Display*, 88–93.

58) Peer, *France on Display*, 89.



Figure 4: Vasilii Puzanov-Molev, Sketch for a miniature, 'Happy Childhood' (1937).

Source: *Narodnoe Tvorchestvo*, 1938.

authentic, and ideologically correct in the local crafts. At the same time, artisans indeed relied on this expertise, as it held the potential to enhance their chances of selling their works more effectively. It would be interesting to investigate further how craftsmen and -women in different countries perceived such interference in their work and what their experiences of authorship were under various craft policies.

## Conclusion

In summary, for both the Scientific Research Institute of Art Industry and regional workshops, the preparatory period was an intensive time for networking, mapping the industry, and identifying the advantages and limitations of cooperation with each other. Having received an extra budget for preparations, the Institute's collective was able to set more ambitious goals for researching new crafts and restoring older ones. During the expeditions and trips, the fellows were able to gain a deeper understanding of the artistic traditions and



working practices in the workshops, as well as to learn about the everyday life and needs of the artisans. As for the craftsmen and -women, they received consultation advice from the experts and modified their artworks in accordance with the expectations from the center, ensuring their chances for the pending commissions and success in regular artistic competitions. Mediating between the artisans and the state's authorities, the Institute's members sought to respond to the ideological guidance of the Soviet officials as well as to navigate the workshops through the challenge of meeting production plans.

Reflecting on Soviet culture in the 1930s, Malte Rolf invites to think about it as a 'hall of mirrors', where 'cultural items constantly reflected other bits of the rhetoric, symbols or rituals of the Soviet cultural canon. Although extensive in quantity, these reproduced images were limited with regard to subjects, themes and composing elements.'<sup>59</sup> This metaphor describes, among other things, the processes taking place in handicrafts and the art industry in the mid-1930s. As the Institute prepared exhibits for the Paris Fair, it transformed the handicrafts into yet another mirror that was supposed to reflect Soviet reality accurately, clearly, and without any distortion. In this regard, the Institute met the ideological goal of introducing handicrafts not as a marginal or exotic domain of cultural production, but as an integral part of the Soviet system of arts, which shared the same values, ideas, and norms.

The objects displayed also demonstrated that the Institute had accomplished another task entrusted to its fellows: teaching artisans how to express themselves in different media with Soviet visual vocabulary. Summarizing the outcomes of the exhibition, the senior researchers Vasilii Voronov (1887–1940) and Viktor Vasilenko reported that Soviet artistic crafts discovered a tendency to explore new imagery and modern compositions. It was especially noted that artists were interested in complex thematic commissions on Soviet themes, which gave them the opportunity to reflect on new dimensions and manifestations of Soviet socialist culture.<sup>60</sup> However, the more demanding ideological commissions required more consistent and careful expert assistance. Here again, the Institute demonstrated the necessity and importance of its work and collaboration with the workshops. In the field of arts and crafts, the Institute thus guided artisans into the Soviet visual canon, explaining its elements, translating the ideological language into the language of artistic practice.

The additional resources dedicated to the exhibition allowed the Institute to expand its networks with workshops and establish closer ties with artisans. These encounters were mutually beneficial: by building a common ground between experts and artisans, the Institute could count on a more predictable outcome of the production plan, while workshops in turn acquired official patrons and advisors, to whom they could turn for solutions to their problems. Based on observations made during the trips, the Institute's collective planned for further reforms in the industry: creating artistic councils in the workshops, inviting professional artists to make samples for copying, introducing new administrative regulations for the workshops, and so on. As expected, with growing political and cultural consciousness of the artisans, some of the Institute's supervision and advisory functions would gradually be taken over by workshops' own art councils.

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59) Malte Rolf, 'A Hall of Mirrors: Sovietizing Culture under Stalinism', *Slavic Review* 68: 3, 2009, 601.

60) GARF, f. A643, op.1, d. 73, l. 6.

Contemporary scholarship on the history of international exhibitions often tries to measure how participation in World's Fairs affected a country's international reputation, trade, and diplomatic relations with other states. However, it is also relevant to consider how preparations for the exhibitions altered relations between different stakeholders within the state, what new opportunities arose from them, and how collectives and individuals took advantages of these opportunities. By focusing on the endeavors of the Scientific Research Institute of Art Industry, this paper has demonstrated how the 1937 Paris World's Fair brought together different groups and communities within the Soviet art industry: experts of cultural and trade organizations, researchers, art historians, and artisans. While working together towards a common goal and following the official directives, all the agents were also pursuing their own individual objectives and agendas, which may not necessarily be announced as a part of the preparation program.



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