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Romantic Nationalism and the Image of the Bird-Human in Russian Art of the 19th and early 20th Century

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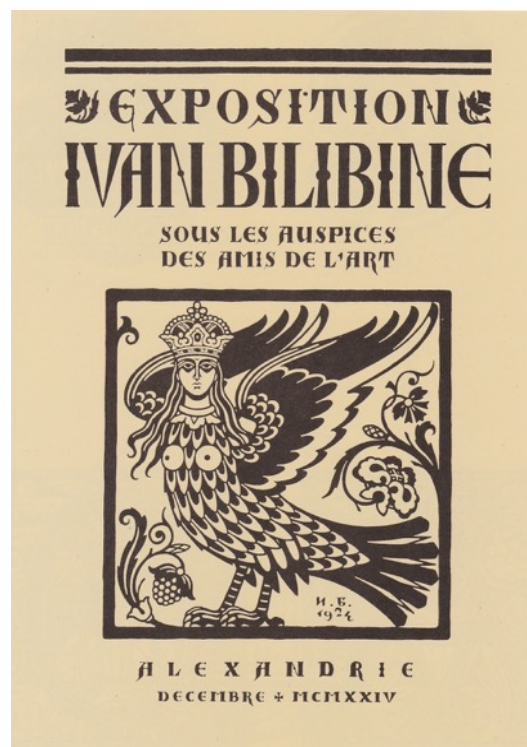
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Romantic Nationalism and the Image of the Bird-Human in Russian Art of the 19th
and early 20th Century



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Introduction

Russian culture is incredibly rich and varied. Its pre-Christian roots stretch back to the agriculturally-based Slavs and the nomadic Scythians that held dominance in for a time in what is now Eastern Europe. When the Scythians faded into the mists of time, the Slavs expanded, building cities, beginning trade with the Varangians and Byzantium, establishing the principality of Kievan Rus, and gradually converting to Orthodox Christianity after Prince Vladimir's decree in 986. Whether it is accepted or not, there was also a strong cultural influence from the Tatars of the Golden Horde, which ruled the area from 1240 until the unity of the Golden Horde crumbled completely, allowing Muscovy to take control.

Muscovy was the most direct predecessor of the Russian empire. While it underwent years of political turmoil, it retained a good measure of conservatism, clinging to its old traditions whenever possible. This was radically changed with the reign of Peter the Great. He was enamored with the mechanical, architectural, and bureaucratic prowess of the West, and he single-handedly led a campaign to Westernize Russian government and society, ordering the construction of the city of St. Petersburg in Western style and moving the capital there from Moscow as a dramatically visible sign of his reforms. From that time on, Russian high society was split between the distinctive, Eastern-tinged Russian traditions and the rationalism of the West, with those inhabiting Moscow holding on to the traditions of their forefathers more firmly than those in St. Petersburg.

The lower classes, however, remained relatively detached from this abrupt change, and kept to their traditions without undue cultural disruption. This became quite important in the 1800s, when the philosophies of Romanticism and Romantic Nationalism became a dominant

trend in the Russian upper classes, and the upper classes therefore began to take a strong interest in the folk traditions that had been preserved by the serfs. Wealthy scholars and patrons, with varying levels of professional ethnographic experience, started recording traditional rituals, collecting folk stories and folk songs, and assembling collections of folk art. Artists and authors began using folk elements in their work in an effort to develop, not only as creative producers, but as creative producers that were distinctly Russian as part of what became known as the “Neo-nationalist revolution,” and also as part of the later Neo-primitivist movement. One of the folk motifs that they adopted was what I have come to term “the bird people,” or “avian-humans.” This folk motif of bird-humans was borrowed by certain artists, including Viktor Vasnetsov, Ivan Bilibin, Sergei Solomko, Mikhail Vrubel, and Natalia Goncharova, as part of their Neo-nationalist and Neo-primitivist work.

There are a few reasons why the avian-humans in folklore are particularly striking. The first is that they appear in the folk tales as equally at home in either human or animal form. They change between these forms at will, and both forms are essential to the character. There are also peculiar consistencies connected to gender — the women will always be doves or swans, while the men will be birds of prey, such as eagles, falcons, hawks, or in some cases, ravens. These correlations between gender and specie of bird can also be seen in the metaphors of the Russian folk songs. While the connections between specific avian species and gender are somewhat more relaxed, with men being referred to as doves in the context of some love songs, the patterns were still clear enough to be convincing. Avian-humans also appear in traditional Russian art. There, they are seen in a figure that gives a physical representation to the melding of bird and man, the Sirin bird, which was traditionally used as a kind of protective measure and good luck charm by

the Russian serfs up through the 19th century. There was also a tradition in some parts of Russia that a person's soul would become a dove after death. Taken together, these pieces of Russian folk culture point to a strong bond between birds and human souls in Russian folk tradition. Because this motif had such a strong presence in the folk tradition, it was natural for the artists of the Neo-nationalist and Neo-primitivist movements to choose it as a part of their visual vocabulary to express their Russian identity.

Since the philosophy of Romantic Nationalism was at the root of the artistic movements of Neo-nationalism and Neo-primitivism, Chapter 1 will open with a description of how Romantic Nationalism developed in Russia. It will examine the philosophical thought of Nikolai Mikhailovich Karamzin, Dmitry Vladimirovich Venevitinov, and Prince Vladimir Fyodorovich Odoevski, whose writings in the early 1800s helped prepare the way for the ideals of Romantic Nationalism, which inspired a fresh interest in traditional Russian culture. This will be followed by discussion of the work done by people such as the prominent folklorist Alexandr Afanasiev, who, in the spirit of Romantic Nationalism, began preserving and studying Russian folk tales. A mention will also be made mention of the folk-inspired tales and poems of Alexandr Pushkin, which became popular sources of inspiration for the artists of the Neo-nationalist movement. The chapter will end with a more thorough description of the avian-human motif of Russian folklore, folksong, and traditional handicraft, in preparation for the examination of the Neo-nationalist and Neo-primitivist artworks that will come in Chapters 2 and 3.

Chapter 2 will detail the Neo-nationalist movement that was born from the philosophy of The Lovers of Wisdom and the Slavophiles. In particular, I will turn my attention to the artistic colonies of Abramtsevo and Talashkino, which, thanks to their patrons, Savva Mamontov and

Princess Maria Tenisheva, became strongholds of the Neo-nationalist movement. I will focus on the artists Viktor Vasnetsov, Ivan Bilibin, Mikhail Vrubel, and Sergei Solomko as examples of the Neo-nationalist aesthetic. I will then compare the works in which these artists portrayed their interpretations of the traditional Russian avian-human motif, demonstrating the various ways in which these artists used their peculiar styles to represent it in the context of the traditional forms and their efforts to create art which focused on Russian themes.

Chapter 3 will focus on the work of Natalia Goncharova, specifically her set and costume designs for the Ballet Russes. I will describe therein the philosophy of Neo-primitivism, which she helped to develop, and how these ideas caused her to turn her attention to the East and to the indigenous culture of her home land — just as the artists of the Neo-nationalist movement of Abramtsevo and Talashkino before her. I then will explore Natalia Goncharova's artistic practices of her Neo-primitive period, ultimately focusing on her designs for the Ballets Russes' productions of Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov's *Golden Cockerel* (*Золотой Петушок*, 1914) and Igor Stravinsky's *Les Noches* (*Свадебка*, 1923). My examination of these designs will focus on the Sirin birds found therein, and on her use of these birds as a marker of Russian identity in productions meant to portray a Russian ethos to a Western audience.

My overall intent with this project is to bring greater attention to the image of the bird people as it appeared in Russian folklore, and apply this knowledge to interpret the artworks that this image inspired: in every book about Russian folk practices I used for research, the birds which seemed to have such a presence in the folk tradition were hardly given mention as a phenomenon in their own right, and no conclusions were drawn between the characters in the folk tales, the metaphors in the songs, and the figures in the folk art, despite the clear parallels

between these media. Additionally, in sources about Russian art and artists, there was no discussion of the various representations of the avian-human motif they developed in their Neo-nationalist and Neo-primitivist work, and only the barest reference to the folk traditions that these images were drawn from. My hope is that my research will thus provide a new angle for the understanding and interpretation of Russian creative work of the modern period, and that the collective understanding of Russia's vibrant culture in the West in general, and the United States in particular, will be that much more complete.

Chapter 1: Romantic Nationalism in Russia and the Bird-Human Motif

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the reader to the development of Romantic Nationalism in Russia, and explore how this movement of thought came to influence the artists and writers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. I will first demonstrate how Russia's philosophical thinkers, such as Nikolai Mikhailovich Karamzin, Dmitry Vladimirovich Venevitinov, and Prince Vladimir Fyodorovich Odoevski, in the early 1800s laid the groundwork for the ideals of Romantic Nationalism, which inspired a fresh interest in Russian folk arts in the late 1800s. This will be followed by discussion of the work done by people such as the prominent folklorist Alexandr Afanasiev, who collected folk tales in order to preserve them in what was considered to be their most authentic forms. I will further explore an early example of professional creative work that exemplified at an early stage the patriotic ideals of Romantic Nationalism — the folk-inspired tales and poems of Russia's greatest poetic genius, Alexandr Sergeevich Pushkin. The chapter culminates in an exploration of a particularly prevalent motif in Russian folk works, that of the bird as connected to the human in folk tales, songs, and handicrafts. As will be demonstrated in Chapters 2 and 3, this motif became important to the Neo-nationalist and Neo-primitivist artistic movements of the late 1800s and early 1900s, which, as I will argue, came out of the ideas of Romantic Nationalism of the early 1800s.

After the reign of Peter the Great, Russia's nobles and intelligentsia were enamored with the philosophy and culture of France and the Enlightenment. There was little interest in the artistic work and oral lore of the common people of their own country. Over the years, however, views changed, especially in response to the French Revolution of 1789. This revolution brought with it the abolition of the feudal system, and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the

Citizen, which asserted the equality of all men. When King Louis the XVI refused to approve of these two actions, the country fell into a civil war that became a massacre of France's aristocracy. In response to a philosophy that they saw as a threat to their privileged lives, the upper classes of Russia, like the other nobles of Europe, began looking for other schools of thought that would not challenge their position.

The German movement of Sentimentalism proved to be particularly resonant at this time. This philosophy put an emphasis on emotion over reason, and encouraged its adherents to look to the past for inspiration. Importantly, history was not intended to be inspiration for historians alone, but for the people of the nation, to increase their patriotism. Nikolai Mikhailovich Karamzin, an influential Russian thinker, historian, and a man of letters, who at first was deeply attached to enlightenment ideals and reason, began to slowly transfer his allegiance to sentimentalism after 1789. With new ideas in mind, in 1803, he wrote that it was "necessary to inculcate in Russians a consciousness of their own value; it is necessary to show them that their past is capable of furnishing subjects of inspiration for the artist, of encouraging works of art, of making hearts palpitate. Not only the historian but also the poet, the sculptor, and the painter can be organs of patriotism."¹

Karamzin was not the only Russian philosopher to become convinced that Russia's artists and authors needed to draw inspiration from their native forms. The poet Dmitry Vladimirovich Venevitinov was a member of the Lovers of Wisdom (*Любомудры*), a group of philosophically-minded men who wanted to think independently of the French philosophers of the day, and whose main influence was therefore German. These thinkers' main interests were the

¹ Thaden, Edward C., "The Beginnings of Romantic Nationalism in Russia," *The American Slavic and Eastern European Review*, Vol. 13, No. 4, 1954, 509-510

philosophies of nature and art, with an emphasis on organic process and intuition.² For instance, Venevitinov was of the opinion that each nation had a “particular collective personality,”³ and that the people of the nation would seek to express that personality through their artworks. He was convinced that Russian art and literature was inferior to that of the West because it had not developed internally, but been borrowed from Western Europe. If Russia were to isolate itself, and follow its natural course of national development, then “the energy of her people could be fully utilized,”⁴ and then Russian literature and art would express her individuality and essence.

