TALASHKINO

By NICHOLAS ROERICH

[Talashkino, the Estate of Princess Marie Tenecheff was a famous art centre, where the best Russian artists collaborated. Nicholas Roerich closely co-operated with Princess Tenicheff and painted large murals for the Church of the Holy Spirit. The War and Revolution destroyed this cultural stronghold and now, near Smolensk the remains of former structures were once more endangered.]

We have become poor in beauty. We have lost all beauty from our homes, from our surroundings, from within ourselves, from our problems. Only fragments of the beauty of former times strangely remain in our lives and do not serve to transform anything. It is hard to believe, but it is so. It is even out of fashion to talk of it.

Dead, dead is the great Pan!

Infused with visions of beauty, numberless publications are issued; they live a few decades, and die on the same expression. As before, our self-satisfied consciousness keeps silent. As before, with surprised raillery, we observe the sincere attempts for the adornment of our existence, and on opportunity, treat miserably the restless searchers. Slowly the ranks of the lovers of art are increasing.

Such is the case with us in Russia.

It is not easy to speak thus. It is necessary to feel a new impulse—without fear of realizing that the ancient Russia in its artistic conception was closer than we to the contemporary West. It is necessary. But is it possible?

It is shameful! During the Stone Age there was finer feeling for the importance of decoration, with its originality and endless variety. Not for our indifference blossomed the beauty of the old Oriental arts. The delightful currents of the Renaissance are far from our hectic noises. Sadness grips our hearts while we look in the museums at the beautiful dead forms of the not-distant ages. Better let us not ponder on the ornaments of antiquity! It is simpler to pity the savage days of long ago and boast of our “progress”. How absurd that word often sounds! What can one expect from us? In celebrating a thousand years of our Empire, we did not learn to revere worthily even the beauty of our ancient periods; to appreciate them even historically, if otherwise the paths of art are unattainable for us.

It is difficult in Russia to get an idea of antiquity; the new ways are hard, unyielding.
For us, beauty is an empty sound, incomprehensible and shameful, something unfit. Beauty is useless where exists the great depression of our age—all-powerful vulgarity; where one sees and feels things through vulgarity; where by a thousand hands the unusual is depressed. Need we give examples?

We cannot expect beauty in a rush of a metropolis, nor from its poor museums, nor from its commercial arts.

Every aspect of beauty is a rare guest there.

In such springs the living water is polluted as it flows from silence and peace—the very earth. Summit and base. The crown and the origin will illumine the light of beauty, so that the mediocre should perish.

Action is needed. New steps and achievements are needed regardless of how difficult they are.

In recent days we have attempted to lay the way for new springs. All renovators of our life are worthy of great honor. For several years already, I have observed such sources. As in every vital venture, there is no coercion. The ancient period deserves the best attention: in it is to be found the living power, the power of beauty aspiring towards the new; and its origins have woven for the crystals of all ageless ornament, all kingdoms of nature: wild animals, birds, rocks, flowers. How many enchanting colors, how many new incomparable lines!

The beautifier of life does not need to search any materials. All he needs is to search new ideas, new views and to penetrate into the nobility of the old forms.

And how far is the inspiring example of antiquity from the perverted style which, due to our short-sightedness, we call modern.

From the source—as I think of it—work the friends of art, filled with the best ideas.

To this source come our worthiest artists. Vrubel, the most delicate master—went to the source. From the same source started Maliutin, Stelletzky and others equally interesting. Close to the source is the work of the late artists Polenova and Yakunchikova. The source creates new powers. It strengthens Sinoviev and Beketov—our talented youth. Borstchevsky, who contributed so much to the lovers of Russian antiquity with his sketches, and who has not been sufficiently studied by our academic artists, was inspired by the course.

Such a venture makes us joyful.

