IUSB FACULTY RESEARCH GRANT PROPOSAL
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Old Stitches/New Patterns: Russian Fin-de-Siècle Needlework and Imperial Culture

ABSTRACT

Needlework played a key role in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Russian art and culture, none more so than peasant needlecrafts. Folk art needlework tells the audience much about the peasantry and their daily life. These objects likewise inform us about fine art as this needlework influenced the nineteenth century Neo-Nationalist artists in their creative endeavours. Needle art, therefore, is the perfect intersection of high art and mass art, creating a unique cultural icon and marker of Fin-de-Siècle Russian society. Russian Imperial needle art will be analyzed not just for their technical and aesthetic elements, which were remarkable, but for how these works reflected their society and, at the same time, were an influence on that society. These needlework objects are clearly on a par with high art and need to be analyzed with the same academic rigor as fine art, which my scholarship will accomplish. My research will fill the lacunae in the scholarship on Fin-de-Siècle art history as well as Imperial Russian cultural history.

PROPOSAL

Project

Needlework played a key role in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Russian art and culture, none more so than peasant needlecrafts. Folk art exemplars of needlework (embroidery, cross-stitch, lace, crochet, and the like) tell the audience much about the peasantry and their daily activities. Peasant needlework also informs us about fine art as these objects were an influence on Neo-Nationalist artists. But what was the visual appearance of this folk art? How were these needlework items used in peasant culture? How did professional artists utilize these same objects? Peasant needle art was appropriated by industry but in what ways did this industrial absorption affect indigenous culture? What implications did this mechanization have for high art? And, of course, what did this all signal about Imperial Russia in its twilight years? Needle art is positioned as the perfect intersection of high art and folk art, providing historians with a distinct symbol of Fin-de-Siècle Russian society.

The Abramtsevo and Talashkino art colonies, set up by Savva Mamontov and Princes Maria Tenisheva respectively, are a launching point for any study of Fin-de-Siècle Russian needlework. While these two art colonies are known in the West, especially among historians and art historians who study Russia, less is known about the actual role needlework played at each institution. Each colony had examples of needlework from rural Russia, both as a means of preserving the objects and so the works could act as inspiration for the colonies’ fine artists. Professional artists not only used needlework as an influence on their art but a number also executed needle art in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While it is not surprising that Elena Polenova, who worked at Abramtsevo, created her own needle art, it is less well known that male artists such as Konstantin Somov and Pavel Kuznetsov designed needlework objects. Given the designated
gender roles for men and women in Imperial Russia it seems an anomaly that men created needlework. While this aligns Russian art with the Arts and Crafts movement elsewhere in Europe, how did this come to pass in the traditional Russian context? And, as importantly, given men were doing needlework did this change how such art was perceived -- as is so often the case when men produce needlework? Not only was needlework of interest to Mamontov and Tenisheva, as well as Fin-de-Siècle artists, but it was also of interest to the broader public in the waning days of Imperial Russia.

Fine artists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who not only explored and preserved needlework but actually produced such objects become the forerunners to Soviet avant-garde artists, such as Varvara Stepanova and Liubov Popova, both who worked in First State Textile Mill. Scholars tend to assert that Soviet artists were the first to actually put their rhetoric of art fulfilling a pragmatic function into action. However, Fin-de-Siècle Russian artists actually preceded them. How did such artistic needlework activity arise? What did this signal about fine artists? Did the fact that artists actually engaged in needlework raise their status or diminish it? What did such an activity by a cultured segment of society indicate for the broader Russian Imperial context?

Upper class women of Imperial Russia, like artists, were interested in textiles and collected pattern books for various needlework processes as well as actual objects of needle art. Sofia Davidova, for example, compiled albums on lace as well as actual lace items, preserving this rural Russian heritage for future generations. But how did society women develop their interest in peasant needlework? What did such a marked interest in needlework at the turn of the century indicate about the interaction of peasant culture, which traditionally produced folk art textiles, and elite culture, embodied in upper class women as patrons of such needle art? While peasants decorated clothing, towels, bed linens, and ceremonial objects with needlework did upper class women, such as Davidova, fashion similar objects? Or, were these women merely patrons of needle art? And, as important, how did the collecting of needlework by these elite women fit into the broader cultural context of late Imperial Russia?

Is a study on needlework a viable academic project? The answer is a resounding yes. Needlework falls under the broad rubric of textiles, and the study of textiles is a burgeoning field in cultural history. The analysis of textiles tell us not only about the art of a given milieu, but also who was producing art, what was considered art, how folk art was used, how professional artists utilized folk art for their own ends, and what role needlework played in the culture. Studies of this important avenue of cultural history are emerging in the west. Yet, it is an underrepresented area of art historical studies. Needlework is art, and was certainly perceived as such in late Russian Imperial culture, therefore a study on this topic will add to an understanding of Russian art history and Russian Imperial culture.

