Inventing Folk Art  
Artists’ Colonies in Eastern Europe and their Legacy

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A photograph of the Polish painter Stanisław Witkiewicz, taken outside in wintertime around 1899, shows him with six unknown men wearing picturesque peasant costumes (Fig. 1). On the snow is a large wooden model of the Dom pod jedlami (House under the Firs), made for the Galician Pavilion as part of the presentation of Austro-Hungarian Empire at the Paris World Fair in 1900. The model for a villa in the form of a peasant log cabin was designed by Stanisław Witkiewicz for Jan Gwalbert Pawlikowski, an economist and publicist from Lemberg (Lviv). In the photograph Witkiewicz, wearing a winter coat and a top hat, stands behind the model as if he wants to withdraw himself. But his gaze is focused directly at the camera. In the front, you can see the local carpenters who have built the house as well as the model. Despite their prominent position and their handsome fur vests and felt hats, they seem unnaturally rigid. Positioned near the photographer in forced poses and forming a tight diagonal line, they are looking out beyond the picture. Their function is similar to that of the model – they too are exhibits. The photo appears staged, like a play, which is being controlled by the puppet master from behind the scenes. This inner tension in the photograph, which reveals itself only at second glance, uncovers a fundamental dilemma behind the Zakopane project, namely a discrepancy between the ‘real’ and the ‘invented’ peasant culture.

A painter and writer, Stanislaw Witkiewicz was also a keen promoter of the picturesque landscape in the Carpathian mountains, as well as the culture of the original inhabitants – the Highlander górale. Witkiewicz liked to have himself photographed in the górale costume.

He and his compatriots, the Polish nationalist bohème, settled in Zakopane, supposedly in simple living conditions,
but which turned out to be more sophisticated. Despite their enthusiasm for the peasant culture and attempts to reconstruct it and save it from the damaging influence of urban civilisation, these incomers created a stylised and well-groomed peasant art that was a far cry from the life and nature of the local population. The local people were elements of the decoration, as can be seen in the photo.

Since the introduction of the term ‘invention of tradition’ by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger in the 1980s, there has been increased attention to the interrelation between national ideas and the formation of traditions. It turned out that most of the ‘traditional’ customs worldwide (festivals, folk costumes and other symbolic actions and artefacts) go back to the end of the 19th century, the period of increasing nationalism. They were mostly constructed, hybrid or ‘invented’ traditions, adjusted to or glorified by the period’s eye.

Fig. 1. Stanisław Witkiewicz standing behind the wooden model of the Dom pod jedlami (House under the Firs) with local craftsmen. Photograph, c. 1899, from the Museum Zakopane
‘Invented’ tradition is taken to mean a set of practices, normally
governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or
symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and
norms of behaviour by repetition which automatically implies
continuity with a suitable historical past.\(^2\)

Hobsbawm and Ranger also accentuated the fact that
‘invented traditions’ ‘used the history as a legitimation of action
and cement of group cohesion’.\(^3\)

This article is devoted to the phenomenon of the ‘invention’
of the folk arts and crafts in the artists’ villages in Eastern Europe
and explores the following questions: What role did artists’
colonies play in rediscovering folk culture? How characteristic was
the discrepancy between ‘real’ and ‘forged’ for a transnational
phenomenon of revival of popular culture around the turn of
the century? How did the revival relate to national ideas and
political conditions of an empire? To what extent was the return
to traditional culture a phenomenon of modernity?

As case studies, three artist colonies in the Habsburg Dual
Empire and the Russian Romanov Monarchy are considered.
Besides the above-mentioned Zakopane in Polish-Austrian Galicia
(c. 1880s–1930s), there is the Hungarian artists’ village Gödöllő,
near Budapest (1901–20) and the Russian private estate of
Abramtsevo, near Moscow (1880s–1905). All three were artists’
colonies that shared many principles in common: they aimed
to unify art and life. All three cherished an ambition to create
a modern national art that should flourish on the basis of the
doomed folk tradition. And, as I’ll be trying to show, they became
quite successful in their idealistic aspirations.

**Artists’ colonies as a global phenomenon**

From the late 19th century until the outbreak of the First World
War, artists’ colonies were booming. In rural areas of Europe and
the US, in the middle of unspoilt countryside, artists’ settlements
emerged which strove to unite the ideals of the Life Reform
Movement with their attempts at artistic innovation.\(^4\)

They rejected what was generally perceived as the
damaging results of increasing industrialisation inflicted on urban
life. In this reawakened ‘need for escapism’ and the return ‘to
the soothing respite of rural seclusion’, the Viennese art historian
Alois Riegl detected not only ‘purely selfish interest’ but ‘a very serious and highly ethical sentiment (...). This is how humankind creates an ideal faculty which elevates it, ennobles and glorifies it amid the battle for earthly material possessions.’\(^5\) The rural idyll and the invigorating nature of communal life were central to this way of life – whether it was a permanent artists’ colony, such as Gödöllő near Budapest, known as one of Empress Elizabeth’s favourite retreats, or one designed for the summer months, such as the artists’ village on the Abramtsevo estate in Russia. As the researcher of artists’ colonies Michael Jacobs has demonstrated, the pursuit of the ‘good and simple life’ was an integral part of the nature of artists’ settlements.\(^6\)