The founder of the Lovers of Wisdom, Prince Vladimir Fyodorovich Odoevskij, took this theme one step further. He thought that art, science, love, and faith were the four elements most necessary to be balanced in a society for its survival. He claimed that the Western world was in a decline because it had followed its philosophies to their logical conclusion, and no longer had any further to go, since it was out of balance. While the West had art and science, it lacked in faith and love. The East, which to him meant principally Russia, had developed a balance of the four elements after Peter the Great had brought the art and science of the West to his land — Russia had already faith and love in abundance. Therefore, the East was not only important, it could be the salvation of the West by providing it with an infusion of the faith and love that it so desperately needed to regain its balance.⁵

² Walicki, Andrzej, A History of Russian Thought: From the Enlightenment to Marxism, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 1979, 75-76

³ Thaden, 516

⁴ Thaden, 516-517

⁵ Thaden, 519-520

The activities and rationale of the Lovers of Wisdom were followed by those of the Slavophiles, a group of rather conservative members of the intelligentsia who believed in Russian moral supremacy. In fact, it may be argued that the Slavophiles were the direct heirs of the Lovers of Wisdom since Ivan Kireevsky, the man who developed the Slavophile philosophy of man and history, had been a member of said group. The Slavophiles, whose numbers included men such as the Aksakov brothers (Konstantin, a critic and dramaturge, and Ivan, an intellectual), and Petr Kireevsky (Ivan Kireevsky's brother, and a folklorist), believed that Russia's Orthodox Christian development had given its people a sense of community (*narodnost*, *народность*) that was lacking in the West. They felt that only Russia's Orthodox faith, therefore, could produce a new Christian philosophy that would revolutionize European intellectual life.⁶

These ideas about Russia's special status, while not broadly accepted at first by the Russian intelligentsia, were incorporated into the Romantic movement which, at the turn of 19th century, was gradually replacing Sentimentalism, to create a framework for thought known as Romantic Nationalism. Romantic Nationalism claimed that the purest form of national expression in art and literature could be found in the works of the lower classes, which had been left isolated, untainted by the cosmopolitan worldview of the Enlightenment, and that therefore, a nation's creative minds should draw upon these 'folk' pieces for their inspiration. It was also thought that the urbanization brought about by the industrial revolution was threatening to destroy the pure sources of native expression, and therefore folklore and folk art should be preserved.⁷

⁶ Walicki, 92-104

⁷ Thaden, 500-501

One of the most immediate responses to this philosophy was the drive to collect Russian folk tales. This was seen by adherents to Romantic Nationalist doctrine as a necessary activity, to preserve the pure forms of folk tradition before it was corrupted by external influence. One of the earliest people to do so in Russia was Alexandr Afanasiev (Александр Афанасьев, 1826-1871). A librarian and a scholar of Pushkin, Novikov, Kantemir, Fonvizin and Lermontov, Afanasiev began working with folklore in the 1850s, publishing many articles about folktales. He interpreted the stories as containing information about ancient Slavic beliefs and traditions. He also worked with many assemblages of folktales from various collectors around Russia, editing the stories for ease of reading, and for content, and compiling them by topic for publication. In his introductory article to Afanasiev's collection of folktales, critic V. Anikin writes that the scholar "extracted from the archive of the Russian Geographic society fairy tales that were preserved in the archive and added to these many of V. I. Dal's notes. The collection was composed of fairy tales of not just a single territory; it was an all-Russian compilation (*obshherusskoe tvorchestvo*). It included fairy tales from the Arkhangelsk, Astrakhan, Vladimir, Vologda, Voronezh, Enisei, Kazan, Kaluga, Kostroma, Kursk, Moscow, Nizhnii Novgorod, and Tula regions as well as fairy tales from Russia's other places and territories. A huge country gained a voice in this volume. An undertaking such as this would not be possible, if Afanasiev's effort to collect all known fairly-tales was not supported by other men of science and culture."⁸ Indeed, the resulting vast collection is still held by many to be the definitive collection of Russian folk tales.

⁸ Anikin, V. "Aleksandr Nikolaevich Afanasiev i ego fol'klornye sborniki" in *Narodnye russkie skazki* (Moscow: Pravda, 1982): 10.

The main belief of the adherents of Romantic Nationalism, however, was that these pure national sources, such as folk tales and crafts, should become a wellspring of creativity for the country's artists and authors. Alexandr Pushkin (*Александр Сергеевич Пушкин*, 1799-1837) is an example of an author thusly inspired at a time when Romantic nationalist ideas were taking root on Russian soil. In fact, it would be quite appropriate to think of some of Pushkin's work as an early manifestation of the Romantic Nationalist sentiment. One of Russia's greatest writers, he achieved fame for his frank emotion, lively personality, and inventive imagination. One of his sources of inspiration was the stories his caretaker Arina Radionovna, a serf woman, told him as a child. He loved these tales, and later took elements of them and worked them into new stories written in verse, beginning with *Ruslan and Ludmilla* (*Руслан и Людмила*) in 1820, and later *The Tale of the Golden Cockerel* (*Сказка о Золотом Петушке*), first published in 1835, and *The Tale of Tsar Saltan* (*Сказка о Царе Салтане, о Сыне его Славном и Могучем Богатыре Князе Гвидоне Салтановиче и о Прекрасной Царевне Лебеди*, 1832).⁹ These tales, in turn, went on to inspire artists later in the 19th and 20th centuries who were interested in Russian traditional works, and in particular the artists, composers, impresarios, and performers of the *fin-de-siecle*, such as Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, Ivan Bilibin, Mikhail Vrubel, Savva Mamontov, Sergei Diaghilev, and Natalia Goncharova, many of whom will be discussed in greater detail in the subsequent chapters.

Not only did Pushkin's interpretations of folk elements inspire these artists, but folk tales themselves, like those that had inspired him, did as well. In particular two genres of folk tale, the wonder tale and the bylina, were used. An important motif in these stories, as well as in folk

⁹ Massie, Suzanne, *Land of the Firebird: The Beauty of Old Russia*, HeartTree Press, Blue Hill, Maine, 1980, 204 and 207

songs, was the bird men and women, figures that connect humans to birds. Pushkin used this motif in *The Tale of Tsar Saltan*, and it became popular among the artists who adhered to the Romantic Nationalist ideal. This will be discussed further in Chapter Two of this project; the remainder of this section will focus on the appearance and function of this motif in the folk material it was later borrowed from, in order to facilitate better understanding of the sources of inspiration for the artworks, the discussion of which will also follow in subsequent chapters.

In the folk tales, the women who can become birds are referred to as a “dove-maidens” or “swan-maidens.” Their bird forms are birds connected with fertility and, an interpretation that was possibly developed later, eternal love. They are usually royal; swan maidens are nearly exclusively princesses, and dove maidens in some tales are the daughters of the Tsar of the Sea, ruler of the spirits of the water world.¹⁰ They are always magically powerful, and very intelligent, however, the two types of bird women serve very different functions in the stories they feature in.

The swan maiden is an object of conquest, part of a task the hero must accomplish in order to gain his own fortune in the end. She is often a princess that the hero must bring back for his Tsar, that he may wed her. She uses her swan form in an attempt to escape, which she does successfully the first time, but the second time, the hero subdues her so that she willingly submits to marry the Tsar. There is usually a sexual undertone to this coercion, because the manner in which the hero subdues the woman involves substituting himself for the Tsar on their wedding night. The Tsar refuses at first, which allows the princess to escape, because she is stronger than the Tsar, and she overpowers him. Because the hero is stronger than the Tsar, when the Tsar

¹⁰ Curtin, Jeremiah, *Myths and Folk Tales of the Russians, Western Slavs, and Magyars*, Dover Publications, 1999, 249-270

grants that he may take his place in the bed chamber, he fights with the princess and wins, gaining in the process her respect for him and the Tsar he serves, and she submits. This process can be seen in the tales “The Seven Simeons,”¹¹ and “Shkip.”¹²

Conversely, the dove maiden is typically an anthropomorphic helper for the hero. More often than not, she is also his wife, or bride-to-be. She is wise, and usually provides information for the hero, guiding him through the puzzles that he faces in his quests. A particular example of this is the tale “Go to the Verge of Destruction and Bring Back Shmat-Razum.”¹³

The bird men are also royal, sometimes even Tsars in their own right: in the tale “Vassilissa the Cunning and the Tsar of the Sea,” the eagle is the Tsar of the birds, and he takes the form of a “gallant hero” when he visits his sisters.¹⁴ The avian forms of these men are ravens, hawks, falcons, and eagles — the raven was associated strongly with death, while falcons and hawks were birds of war, and the eagle symbolized power. These characters typically act as aids to the hero. Occasionally, they are his brothers-in law, as in the tale “Marya Morevna.”¹⁵

Outside of the wonder tale, there are a few traditions that explicitly describe humans becoming birds. Witches, in Russian culture, are said to turn into owls or magpies.¹⁶ Magpies were especially feared. Pregnant women were warned not to venture outside after they heard a

¹¹ Propp, Vladimir Yakovlevich, tr. Forrester, Sibelan, The Russian Folktale, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 2012, 188

¹² Haney, Jack V., Long, Long Tales from the Russian North, University Press of Mississippi, 2013, 73-90

¹³ Curtin, 179

¹⁴ Curtin, 250, 254-257

¹⁵ Curtin, 203-205

¹⁶ Ralston, William Shedden, Songs of the Russian People, republished by Forgotten Books, 2008, 263

magpie call, for fear that the witch would lay a curse on the woman, endangering the pregnancy.¹⁷ Importantly, a witch, though she could take the form of many creatures, could not become a dove or pigeon.¹⁸ The dove, or pigeon, is the form that the human soul was meant to take on after death,¹⁹ and the witch, being a compatriot of the devil, was too impure to take this form.

There is another kind of oral media in which the human and bird are deeply and clearly connected, and that is the Russian folk song. These songs, like the folk tales, were important to the Romantic Nationalists as a source of pure national expression because they were created and sung by people who, on the whole, had not been exposed to the cultures and philosophies of other nations.

There are many different sub-genres of folk song, and they have been classified differently by ethnographers over the years. According to Vladimir Propp, the varied identities of the Russian peasants affected the poetic choices and topics of the songs, as did the purpose of the song.²⁰ The purpose of a folk song would have been either ritual or for personal amusement. The ritual songs can be categorized by the time of year they would have been sung. Non-ritual songs, however, can be divided by their social function and the people who would have sung them;

¹⁷ Warner, Elizabeth, Russian Myths, University of Texas Press, Austin, 2002, 58

¹⁸ Ralston, 263

¹⁹ Oinas, Felix J., Essays on Russian Folklore and Mythology, *Russian Golubec 'Grave Marker' and Some Notions of the Soul*, Slavica Publishers Inc., Columbus, Ohio, 1984, 79

²⁰ Reeder, Roberta, Russian Folk Lyrics, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1992; full excerpt (1) in appendix

barge haulers, soldiers, robbers, prisoners, and young women, all had distinctive songs that would have been sung by and about them.²¹

The use of birds as a metaphor for humans, however, is a poetic device that is found in many genres of song. There are specific birds that are used for certain situations. Most often, the birds that are directly related to humans in these songs are the same that were bird-men and bird-women in the wonder tales: swans, doves, and falcons.

An example of this is found in a piece called a “platter song.” This song in particular is a prediction of marriage, and features a falcon as metaphor of the groom, and a dove as the metaphor of the bride:

“A falcon flies
from one street,
glory!
A little dove
from another.