Current Research

My project aims to correct the lack of appreciation for Russian Imperial needlework by analyzing the art objects not just for their technical and aesthetic elements, which were remarkable, but for how these works reflected their society and, at the same time, were an influence on that society. There have been few English language publications analyzing late nineteenth and early twentieth century Russian needlework. Generally, these objects are discussed as just one of a number of folk art products or are analyzed merely as visual influences on high art. Wendy Salmond’s groundbreaking work on kustar workshops, Arts
and Crafts of Imperial Russia (Cambridge University Press), does discuss peasant needlework and efforts to preserve it, but that is not the main thrust of her important work. In a similar vein Folk Art, by Alison Hilton (Indiana University Press), presents textiles but only in one chapter in her recently there has been a spate of publications on Russian clothing, in which needlework played a key role. Christine Ruane’s The Empire’s New Clothes: A History of the Russian Fashion Industry, 1700-1917 (Yale University Press) is an academically rigorous account of Imperial fashion. Russian Elegance: Country and City Fashion from the 15th to the early 20th century by Luisa V. Yefimova and Tatyana S. Aleshina, (Vivays), is less academic than Ruane’s text but nonetheless is a treasure trove of visual images and one that highlights the needlework incorporated into the fashions. My research will fill the lacunae in the scholarship on Fin-de-Siècle art history as well as Imperial Russian cultural history.

**Methods**

Needlework is an essential element of Fin-de-Siècle Russian art history and this study will help broaden knowledge of Imperial Russian culture. My interpretive framework for the investigation of Fin-de-Siècle Russian needlework is to analyze the works within their historical, political and cultural contexts, as no work of art is produced in a vacuum. In order to conduct such a comprehensive approach one must consult primary documents to assess how the works affected and, at the same time, were affected by Imperial society. I need to investigate the primary sources in museum archives in order to make the contextual argument that is central to any study on Russian art and culture. The primary sources to be evaluated include artists’ statements, patrons’ statements, official directives on art, exhibition catalogues, recorded peasant interviews, art journals and any political directives from the Imperial household.

Seeing the works in person is essential for me as a scholar so I can speak about the needlework with authority. I will analyze the objects for their myriad technical and aesthetic elements as well as the various subjects incorporated into the works. The art will be assessed in order for me to analyze how the needle art exemplifies the issues being raised in the project. The methods I will employ for analyzing the art, along with the assessment of the primary documents, will provide a solid foundation for the exploration of the issues raised in this project.

**Activities**

My proposed research project is an art historical study of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Russian needlework. Such an analysis necessitates research in Russia in order to make this a viable project. Actual needlework items and archival papers at key museums will be analyzed. I plan to do this during the end of the summer and the first two months of my fall sabbatical. I will spend one month in St. Petersburg where I will analyze art works and assess primary documents at the State Museum of Ethnography, Russian Museum, and Hermitage. I will then spend two months in Moscow examining the art and papers in The Tretyakov Museum, the Museum of Folk Art, and the museum at Abramtsevo. In addition, while in Moscow, I will avail myself of The Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (RGALI), one of the largest repositories of fine arts documents, and the State Historical Library. My research on the objects and their attendant archival documents will
demonstrate that this is vital area of scholarship for art history and the history of Imperial Russia.

**Outcome and Goals**

The expected outcome is that this project will generate a fuller understanding of material culture, textile arts, and Russian history. The questions outlined in the proposal will be fulfilled with the research in Moscow and St. Petersburg addressing an under represented but vitally important aspect of art history. My immediate goal upon returning from Russia is to put together a panel presentation on nineteenth century Russian textiles for the national conferences of the Association of Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies (ASEEES) and College Art Association (CAA). The panel papers will form the foundation for a written article that I will submit to a peer-reviewed journal. My ultimate goal is to produce a book on Russian needlework, the basis of which will be the research I do with this grant.

**Qualifications**

*Old Stitches/New Patterns: Russian Fin-de-Siècle Needlework and Imperial Culture* is uniquely positioned to be a groundbreaking work in the venue of art history and Russian studies. Given my training as an art historian with Russian language skills who has specialized, since my undergraduate years, in Russian and Soviet studies I am more than qualified to undertake this project. My expertise in Russian and Soviet art bodes well for the success of the proposed project. I have lived and done research in the Soviet Union/Russia on three separate occasions, the most recent being 2006. I have used the art collections in all of the proposed museum venues except the Abramtsevo collection. I also have used the archives at most of the museums, except Abramtsevo and the Folk Art museum, as well as the archives at RGALI and the State Historical Library. Given my previous work, as well as personal connections through esteemed colleagues, I will be able to use the sources at Abramtsevo and the Folk Art Museum. My methodological approach to the material will not be unlike that I used for my book *Socialist Realist Painting During the Stalinist Era (1934-1941): The High Art of Mass Art*, a publication that indicates I have the ability to produce a scholarly tome based on my research.