Hermann Bahr, who introduced the term ‘artists’ colony’ at the turn of the 20th century, saw it as a modern type of collective which was not based on family structures but on elective affinities.\(^7\) Most colonies were initiated by artists searching for new motifs, a cheap way of life, and a summer retreat, and they were often established as permanent settlements. Others, however, were dependent on the support from their upper-class or aristocratic patrons. The artists’ colony founded at the request of the Grand Duke Ernst Ludwig of Hesse-Darmstadt in his residential city had the exemplary character of a permanent exhibition.\(^8\) Thanks to the media coverage and the presence of eminent artists, the Darmstadt artists’ colony gained considerable international acclaim.

The artists’ village in Abramtsevo in Russia was a modest dacha settlement on the summer estate of the wealthy new-bourgeois Mamontov family. Nonetheless Abramtsevo made a crucial contribution to the turning point in the Russian art world. Zakopane was first and foremost a health resort, which gradually attracted artists and developed into an artists’ village. Despite their differences, Abramtsevo, Zakopane and Gödöllő all had at least one thing in common: they combined artistic work with social impetus.

**Instrumentalisation of folk art: the Austro-Hungarian monarchy**

Towards the end of the 19th century, both in the Romanov Empire and the Dual Monarchy of the Habsburgs, the tendency towards the vernacular\(^9\) was an important aspect of imperial representation.
During the last third of the 19th century, folk art in Austria-Hungary became an object of fashion and scientific interest. The Austrian Museum of Art and Industry (now The Museum of Applied Art) – established in Vienna in 1863 and modelled on the Museum of South Kensington in London that had opened only ten years previously – became the focal point for collections of folk art from all corners of the empire. In addition to the School of Applied Arts in Vienna, the museum also coordinated state-run industrial schools in other cities, such as Salzburg, Graz, Prague, Pilsen, Brünn (Brno), Czernowitz (Chernivtsi) and Krakow. With the aim of preserving the arts and crafts, as well as maintaining the rural youth, technical colleges for national cottage industries emerged in remote provincial towns. These included the woodcarving and lace-making schools in Zakopane in Galicia, the traditional craft schools in Bleiberg in Styria as well as those in Proveis in Tyrol. They operated according to standardised syllabi under the guidance of professional teachers.\(^\text{10}\)

Ever since the World Exhibition in Budapest in 1873, folk art products had become an indispensable part of the exhibition programme of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. National villages that reflected regional architectural traditions – complete with local people dressed in colourful ethnic costumes – could be seen at the Regional Exhibition in Prague in 1890, as well as in Lemberg (Lviv) in 1894 and the Millennium Exhibition in Budapest in 1896. For the Regional Exhibition in Lemberg, the architect Julian Zachariiewicz built a Ruthenian village in order to showcase the regional traditions of Galicia and Bukovina. In contrast, the Millennium Exhibition in Budapest in 1896 displayed the diverse national traditions of the Empire, thus representing the ‘multi-national Austrian mosaic’ based on the imperial idea of ‘unity in diversity’. This was particularly evident in the publication *The Austro-Hungarian Monarchy in Words and Pictures* (Kronprinzenwerk, 1885–1902), which was published by Crown Prince Rudolf and comprised several volumes.\(^\text{11}\) This was a comprehensive richly-illustrated ethnographic documentation of the many national facets of the Habsburg Empire.

As demonstrated by Rebecca Houze, the enthusiasm for folk art found its way into the professional fashions and everyday décor of the upper classes, as well as among the artistic bohème. Hence Empress Elizabeth designed the dairy, her private

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Fig. 2. The Finnish Pavilion at the World Fair in Paris, 1900 (architects Eliel Saarinen, Armas Lindgren, Herman Gesellius). in Dekorative Kunst. Illustrierte Zeitschrift für angewandte Kunst, Bd. 6 (1900), 459

‘farm’ in Schönbrunn, as a Hungarian farmhouse parlour. Gustav Klimt’s partner, Emilia Flöge, wore outfits inspired by traditional costumes.12

The Paris World Fair of 1900 presented three outstanding displays from Hungary, Finland and Russia as a reinterpretation of folk style. Accordingly, the Finnish Pavilion was constructed in the style of a village church (architects Eliel Saarinen, Armas Lindgren, and Herman Gesellius; interior design by artist Akseli Gallen-Kallela, Fig. 2.)13

The Hungarian Pavilion attracted the attention of visitors with its arts and crafts products. A certain similarity

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was noticed between the appearance of the Hungarians, Finns, and Russians. Critics even wrote about a ‘Hungarian-Slavic union’ (comprising the Hungarians and the Finns as one ethnos). This rural trend was determined by the collective spirit of the artists, who were either already living in painters’ collectives or were to do so a few years later.