They fly together and kiss,
with their gray wings
they embrace.”²²

This is similar to a love song in which the woman is described as a white swan, and her partner as a drake:

“the white swan is a lovely beautiful maiden;
and the gray drake is a fine young man.”²³

²¹ Reeder, 2

²² Reeder, 89-90; full text (2) in appendix

²³ Reeder, 108; full text (3) in appendix

Songs of disappointed love differ in that the man is described as a dove as well as his partner, in a reference to the view that doves mated for life. This also seems to invoke the idea that the soul often becomes a pigeon after death.²⁴

Part of the ritual surrounding the marriage ceremony was the singing of laments by the bride. She would express her sadness, real or imagined, at leaving her parents' house and giving up her maiden freedom, through songs that had very structured imagery. She would often refer to her girl-friends as "white swans," or "little doves," as if they are the magical princesses of the wonder tale. In the example that follows, the use of "sweet dove" as an endearment for women, and "falcon" as an endearment for men is exhibited:

"Auntie, sweet dove!
Tell me, sweet dove,
how you parted
with your own daddy, with your mama who nourished you,
with your dear falcon brother,
with your dear sister dove,
with your aunties and grandmas,
with your dove girl friends...?"²⁵

Soldier songs also connect birds of prey to men, and to powerful warriors, while also expressing the soldiers' intense longing for home. This example uses the same type of indirect association between the natural world and the human world as does the song of disappointed love previously cited, by first describing the natural setting, then connecting a human to these natural images:

"...a young gray eagle
was flying high,
flying high,

²⁴ Ralston, 16-17; full text (4) in appendix

²⁵ Reeder, 123

shrieking pitifully.
In the formation a soldier
was sighing heavily...”²⁶

Another song, which refers to the Cossacks, directly connects the falcon to warriors. The song begins with the singer questioning the Don River, asking why it was no longer flowing freely. The River replies:

“How otherwise than troubled can I be?
I have sent forth my falcons bright,
my falcons bright, the Don-Kazáks.
Deprived of them my steep banks crumble down,
deprived of them my shoals are thick with sand.”²⁷

Songs sung by and about prisoners also use this same kind of imagery. One song, likely sung by a woman, is similar to the songs of frustrated love in that the male lover is identified as a dove, a peaceful bird — the prisoner’s innocence is thus implied.²⁸ Another example of a prisoner song directly equates the young male prisoner with the falcon, romanticizing him, and connecting him to the tradition of young men as powerful warriors.²⁹ In another song, the prisoner himself describes his siblings as falcons and swans, like the singers of marriage laments would:

“I, a fine young fellow, found...
neither brothers bright falcons,
nor sisters, white swans...”³⁰

²⁶ Reeder, 156

²⁷ Ralston, 37; full text (9) in appendix

²⁸ Reeder, 161

²⁹ Reeder, 162

³⁰ Reeder, 162

The songs and tales demonstrate that the connections between birds and humans were quite standardized and recognizable among the peasants, but they are not the only folk traditions that show a connection between birds and men. Folk art also portrays this connection by melding bird and human together. A figure of particular importance in folk media is that of the heavenly bird, particularly the one named Sirin, a bird connected with good fortune and protective abilities. The figure



Fig. 1: Enameled *kolt*, or temple pendant, showing Sirin birds flanking a tree of life, Kievan Rus

of Sirin is a very old one. Pieces of gold and enamel jewelry, called *kolti* (колти, Fig. 1) and *ryasny* (рясны, Fig. 2), from Kievan Rus portray Sirin or doves flanking stylized trees of life. These images were likely meant to protect the wearer, which would have been a woman, and grant her increased fertility.

These heavenly birds, Sirin and her counterparts Alkonost and Gamayun the Prophetic Bird, are portrayed as birds with the heads and chests, and sometimes the arms, of women. Sirin is often referred to as the bird of joy, and Alkonost as the bird of sorrow, but there seems to be no standardization for this, and the two can be switched with no apparent contradiction. Symbols of good luck meant to bring good fortune and safety, they were painted and carved onto household implements of all types as protective symbols. (Figs. 3, 4, 5) They even appeared in the *lubki* (лубки), the cheap woodcuts popular among the middle and lower classes, an art form that later gained particular significance as a source of inspiration for the Neo-nationalist and Neo-

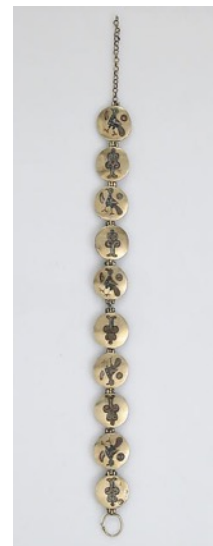


Fig. 2: *Ryasn* depicting doves and trees of life, Kievan Rus



Fig. 3: Carved Sirin, traditional, 19th century

primitivist artists. They were often depicted perched on, or near, flowering, fruited vines, symbolic of good fortune, wealth, and plenty.

It was said that these heavenly birds lived in heaven, and that when they came to earth, their songs were so beautiful that all who heard them would forget everything in rapture and die.³¹

The frequency and consistency of the appearance of these bird-human motifs in their respective mediums, such as story, song, painting, *lubok* prints, and wood carving, suggests that they were essential to folk culture. The next chapter will demonstrate that, since these birds were important to folk culture, they became important to the artists of the Romantic Nationalist movement in the late 1800s and early 1900s as a marker of Russian culture. For the creative minds of the *fin-de-siècle*, the bird-human became a representation of the Russian spirit, just as individual birds in folk tradition were symbolic of the human soul.

Fig. 4: Lid of chest with Sirin painted on it as a protective measure, traditional, 19th century

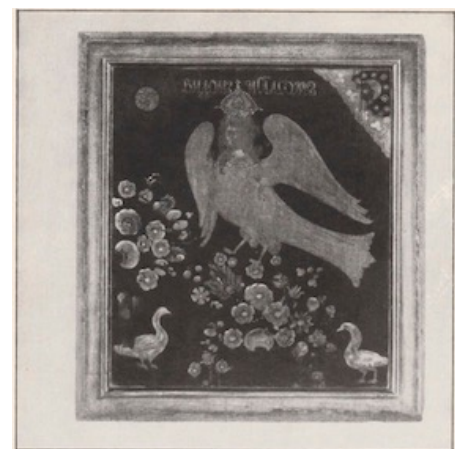


Fig. 5: A cupboard door with Sirin painted on it, traditional, 19th century

³¹ Hilton, Alison, Russian Folk Art, Indiana University Press, 1995, 172-174

Chapter 2: The Russian Neo-nationalist Revival of the *fin-de-siècle*

The ideals of Romantic Nationalism engendered by the writers and artists of the early to mid-1800s, continued to flourish in Russia in the last three decades of the 19th century within the so-called “Neo-nationalist” cultural revival. It is important to note that this revival, despite its connection to nationalism, had no political goals. The interests of its adherents were strictly in promoting the growth of creative genres that reflected the spirit of the nation by incorporating its traditional forms, while simultaneously preventing the disappearance of those forms. One of the manifestations of this revival was the development of workshops and schools meant to instruct serfs in traditional folk handicrafts, which were seen by the intelligentsia as at risk of dying out under the onslaught of urbanization and modernization. Two major centers emerged in Russia to facilitate and sponsor these endeavors — the artistic colonies of Abramtsevo and Talashkino. In this chapter, I will discuss these two colonies as the major centers of the Neo-nationalist revival, and their respective patrons as the supporters of the Romantic-nationalist ideals. I will then examine the artists of these colonies, and the romantic-nationalist bend to their work, specifically addressing the work, activities and accomplishments of Viktor Vasnetsov, Yelena Polenova and Ivan Bilibin – the artists that most vividly exemplified the workings of the Neo-nationalist cultural sentiment. In this context, I will draw attention to the importance of these artists’ creative imagination and reliance on the extant folklore sources in their attempts to develop an art that did not depend on the West for its subject matter and, more broadly, provide a vivid visualization of ancient Russia. Lastly, I will examine the motif of the avian-human as derived by these artists from the Russian folklore and reinterpreted in their own idiosyncratic ways. I will also discuss the work of Sergei Solomko and Mikhail Vrubel alongside that of Vasnetsov and Bilibin in order

to demonstrate the various forms that this avian-human motif took on in the Neo-nationalist movement. Solomko, although a lesser celebrity than Vasnetsov, Bilibin, and Vrubel, left a remarkable record of his idiosyncratic depictions of this motif, which, unlike those of Bilibin and Vasnetsov, were informed by the emerging Symbolist aesthetic, as were Vrubel's.

Originally the property of Sergei Aksakov (1791-1859), a Slavophile writer and the father of the Slavophiles Ivan and Konstantin Aksakov, *Abramtsevo* was bought by the Moscow railway magnate and patron of the arts Savva Mamontov (1841-1918) and his wife Elizaveta in 1870. Born in Siberia, Savva had fallen in love with Moscow upon moving there as a child. The Mamontovs, according to the fashion of the upper classes of the time, were well traveled and had spent time in Western Europe. A lover of music, Mamontov had even spent some years in Italy operatically training his voice.³² He had met Elizaveta there in 1864 — she was not only well educated for the standards set for women at that time and loved to read, but she also could sing and play keyboard. The pair had honeymooned in Rome, and often visited Germany, France, Rome, and Venice, taking particular pleasure in the operatic productions the West had to offer.³³

While both Mamontov and his wife were also interested in the traditions of the West, they were greatly influenced by the Slavophiles' ideals, as evidenced by the following quotation by Savva: “I am deeply convinced that art is destined to play an immense role in the reformation and reeducation of the Russian people, and that Russian society, morally reborn through art, is perhaps destined someday to serve as a beacon, a source of spiritual renewal even for Western

³² Massie, Suzanne, *Land of the Firebird: The Beauty of Old Russia*, HeartTree Press, Blue Hill, Maine, 1980, 393

³³ Stupples, Peter, “Abramtsevo: Resisting and Accepting Cultural Translation,” *New Zealand Slavonic Journal*, Vol. 45, No. 1, 2011, 77

Europe.”³⁴ In particular, Mamontov’s words reflect the views of Prince Odoevskij of the Lovers of Wisdom, who had been convinced of art’s importance in a society and Russia’s creative potential. His wife was no less equally devoted to these ideas. She was an active participant in the artistic productions at Abramtsevo, and set up a hospital and school for the serfs on the estate.³⁵

While Mamontov’s position at Abramtsevo was certainly influential, he himself was under the influence of an artist named Mstislav Prakhov.³⁶ Prakhov was an adherent to romantic ideals, and was seen by other members of Mamontov’s circle as a founding member, philosophically. Thanks to the ideals of its founding members, such as Prakhov, Mamontov’s estate soon became a center for romantic nationalist development.

In accordance with their ideals, Mamontov and his wife created a woodworking shop on their grounds. This shop was meant to teach traditional woodcarving to local young men, who were given designs based on traditional forms taken from all across Russia. This was followed by a ceramics shop, built with the same intent of reinvigorating traditional craft. The resulting decorative pieces would then be sold in shops run by Mamontov in Moscow and St. Petersburg. The patterns followed by the workers in the Abramtsevo shops were taken from artifacts collected by Elizaveta Mamontova and Yelena Polenova (1850-1898), a Russian artist with a strong interest in Russian folk culture, which were eventually organized into a museum of folk art curated by Polenova.

³⁴ Blakesley, Rosalind P., and Samu, Margaret, editors, From Realism to the Silver Age: New Studies in Russian Artistic Culture, *The Abramtsevo Circle: Founding Principles and Artistic Direction*, Northern Illinois University Press, 2014, 61

³⁵ Figs, Orlando, Natasha’s Dance: A Cultural History of Russia, Metropolitan Books, 2002, 265

³⁶ Blakesley and Samu, 63

Yelena Polenova used the pieces she collected from the villages as templates for designs meant for the woodcutting shop. As she became more familiar with the patterns of traditional wood carving, she began to create designs that were more traditionally-inspired than strict replicas of traditional work. She combined style elements from different areas of Russia as well, resulting in pieces with a more generic Russian look. She also had an interest in folklore, and she collected and illustrated Russian folk tales. She was one of the first Russian artists to do so; she was followed by the likes of Ivan Bilibin, whose works will be discussed more fully later on in this chapter.³⁷

The interest in building a place where Russian culture was the centerpiece was strong, and it fed into other developments at Abramtsevo. Russian artists were invited by the Mamontovs to design various buildings on the property in “Neo-nationalist style,” which meant that traditional Russian architectural forms like those of the *izba*, the traditional wooden peasant house, were used as inspiration.³⁸ For example, in 1880 the Vorya river, which ran through the Abramtsevo property, burst its banks, making it impossible for those Orthodox worshippers living nearby to access the local church. This inspired the Mamontovs to sponsor the construction of their own Orthodox chapel on the site. The chapel was designed by Viktor Vasnetsov,³⁹ an artist who was an integral part of the colony and one of the most important

³⁷ Bowlton, John E., *The Silver Age: Russian Art of the Early Twentieth Century and the “World of Art” Group*, Oriental Research Partners, Newtonville, MA, 1982, 35

³⁸ Bowlton, 1982, 33

³⁹ Bowlton, 1982, 34

practitioners of the Neo-nationalist artistic revival, with the old churches of Novgorod, a city which had originally been the northern stronghold of Kievan Rus, as his inspiration.⁴⁰

The Abramtsevo aesthetic reached into Moscow proper as well, and not just in the stores that sold the output of its workshops. Mamontov's interest in theatrical productions drove him to create his own private opera company and preside not only as producer but also as director. He did not focus only on Western operas, but sponsored the creation of new Russian productions. The plots were often based on Russian stories, either folk tales or stories based on historical events and personages, with music by Russian composers such as Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov and Modest Mussorgsky. The designs for sets and costumes were provided by the artists working at Abramtsevo, and included the works of Viktor Vasnetsov, Mikhail Nesterov, and Ivan Bilibin. Quite a few of these new Russian operas were created and premiered there, including *Snegoruchka* (1885), *Sadko* (1897), and *Boris Godunov* (1898).⁴¹ Of particular importance is the use of Abramtsevo's artists to create the designs for sets and costumes. Prior to this, stage designs had been done by people working strictly for the stage. It was not a particularly exalted position, and professional artists had never before turned to it in such a fashion. This experiment in stage decor would influence Sergei Diaghilev in his choices for the sets of Ballet Russes, which will be discussed in Chapter 3.