In the Smalensky Krivitchi, on the great highway to Greece, is such a source. There is much of originality. The undertaking is wide open to every gifted sincere searcher. One hears talk not only about favorites of the moment, but of many others, whose names are not at present on the crest of the wave. Princess Tenisheva—Maria Klaudievna—is striving ardently to establish such a venture on her estate, Talaskino, near Smolensk. From the proximity of such a centre of art, interest is being revived also for the ancient city of Smolensk.

The late Mr. Sisov, an old friend of Talashkino, always responsive to every living idea, spoke cordially to me of the beginning of the new moment: S. P. Diagilev,
the editor of "Mir Iskusstva", writing of the results of the workshops of the princess, sensitively described his impressions. "Talashkino has a great future" said M. V. Nesterov recently to me.

The main thing Talashkino lacks the oppression of the conjured circle. Even if one cannot avoid the exaggerations and abstractions, which always exist in art, one feels how flexible is this venture, how able of accepting all that is worthy, finding fermentation —growth.

True love of art is needed in order to arouse and establish such an artistic menage. The building of workshops, schools and museums is complicated and full of difficulties. But Maria Klaudievna possesses such love. She lived long with art. She has already succeeded in many great undertakings.

In the Russian Museum in Petersburg she has a department of Russian Water-Color art. Only due to the efforts of the Princess, the Museum did not close its doors to such artists as Vrubel, Somov and a whole line of excellent Finns. It is an excellent collection. It is rapidly increasing with new acquisitions. Her original idea was still broader. She thought of a complete collection of the water-color art of the entire history of the Occident. Plans were made for its realization, but the means of the Museum were not sufficient to undertake it. Thus collapsed the idea of a broadly planned and necessary work in the capital.

The appearance of "Mir Iskusstva" was the first help to the Princess. How much care was expressed in helping the creations of so many artists!

At last now is completed the collection of the superb Museum of our ethnographic art and art-crafts. And again the Museum is presented for public use. Smolensk will have this joy. The Museum has already been transported from Talashkino to the city. Many excellent objects have been carefully collected. Remarkable are the embroideries, the carvings, the icons and the yarn and metal objects. They are united by a personal taste, not only by literal science. The subjective side always gives an impression of appropriateness, to such collections. Besides the old objects the works of the latest masters will occupy a conspicuous position, such as the incomparable ingenuities of Lalik, Fallis, Halle, Kolonn, Tiffany and other superb-creators. As was to be expected, Smolensk has looked askance and preferred to dig sand just from out the walls and towers from out its famous necklace, (of buildings) but to save one of them for its Museum seemed too much! But it is just as well. It is safer for the Museum to stand on its own site, fortified by clear-cut statues against all casualties, than to depend on the mercy of our "culture".

To arouse tirelessly so many ventures precious to art is unprecedented in our age; it is only possible through special love of art and long preparation. And when you see at Talashkino the joy over the kurgans' enamel, the combs of Lalik, the latest samples of book-binding, miniatures, Limoge, cloisonne, carved tryptichs,
embroideries—the most beautiful things imaginable, you rejoice inwardly over the work itself.

It means that it will endure.

In Talashkino the broad home-like spirit is unexpectedly combined with freedom of art; a country house with ornate chambers; a hand-written chronicle with the latest utterances of the Occident. Much is conflicting. But in this conflict is a special pulse which reflects our many-sided life.

This pulse beats with a special force in Talashkino. A special aspect is acquired by the agricultural school and art work shops. It develops in the students and young masters a specially penetrating mein. In the surrounding population—always close to the art movement of Talashkino—is impressed an eternal stamp of the everlasting sense of life. Thousands of surrounding workmen and women go to the Talashkino, so that it has a tremendous influence on the whole neighbourhood; thus stretches out the endless web of the better life to come.

On the sacred hearth, away from the contamination of the city, the people create again newly conceived objects, without servility, without the trademarks of factories—creating lovingly and freely. We are reminded of the covenants of our forefathers and of the beauty and solidity of ancient works. In our youth are born new demands, strengthened by fine example. There is no need to run to the wine-shop we can celebrate our holy-days without it when there is so much around to keep one's mind busy and to carry one out of the daily monotony.