Thanks to recent research, the impact of the British Arts and Crafts movement on Eastern Europe has become clear, not only in aesthetic terms but also in the social and Utopian aspects. English art magazines such as The Studio and The Artist played an important role in this, as did direct contacts between artists and journalists. In particular, Amelia Sarah Levetus (1853–1938) should be mentioned here. An emancipated woman, who was born into a Jewish family in Manchester and lived in Vienna from the 1890s onwards, Levetus played an important role in the Austrian women’s movement, amongst others. Thanks to her articles about the arts and crafts, and architecture in Austria and Hungary, as well as those on British art in British and Austrian magazines, she became an intermediary between these cultures. She was one of the founders of a John Ruskin Club in Vienna, where various events on English culture took place. Thanks to her friendship with the Hungarian art critic Ludwig Hevesi, she was particularly interested in the evolution of Hungarian art. The most important English-language source of information on the subject of peasant art in the k.k. Monarchy was the richly illustrated Special Edition of The Studio from 1911, Peasant Art in Austria and Hungary, which included chapters by Levetus, with illustrations.

When the British artist Walter Crane (1845–1915) visited the Museum of Arts and Crafts in Budapest in 1900, which had opened in 1896 in a magnificent building by Ödön Lechner, he was able to admire a beautiful collection of folk art. Invited by the Director of the Museum, Jenő Radisics, in preparation for his exhibition, Crane received an overwhelming reception. He emphasised the meaningful role of the collected objects as the basis of the, as he called it, particularly distinct Hungarian patriotism. He quoted the novelist Maurice Jokai (Mór Jókai), who pointed out in his opening address:

>We must learn how the Hungarian peasant cloaks, flower-decorated trunks, dishes, cups must be transformed into

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ornaments fit to embellish drawing-rooms, palaces, altars. We must learn how to transform into a creating power the aesthetical sense and artistic inclination of our people.¹⁷

It was precisely this attempt by the state to instrumentalise the folk tradition, which Crane, who shared William Morris’ socialist views, found problematic. Travelling through Transylvania (now in Romania), he admired the diversity of national traditions in this rural Carpathian area. On the other hand, he noticed that genuine old embroideries had become almost impossible to find because ‘rich people’ had bought them all up, a sign of how widely fashionable the time-honoured folk tradition had become.

Schools of embroidery were being established in the towns to teach the work which the peasantry had taught themselves, and of course, at every remove, the pattern became tamer. It does not seem possible to transform unconscious spontaneous art into conscious learned art, any more than it is possible for wild flowers to flourish in a formal garden.¹⁸

This discrepancy between ‘real’ folk art and the commercial products of the Imperial national education policy was also recognised by other critics. A selling exhibition in the London department store Norman & Stacey’s Tottenham Court Road Emporium, organised in 1902 by the Society in Support of Hungarian Industry under the patronage of the British and Hungarian aristocracy, was heavily criticised in The Artist.¹⁹

Did these Habsburg art policies produce ‘genuine or forged art’? This was also a question asked by the journalist Berta Zuckerkandl in regards to the cottage industry and national education in Austria.²⁰ Contrary to the model of Austrian ‘Gesamtpatriotismus’ (patriotism embracing the whole monarchy) which she too represented, part of the revival of folk art in Hungary was the rhetoric of growing nationalism. The renowned Austrian art critic Ludwig Hevesi, who himself had Hungarian origins, also took a critical view of folk art as a fashion: ‘The countryside may become urban, but the new prescriptions issued by technical schools only create templates instead of promoting creativity.’²¹

¹⁸ Crane, An Artist’s Reminiscences, 478.
Gödöllő: the spirit of folk art

Enthusiasm for Hungarian folk art was of great significance for the concept of the artists’ colony Gödöllő. The artists Sándor Nagy (1869–1931) and Aladár Körösfői-Kriesch (1863–1920), who had settled there with their families from 1904 onwards, shared aesthetic and social ideas. Nagy had previously lived in Diód, a Tolstoyesque rural commune, where he had met the socialist, anarchist and Tolstoy devotee Jenő Henrik Schmitt (1851–1916), whose philosophy influenced the circle.22 The painter Aladár Kriesch and the architect István Medgyaszay supplied sketches with examples of ornamentation, wooden furniture, peasant architecture, and textiles for The Art of the Hungarian People, by Desző Malonyay, a publication comprised of several volumes, thus confirming their interest in ethnographic studies.23 Széklerland (Székely) near Kalotaszeg (today Tara Călatei in Romania) in Transylvania was chosen as an unspoilt region with ‘genuine’, surviving folk traditions. The architect Eduard Wigand studied the farmhouses of this region and designed villas based on their shapes for his clients, artists, and art lovers. Like Aladár Kriesch, who later went by the name Körösfői-Kriesch, Wigand adopted the additional name ‘Thoroczkai’, derived from a place in Transylvania, as an expression of a special affinity with the area.