⁴⁰ In his work on the Abramtsevo church, Vasnetsov was aided by Vasily Polenov, the brother of Yelena, who worked out the basic design. The prototype for the Abramtsevo church was the Church of the Savior at Nereditsa (ca. 1199) located near Novgorod. Vasnetsov's design was instrumental for the completion of the project. In addition to the architectural drawings, Vasnetsov completed two icons for the church (*Sergii of Radonezh* and *Mother of God with a Baby*) and prepared sketches for the mosaic floors. See, *Viktor Mikhailovich Vasnetsov. Mir khudozhnika. Pis'ma, dnevniki, vospominaniia, suzheniia sovremennikov*. (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1987): 369.

⁴¹ Bowlt., 1982, 37-38

Abramtsevo was perhaps the most well-known of the Neo-nationalist artistic colonies, but it had an important companion in its quest to revive traditional Russian art, Talashkino. Located just to the south of Smolensk, Talashkino was established as an artistic colony by Princess Maria Tenisheva (1858-1928). Influenced by Slavophilic ideas, Tenisheva was very interested in supporting the Russian artistic world and in improving the lives of the Russian peasants. After her marriage to Prince Vyacheslav Tenishev in 1892 and their purchase of the Talashkino estate in 1893, Tenisheva had both the means and the location to begin her work in preserving Russian culture. Not one to do things halfway, she wanted to surpass Abramtsevo with her endeavors at Talashkino.⁴² Similarly to Elizaveta Mamontova, Tenisheva started by creating a small boarding school for orphans on the estate, where they were to be taught agricultural methods and traditional handicrafts.⁴³ In 1894, she established a school in St. Petersburg to help train students preparing to join the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts.⁴⁴ She also invited Sergei Maliutin, an artist who had gotten well established with Abramtsevo, to be the main resident artist at Talashkino. He designed a church for the property, as well as a building that was called the Teremok, or Little Tower, which eventually became a workshop where Tenisheva perfected her natural dyes for fabrics and threads.

Maliutin was also involved in running the woodcarving workshop that Tenisheva established as part of a complex of shops meant to produce Russian folk designs. This complex included a ceramics workshop run by an archaeologist, Ivan Barshchevsky, with assistance from

⁴² Bowlt, 1982, 42

⁴³ Bowlt, 1982, 42

⁴⁴ Bowlt, 1982, 40

Mikhail Vrubel, a key artistic talent in the development of Russia's *fin-de-siècle* modernism.⁴⁵

Talashkino also produced beautifully decorated balalaikas, which were sold as ornamental pieces for the wealthy — some of these instruments were designed by Vrubel, who imbued them with scenes from Russian tales. (Fig. 6) Tenisheva also ran an embroidery workshop on the estate where peasant women produced clothing with traditional embroidery to be sold to upper class women, like Tenisheva herself. This workshop showcased an important difference between the two Neo-nationalist colonies: while Abramtsevo was rather free in its artistic output, and the idea for the workshops was to produce near-facsimiles of peasant work, Talashkino's was controlled by the princess' impeccable taste. The traditional embroidery was typically executed in bright reds and yellows, but Tenisheva thought that it was too bright for subtle and subdued upper-class tastes. Therefore, even though she was forced to pay her work-women extra, she had them use softer colors that would be more likely to sell among the rich urban women who were following the trend of dressing in peasant embroidery.⁴⁶



Fig. 6: Balalaika design featuring Gamayun the Prophetic Bird, Mikhail Vrubel

In 1905, the year of the first Revolution, the princess established a museum of rare Russian artifacts in Smolensk, proving that her interest in folk art was not merely in taming and reproducing the images of folk culture for the decorative use of the upper classes, but in the

⁴⁵ Bowlt, 1982, 42-43

⁴⁶ Figes, 267

actual preservation of these forms for the sake of the Russian ethos that they evoked. Her collection of about 10,000 pieces of folk art, from embroideries to wood carvings to metal work, was thus put on display. Due to her concern for the artifacts' well-being during that time of political turmoil, after she moved to Paris she had part of the collection sent to her, and put it on display for a time there as well.⁴⁷

Some of the greatest artists of Russia's Silver Age, such as Mikhail Vrubel, Viktor Vasnetsov, and Ivan Bilibin came to Abramtsevo and Talashkino. Imbued with the ideals of Romantic Nationalism, they used resources such as the materials in the Abramtsevo museum to inform their painted works and applied arts. They also participated in the activities of the traditional craft workshops — Mikhail Vrubel's work in ceramics, which often featured Russian themes, was particularly noted. (Fig. 7) Russian folk tales also became a great source of inspiration to these artists, especially Viktor Vasnetsov and Ivan Bilibin.



Fig. 7: Ceramic fireplace, *Mikula Selyaninovich and Volga*, Mikhail Vrubel, 1898-1899

In the context of the Neo-nationalist revival lead by Abramtsevo and Talashkino, and the attention these colonies paid to Russia's traditional art, the work of Viktor Vasnetsov is particularly noteworthy. Vasnetsov (1848-1926) was born in the provincial town of Lopyal, which is about 563 miles east of Moscow. He attended a parochial school, and then seminary. While he was at seminary, he received tutoring in drawing. In his final year of seminary, his

⁴⁷ Bowlt, 1982, 44-45

father gave him his blessing to study at the Academy in St. Petersburg; he studied there from 1868-1873. Befriending Ilya Repin, he became a member of The Wanderers (*Передви́жники*), a group of Russian realists which focused on portraying the lives of the Russian folk, with some emphasis on the hard labor and social inequalities faced by the serfs.⁴⁸ This was a decision that influenced his artistic style for the rest of his career, even after he began painting subjects from folk lore, a move that was controversial among the other members of The Wanderers for its removal from reality. He applied the realist mode of portrayal, in which he was trained at the Academy, to the themes and characters from the old Russian stories, creating a sort of painterly “magical realism” that was to define a large portion of his career.

In 1870s, Vasnetsov started his association with Abramtsevo, which continued until the colony folded in the early 1900s. His village childhood and his religious background influenced his artistic work from this period greatly. Many of his paintings are of religious subjects, such as angels and saintly figures, the creation of which was informed by the power of his vision. His



Fig. 8: *A Knight at the Crossroads*, Viktor Vasnetsov, 1878

imagination was also captured by the rich assortment of Russian folk tales. He often painted scenes from wonder tales and *bylini*, creating works such as his *A Knight at the Crossroads* (*Витязь на Распутье*, 1878). (Fig. 8) In his letters, he wrote that he often found it necessary to use his imagination to fill in the realistic details of the “Old Russia” he portrayed in his work,

⁴⁸ For more information about The Wanderers, see the following book: Valkenier, Elizabeth Kridl, Russian Realist Art: The State and Society: The Peredvizhniki and their Tradition, Columbia University Press, 1989

since his sources — *lubki*, peasant designs, and icons — were all notoriously lacking in detail.⁴⁹ These paintings, steeped in the imagery of bygone days informed by his imagination and use of the folklore, ethnographic artifacts and ancient icons, deeply affected the art of his contemporary, Ivan Bilibin, who was also actively involved in Abramtsevo and Talashkino.

Ivan Bilibin (1876-1942) was born in Tarkhova, near St. Petersburg.⁵⁰ He studied at the School of the Society for the Advancement of the Arts from 1895-1898. In 1898, he studied with Anton Ažbe, then joined the art school of Maria Tenisheva where he studied under Ilya Repin until 1900. In 1899 he met Viktor Vasnetsov, and saw his work for the first time. In a 1928 interview with N. Misheyev, Bilibin recorded his impressions after encountering Vasnetsov's work: "I saw in Vasnetsov's canvas that towards which my soul was striving in confusion and that for which it yearned...If I had come from Moscow and not from St. Petersburg, it would have been somewhat easier for me to find myself."⁵¹ Bilibin was referring to the cultural differences and tensions between the two cities. Moscow was seen as the untainted cultural heart of Russia, while St. Petersburg was a rational European city that lacked the warmth of pure Russian culture. Bilibin saw his best art as that which came from inspiration from his homeland.

His conviction that Russian tradition was the best source of his inspiration was evidenced by the trajectory of his career from his encounter with Vasnetsov's work onward. Using Yelena Polenova's work and the style of the Russian *lubki* as inspiration, he began illustrating Russian

⁴⁹ In a letter to his friend, Vladimir King of August 20, 1887, Vasnetsov writes the following in regard to his fresco designs for a cathedral in Kiev: "Imagination is constantly needed to be engaged – sometimes the soul – to bring out and attach to the wall either an eye or a nose, even the entire head, a hand, a finger, a piece of clothing, a nostril, grass." See, *Viktor Mikhailovich Vasnetsov. Mir khudozhnika*, 79

⁵⁰ Golynets, Sergei, *Ivan Bilibin*, Harry N. Abrams Inc., NY, Aurora Art Publishers, Leningrad, 1981, 181

⁵¹ Golynets, 184

folk tales, a task which produced some of his most recognizable works. He also did more strictly ethnographic work. For instance, between 1901-1904, working with the Ethnographic Department of the Russian Museum, he travelled to different Russian provinces collecting examples of folk art.⁵²

Bilibin's illustrations of folk tales are perhaps his most well-recognized pieces, not least because he was quite active in his production of works that were meant to be printed and mass produced. Alexandr Benois, an artist, critic, art historian, and one of the key members of the World of Art group, commented on his work in the context of artists who, like him, were producing illustrations and prints for publication in books with great enthusiasm:

“It is characteristic of the St. Petersburg artists like...Bilibin...that they are working almost exclusively on book design. They have, with their great talent and the persistent call of their vocation, brought a breath of fresh air into the stuffy atmosphere of the book world and, thanks to them, we are today witnessing a sort of rebirth (if not the conception) of Russian book art.”⁵³

Benois' statement shows that Bilibin's work was seen as somewhat revolutionary by his contemporaries, that he was breaking new ground with his folk-inspired style and illustrations.

As the motifs of folklore and folk art played an ever-larger role in the works of these Neo-nationalist artists, such as Vasnetsov and Bilibin, the motif of the bird-man became particularly dominant in their artistic output, possibly because of the romantic notions attached to flight. The grace and beauty of avian flight, and its associations with individual freedom, made birds particularly popular among artists. However, it is likely that the romantic nationalists also had an interest in the bird as a symbol of the Russian spirit. Because it was so ubiquitous in

⁵² Golynets, 184

⁵³ A. Benois, *The Russian School of Painting*, 1904, as quoted in Golynets, 185

Russian folk culture, and because (as shown in Chapter One) the bird was so connected to the human soul and identity in folk culture, the birds that were most common in folklore became significant in art as representative of the Russian spirit. Perhaps the most ubiquitous of these bird motifs was Sirin, the Heavenly Bird.

Bilibin’s interpretation of Sirin was very literal when compared to its appearance in folk culture, which suggests that his ethnographic work for the Russian Museum had not been at all casual, but that he had



Fig. 9: Details of a house in Gorokhovets with Sirin on upper story

Fig. 12: Title page to “Tsarevna Frog” with Sirin on the bottom right, Ivan Bilbin, 1899



absorbed what he had learned through his observations for his own artistic use. He used Sirin mostly as a decorative element, in much the same style as it appeared, for instance, on peasant houses. (Fig. 9) For example, he used it as a decoration on the window of his illustration *The Princess in*

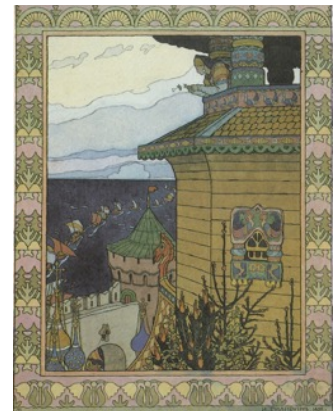


Fig. 10: Illustration for “The Little White Duck” with Sirin adorning the window, Ivan Bilbin, 1902

Fig. 11: Headpiece to “Vasilisa the Beautiful” featuring Sirin and Alkonost, Ivan Bilbin, 1900



the Tower for “The Little

White Duck” (*Белая*

Уточка) in 1902. (Fig. 10) It also appeared in the

borders of title pages and in the headings of his

folktale illustrations, like his 1899 frontispiece to a

collection of folktales which included “Tsarevna

Frog” (*Царевна Лягушка*), (Fig. 11) and his 1900

headpiece for “Vasilisa the Beautiful” (*Василиса Прекрасная*).