Even Mikula digs the beauty of life out of the soil. This beauty is impressed into the life of the village, and is transmitted into many generations. Again all details of work may arouse the consciousness to something pure and good. Again, much can be discovered in efforts of this kind.

We need it all. From the big life of art, from the latest vigorous circles to the solitude of the village—everywhere is needed the foundation of desire and aspiration. Yet there are difficulties without end.

The visions of a clear approach to life's aspects inborn with the secrets of nature subconscious, are beautiful as nature, and are depthlessly great in the meaning of beauty. In order to see, one has to bathe one's eyes with pure art, without teachings, boundaries and conditions. Whoever sees thus will not return to the commonplace.

I look at Talashkino.

It is evident that an inner necessity combined with consciousness of solid foundation developed the venture of the schools and museum in Talashkino.

After knowing the creative ways of the best masters of all ages, after the jubilee dates of the teaching of Ruskin, it is ridiculous to speak of the worth of technique in developed creations. But with us, where the industrialist and artist are so often divided, when the very combination of these words is endless in syllables and dark in meaning; where those who bear this long title are multiplying, but whose names are not yet recorded in the history of art; with us, one can still praise the conscious
creation of our applied art. In this Talashkino deserves great praise. Here lie no secrets of austere augurs. All phases of art are clear to the workers in the art shops. The domestic hearth fully attentive to the best contemporary publications, to the works of new artists, to the excited discussions of exhibitions—is close to all of us. Every student creates his Holy of Holies in the execution of the selected craft; albums, designs, copies and compositions.

Besides the natural ability of the carver or the embroider, in the works of the students is felt the natural creator of a style, who understands and appreciates the quality of his material. Thus the students hear of the unity of craft and creation not only verbally, but they acquire the consciousness by practice. The Princess herself gives an example by applying the ornaments to various materials. Artists who have been in the work-shops, do not remain indifferent to the various productions. And the students in technical practice, remember the creative principles. It is evident that the work for them is not a soulless ideal, "without blemish", but closely conscious in the very details of spontaneity, which make the art objects so supreme. Working in nature leads to the same point.

The degrees of higher and lower become more pliable. It is plain to the students that above all and of most value is the artistic spark, which alone contains the true perfection of technique. There are many misunderstandings on this plane. I remember that A.I. Kuindjy also told me the very same thing, seemingly familiar to all—the same A.I. Kuindjy, whom, for some reason or other they failed to understand, speaking of him as an enemy of applied art. But he, like an artist, of course valued creation too highly to admit the label of craftsmanship. Undoubtedly the Princess also prefers the creative feature of the work rather than orders from stores for the repetition of sold objects. Instead of an answer in some cases, she prefers, as the only proper thing, to give objects with new designs. The mere atmosphere of the work for sale in stories apparently does not satisfy her, so she is endeavoring to establish better conditions through exhibitions. Such a fear of cheapening the work is a splendid guarantee. In aspiring to perfection and variety the students acquire a solid barricade against the future temptations of life.

With the years the graduates of Talashkino will heartily remember the period of their schooling.

A procession of keen memories:

Gates and posts designed with figures, animals and flowers; fairy-like chambers...Embroideries...A profusion of patterns; sharp festoons, bloated nastebka, transparent weaves, "Moscow inlays", back-stitch crosses, woollens, open sack-cloths, checked linens, hooked cloth...plain textiles, velvety and soft to the sight. Dye-shops, with the mystery of colors; tufts of grass and roots; the ancient witch in antiquated garb of cotton thistle the witch of the combination of fast colors.

ingenious. I remember the preparations for the "Tale of Seven giants". I, a visitor, see the whole ant-hill of action. Music is written. The text is prepared. What work on the costumes! The ones newly made should be splendid and equal to the old ones taken from the museum. Staging. Dances. And it is difficult to believe that they are students. How they hurry, after working at the carpenter's bench, the scythe, and the rake, to get into ancient garments; how they rehearse their parts; how they move in their dances and play in the orchestra! Unwillingly they meet the night. And it is over.