Following projects by István Medgyaszay, artists’ houses emerged in Gödöllő, amongst others for Leo Belmonte and Sándor Nagy. Their design resembled those of British houses, which were popular at the time. A central element of these utterly modern villas, which were concrete structures, was their workspaces. Thanks to their high ceilings and large windows, the artists’ studios were particularly spacious and bright. And yet the seemingly functionalist buildings were decorated with folk ornamentation. Despite all the differences between separate projects, both architects aspired to a distinct modernisation of architecture and its liberation from the ornateness of historicism. Hence the functionalistic, as well as organic approach to construction, as Katalin Keserü has demonstrated, was enhanced and effectively even made possible by drawing on local tradition.24

At the forefront of the weaving mill that opened in Gödöllő in 1905 (based on the project by the architect Eduard Wigand) was Leo Abraham Abendama Belmonte (1875–1956), an artist.

with international experience. He came from a wealthy Jewish family in Sweden and had studied painting and tapestry in Paris. The tapestries, which were produced there by local women, were based on sketches by painters such as Sándor Nagy or Aladár Körösfői-Kriesch. In the spirit of the Arts and Crafts movement and similar to that of architecture, they combined ornamental patterns and compositions of folk art with a modern approach. Organic materials and colours rather than the authenticity of origin and style, were prerequisites for the production. In addition to the traditional kilims that were prevalent in Transylvania, they produced Swedish scherreben rugs, as well as gobelin tapestries, using Caucasian weaving techniques. The Gödöllő textiles won awards at international exhibitions – in Paris in 1900, Turin in 1902, St Louis in 1904 and Milan in 1906. This production, which was based on a ‘Morrissonian model’, as Katalin Keserü called it, was subsidised by the state.25

It is important to emphasise the vital part that women played in this artists’ community and in the commercial enterprise. The textile artist Valéria Kiss, who had studied the art of gobelin tapestry in various countries, taught the girls. Mariska Undi (1877–1959) and Laura Kriesch-Nagy (1879–1966), Aladár Kriesch’s sister and wife of Sándor Nagy, collected peasant textiles and used them as patterns for weaving. Undi and her sisters, Carla and Jolán, wore costumes from Kalotaszeg.26

In the leading art magazine Magyar Iparműveszet Elek Petrovics (1873–1945), who would later become the Director of the Museum of Fine Arts, emphasised the important role the artists of Gödöllő played in the ‘salvation’ of the arts and crafts, which were threatened by industrialisation (Fig. 3). He pointed out that the philosophical background was the union of art and life as sought by Ruskin and Morris. Hence art should not be solely accessible to the upper classes but also allowed to find its way into every apartment. There should be no contradiction between fine arts and applied arts. Not only art, but the entire way of life, would be formative. The artists of Gödöllő did not try to modernise life but returned to ‘primitive conditions’, thus following Tolstoy.27

Gödöllő was a new settlement that was created in the spirit of life reform. As the photographs taken there show, this meant promoting a healthy lifestyle, such as nude bathing and winter sports, liberating women from their corsets and peasant

26 Houze, Textiles, Fashion, and Design Reform in Austria-Hungary Before the First World War, 8.
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Fig. 3. Elek Petrovics, ‘A Gödöllői telep Kultúrtörekvéseiről’ (Cultural ambitions of the artists’ colony Gödöllő), in Magyar Iparművészet 12 (1909)

dresses. The Hungarian artists were in contact with their Finnish colleagues, especially the Finnish national painter Akseli Gallen-Kallela (1865–1931), who visited them there and who was in many respects a kindred spirit.

In Hungary, as well as in Finland, the search for artistic reinvention by means of discovering regional traditions was part of the national liberation movement on the peripheries of the great empires – the Habsburg Monarchy and the Great Russian Empire of the Romanovs. This trend intended to subvert the diktat of the titular nations. The Finnish artists chose the region of Karelia as a place of longing and inspiration – an unspoilt area,
Fig. 4. Peasant houses at Körösfő and Toroczkó in Transylvania, from the drawings by Aladár Körösfői-Kriesch, in The Studio (1911)
home of the Finnish national epic *The Kalevala*. The equivalent for the Hungarian painters and architects was the region surrounding Kalotaszeg in Transylvania.

However, part of this ‘invented tradition’ was a clear attempt to emphasise the Hungarian and ‘dumb down’ everything else. In his essay for *The Studio*, Aladár Körösfői-Kriesch described Transylvania as a unique reservation for national Hungarian culture, which in its purity remained ‘practically intact’.

> Transylvania is the fairyland where one can imagine oneself back in the sturdy days of the Middle Ages with their exuberance of joy and energy. How long will its primeval forests, where the bear and the fox are still at home, retain their virgin splendour? How long will the maidens of Kalotaszeg, with their red-bordered, looped-up skirts and their red embroidered blouses, continue to disport themselves in its emerald pastures like butterflies – or go gleaning the golden corn in its fields?²⁹

The essay is accompanied by scenic sketches (Fig. 4).³⁰ In contrast, an outsider, the British visitor Walter Crane, saw a unique diversity of ethnic cultures in this region, which in turn generated different forms of folk art:

> There were peasants who had migrated from Saxony centuries ago who still had the characteristic fair hair and blond complexion. There were the ‘Gipsies’ who claim descent from an original Roman colony (...) and there were, of course, the Magyars in their semi-oriental white dress, with gay embroidered jackets and riding boots, sometimes wearing the heavy white overcoat, cloak-wise, with the sleeves hanging.³¹

In terms of lifestyle, clothes, and simplicity of life, the artists’ colony in Gödöllő imitated ‘primitive’ peasant culture. And yet the artists’ villas, which were decorated with elements of folk art, provided maximum comfort. The textiles produced there transposed peasant ornamentation using sketches by professional artists. The artists successfully used folk art as an inspiration for their artisanal products, as well as paintings and graphics. And yet, just as in the case of William Morris, the egalitarian model...
was doomed to fail: too expensive and exquisite, their trendy and elegant products did not reach the broad swathes of society but only the wealthy élite. The ‘Home for an Art Lover’ was a popular and successful project presented by Hungarian designers at international exhibitions and competitions.  