(Fig. 12) The positioning of Sirin in these images is very similar — in each case, Sirin is not shown alone, but in a pair, with either Alkonost, the bird of Sorrow, or another bird. These pairs frame the images in the manner that the protective Sirin on a building would be set symmetrically around a window.

Furthermore, Bilibin also chose to use Sirin in a very traditional manner in a more ethnographic type of drawing. In a series of postcards done in 1905, he depicted a young woman from Vologda in “festive dress.” (Fig. 14) The woman is carrying what appears to be a wooden basket. The roughly painted Sirin on the basket’s center, portrayed in red, yellow, and blue, is very similar to the way that Sirin was often styled on household tools, such as spindles and hand baskets. (Fig. 13)

In his work, Bilibin often mimicked the style of the *lubki* as well. (Fig. 15) In 1905, he produced a pair of paintings, *Sirin* (*Райская Птица Сирин*) (Fig. 17) and *Alkonost* (*Райская Птица Алконостъ*). (Fig. 16) The works are almost archetypical of his style, with clean lines and solid colors. The two birds face in opposite directions, as if they are meant to be placed facing each other like the Sirin that he used to frame the title of “Vasilisa the Beautiful,” and like the Sirin that were traditionally used to



Fig. 13: Drop-spindle and basket with Sirin painted on them, traditional, 19th century

Fig. 14: *Maiden from Vologda in Festive Dress*, postcard design, Ivan Bilibin, 1905





Fig. 15: *Lubok* print of Heavenly Bird Alkonost, traditional, 19th century

protect windows. Another traditional element in these illustrations was the flowered vines that the birds are perched on. As was common in the *lubki*, he identified the heavenly birds with titles, and provided smore information about their characteristics in detailed captions underneath the images. He also emphasized the heavenly birds' songs by writing a string of text that extends from each bird's mouth.

Despite the many similarities between the two images, the birds are



Fig. 17 (left): Heavenly Bird Alkonost, Ivan Bilibin, 1905



Fig. 16 (right): Heavenly Bird Sirin, Ivan Bilibin, 1905

strongly distinct from one another. The feathers of Sirin are black. Her crown is simple, more like a coronet, and she lacks clothing and human arms. In appearance, she is very much like the harpies, the fierce punishers from Greek mythology. Alkonost is almost in complete contrast to her. Her feathers are red, and her breasts are covered by an embroidered scarlet coat. She has

human arms, and she holds a flower and a scroll in her hands. Her crown is also more elaborate than Sirin's, as if every part of her is bursting with vitality and wealth.

The difference in their facial expression is very subtle. They both look very proud and stern, but while Sirin looks as if she is smiling through her tears, Alkonost seems to be smiling from true happiness. All elements of their appearance taken together, it seems that Bilibin has decided to give Sirin the role of the Bird of Sorrow and Alkonost the position of the Bird of Joy.

Bilibin's approach to the depiction of these figures was very different than that of Viktor Vasnetsov. Unlike Bilibin, who imitated the flat planes and solid lines of the *lubki*, Vasnetsov reinterpreted the heavenly birds' appearances, painting them in a realistic style typical of his oeuvre in general, and his Neo-nationalist works in particular. His *Sirin and Alkonost — Birds of Joy and Sorrow* (*Сирин и Алконост — Птицы Радости и Печали*) (Fig. 17) shows the two birds sitting next to each other in a tree. Unlike the stiff form and subtle expression of Bilibin's

Fig. 18: Sirin and Alkonost — Birds of Joy and Sorrow, Viktor Vasnetsov, 1896



interpretation, Vasnetsov's birds are animated and passionate. Alkonost weeps disconsolately, while Sirin appears to sing happily, gesturing broadly with her wings. Neither of the two have arms, which makes them more bird than human, emphasizing their identity as mythical beasts.

A similar stylistic approach was taken by Sergei Solomko (1867–1928), who painted a version of Sirin. Solomko, who studied at both the Moscow School of Art, Sculpture, and Architecture, and the St. Petersburg Academy, is known for his art-nouveau watercolors. His work showed symbolist influences, with much of it comprised of scenes from a romanticized past. It can be said of him that, though he was less recognized than either Vasnetsov or Bilibin, he was another artist of the Neo-nationalist revival. While he had a great passion for the West, and spent his years after 1910 living in Paris, he also had a great affection for his homeland and its folklore. This is evidenced, for instance, by his illustrations of Pushkin's folk-inspired tales, *The Tale of Tsar Saltan* in 1896, and *The Golden Cockerel* in 1925, and also his series of postcards based on ideas of "Old Russia" that became quite popular for a time in Western Europe.⁵⁴

His *Blue Bird (Sirin Bird)* (*Синяя Птица — Птица Сирин*) (Fig. 19) is depicted in a realistic style, somewhat similar to Vasnetsov's. However, his Sirin is far more languid. She lies on the tree branch, more like a reclining angel than a bird, her arms gently caressing the limb and pillowing her head. In fact, she has more of a human body than other representations of the heavenly bird, with her torso extending nearly to the waist. Her gaze is very direct, but she does not seem to look at the viewer, rather at some spot in the middle distance with a focus almost strangely intense for her relaxed pose. The use of watercolors, as opposed to Vasnetsov's oil paint, makes the colors of Solomko's appear softer. It may also be argued that Solomko applied

⁵⁴ "Solomko, Sergei Sergeich" in *Khudozhniki russkoi emigratsii (1917-1941)*, eds. D.Ia. Severiukhin, and O.L. Leikind, Peterburg, Izdatel'stvo Chernysheva, 1994, 421-422.

the idea of the romanticized, ideal Symbolist woman to this traditionally magical bird, creating an art-nouveau version of the beast that is in line with the symbolist concept of the eternal feminine.

The romanticization of bird-human figures, specifically in terms of the romanticization of females, became modish in art and literature at this time. As mentioned in reference to Solomko, the symbolist idea of the eternal feminine (*вечная женственность*) was particularly important to this interpretation of the bird-woman. The eternal feminine was a concept of “inherent femininity,” the idea that women were born capable of sympathy, kindness, grace, and beauty, and that these elements were crucial to what it was to be a woman. Women were inherently capable of caring for a home and family, and were more morally upright than men from birth. However, for the symbolists, the woman also took on the role of erotic, mysterious seductresses. There was something tantalizing about a woman that a man simply could not understand, and so while she was a nurturing, mothering figure she was also gorgeous and strange, sometimes nearly fey.⁵⁵ The image of the Swan Princess is particularly noticeable in this context.

Fig. 19: *Blue Bird (Sirin Bird)*, Sergei Solomko



⁵⁵ For a closer examination of the notion of the “eternal feminine” in the context of Russian literary Symbolism, see Avril Pyman, *A History of Russian Symbolism*, Cambridge UP, Cambridge, 1994, and Jenifer Presto, *Beyond the Flesh: Alexander Blok, Zinaida Gippius, and the Symbolist Sublimation of Sex*, Madison, The University of Wisconsin Press, Wisconsin, 2008

As shown in Chapter One, the Swan Maiden in Russian folk tales was typically a powerful woman, capable of overpowering men and changing her shape at will. However, her appearance and function changed when she was reimagined by the Romantic creators of the fin-de-siècle. The change seems to have originally come with Pushkin's *Tale of Tsar Saltan*. The main woman in the text is the hero's wife. She is a swan-princess, a woman who was placed under a curse that turned her into a swan. Her role in the text is more like that of the dove-maidens from the wonder tales, such as "Go to the Verge of Destruction and Bring Back Shmat-Razum" which was referenced in Chapter One, than a traditional swan-maiden: she gives aid to the hero, and becomes his loyal wife, like an ideal romantic woman.

Interestingly, Bilibin was one of many to illustrate Pushkin's *The Tale of Tsar Saltan*. His portrayal of the Swan Princess from this series of illustrations is extremely straight-forwardly graphic, almost completely lacking in any emotional interpretation. (Fig. 20) The swan sits serenely in the blue-green waves, a sturdy golden crown perched on her head. He has effectively divorced this particular swan-princess from any notion of romanticism, or even femininity, and produced a swan that belongs to royalty, but not to humanity.

Fig. 20: *The Swan Princess*, illustration for Pushkin's *Tale of Tsar Saltan*, Ivan Bilibin, 1905



Mikhail Vrubel, a celebrated proto-symbolist artist with strong connections to Abramtsevo and especially its ceramic workshop, had a greater interest in the romantic possibilities of the image of the bird-become-woman. Instead of being strict illustration of the concept of a swan-who-is-a-princess, like Bilibin's

portrayal, his 1900 painting *Swan Princess* (*Царевна-Лебедь*) shows the princess, modeled by his wife,⁵⁶ in the process of changing from bird to woman. (Fig. 18) She looks at the viewer over her shoulder, as if she has just been discovered by the side of the pool. The softness of the edges of her outline make her seem fragile, almost ethereal, as if she might fade away into the mist like a spirit. Her dress is rich, with silver lace edging it, and a delicate bejeweled silver crown, based on the traditional Russian women's headdress, the *kokoshnik*, graces her head, emphasizing her royal position and her non-Western ethnic identity. Her long hair and large, liquid eyes, emphasize her femininity, connecting her to the symbolist "eternal feminine" as a representative of that ideal beauty. Her complexion is pale, and her expression is soft and kind. She is the picture of ideal womanhood: gentle and fragile. The way the feathers of the swan skin seem to be splitting and falling away from her like the open back of a dress is reminiscent of the phrase



Fig. 21: *Swan Princess*, Mikhail Vrubel, 1900

used in the folk tales to describe how dove maidens change from bird to woman: they “take off their wings.” This resonance between the phrase and the visualization suggests that Vrubel may have been aware of this trope and used it as a source of inspiration.

⁵⁶ Vrubel's wife, Nadezhda Ivanovna Zabela-Vrubel (*Надежда Ивановна Забела-Врубель*), was a coloratura soprano. Between 1897–1904, she performed in Savva Mamontov's private opera, during which time she debuted the role of the Swan in Rimsky-Korsakov's operatic interpretation of Pushkin's *Tale of Tsar Saltan*.

Solomko also painted a swan maiden, but unlike Vrubel, who portrayed her as a romanticized, ideal woman, Solomko created an image based on the crafty, tricky swan-maiden of the folklore, specifically the bylina of Mikhailo Potyk. (Fig. 22)

The story of Mikhailo Potyk showcases the independent spirit and fickleness of the traditional swan maiden. As Potyk is making his way back to Kiev from a mission given him by the Tsar, he sees a swan. He decides to shoot this swan. However, the swan tells him that she is actually a woman, Maria White-Swan, and will be his wife if he swears to her that if one of them survives the other, they will enter the tomb of their spouse for a time. He agrees, and they go back to Kiev. On returning from a later trip, Mikhailo learns that his wife has died. He enters the tomb with her, beats off the serpent that comes to devour her body, and uses the “living water” the snake brings him to revive her. After they are released from the tomb, Maria’s attitude toward



Fig. 22: *Maria Swan-White*, Sergei Solomko, 1917

Mikhailo, which had previously been loving, changes. Her head is turned by one of the many suitors that come to court her as a result of her supposed immortality, and she casts a spell over her husband, turning him to stone. He is saved by his friends, Ilya Muromets and Dobrynya

Nikitich. This happens two more times, after which Mikhail gives up hope that she still loves him, kills her, and takes another wife.⁵⁷

Solomko painted *Maria Swan-White* (*Мария Лебедь Белая*) after Mikhailo Potyk's wife from the *bylina*. The feathery texture of her gown and her unnaturally pale white face mark her as a magical being. Unlike Vrubel's princess, however, these features do not make her appear fragile. Instead, she looks sharp and cunning, a Jezebel. She looks over her shoulder at the viewer with a sly grin, as if teasing, or seducing. Despite her lack of royal rank, her jewelry is rich, with a multitude of pearls that gleam against her clothing. She wears a large, heavy crown. She seems to be actively happy with this wealth, raising the string of gems around her neck for her audience to see.

While the bird-women were more popular among artists, the bird-men also had a place in painting. The best example of this is Viktor Vasnetsov's ancient Russia-themed monumental canvas *The Battlefield of Igor Svjatoslav and the Polovtsy* (*После Побоища Игоря Святославича с Половцами*). There are two completed versions of paintings on this theme; the first was finished in 1880, (Fig. 23) the second in 1890, (Fig. 24) during the period when he was focused on portraying the themes of the romanticized "Old Russia," and the heroes of the epic tales.