Last summer I enjoyed a similar presentation. I was a member of the noisy joy!

Thus I witnessed the beginning of the temple of this life. Its end lies far away. They are adding to it all that is best. In this construction can be happily realized all the miracle-working traditions of ancient Russia, with its refined feeling for decoration. And the unusual unrestrained sweep of designs of the out-walls of the cathedral of Yuriev-Polsky, the fantasmagoria of the temples of Rostov and Yaroslavl and the impressiveness of the Prophets of the Novgorod Sophia—all these divine treasures of ours should not be forgotten. Even the temples of Ajanta and Lhassa. Years may pass in quiet labor! May the covenants of beauty be fully realised in this venture!

Where else could we wish more the apotheosis of beauty than in a temple, that highest creation of our spirit?

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- One wonders at the success of Talashkino. One wonders why the objects of its workshops are disposed of so fast. These are the clefts in the solid order of the past which gives hope for the future. Not without reason do they naturally appreciate abroad the value of what Princess Tenisheva is doing, and speak benevolently of her work. Not without reason the young people are enthusiastic in applying their efforts to such an undertaking. There is always goodness in the ideals of youth, not oppressed by the prejudices of the age.

While speaking now of the work, we can say only something of its current development. It is hard to prophesy how it will develop; what kind of difficulties it will meet, and what kind of traces it will leave on Russian life. One can merely guess that its future will be just as remarkable as its beginning. The roots of the undertaking are not far from the "unity" of style in the aspirations of the young Occident. The difference in approach does not obscure the ends—the triumph of the austere form and line, and the merging with the "oneness" of the western style, not in its blind imitation, but in the unity of the profundity of beauty. Some consider the products of Talashkino impeccable. Others deny it, forgetting the fact that the one main feature of the creation of Talashkino is—the absence of a boring conclusive limit.

There is the usual discussion, as of everything that can be placed in the customary measures.

One hears different views of the characters of the products of Talashkino. One calls this style
new, sophisticated and impractical. It is said that it is a direct heritage from the ancient Russian traditions. One finds in it a path towards the renovation of Russia's entire domestic life. One sees in it almost an entire national inheritance. There are reproaches for the crudeness of material and technique; Maliutin is accused for this... I do not know what is right. I do not want to think of it. It is superfluous. It does not help, either the creators or the consumers. With such thoughts one merely limits a venture which is free in spirit. The peasant’s embroideries, with their agreeable vegetable colors and traditional stitches and patterns, crystallized by centuries; the mellow carvings and pottery in the completed objects—what does it matter to them to whom, or how they appeal? It does not matter whose eye will be caressed and calmed by them.

It is important if such ventures are but growing and developing. It is important, since in that way, art becomes a necessity.

We smile at it bitterly, "It is not forbidden to despise art." Nobody is compelled to love it. It is just that art should not demand anything more from a government than what Diogenes asked of Alexander: "Stand aside. Do not obscure the sun." This modest request of art is addressed to the masses, the academies, often to the critics, and to many artists.

It is at present, and in the immediate future that art will be remote from us, as we will be absorbed by other developments of life. Perhaps never was Russian thought as removed from art as it is now. Nevertheless, it is agreeable to meditate on art. It is agreeable to realize that perhaps by the path of temporary removal, we will approach its vital substance. Very likely... And our half-closed eyes will open to something much more lasting.

Towards that we must work. Efforts are needed, not only of isolated individuals, deprived of work, or departing for the mountains, or depressed in their best aspirations; powerful manifestations, broad in sweep are needed. Such is the work of Princess Tenisheva—powerful in its unexpected fusion of the core of earth and the best words of culture.

Away from the marts, from profits and calculations, develops a great noble and beautiful enterprise.

Thus I think of Talashkino.