Gold flows into steel, East into West
(Valery Briusov, The Diadochs)

INTRODUCTION

Eastern motifs permeate the entire body of Russian culture. These motifs not only transform many works of Russian literature into Oriental novelettes and stories, poems and ballads; they make chinaware manufactured in Russia look like the celebrated work of Chinese and Japanese masters; they add a touch of the Arabic or Siamese to the interiors of the homes and palaces of the nobility. Indeed, the East reaches into the very heart of Russia’s poetic vision, transmitting artistic forms, and intruding into the meditation of its poets and artists:

It was your lynx eyes, Asia,
That spied out something in me,
That teased something more hidden . . .

Anna Akhmatova

The Orient finds its way into verses about the essence of poetry, as Boris Pasternak wrote about Pushkin’s Prophet in his poem Prophet, – poetry is like a planetary night spread out from Morocco to the Ganges. By the nineteenth century, Russia came to think of itself as a bridge connecting East and West. The way to the East, or to be more precise, the way of Russian cognition of the East led directly from the ‘bridge of Russia’ into the depth of Asia. However, the path was not a straight
one: knowledge of the East was drawn from both Eastern and Western sources.

Russian fascination with the East has ancient roots, beginning with the old Russian ‘Alexandrias’ (Romances of Alexander the Great), a cycle of literary works on India, and descriptions of voyages to the Holy Land, continuing with Oriental themes and motifs in the classics of the ‘Golden’ (mid-nineteenth century) and ‘Silver’ (fin de siècle) Ages, and finding a way into works of more recent Soviet times. Even now new interpretations of Oriental themes can be found in the post-modern Russian art and literature.

Works of Russian literature, dealing with images of the Ancient East and Palestine, of the Islamic world (the Arab countries, Persia, Turkey) and India, of China and Japan, are numerous. Oriental motifs are represented in all forms of art and literature. The ‘universal responsiveness’ of the Russian soul, proclaimed by Fyodor Dostoyevsky in his famous ‘Pushkin Speech’, is associated with the greatest virtue of Russian culture – its ability to feel deeply the essence of other cultures and ‘be reincarnated in them’.

This chapter concentrates on the ‘Silver Age’ of Russian culture, or the period between the 1880s and the end of the 1920s and looks particularly at the influx of artistic motifs from Japan. This period follows the initial years of encounter with Japan as described in Michiko Ikuta’s chapter, but predates academic studies of Japan and Japanese culture. During this time images of Japan gradually entered and became ingrained in Russian art and literature. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Russians came to understand Japan on different levels (high culture/low culture) and in different genres, forming a bright and expressive, albeit somewhat blurry, picture. That image was incorporated into classical Russian literature and the writers of the Russian fin de siècle accepted and transformed it still further. It thus emerged like a photograph in various stages of development. Starting from the classical period onwards, the image of Japan was enriched, not only by works of Western writers and scholars, but also, as Ikuta has shown, by the personal experience of Russian travellers.

**JAPONISME IN RUSSIA**

Things Japanese (such as chinaware, kimono, fans, lacquerware, etc.), brought from Japan to Russia often via Europe, were important in helping to identify the land of Japan, but also because they contributed to orientalizing motifs in Russian art and literature. These things Japanese become the ‘load of spices’ (as the poet Maximilian Voloshin put it) badly needed by Russian artists to create a new poetic language and a new sphere of sentiment.4

Images of Japan observed throughout the history of Russian literature have certain recurrent motifs and themes in common handed down by generations of Russian artists. They form an organic part of the Russian vision of the Orient as a promised land, a paradise lost, an ‘India of the