**Results from Previous Overseas Research Grants**

I completed two panel presentations, finished the article "The Art of Collectivization: The 1939 All-Union Agricultural Exhibition and Socialist Realism" (published in *Totalitarian Art and Modernity* by Aarhus University Press), and put the finishing touches on my book *Socialist Realist Painting During the Stalinist Era (1934-1941): The High Art of Mass Art* all thanks to the IUSB Faculty Research Grant I was awarded in 2006. Earlier research opportunities included trips to St. Petersburg, Moscow and Prague. I was awarded the Bourchard Foundation Grant for Study in Russia and the Russian Museum Exchange Fellowship for the fall semester of 1994. These two grants allowed me to do research for my dissertation in St. Petersburg at the State Museum of Russian Art, the Academy of Arts library and archives, and the Russian Library poster archives. In 1988 I was awarded the Stanley Prostrednick Award for Study Abroad and the Friends of Frick Fine Arts Travel Scholarship for summer study in Leningrad and Moscow. I took classes in Russian at Leningrad State University and did research for my master’s thesis in the State
Russian Museum and Ethnographic Museum in Leningrad. In addition, while teaching in Prague during the summer of 2002, I conducted research on East European art at various museums in the city.

**Outside Funding Applications**

I have applied for several grants to obtain funding for my proposed trip to Russia to conduct research on Russian Imperial needlework. I sent in an application for the Likachev Foundation Travel Grant for a two-week stay in St. Petersburg. This was extremely competitive and of the 12 grants awarded 11 went to people working on contemporary cultural issues. I submitted an application to the Embroiderer’s Guild of America for their Legacy Scholarship ($1,000), a grant available to all members, of which I am one. I submitted an application for the all IU Exploratory Travel Grant ($2,500), which is open to all full-time IU faculty members. I also have submitted an application for the prestigious Summer Mellon Grant through the Russian and East European Institute ($5,000), which is an all IU institution of which I am a member. This is an extremely competitive grant and only one is awarded.

Should I have the honour to be awarded an IUSB Faculty Research Grant and no other grant monies I will still be able to go to Russia for at least 6 to 8 weeks. I will be able to accomplish quite a lot during that time. My previous Faculty Research Grant allowed me to go to Moscow, one of the most expensive cities in the world, for 6 1/2 weeks in which time I acquired enough research material to complete the activities listed in the previous section on results.

Thank you for considering this application.
Budget*

Airfare from Chicago to Moscow $1,553
Airfare from Moscow to Saint Petersburg $240
Lodging in St. Petersburg (one month) $1,200
Lodging in Moscow ($1500 a month for 2 months) $3,000
Meals and Incidentals (according to State Department Guidelines)
   St. Petersburg: $134 a day for 30 days = 4,020 ÷ 2 $2,010
   Moscow: $109 a day for 60 days = 6,540 ÷ 2 $3,270
Travel within Moscow and St. Petersburg $180
Invitation and Visa through Praxis $250
Incidental Expenses $500

Total $11,798

*This budget is based on prices as of 10.Feb.2012

Budget Justification

My goal is to go to Russia for three months (August to November), which will coincide with my fall sabbatical.

Air Travel
I need to go to Moscow and St. Petersburg as that is where the museums and archives are located for my project. Flights from the US to Russia are expensive and the price, of course, fluctuates depending on oil prices and the time of year. Once in the country I can then travel from one city, Moscow, to the other, St. Petersburg, at a nominal cost.

Lodging and Food
Moscow routinely ranks as one of the most expensive cities in the world where even a modest apartment on the outskirts of the city can go as high as $2,000 a month. Having looked at prices of apartments in St. Petersburg I know that those are less (but not by much) expensive than in Moscow. Nonetheless it is less expensive to stay in an apartment than in a hotel, not the least of which is because than one will have their own kitchen and will not have to eat out for every meal. For that reason I cut the State Department "Meals
and Incidentals" per diem in half for purposes of my budget. (Oddly the State Department per diem for St. Petersburg is higher than for Moscow.)

Transportation
Travel within Moscow and St. Petersburg is relatively easy as both cities have very efficient metro and bus systems. I should be able to secure a monthly pass for public transportation that will be less than the price of daily travel.

Invitation and Visa
One still needs an invitation to go to Russia. There are several organizations set up to get scholars an invitation and help with the visa process. Under current Russian regulations one can only be in the country for three months at a time, hence my timetable.

Incidental Expenses
I will need money for incidental expenses. Some of this will be in the form of photocopies documents, as in many archives you still can not bring a digital camera, and the cost of photocopies is astronomical in Moscow.