Zakopane: a cure for the disease of civilisation and a national project

An interest in ethnography and philanthropic efforts was also at the basis of another artists’ colony. Zakopane is in the region of Podhale, at the foot of the High Tatra massif.

This region was discovered by the Warsaw doctor and art lover Tytus Chałubiński (1820–89). While tackling a cholera epidemic in the area, he discovered that this place was perfect for curing what was then a disease of civilisation – tuberculosis. As an amateur ethnographer, he was involved in collecting and publishing artefacts of the mountain people’s cultures – the górale. However, it was only after the relocation of Stanisław Witkiewicz (1851–1915), who suffered from lung disease, that a popular colony and an independent Zakopane Style emerged. The then partially intact tradition and landscape were sources of inspiration for Witkiewicz’s artistic and literary works. He also tried to imitate them in his architectural projects. This resulted in spacious and comfortable villas with the outward appearance of a farmhouse. They were inhabited by the bourgeois intellectual and artistic elite, who at the turn of the century formed the artists’ settlement in Zakopane. It was, as David Crowley pointed out, ‘a hybrid style – both peasant and disguised historical’, borrowing from the wooden architecture and crafts of the local population. As mentioned earlier, as part of the Austrian policy of reviving cottage industries there was a Wood Carving and a Lace-Making School in Zakopane (which was in the Austrian territory of Poland), but it tried to professionalise folk art from the top.

Whilst executed by local craftsmen, the Zakopane villas were based on a design by Witkiewicz himself and under the guidance of professional architects, and provided ample comfort. This did not just apply to the size of the villas, but also to their spacious interiors and wide windows, which were adapted to the new type of house popular with art lovers (Fig. 5). They were stylishly

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33 About Zakopane artists’ community see also Edyta Barucka’s article in this publication.
furnished with handmade fittings and textiles from the area. As an outcome of collecting activities and ethnographic studies, furniture, textiles and crockery were made, that gave these luxury villas a ‘real’ peasant look. It is safe to assume that the idea was influenced by the Russian élitist folk style surrounding the Abramtsevo circle. 36

In Zakopane too there was a romantic glorification of the peasantry taking place. The culture of the górale – similar to that of the Székely – is declared as the authentic and genuinely Polish one. Its symbolic effect applied to all three Polish territories – Russian, Austrian (of which Zakopane was a part), and Prussian. The Zakopane Style is not only found in wooden architecture; it also highlights a national emphasis in the urban space of trisected Poland – from Lemberg to Warsaw. Textiles and furniture with folk patterns became fashionable accessories where the furnishings of Polish families were concerned. 36

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36 Witkiewicz attended for two years the Academy of Arts in St. Petersburg and lived in Warsaw from 1875 until moving to Zakopane, to the Russian partition part of Poland. It can be assumed that he was informed about the trend of the neo-Russian style.
Around the turn of the century, artists started to settle in Zakopane, while a fashionable *dacha* colony and sanatoriums were also established. Accordingly, the modern Dłuski Sanatorium was modelled on Davos in Switzerland. The furnishings and design, however, used elements of regional folk art. This was the world of the imaginary ‘Polishness’ beyond the boundaries of the territories. Zakopane drew visitors from both Warsaw and Krakow, as well as other Polish regions. The School of Wood Crafts continued well into the Polish Republic between the two World Wars, contributing considerably to the fact that the Zakopane Style was established as a fashion trend: the Polish Pavilion at the ‘Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes’ in Paris in 1925, for instance, was designed in the Zakopane Style, with a touch of Art Deco (architect Architekt Jósef Czajkowski).37

**The revival of folk art in Russia**

Similar processes aimed at reviving the arts and crafts took place in Russia. The rapid industrialisation following the abolition of serfdom in 1861, and the consequent administrative reforms implemented by Tsar Alexander II, led to many peasants migrating to cities. At the same time, an orientation towards the old Russian traditions was not only scientifically motivated but also the result of national policies. The state ideology claimed by Tsar Nicholas I, of a union of ‘orthodoxy, monarchy and the common touch’ still remained influential. Contrary to the Habsburg doctrine, it created a Russian-national self-perception instead of a multi-national mosaic, and thereby unity rather than diversity.