The version from 1880 shows the sun setting in a cloudy sky over the aftermath of the battle. The bodies of both armies lie sprawled on the verdant field, their useless weapons and shields scattered among them. The sunlight, filtered through the clouds, makes the corpses of

⁵⁷ Bailey, James and Ivanova, Tatyana, *An Anthology of Russian Folk Epics*, M. E. Sharpe, Inc., Armonk and London, 1998, 147-148



Fig. 23: *The Battlefield of Igor Svjatoslav and the Polovtsy*, Viktor Vasnetsov, 1880

Fig. 24: *The Battlefield of Igor Svjatoslav and the Polovtsy*, Viktor Vasnetsov, 1890



Igor's men seem to glow, as if they are somehow holy, while the opposition is not touched by these last rays of light.

The 1890 version is more somber. The sun has already disappeared beneath the horizon, its last rays tinging the clouds red. The field is dark, and the forms lying thereon are thus less distinct than in the 1880 version. The men lie where they have fallen, haphazard and broken. The darkness of this scene removes the sense of peace that was imbued by the light that tinted the earlier painting; while the first imparted the sense that the battle had finished, the second contains a tension that suggests that, even after the death of the combatants, the fight is ongoing.

The most striking and symbolic feature of both paintings is the birds that have come on to the scene, ostensibly to feast on the bodies left behind. The reason that this is of any interest in context of this project is Vasnetsov's choice of species. The most recognizable carrion birds are crows, ravens, and vultures; in Russia in particular, there is a tradition that ravens and crows will come to the aftermath of a war to pick out the eyes of the dead. Therefore, it is surprising that the birds Vasnetsov chose to feature in these paintings were eagles and falcons. In both paintings, an eagle crouches in the lower left hand corner. Its wings are hunched, its head is bowed, as if sorrowing at the carnage behind it. Two birds, whether eagles or falcons is unclear, squabble just to the right of the paintings' centers.

It seems less strange that these birds are featured in an image of war, however, when their role in folk lore is considered. As was demonstrated in Chapter One, the falcon is symbolic of young men, and especially of warriors, while the eagle is symbolic of powerful leaders. Vasnetsov had an intimate knowledge of folk lore, so it seems likely that he was aware of these meanings, and used the birds to symbolically portray the battle that had taken place on that field.

In a way, the birds of prey are the spirits of the warriors who had lain down their lives. Vasnetsov thus portrayed the spirits of the ideal Russian heroes of old, perhaps bowed after the fight but unbeaten, defiant and powerful even in the face of Death itself.



Fig. 25: *Gamayun, Prophetic Bird*, Viktor Vasnetsov, 1897

Abramtsevo's and Talashkino's artists such as Bilibin, Vasnetsov, and Vrubel were not the only ones working with the avian-human motif. It was popular among men of letters as well. In addition to Pushkin, writers of the Silver Age, such as Aleksandr Blok, also picked up these images, using them in their own works. Some of these works, however, were inspired by the paintings of their contemporaries. An example of this artistic cross-pollination involves the Heavenly bird Gamayun. In 1897, Vasnetsov painted *Gamayun, Prophetic Bird* (*Гамаюн, птица вещая*), showing the strange bird with her woman's head sitting on a bent sapling above waters tinged red with the sunset, gesticulating with her

wings, her face stern and wild. (Fig. 25) Blok, one of the poets belonging to the "young symbolists" (*младосимволисты*), a group who also derived inspiration from traditional Russian ideas, wrote a poem based on Vasnetsov's painting (Fig. 26):

"Gamayun, Bird of Prophecy
(painting by V. Vasnetsov)

On the glass-still unending water,
vested with purple by the sunset,

not rising on her strong wings in turmoil,
 she prophesies and sings...
 She prophesies the yoke of cruel tatars,
 she prophesies a row of bloody executions,
 of cowards, famine, and fire,
 the power of villains, the death of the righteous...
 Embraced by eternal horrors,
 her fair face burns with love,
 but prophetic truth rings
 from her lips, caked with blood!...”⁵⁸

Blok’s poem gives the Bird Gamayun a life outside of Vasnetsov’s painting by giving her a historical context, connecting her with the invasion of Kievan Rus by the Golden Horde through her prophecies. That she speaks of it as an event yet to come connects her to an even deeper past, to at least the Slavic glory of Kievan Rus itself, or even to the early Slavs, who lived in the area now collectively referred to as Eastern Europe before Kievan Rus even emerged. Blok also gives the prophetic bird a sympathy for the Slavs whose destruction she predicts, referring to the invaders as “villains” and their victims as “the righteous.” He thus gives the Bird Gamayun a definite place outside the canvas, not only in the realm of Russian mythology and folk tradition, but as a figure tied to Russian history who is not only prophetic, but has an active affection for the Russian people, the Slavs.

The symbolist poets and artists, like Blok and Vasnetsov, made the turn of the century an exciting time in Russian arts and letters. Many changes, including revolutionary shifts in art that

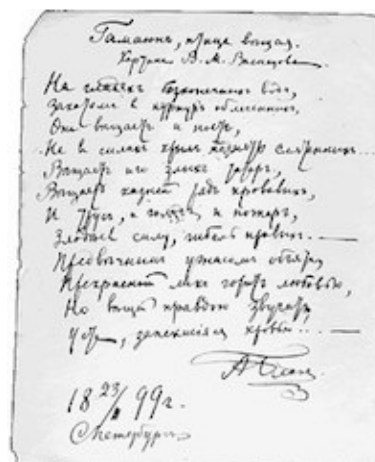


Fig. 26: Manuscript of A. Blok’s *Gamayun, Bird of Prophecy*, 1899

⁵⁸ translation by K. Keating, 3-17-16

had never before been dreamt of, came to the fore. Yet, despite these often revolutionary developments, there persisted a continuity in the philosophy of Russian romantic-nationalists and the Neo-nationalist revival engendered by the artistic colonies at Abramtsevo and Talashkino. Even as the new, more radical artists strove to be different from their predecessors, often rejecting and debunking them, they retained a respect for the cultural wealth of their native land, and despite their radical new styles, embraced the idea of taking inspiration from their home, thus advancing further the attitudes and ideas of Romantic nationalism. In Chapter 3, I will provide evidence of this modernist attraction to old Russian tradition through the works of Natalia Goncharova and her Neo-primitivist work, particularly her set and costume designs for Sergei Diaghilev's grand experiment, the Ballet Russes.

Chapter 3: Romantic Nationalism and Natalia Goncharova: Neoprimitivism and the

East

One of the creators at the forefront of the new generation of Russian modernist artists was Natalia Goncharova (1881-1962). Though in the history of Russian modern and avant-garde art she is likely to be best known for her Cubo-futurist works such as *The Cyclist* (*Велосипедист*, 1913) and *Airplane over a Train* (*Самолёт над Поезд*, 1913), she was an artist who loved to experiment, and who often changed her style to push avant-garde experimentation forward. In the context of this research, Goncharova's oeuvre is important because the "Neo-primitivist" period in the development of her art (c. 1909-1910) saw her turning in the exact same direction as Vasnetsov, Bilibin, Vrubel', Polenova and other artists of the Neonationalist movement of Abramtsevo and Talashkino: to the East and to the indigenous culture of her homeland. In this chapter, I will explore Natalia Goncharova's artistic practices of the neo-primitive period ultimately focusing on her designs for the 1914 Ballets Russes' Paris production of Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov's *Golden Cockerel* (*Золотой Петушок*) and Igor Stravinsky's *Les Noches* (*Свадебка*, 1923). I will argue that Goncharova's costume and set designs for these productions, which stemmed from the so-called "peasant" cycle of her Neo-primitivist canvases, represented the next phase in the workings of the tenets of Romantic Nationalism in its experimental guise in *fin-de-siècle* Russia. Broadly, in this chapter I will focus on Goncharova's costume and set designs for these productions and explore more narrowly the motif of the Sirin birds in them and Goncharova's idiosyncratic interpretation of it.

After graduating from the Fourth Women's Gymnasium in Moscow, Goncharova followed her father's footsteps and studied at the Moscow Institute of Painting, Sculpture and

Architecture beginning in 1901. Initially training as a sculptor, her interest changed to painting after a year or so because she felt that the medium of sculpture did not allow for a great enough range of expression. Once she got accustomed to the new medium, she started working in the impressionist style, following the mode of the time. She quickly and fluidly switched from style to style from then on, beginning with periods characterized by Symbolism and French modernism; often, different styles would overlap, since she was interested in choosing the best possible form to transmit the response she wanted to evoke, and less concerned with purity of style.⁵⁹

While she studied at the Academy, Goncharova met Mikhail Larionov, who was also a student there at that time. They soon became lifelong bosom companions, living together and continually exchanging ideas about art. Starting in about 1908, the work they did while studying the French modernists brought them to a realization: they began to feel that the Western modes of expression were worn out. They were not the only ones. A small group of Russian artists, which included David Burlyuk, Marc Chagall, and Kasimir Malevich, began to not only look at their national folk art and use the subject matter — like the artists involved in the Neo-nationalist movement at Abramtsevo and Talashkino — but to also mimic the “primitive” style of the peasant artists in its simplicity. Part of what Goncharova in particular found attractive in these styles was the bright color palate. Traditional Russian art was not known for muted tones, but instead for brilliant reds, yellows, blues, and greens.

One of those to join Goncharova and Larionov in the creation of the Neo-primitivist style was Aleksandr Shevchenko, an artist born in Kharkiv, Ukraine who had been trained in theatrical

⁵⁹ Parton, Anthony, Goncharova: The Art and Design of Natalia Goncharova, Antique Collector’s Club, Suffolk, UK, 2010, 15-39

design before moving with his family to Moscow, where he studied under Konstantin Korovin and Mikhail Vrubel, among others. He met Larionov and Goncharova in Moscow in 1907, just before they began exploring the possibilities of Neo-primitivism. Along with the artists mentioned in the previous paragraphs, he joined them in this pursuit. In 1913, he published a pamphlet titled “Neo-primitivism: Its Theory, Its Potentials, Its Achievements,” a practice typical of the avant-garde artists of the period wishing to disseminate their ideas about new painterly practices. In it, among other things, he detailed the Russian folk sources exploited by the Neo-primitivists for inspiration. Schevchenko writes:

“We are striving to seek new paths for our art, but we do not reject the old completely, and of its previous forms we recognize above all — the primitive, the magic fable of the old East...

Beauty is only in the harmony of simple combinations of forms and colors...

Primitive art forms — icons, *and*, trays, signboards, fabrics of the East, etc. — these are specimens of genuine value and painterly beauty.”⁶⁰

According to Schevchenko, for the Neo-primitivists, the simplicity of the flat, abstracted forms of the icons and *lubok* prints were the best representation of the natural world because they were truly artistic interpretation of the world, as opposed to the strict representation of realism. The focus of these artists was not the subject of their works, but the painting itself, and the subject was only a means to further the development of the art. Schevchenko goes on to assert that Russia itself gained its artistic style from the Far East, specifically from the Tatar occupation, and that Russia’s “Eastern” national character had always held an interest for Westerners who came to visit because of its vibrant, emotive “otherness.” He notes, however, that Neo-primitivism’s philosophy derives some of its foundation from Western artistic theory.

⁶⁰ Schevchenko, Alexandr, “Neo-primitivism: Its Theory, Its Potentials, Its Achievements,” Bowlf, John E., ed. and trans., Russian Art of the Avant Garde: Theory and Criticism, Viking Press, 1976, 45

Neo-primitivism, therefore, is not simply the copying of the colors and forms of primitive art, but utilizing these for the artists' self-expression.

Goncharova used the Neo-primitivist style to paint a multitude of subjects, running the gamut from peasants working in the fields to the Orthodox saints. Her adoption of her native folk traditions as a source of inspiration is perhaps most dramatically visible in the preface to the catalogue of her 1913 solo exhibition in Moscow. Goncharova writes on this occasion:

“Now I shake the dust from my feet and leave the West, considering its vulgarizing significance trivial and insignificant — my path is toward that source of all arts, the East. The art of my country is incomparably more profound and important than anything I know in the West... We have learned much from Western artists, but from where do they draw their inspiration, if not from the East?...

I am convinced that modern Russian art is developing so rapidly and has reached such heights that within the near future it will be playing a leading role in international life. Contemporary Western ideas (...) can no longer be of any use to us. And the time is not far off when the West will be learning from us.

...the objectives that I am carrying out and that I intend to carry out are the following:

...To draw my artistic inspiration from my country and from the East, so close to us...

I turn away from the West because for me personally it has dried up and because my sympathies lie with the East.

The West has shown me one thing: everything it has is from the East...

