Vladimir Stasov and Russian Folk Ornament: An Introduction

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Vladimir Vasil'evich Stasov (1824-1906), the well-known art and music critic, was a passionate supporter of Russian folk art (Fig. 83). Conventional wisdom has it that Stasov was the first to address the historical importance of Russian needlework, an exploration that culminated in his 1872 book Russkii Narodnyi Ornament: shit'e, tkani, kruzheva (Russian Folk Ornamentation: Embroidery, Weaving and Lace).1 While Stasov solely concentrates on peasant needlework (Fig. 84), rather than the broader scope of needlework by women of all social classes, his work is, nonetheless a key document for analyzing Russian textile arts of the late 19th century. Yet, this important document has generally been discussed as a thesis on ornament not on embroidery and, while ornament is indeed a component, it is not the main thrust of this important publication. Stasov's volume is, first and foremost, about needlework with the examination of ornament used to support his investigation of Russian folk embroidery.2

Russian Folk Ornament was published by the Society for the Encouragement of the Arts in St. Petersburg and was distributed through art schools and


2 In addition, Stasov’s treatise is a unique intersection promoting both his Slavophile leanings and his admonition to look to the East for influences on Russian art.
libraries, thus reaching professionals in the arts and the public at large.Originally to be part of a multi-volume set on Russian folk art this was the only published manuscript and, in fact, the only one slated to deal with textiles. The book, with text in Russian and French, is illustrated with over two dozen black and white images of ornamental motifs and more than 200 color plates showing embroidery, weaving, and lace—with the vast preponderance of images showing embroidery. The examples of folk needlework came from the author’s collection, which he amassed over a 12-year period, no doubt from his own expeditions as he was a member of the Russian Archaeological Society and one of the founders of the Geographic Society’s Ethnographic Museum, but also from material he received from researchers in various provinces throughout Russia. Stasov was worried that without collecting these works they would “disappear leaving no trace behind.” That these same folk art objects exist today in museums, such as the State Folk and Decorative Arts Museum in Moscow and in the State Ethnography Museum in St. Petersburg, show his project was not in vain.

Stasov claimed, “the most numerous, original, characteristic and considerable remains of national culture remain intact in embroidery on canvas.” In fact, he further stated that, “An examination of Russian folk art artifacts leads to the conclusions that the most diverse…and important relics of Russian national folk art remain intact in the embroidery on fabric.” Statements such as these abound in the first half of his work, clearly indicating the intention of this book is to elucidate folk needlework not simply ornamentation. It is no wonder, than, that he insisted on not only collecting and cataloguing these needlework objects but that he would want to produce a published document to preserve this record.

Stasov spends the first section of his text arguing that the stitches and patterns are uniquely Russian and the second section demonstrating that the influences for these “unique” stitches and patterns came from ancient Rus’ and from Asian prototypes. (He also notes some Finnish influences but these connections do not compromise the bulk of his argument.) The manuscript also contains a short introductory section and a very short section on the general classification of the embroidered patterns as well as a comprehensive entry for each reproduction, which includes the type of work, place of location, the pattern, and the materials used for the varied needlework pieces (Fig. 85). Stasov also brings fine art into the mix by arguing that the play between embroidered

4 Hilton, p. 223; Ruane, p. 158; Simakova, p. ii.
5 All quotes are taken from the translation of Stasov’s document in this edition of Experiment.