At international exhibitions, the neo-Russian style took on greater significance as the representative style of the Russian Empire. However, the study of folk ornamentation not only led to discovery, but also to a dry, archaeological, and eclectic reconstruction. Hence the Russian ‘Pavilion of the Russian Provinces’ at the World Fair in Paris combined objects from the Moscow and the Kazan Kremlin, with made-up ‘Russian-style’ details in order to portray a general view of the Empire.38

In the context of public administration reforms (*zemtsvo*) there was increasing support for the *Kustar* industry, the Russian equivalent of the cottage industry.39 Opened in 1885, a *Kustarnyi muzej* (museum of arts and crafts), was supposed to collect

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37 About the Zakopane style as a promotion of Polish national identity, see Katarzyna Chrudzimska-Uhera, ‘Artists’ colonies as a response to the experience of modernity. The case of Zakopane’, *Dailės istorijos studijos* 8 (Lietuvos kultūros tyrimu institutas), 14–39, here 25–26.

38 Juri A. Nikitin, *Vystavochnaya architektura Rossii XIX – nachala XX vekov* (Exhibition architecture of Russia in 19th and beginning of 20th centuries) (St. Petersburg: Izdatel’skii dom “Kolo” 2014), Chapter II: Architektura vystavochnykh pavilionov Rossii na vsemirnykh i mezhdunarodnykh vystavakh (Architecture of the exhibition pavilions of Russia at the world and international exhibitions), 269–322.

artefacts and support production, similar to those in Vienna and Budapest. The opinions of economists were divided. Some saw it as an outdated form of production, which would inevitably be superseded by rapidly growing industry. Others saw it as an expression of Russia’s national idiosyncracy.

Similar to Hungary, an important invigorating impulse for the revaluation of the arts and crafts originated in an artists’ colony. It was, as it is called in Russian, the artists’ circle (Russian: kružok) Abramtsevo.

**Abramtsevo: the Russian Barbizon**

The Abramtsevo estate, with its modest timber manor house and large park, is situated approximately 60km north-east of Moscow, on the pilgrim route to the centre of Orthodox life, Sergiev Posad. The beautiful location on the banks of the Vorja creek, and especially their adoration of the previous owner, the legendary Slavophile and author Sergei Aksavov, prompted the Mamontovs, a merchant family, to purchase the estate in 1873. Savva Mamontov (1841–1918), who inherited his father’s sizeable railway business, was part of the new Russian élite of energetic entrepreneurs and patrons of the arts. He and his wife, Elizaveta Grigorievna Mamontova (née Sapozhnikova, 1847–1908), initially attempted to restore the atmosphere of a stately home. It was only after a trip to Italy, where they met artists in Rome (‘the Russian Romans’), that the idea of an aesthetic refuge was born. It soon became customary for artists, musicians, and writers, at the invitation of the host, himself an amateur sculptor and singer, to come to Abramtsevo to spend the summer together. ‘The best dacha in the world’ (Ilya Repin), the ‘Russian Barbizon’ (Kuz’ma Petrov-Vodkin), Abramtsevo offered good working conditions, pleasant company, and a particularly creative atmosphere. The brothers Viktor and Apollinarij Vasnetsov, Ilya Repin, Valentin Serov, Konstantin Korovin, Vasili Polenov, Mikhail Vrubel, and Matvei Antokol’ski were well-known names in the Russian art world even in those days.

Gradually an ‘artists’ village’ came into existence, located near the manor house and charmingly spread around the park. The first building was designed as a sculptor’s workshop in 1873 (Fig. 6), by the architect Viktor Gartman (1834–73). This spacious studio, with its large windows to the rear, was, as a friend of...
the family commented sarcastically, built in a style ‘which this brave architect took to be Russian’. Gartman was known for his exhibition architecture in the neo-Russian style. From 1877–78 the guesthouse called Teremok followed, which was designed to be the guest accommodation. Elaborately decorated with wooden ornamentation, and executed by local craftsmen, this building by the well-known architect Ivan Ropet (anagram of Petrov, 1845–1908) was based on the local architectural tradition (Fig. 7). Following a similar pattern of the national revival in Britain or the Baltic area, these wooden structures in the reinvented national style combined the results of ethnographic and archaeological studies with imaginative fusions.

This also applies to the church project (1881–82) in Abramtsevo. The small stone St Saviour’s Church was a collaborative project carried out by the members of the colony. The artists Viktor Vasnetsov (1848–1926) and Vasili Polenov (1844–1927) supplied the first draft, which was modelled on the architecture of Novgorod and then executed by a professional architect (Fig. 8). Everyone, including women and children, collected motifs of the native flora, which they consequently incorporated in the decor, thus creating a building of exceptional

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41 Nikolai Prachov, _Staroje Abramtsjevo_ (The Old Abramtsevo) (Abramtsevo: own publisher, 2013), 11.
42 In Russian a small house, a word mostly used in Russian fairy tales.
Fig. 7. The Teremok guesthouse in Abramtsiovo, architect Ivan Ropet, 1877–78
Photo: Marina Dmitrieva

Fig. 8. St Saviour’s Church, Abramtsiovo
@A.Savin, WikiCommons
spirituality and grace. The church of Abramtsevo internalised the ancient Russian tradition and modified it in the modern spirit of a Gesamtkunstwerk (‘Total Work of Art’). From then on it served as a perfect example of the new style of the turn of the century, which is called ‘the modern style’ (stil’ modern) in Russian.