If I extol the art of my country, then it is because I think that it fully deserves this and should occupy a more honorable place than it has hitherto.”⁶¹

Goncharova's description of the West as dried up, and her assertion that everything it has artistically came from the East and that Russia will become the West's source of renewal is extremely similar to the beliefs of Savva Mamontov, and Prince Odoevskij of the Lovers of Wisdom before him – the major proponents of the Slavophile sentiment and the Neo-nationalist revival. In the case of Goncharova, an artist who continually searched for the best possible form

⁶¹ Goncharova, Natalia, “Preface to Catalogue of One-Man Exhibition,” in Bowlt, 1976, 54-60

of expression for a given subject, she found what she considered some of the richest media for expression in the folk art of Russia and other Eastern countries.

In addition to her “peasant” cycle of paintings, which included works such as *Harvest* (*Жатва*, 1911) (Fig.) and *Dancing Peasants* (*Крестьянские Танцы*, 1911), Goncharova’s work in the Neo-primitive style is also exemplified by her first attempt at creating designs for the ballet theater, for the production of *The Golden Cockerel* staged by Sergei Diaghilev and the Ballet Russes in 1914, and her later designs for their 1923 production of Stravinsky and Bronislava Nijinska’s *Svadebka*.

Sergei Diaghilev (1872-1929) was the enigmatic impresario, founder and producer of the Ballet Russes, a ballet troupe created to bring Russian ballet to Western audiences. However, before he had begun that project, he was more involved with the painting world. Always interested in the arts but lacking the talent to create himself, Diaghilev’s true talent lay in organization and



Fig. 27: *Harvest*, Natalia Goncharova, 1911

fundraising, skills crucial for setting up exhibitions. Upon receiving an inheritance in the early 1890s, he began traveling around Europe, meeting some of the influential artists and patrons of the day and buying pieces he found interesting. He also befriended Savva Mamontov, and met the artists working at Abramtsevo. These relationships deeply influenced him and his taste in art, and, possibly, his views on Western Europe as well.⁶² Upon returning from a trip there in 1896,

⁶² Massie, Suzanne, *Land of the Firebird: The Beauty of Old Russia*, HeartTree Press, Blue Hill, Maine, 1980, 422-423

he wrote, “Europe needs our youth and spontaneity. We must go forth at once. We must show our all, with all the qualities and defects of our nationality.”⁶³

As part of “The World of Art” (*Мир Искусства*) group of modernist artists and intellectuals and one of the editors of the group’s eponymous journal, Diaghilev, along with his compatriots, a group which included both Mamontov and Princess Tenisheva as financiers, was able to provide another outlet for Neo-nationalist and symbolist artists to publish their artworks. He began organizing exhibitions as well, displaying the works of these artists not only in Russia, but in Western Europe. Goncharova and Larionov were two of the artists to become involved with him at this time. He saw their individual and group exhibitions during this period, and was impressed by their work, enough so that he kept them in mind for future projects.

In the early 1900s, the group that had put together the World of Art journal decided to move on to the ballet world. Since Russian handicraft had been well received in Western Europe at the Exposition Universelle, a world’s fair held in Paris in 1900, where Russian peasant crafts had been one of the most popular exhibits (Abramtsevo and Talashkino had also displayed their folk-inspired works to positive response),⁶⁴ they decided to bring Russian painting, opera, and ballet to the West as well. Diaghilev saw further opportunity for this venture in Russia’s dependence on French loans — the 1905 revolution and the disastrous Russo-Japanese war had shaken French confidence in Russia’s capabilities, and therefore the Russian government was willing to fund cultural initiatives in France in order to promote a positive image of Russia as a

⁶³ Figes, 270

⁶⁴ Bowlt, 1982, 43

strong, vibrant, and civilized nation.⁶⁵ Diaghilev began this program of promotion in 1906 with an exhibition of Russian painting in Paris. The positive reception allowed him and his comrades to continue, organizing operatic productions first, then branching out into ballet.⁶⁶ At this time, ballet in Russia was still very connected to the traditions it had inherited from France and there were not any ballets that were created completely by Russian choreographers, composers, and artists, and based on Russian stories — it would be the Ballet Russes, therefore that would develop what the Western world came to recognize as “Russian” ballet.

Beginning in 1909, the Ballet Russes began staging productions, giving Paris a mix of reinvigorated ballet standards, such as *Giselle* (1910), and entirely new works put together entirely by Russian artists, such as *Prince Igor* (1909) and, famously, Igor Stravinsky’s *The Firebird* (1910) with Tamara Karsavina and Adolph Bolm dancing the principal parts. The company became incredibly popular, with the work of choreographers like Mikhail Fokine and Vaslav Nijinsky melding with the designs of such talented and innovative artists as Lev Bakst to reinvent ballet with a sense of “Eastern” exoticism and eroticism, changing the ballet world forever. A particular landmark in the Ballet Russes’ work to create a new “Russian flavored” ballet came in 1911 with Igor Stravinsky’s *Petrouchka* in which Vaslav Nijinsky, the male star of Ballets Russes, danced the principal part. Inspired by the wooden theaters that had once been set up for holiday festivals at the Winter Palace, *Petrouchka* was a sort of romantic ode to the Imperial Russia of its creators’ childhood that was fading away. Another innovative work, one

⁶⁵ Marsh, Geoffrey, *Serge Diaghilev and the Strange Birth of the Ballet Russes*, in Pritchard, Jane, ed., *Diaghilev and the Golden Age of the Ballet Russes, 1909-1929*, V&A Publishing, South Kensington, London, 2010, 21

⁶⁶ Marsh, in Pritchard, ed., 26

that shocked the viewing audience so badly that it only ran for eight performances, was Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* (1913), with set and costume designs by Nicholas Roerich inspired by ancient Slavic and Scythian artifacts, and choreography by Vaslav Nijinsky. Though it was not his first attempt at modernizing ballet choreography, it was by far his most provocative. Working with Stravinsky, Nijinsky created a depiction of a fictional sacrificial rite that absolutely shocked the audience with its stark lack of romanticism, and frustrated the dancers for its ungainly movement and nearly un-danceable rhythms.⁶⁷

In 1914, Diaghilev asked Goncharova to provide set and costume designs for the Ballet Russes production of *The Golden Cockerel*. The ballet, based on Pushkin's tale and with music by Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, had been originally premiered in 1909 in Mamontov's opera in Moscow, and this time Diaghilev wanted to bring it to Paris as a new addition to the company's repertoire of "Russian" ballets. Goncharova accepted the commission and set to work. Her designs borrowed much from the traditional forms, from the bright yellows, blues, and reds that dominated the color scheme, to the rough, flat, geometric shapes she used. (Fig. 29) Another borrowing of note was the floral motifs that bordered many of the sets. It was in the stage and costume designs for this production that she first utilized the bird-human motif from Russian folk art, portraying Sirin as both set piece and costume. (Figs. 28, 30, 31)

In the set design, Goncharova set a pair of these woman-birds together in a tree blooming with large red flowers — since one bird's breasts are visible, while the other's are covered, it seems likely that one is meant to be Sirin and one Alkonost, though which is which is unclear because there seems to be no standardization in folk tradition for which bird should take a certain

⁶⁷ Homans, Jennifer, *Apollo's Angels: A History of Ballet*, Random House Inc., New York, 2010, 290-319

appearance. (Fig. 2) The two birds are central to the image, their wings nearly touching. Though it is difficult to decipher how the set was meant to come together on the stage in reality because of the lack of perspective, it seems that they are part of what is meant to be a backdrop, while the flowered border that surrounds the image on three sides might be the proscenium of the theater.

Unlike the various Sirin and Alkonost discussed in Chapter 2, Goncharova's birds are drawn in the rough manner of the Russian peasants, (Fig. 26) without romanticization, or any



Fig. 28: Set design for 1914 production of *The Golden Cockerel*, Natalia Goncharova

notions of femininity or beauty, and no attempt to display trained artistic skill, which was a Neo-primitivist painterly device. Here, they are simply the protective beasts and bringers of good fortune from the folk art. It appears that Goncharova has connected them with plenty, as they were in the folk tradition, because in front of the base of the tree they are sitting in stands a long table set with plates and bottles, as if prepared for a feast of some kind.



Fig. 29: Drop spindle featuring Sirin and floral motifs, traditional, 19th century

The Sirin bird appeared in her costume designs for the chorus as well. There are two such costume designs; as was done in the set design, one has her breasts uncovered, possibly identifying the two as Sirin and Alkonost instead of two Sirin birds. (Figs. 30, 31)

The bird with her breasts concealed has bright red, orange, and yellow wings. Her body is blue and green. She carries a red flower in her right hand. Together with her covered chest, this could be used to identify her as Alkonost, if Bilibin's

interpretation of the birds' traits is correct. (Fig. 30) The other bird has obviously been made to complement her, with blue and green wings and a red and yellow body. She lacks arms, and has a shorter tail than her counterpart, which makes her appear less showy — perhaps she is meant to be like Bilibin's Sirin, the more somber, sorrowful interpretation. (Fig. 31)

The repeated appearance of these birds in the designs for a show based on a story by Pushkin, an author broadly considered to be one who best expressed the "Russian soul" through his work, and in the context of a show design based heavily on traditional Russian art, shows that Goncharova considered them to be important to Russian tradition and expression. This assertion can be reinforced by her designs for Ballet Russes' 1923 production of Stravinsky's *Les*

Fig. 30: Costume design for Sirin Bird, *The Golden Cockerel*, Natalia Goncharova, 1914



Noches (Свадебка).

This was the fourth production that Goncharova designed for Ballet Russes. This time, instead of a strange fantasy tale, the ballet was based on the traditional Russian peasant wedding and the strict tradition that surrounded it, themes inspired by Russian folk culture that Stravinsky loved to explore throughout his career. The choreographer for the production was Bronislava Nijinska, the sister of Vaslav Nijinsky, the famous dancer and infamous choreographer. Like her brother and his *Rite of Spring*, Nijinska was interested in expressing with this project the rigidity of old tradition through a modernized version of ballet. She, too, worked with Stravinsky's music to achieve this goal. The sparse, mechanical sound of his score helped to emphasize the lack of individual freedom and the weight of tradition in the peasant community.⁶⁸

Stravinsky, however, was also interested in the colorful, bright expression of Russian folk art. He had been commissioned by Diaghilev to write *Les Noches* in 1914; attracted by Goncharova's designs for *The Golden Cockerel*, which he saw realized on stage to an enthusiastic reaction, he himself asked Goncharova if she would consider doing the designs for *Les Noches* in the spirit of *The Golden Cockerel*. In 1915, she was officially commissioned by Diaghilev for the project.

Fig. 31: Costume design for Sirin Bird, *The Golden Cockerel*, Natalia Goncharova, 1914



⁶⁸ Homans, 332-335

She worked to fulfill Stravinsky's request for the style of the designs, writing that she wanted "to design a paragon of theatrical costuming, this time based on peasant elements."⁶⁹

Goncharova's original design for the set was therefore far too bright for Bronislava's intended aesthetic. She initially designed a drop curtain in the brilliant colors of traditional



Fig. 32: Drop curtain for *Les Noches*, Natalia Goncharova, 1923

Russian art, the bright reds, yellows, greens, and blues that had dominated the Neo-primitivist phase of her work. (Fig. 32) The forms that dominate this design are ones familiar to the Russian folk oeuvre: horse drawn carriages, a flowering tree, and the two crowned Sirin birds which sit atop it.

⁶⁹ Iluchina, Evgenia, "Natalia Goncharova — Between Theater and Painting," in Chilova, Alla, and Kemfert, Beate, Natalia Goncharova: Between Russian Tradition and European Modernism, Hatje Cantz Verlag, Ostfildern, Germany, 2009, 45

Sirin appeared in a design for a backdrop as well. (Fig. 33) The colors are slightly more muted than those for the front curtain, but red, yellow, and blue still predominate. In this scene, the birds are perched atop what appears to be an *izba*, or traditional wooden peasant house. Again, it seems Goncharova has associated them with plenty, as a table stands below, set for a meal, perhaps one of the ritual meals that would typically have taken place before or after the wedding ceremony.



Fig. 33: Set design for *Les Noches*, Natalia Goncharova, 1923

These designs did not make it into the final production, however. Nijinska was less interested in reproducing Russian traditional forms, and more concerned with the stark reality of the pressures of society and tradition. Goncharova's first attempts were rejected in favor of

muted blues, grays, and browns that better reflected the theme of individual submission to communal will that underlay Nijinska's choreography and Stravinsky's music.⁷⁰

Goncharova's initial designs, however, show once again that, like the artists of the Neo-nationalist revival before her, she felt that the bird-women were important to the visual representation of Russian tradition, and that they embodied a sense of "Russian-ness" that could be transmitted even to foreign viewers like the Parisians who came to see the Ballet Russes. As an extension of the Romantic Nationalist tradition, therefore, Goncharova used the bird-women to express a Russian ethos, or spirit.

