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Alison Hilton. *Russian Folk Art*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2011. List of illustrations, note on transliteration, bibliography, index. xxiii+357. \$24.95 (paper). ISBN 978-0-253-22335-7.

The world of the senses, the look, feel, smell, taste, and sound of things, is getting more and more attention in contemporary scholarship as we realize that, to understand a people and their culture, it is important to appreciate their sensory world. This being the case, the reissue of Hilton's 1995 *Russian Folk Art* in paperback and in slightly modified form is most welcome.

The book begins with a brief history of the study of folk art. This is followed by a description of village life with an emphasis on the house. We learn what houses looked like inside and out, where ornamentation was located, and how it changed over time. Houses were not the only things decorated and the section on tasks and tools tells us about spindles, distaffs, dippers, saltcellars, breadboxes, yokes and other items that were used in daily life and highly ornamented. Distaffs receive particular attention and a picture of one graces the cover. Hilton next writes about folk specialists, artists who were semi-professionals and made items for sale such as highly decorated distaffs, spice cakes stamped with images, and carved birdhouses in the shape of human figures. Sometimes whole families specialized and a craft would be passed on from one generation to the next. We learn that villages were not as isolated from urban areas as was once supposed and that the sale of village crafts in cities occurred alongside and in addition to commerce within and between villages.

The next unit of the book is devoted to materials. Peasant life determined what was made and how, but so did available materials and available markets. In the Russian north, forests dominated the landscape and wood was widely used for folk crafts. Wood was carved using various techniques and it was also painted and encrusted. Wood was used to make printing blocks which, in turn, were used to stamp fabrics with a pattern or to print *lubki*

(sing. *lubok*), broadsides with a combination of a text and a striking image. Wood was painted with designs that ranged from the ornamental to the representational. Birch bark was carved into patterns that looked like lace and sold to urban dwellers. Wood was lacquered for both local consumption and for sale. In addition to the several chapters discussing woodwork in all its forms, this section also has a chapter on clothing and one on folk toys, which could be made of wood, but were also often made of clay.

The section “Designs and Their Meanings” talks about the symbolism found in Russian folk art. It discusses important mythic figures such as the *rusalka*, the *sirin*, and the *alkonost* and gives a brief overview of the calendar cycle, noting the ritual use of particular objects of material culture. Indigenous images and symbols were influenced by external forces and religious and other urban ornament found its way into the countryside so that grapes, which never grew in the Russian north, came to be a regular embellishment of the iconostasis. Zoomorphic motifs like the horse and the bird and theriomorphic figures such as the half-bird/half-woman *sirin* were important, as were stylized human figures, and were painted on distaffs and embroidered on ritual towels. Scenes from everyday life which ranged from pictures of wedding parties riding on a horse-drawn carriage or sled to portrayals of tea-drinking were also used for decoration.

As times changed and peasants became serfs on the estates of the nobility, the artistic abilities of gifted peasants became a commodity, not only for the folk themselves, but also for their masters. Serfs with special skills were valuable and some were trained in arts needed by the gentry. Some produced fine wares. Some were trained as painters and we have a number of paintings depicting scenes from the lives of the folk such as weddings, lace-making, and even the sale of a female serf. Certain nobles such as Aleksei Venetsianov, Elizaveta Mamontova, and Elena Polenova started schools and workshops on their estates in an effort to foster folk artistry and to keep Russian art from falling under the influence of foreign styles and trends and losing its distinctive features. At the same time, professionally trained artists such as Ivan Bilibin and Viktor Vasnetsov fell in love with folk art and

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started using folk images and adaptations of folk style in their work. In the Soviet period folk content and folk style were promoted as a means of showing that the Soviet system was indeed a political organ of the people. At the same time Soviet subject matter was introduced into traditional scenes such as tea-drinking, which now had an obligatory portrait of Lenin. Soviet politics also encouraged paintings which showed villagers enjoying the benefits brought by the Soviet system such as schooling and the electrification of the village. Hilton concludes by saying that folk art will continue to evolve now that the Soviet Union is no more.

Russian Folk Art provides a good overview of its subject matter and can serve as a useful introduction to anyone new to the field. As the content summary given above shows, the book provides both a description of various art forms and a history of folk creativity. Its main shortcoming is a lack of color illustrations. There was a color insert in the hardback version of this book and the table of contents even refers to a color insert – but there is none. All images are in black and white, presumably to keep the cost of the paperback low. Color was very much a part of the aesthetic experience of folk art and Hilton constantly mentions color: red, black, and gold on distaffs, utensils, and so forth. It would be good to actually see what she is talking about and one of the first complaints voiced by others who have seen the paperback is the lack of color images. Perhaps Indiana University Press can provide free online access to some color images of Russian folk art to supplement this book.

For someone who is familiar with the field, there are other disappointments. Hilton did no field work and relied on museum exhibits and museum personnel for her folk art descriptions. As a result, she repeats the views expressed in Russian books on the subject and reproduces many of the illustrations found in Russian and Soviet publications. Perhaps because she is retelling the thoughts of others rather than describing her own experiences, the descriptive part of the book has a somewhat wooden feel to it, if the reader of this review will pardon the pun. To Hilton's credit is the fact that she does not construct an imagined past and claim to know the symbolic meanings of folk images the way many Russian

and other post-Soviet writers do; her interpretations of symbols are in keeping with contemporary western scholarship and quite nuanced. Also, the second section of the book, which talks about the interaction between the village and the city and the efforts of nobles to preserve folk art and help it adapt to changing circumstances, is much livelier reading. Perhaps it reads better because this is closer to Hilton's own archival research or perhaps because this was the section that contained information that was new for me.

In sum, *Russian Folk Art* is a most useful book that will help those who do not have access to the art books produced in Russia and the Soviet Union get a sense of the visual world of the Russian north. It would make a good textbook for use in a variety of classes, both those dealing with Russian subject matter and those dealing with art. Presumably it was this fact that prompted Indiana University press to issue a paperback edition.

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