Although as patron Savva Marmontov was the driving force of the circle, his wife Elizaveta Mamontova played not only the role of a friendly hostess, but also that of a dedicated reformer and successful businesswoman. At the outbreak of a cholera epidemic she founded a hospital and a school for the residents of the surrounding villages. In 1876, a woodcarving workshop for the village youth was set up with the aim of preventing a mass exodus to the cities and the concomitant moral decline through for example the consumption of alcohol. In the context of the construction of the church and the collective studies of literature on art history and archaeology, she started, together with her artist friends, to collect objects of folk art in the surrounding villages. The area around Abramtsevo was known for its woodcarving tradition. Gradually, the main house turned into a museum of woodcarving and embroidery. In the photographs the children of the family can be seen in peasant clothes. They were also used in the colourful extravaganzas at home, from which Mamontov’s private opera was developed.43

However, it was only after the sister of the artist Vasili Polenov, Elena Dmitrievna Polenova (1850–93), took over the leadership of the workshop, that the pastime could be turned into an established cottage industry. Attempts to let the students work independently, however, were unsuccessful. It was only when she herself and other artists provided sketches and ideas that prototypes for the production emerged. Encouraged by Viktor Vasnetsov, a great expert on Russian antiquities, Elena Polenova designed more than 100 models for furniture and smaller objects. Natalia Vasilievna Polenova (née Jakunchikova), Polenova’s sister-in-law and a keen observer and reporter on Abramtsevo, has described the process of finding shapes and motifs. Hence a simple kitchen shelf was turned into a beautiful small wall cupboard, and painted with floral ornaments, such as those first used by Viktor M. Vasnetsov for the mosaic of the church floor, or motifs from an album by the French architect Eugène Viollet-le-Duc.44 Others, such as the famous wall cupboard with column, were inspired by

43 About the history and visual culture of Abramtsevo artists’ colony, see Eleonora Paston, Abramtsvo. Iskusstvo i žizn’ (Abramtsevo. Art and Life) (Moskva: ID Iskusstvo, 2003).
findings in surrounding villages, as well as in Moscow and along the Volga (Fig. 9). The distinctive Abramtsevo Style, with its flat woodcarving relief and colourful painting, was also similar to that of Gödöllő, a hybrid, invented style.

It is particularly important to highlight the role played by women in turning this business into a success. When Elena Polenova retired in 1893 to focus on illustrating children’s books, a relative of Mamontov, Maria Fedorovna Yakunchikova (1863–1952), took over the management of the workshops, steadily increasing their production, to meet the growing demand. The workshops continued...
to exist in the Soviet era but gradually lost their original creative freshness. Based on the model of Abramtsevo, other production centres emerged – usually organised by female landowners – in the Russian provinces around the turn of the century, such as the embroidery workshop, which Maria F. Yakunchikova founded on her estate in Solominka (administrative district of Tambov)\(^45\), and Princess Maria Klavdievna Tenisheva’s (1858–1928) embroidery and woodcarving workshop in the artists’ village of Talashkino, near Smolensk.\(^46\) They were all successfully represented at the Paris World Fair in 1900, where they were exhibited in the Kustarnyi Pavilion (Village Russe) designed by the architect Ivan Ye. Bondarenko (Fig. 10). They drew a very positive response in the international Press.\(^47\)

Like Amelia Sarah Levetus, who acted as an intermediary in Austria-Hungary, another Englishwoman, Netta Peacock, was a link between Russia and the European art scene. She published articles about the ‘new direction’ of art in international magazines and was well-informed about its philosophies and objectives. For instance, she wrote about how Russian artists, especially Elena Polenova, were talented at adopting the naive and the poetic of folk aesthetic in their work and ‘exalting’ it artistically without losing the original essence of peasant culture.

So thoroughly have they impregnated themselves with the spirit of legend and fairy tale as still told by the poet-peasant, so genuinely do they feel the absorbing charm of that atmosphere of old-world simplicity, with all it contains of dreamlike and weird reality – its mingled fancy and belief – that their designs are distinctly national both in feeling and colour. This new movement is, in fact, an exaltation of the popular genius; and the designs of the artists are so perfectly executed because they answer to the inborn aesthetic sense of the village artisan.\(^48\)

Peacock also reported on Polenova’s wish to travel to England to explore the local art scene. The artist’s premature death, however, put a stop to this.\(^49\)

Abramtsevo products became increasingly popular, even gaining cult status in élite circles and at the Tsar’s court. In particular, the Exhibition of Art and Industry in Nizhni Novgorod, in
Fig. 10. The Russian village, in Netta Peacock, ‘Das Russische Dorf auf der Pariser Weltausstellung’, in Dekorative Kunst. Illustrierte Zeitschrift für angewandte Kunst, Bd. 6 (1900), 480
1896, and the Paris World Fair, as well as the All-Russian Exhibition of the Kustar Industry in St Petersburg in 1902, all contributed to the renown of the Russian cottage industry of Abramtsevo both in Russia and internationally.\textsuperscript{50}