Natalia Goncharova's realization of the importance of her native country's traditional art and culture thus drove her to become a leading developer of the Neo-Primitivist style. This style was her oeuvre for the designs for *The Golden Cockerel* and *Les Noches*. Though in the end the two productions were very different in their appearance, Goncharova's interpretation of their initial design held many similarities, in large part because of Stravinsky's request, but, I would argue, also for the reason that both productions were meant to express something clearly Russian and non-Western, and that Goncharova therefore chose the elements of folk art that she found the most important to the visual expression of Russian culture. Like the Neo-nationalists before her, who were also attempting to develop true Russian expression in artistic media, she found the bird-humans of folk tradition, and Sirin and her counterpart Alkonost in particular, to be essential figures in Russian culture, and therefore used them to help her convey a Russian essence through her stage designs.

⁷⁰ Homans, 333

Conclusion

In Russian philosophical tradition, Romantic Nationalism was developed by thinkers such as The Lovers of Wisdom and the Slavophiles during the early-to-mid 1800s. These men were influenced by the German thinkers of the time to value emotion over reason, and to value the things that made Russian culture vibrant and unique, in particular the native culture of the peasants which had been left largely untouched by Western ideas and influences brought to Russia by Peter the Great. Romantic Nationalism eventually influenced a sizable portion of Russia's intelligentsia, nobility, and wealthy, bringing about the creation of schools and hospitals for serfs on some estates (among other developments meant to help the peasants), and a dramatic increase in activities such as archaeology and the collection of folktales. Some of these activities, in particular the collection of folktales, folksongs, and traditionally-styled artifacts of peasant life, were meant to help preserve Russia's native culture that was threatened by the increasing urbanization and industrialization that were encouraging some serfs to move to the cities and leave some artistic traditions suited to the villages behind. In this endeavor, the work of folklorist Alexandr Afanasiev, who compiled an impressive amount of collected stories into some of the richest volumes of Russian folktales ever made, was key. Although other attempts were made by people like Vladimir Dal and organizations such as the Russian Geographic society, Afanasiev came forth to create the most lasting and complete collection, which had an enduring effect on the subsequent cultural developments. Although the examination of this effect on the contemporary Russian culture remained outside the scope of this research, it is clear that artists of the Neo-nationalist revival and Neo-primitivist persuasion discussed in this project (i.e. Vasnetsov, Bilibin, Vrubel, Polenova, Goncharova) as well as choreographers, composers and

dancers such as Stravinsky, Mussorgsky, and Fokine clearly must have used Afanasiev's collection as one of the principal sources of their inspiration and fuel for artistic imagination.

The philosophy of The Lovers of Wisdom and the Slavophiles did not, however, merely call for the preservation of folk culture before its corruption and disappearance, but called for the professional cultural producers of Russia, its artists and authors, to take the folk culture of their native land and draw inspiration from it. An obvious positive response to this philosophy was the Neo-nationalist revival of the late 1800s, which was centered at the artistic colonies at the estates Abramtsevo and Talashkino. The patrons of these colonies, Savva Mamontov and Princess Maria Tenisheva, helped to support the collection of examples of folk art for reference and display, set up workshops for the production of traditional and traditionally-inspired handicrafts, and encouraged the work of artists such as Viktor Vasnetsov, Mikhail Vrubel, and Ivan Bilibin. These artists were attracted to traditional Russian paintings, carvings, and *lubki*, as well as the folktales for sources of inspiration, especially for subject matter, and created many portrayals of the characters and scenes from Russian lore. These include Vasnetsov's *Knight at the Crossroads*, and Bilibin's illustrations of folktales, works of not only tremendous artistic skill and beauty but also of lasting importance to the ethos of the Russian nation. Importantly, the affection for and interest in Russian folk tradition evidenced by their works was not limited to the artists of Abramtsevo and Talashkino, but had a larger appeal for the artists who worked outside of these colonies. Sergei Solomko, who painted watercolors of Old Russia, both fantastic and realistic, is a particularly fascinating and little studied example of this. His combination of art-nouveau, Symbolism, and Russian folklore is not unique to him, but his work is certainly a good representation of this blend.

The interest in Russian tradition as a source of artistic influence engendered by the ideals of Romantic Nationalism also evolved one step further with the movement of Neo-primitivism in the early 1900s. Like philosophers who came before them, the Neo-primitivists, and Natalia Goncharova in particular, felt that the West was drying up for lack of fresh inspiration, and decided to turn to Russian traditional art to fuel their artistic drive. They therefore not only drew on the subject matter of the *lubki* and folk paintings and carvings — as did the artists of the Neo-nationalist movement — but worked to imitate the rough, unpracticed style of the amateur folk artists and the bright colors that they preferred. Goncharova was given the opportunity to place the Neo-primitivist aesthetic in the context of the stage and a Western audience. Working with Diaghilev and the rest of Ballet Russes' production team, she created sets for the Parisian stage that utilized the colors and forms that she had had been borrowing from Russian folk art for the previous few years. Her sets painted for the audience the image of an exotic, vibrant land that had its roots set deep in folk tradition.

All of the artists of these movements had knowledge regarding the folk traditions they were working with, and chose many different aspects of these traditions to utilize in their work. Some artists, specifically Bilibin, Vasnetsov, Vrubel, Solomko, and Goncharova, perceived the connections between birds and humans as portrayed in folklore and art as important to the representation of Russian culture, and decided to utilize these images as part of their visual vocabulary to express a Russian ethos.

This research project focused specifically on exploring the genesis of Romantic Nationalism in Russia and its artistic manifestation in the 19th and early 20th century Russian art. Arguably, however, there is a larger context for this. There are a plethora of questions that, for

the sake of time and coherence I was unable to pursue — how did the bird become so integral to Russian culture? How did the philosophies based on Romantic Nationalism evolve through the Soviet era, and into present day Russia? Were they simply discarded, or did they have a lasting influence on Soviet, and even post-Soviet culture, both artistic and literary? Did the birds discussed in this project continue to be recognized by Russian creative minds through to the present day as markers of Russian culture, and have they been used as such, or have they been neglected in favor of other, potentially more popularly recognized symbols of “Russian-ness?” These are only a few of the questions that might be asked to promote further exploration into this subject and expand the context of the functioning of the 19th century Romantic Nationalism on Russian soil.

Appendix

1.) “The songs should first be divided into those directly related to peasants, to their work connected with the soil... The peasant lyrics in turn may be divided into two basic types: ritual and non-ritual. Ritual lyrics can then be divided into calendar-ritual songs or family songs: wedding songs or funeral laments. The nonritual lyric may be studied according to its subject matter and the way in which it is performed.

The peasantry was also composed of people who were torn away, voluntarily or not, from agricultural labor. Their songs had very different content: barge hauler songs, soldier songs, robber songs, prison, and labor camp songs all belong to this category...

In many cases the class affiliation determines the poetics as well. For example, in every respect, the barge-hauler songs are quite different from the love songs of peasant girls. Soldier songs have nothing in common with bridal laments, and so on. Thus, to a certain degree the social content also determines the artistic nature of the songs, since different subject matter determines a difference in form.”⁷¹

2.) “A falcon flies
from one street,
glory!
A little dove
from another.

They fly together and kiss,
with their gray wings
they embrace.

To whom we are singing,
all will be well,

whoever takes it out
for her will it come true,
it will come true,
she won't escape.

Glory!”⁷²

3.) “Along the meadow, along the little meadow water flows,
along the little green meadow runs a golden stream,
and on stream after stream, a white swan is floating,
the white swan is a lovely beautiful maiden;

⁷¹ Reeder, Roberta, Russian Folk Lyrics, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1993, 2

⁷² Reeder, 89-90

and the gray drake is a fine young man.
When the maiden sees the young man, she will be filled with joy,
a blush will spread over her white face.”⁷³

4.) “Why, O poor dove, art thou so joyless?
How can I, poor dove, be joyous?
Late last night my mate was with me.
My mate was with me, on one wing she slept,
slept on one wing, embraced me with the other,
with the other embraced me, calling me her dear one.
Dear beloved one! Dovelet blue!
Sleep, yet do not sleep, my dovelet,
only do not, sleeping, lose me, darling.
The Dove awoke, his mate was gone!
Hither, thither, he flung himself, dash’d himself,
hither, thither in homes of Nobles,
homes of Nobles, Princes, Merchants,
in a Merchant’s garden did I find my Dove,
in a Merchant’s garden, underneath an apple tree
underneath an apple tree, wounded sore with shot!
The Merchant’s son had wounded my Dove, wounded her with a weapon of gold.”⁷⁴

5.) ““Ah, why, little dove, are you sitting so unhappy
so unhappy are you sitting and so sad?’
‘How can I, a little dove, be happy,
be happy and joyful?
Last evening a pretty dove was with me,
a pretty dove, who sat by me,
In the morning my dove lay slain,
lay slain, shot!’

““Ah, why, young man, are you sitting so unhappy,
so unhappy are you sitting and so sad?’
‘How can I, a young man, be happy,
be happy and joyful?
Yesterday, a pretty maiden was with me,
a pretty maiden, who sat by me,
she spoke lovely words and gave me her hand,
and gave me her hand in marriage,

⁷³ Reeder, 108

⁷⁴ Ralston, William Shedden, Songs of the Russian People, republished by Forgotten Books, 2008, 16-17

and now the maid is being given away in marriage,
given away in marriage, promised in marriage.”⁷⁵

6.) “Auntie, sweet dove!
Tell me, sweet dove,
how you parted
with your own daddy, with your mama who nourished you,
with your dear falcon brother,
with your dear sister dove,
with your aunties and grandmas,
with your dove girl friends,
with kind, pretty girls,
with a maid’s *krásota*,
with a maid’s adornment?”

‘I will tell you, little dove...’⁷⁶

7.) “Along the mountains,
along the high mountains
a young gray eagle
was flying high,
flying high,
shrieking pitifully.
In the formation a soldier
was sighing heavily...”⁷⁷

8.) “My nights so dark, my evenings so merry!
I sit for whole nights,
I turn over my thoughts;
one thought will not leave me:
if I had gray wings,
if I had golden feathers,
I would fly about, I would fly high,
I would fly far,
I would fly to my own land...”⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Reeder, 111-112

⁷⁶ Reeder, 123

⁷⁷ Reeder, 156

⁷⁸ Reeder, 158-159

9.) “Father of ours! famous, quiet Don!
Don Ivanovich, our nourisher!
Great praise of thee if spoken,
great praise and words of honour.
That thou didst swiftly run in olden days,
swiftly but all clearly didst thou run.
But now, our nourisher, all troubled dost thou flow,
troubled unto thy depths art thou, O Don.
Then the glorious, quiet Don thus made reply —
‘How otherwise than troubled can I be?
I have sent forth my falcons bright,
my falcons bright, the Don-Kazáks.
Deprived of them my steep banks crumble down,
deprived of them my shoals are thick with sand.’”⁷⁹

10.) “the steep hill is stone-built Moskva,
the white rock is our Kreml Gored,
and the cystisus bush is the Kremlin palace;
The dark blue eagle is our father the Orthodox Tsar,
and the black crow is the Swedish King.
Our Gosudar will conquer the Swedish land,
and the King himself will lead into captivity.”⁸⁰

11.) “Ah, my gray dove,
ah, why won’t you fly to me?
Do the frequent rains soak your wings,
or raging winds carry you away?
Ah, my dear little friend,
Ah, why won’t you come to me?
Won’t your father or mother let you?
Does your family forbid you to love?
I will soon hear: my sweetheart is in captivity,
he is sitting in the city prison,
I will take golden keys
and unlock the coffers,
I will take 40,000 of the treasure,
I will ransom my sweetheart.
The judges do not wish to take the treasure,

⁷⁹ Ralston, 37

⁸⁰ Ralston, 42

they will not free my sweetheart.”⁸¹

12.) “I, a fine young fellow, have walked
from river mouths to mountain peaks
walked over the whole Siberian land;
I, a fine young fellow, found
neither father nor mother,
neither brothers bright falcons,
nor sisters, white swans...”⁸²

13.) “A falcon had a little time:
the falcon flew high,
high he flew along the heavens;
he killed and kept killing the geese-swans,
the geese-swans, black ducks.
But now the falcon has no time:
the falcon sits in captivity,
in that golden cage,
sits on a silver perch,
his lively feet enmeshed.”⁸³

⁸¹ Reeder, 161

⁸² Reeder, 162

⁸³ Reeder, 162

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