The \textit{matryoshka} (diminutive from the name Matryona), now known as the epitome of Russian folk art, was created in the 1890s at Abramtsevo as an example of cooperation between a professional artist and a folk craftsman. The author of the proto-
\textit{matryoshka} was the painter and architect Sergei Malyutin. He designed the stacking wooden dolls called \textit{matryoshka}, which was intended as a toy for the village children, together with the carpenter from the nearby timber workshop in Sergiev Posad. The first nested \textit{matryoshka} consisted of eight dolls, representing a mother and seven children. According to the legend, its model was a Japanese figure of a Buddhist god, which a guest of the estate had brought from Japan. Once the doll was shown at the Paris World Fair of 1900, it began a global career as a typical Russian artefact.\textsuperscript{51}

\textbf{Outlook}

All three settlements – Gödöllő, Zakopane and Abramtsevo – were artists’ colonies which held life-reforming aspirations. Their aim was to cure the diseases of civilisation by retreating to a rural idyll, whether it was only for the summer months or longer. The enchanted \textit{pastoral gaze} (Ernst Bloch)\textsuperscript{52} on the peasant community did not just see in it poverty and misery but the yearned-for harmony between art and life, a harmony that had got lost in modern society. Just how illusory these attempts were at living out such ideals is demonstrated by the short life of most of these artists’ colonies. Photographs show male and female artists wearing peasant clothes, posing for the photographer, more often than not with villagers looking mostly reserved and tense, and taking a clear distance from these extravagant performances. Nonetheless, these attempts at reviving the cottage industry and appropriating folk art and lifestyle were successful both in artistic and even commercial terms.

Developing a ‘place-myth’ is a constructive part of an artists’ colony. It often served to articulate ideas of national identity and of universally valued quality. Eastern, Central and Northern Europe, with its unspoilt nature, offered places with

\textsuperscript{50} Salmond, ‘Reviving Folk Art In Russia’, 81–98.
such a potential. Examples include the Karelian topos in the Finnish culture\textsuperscript{53} or the \textit{górale} myth in the Polish cultural self-consciousness, or the role of the Kalotaszeg region in Transylvania in the Hungarian search for the spirit of the nation. Looking for a mythical topos or living in such a place encouraged ethnographic studies and interdisciplinary exchange in the artists’ colonies. This can be linked to a rural location and connected with a real or imagined national tradition.

As I have demonstrated, since the late 19th century, the interest in folk art and folklore has been closely linked with recent developments in the fine arts and modern architecture. The traditional farmhouse, and wood as a material, inspired architects to create innovative solutions in terms of planning, construction or texture of the buildings and artefacts. Not by chance did many of them belong to the circle of artists’ colonies.

Especially important was the role played by the exhibitions, such as the Paris World Fair of 1900, in presenting and popularising the results – nationally and internationally – and in fostering artistic exchange. Above all, the role of the Arts and Crafts movement should be emphasised.

The invention of national styles (Zakopane, Abramtsevo, Gödöllő), associated with the names of artists’ colonies that were influential outside of them, is related to imperial discourses. As I have shown, both in the Habsburg Dual Monarchy and in the Romanov Empire there have been attempts to reanimate, re-use and institutionalise the folk art tradition, though under different premises. While earlier research has accentuated national aspirations as a driver for small nations to free themselves from the hegemony of the empires, recent studies focused on the institutional frameworks that the Empires created for national cultures, have emphasised hybridity, diversity and multiple subjectivities of the Empires seen from the margins and not from the centre.\textsuperscript{54}

There is also the relationship between the revival of folk art and the development of ethnography. In all three artists’ settlements the artist/architect acted as ethnographer and collector. The partially alienated folk tradition was studied in much the same way as the cultures of exotic peoples were in the imperial colonies. It was no coincidence that the social anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski’s interest in ethnography


was enhanced by the ‘ethnographic’ ambience of Witkiewicz’s family house in Zakopane.55

The nationalism researcher Ernest Gellner, reflecting on the origins of discipline, emphasised the formative role of Franz-Josef’s multi-ethnic late empire for Malinowski’s ‘holistic romanticism’. Gellner identified a ‘Habsburg dilemma’ in the balance between the ‘atomism’ (individualism) in the centre and ‘communalism’ (‘Carpathian village; folklore, languages of the small nations and dialects nationalism’) on the periphery.56 The rural artists’ colonies belong without doubt to this category.

The artists’ villages were in many ways utopian communities. This is seen in the aspirations of the artists and their patrons to find a new art movement that would combine a revival of folk art with a view of the modern age, to create such kind of art, in which there would be no more distinction between the artifact and the object of utility. The attempts of downshifting and integrating into the existing village community can also be seen as utopian, even a gender egalitarianism. And the social claim to ‘rescue’ and reanimate folk art, condemned under the advance of industrialisation to the lower slope, was doomed to failure in the situation of global capitalism. Nevertheless, these ideas, which were targeted in artist colonies, have later been taken up in some avant-garde art schools, such as the Bauhaus in Weimar and Dessau in Germany or VKhUTEMAS (Vyshyi Khudozhestvenno-Tekhnicheskii Institut). It was dissolved in 1930.57

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