The Poetics and Aesthetics of Otherness
Orientalism and Identity at Abramtsevo

Maria Taroutina
Assistant Professor of Art History, Yale-NUS College, Singapore
maria.taroutina@yale-nus.edu.sg

Abstract

Although traditionally associated with the ascendance of National Romanticism, Slavic folklore, and the Neo-Russian style in painting, architecture, and the decorative arts, the Abramtsevo artistic circle was also privy to the inception and production of a number of manifestly Orientalist works, such as Vasiliy Polenov’s *Christ and the Adulteress* (1888), Mikhail Vrubel’s ceramic sculptures of *The Assyrian, The Egyptian Girl, The Pharaoh,* and *The Libyan Lion* (1890s), and the costumes and set designs for the theatrical productions *Judith* (1878, 1898), *Joseph* (1880, 1881, 1887, 1889), *The Black Turban* (1884, 1887, 1889), *King Saul* (1890), and *To the Caucasus* (1891). In addition, a series of hybrid works that fused elements of the exotic with national thematic and stylistic content, such as Viktor Vasnetsov’s *Underwater Kingdom* (1884) and Mikhail Vrubel’s *Princess Volkhova* (1898), were likewise produced under the auspices of Savva Mamontov and the Abramtsevo community, thus blurring the boundaries between native and foreign, local and global, self and other, and Slavophilia and Orientalia. The present article posits that an understanding of the romanticized, Neo-Russian artistic and theatrical productions, and the nationalist polemics of the Abramtsevo artistic circle is necessarily incomplete without a detailed examination of the various Orientalist crosscurrents which informed and structured many of the group’s artworks throughout the 1880s and 1890s—a narrative that has been largely left out of scholarly accounts of the movement.

Keywords
Napoleon Bonaparte allegedly once quipped that “if you scratch a Russian, you will find a Tatar.”1 Indeed, nearly two hundred and fifty years of Mongol occupation (1237-1480), coupled with Peter the Great’s subsequent Westernizing reign (1672-1725), precipitated a century-long identity crisis among Russia’s intellectual and artistic elites. A large portion of Russia’s nineteenth-century cultural production was thus centered around questions of national identity, especially since the country straddled Europe and Asia geographically, and had been perceived for centuries both from the outside and inside as being more Asiatic than European. These sentiments were only further exacerbated by the state’s aggressive expansionist campaigns in the ninety years following the Napoleonic wars, which led to the annexation of vast new lands in the East and the large-scale assimilation of religiously and ethnically diverse groups of people. In many ways, the nineteenth century could be referred to as Russia’s “Asian century,” and yet to date only a few scholarly studies have examined in depth the complex relationship between Russian artistic praxis and the cultures and representational traditions of the East during this period.2

Like their European contemporaries, the artists of the Abramtsevo circle were also seduced by the exotic appeal of the “Orient”—and especially Russia’s own Orient: namely Central Asia, Crimea, and the Caucasus—with its rugged landscapes, ornate architecture, colorful bazars, and unusual customs.3 Many of them, such as Konstantin Korovin, Vasilii Polenov, Ilia Repin, Valentin Serov,

---

1 This phrase was originally formulated in French: “Grattez le Russe et vous verrez le Tatare” and has been widely attributed to Napoleon Bonaparte, although there is no textual evidence to support this.


3 I use the word “Orient”—or “Vostok” in Russian—as a historical term that was widely employed during the nineteenth century to designate a vast geographical region that is now known as Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East. Similarly, I use the terms “Orientalism” and “Orientalist” art in the same way as Schimmelpenninck van der Oye does in his seminal study on Russian Orientalism in a neutral, pre-Saidian sense to describe theatrical productions, paintings, sculptures, and works of applied art that employ Eastern [vostochnye] themes and motifs. That is not to say that some of these works are not essentializing or problematic from a post-colonial perspective, but rather that they reflect the multiple and fluctuating “Orients” of the Russian nineteenth-century imaginary that often subsumes the Russian “self” within its broader identification in contrast to the rigid self/other binary and the single, monolithic, and unchanging “Orient” discussed by Edward Said in his seminal 1978 book, Orientalism. Edward Said, Orientalism (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1978).
and Mikhail Vrubel, had traveled to these and other “Oriental” regions during their lifetimes and had expressed a strong interest in their histories and cultures. Moreover, they were also well-versed in European Orientalist art and had even tried their own hands at the genre. For example, during their respective sojourns in Paris in the 1870s, both Repin and Polenov had professed their admiration for Orientalist artists such as Eugène Delacroix, Jean-Léon Gérôme, Henri Regnault, and Mariano Fortuny. Polenov painted an *Odalisque* (1875) and *The Egyptian Girl* (1876), and Repin *A Jew at Prayer* (1875) and *Portrait of a Negress* (1875-76), which suggests that in the case of certain artists, experimentation with the Orientalist genre was yet another facet of an ongoing dialogue with Western artistic practices and tastes. Similarly, even before he first came to Abramtsevo, Vrubel had also produced several Eastern-themed paintings in 1886 and 1887, such as *Girl Against a Persian Carpet, An Oriental Dance, A Persian Prince,* and *An Eastern Tale.*

In fact, from the fashionable Chinoiserie and Turquerie of Catherine the Great’s court, to Ivan Aivazovskii’s moonlit views of Constantinople (1840s), Vasilii Vereshchagin’s controversial Turkestan series (1868-72), and late nineteenth-century Salon paintings such as Aleksandr Rusanov’s *Bought for the Harem* (1891), Orientalism had persisted throughout the “long” nineteenth century as a subgenre in the Russian visual and decorative arts, although it was not as pervasive and prolific as in the British and French contexts. Unique to the Abramtsevo artistic circle, however, was the way in which Eastern themes and motifs became enmeshed and intertwined with ostensibly Neo-national, folkloric material, resulting in a series of hybrid, syncretic works that were prone to self-Orientalization and which complicate the romantic notion of a “pure” Russian identity that we have come to associate with the colony. Indeed, as Lynn Garafola astutely observes, by the close of the nineteenth century, the idea of “Russianness” increasingly “defied neat categories” and became “tinged with Orientalism.”

4 Vrubel had accompanied Sergei Mamontov to Athens and Constantinople in 1894; Korovin spent several months in the Caucasus in 1889, and Repin also traveled there in 1899. Polenov made two extensive trips to the Middle East in 1881-82 and in 1899.


6 Other notable nineteenth-century artists who had worked with Orientalist themes and subjects include Karl Briullov, Aleksandr Orlovskii, Prince Grigorii Gagarin, Lev Dmitriev-Kakovskii, Nikolai Karazin, Vasilii Timm, and Léon Bakst.

nationalist material and exotica [...] the two inhabited similar compartments of the imagination.”

Olga Haldey similarly identifies the beginnings of a recognizable self-Orientalizing aesthetic in the activities of the Abramtsevo artistic circle and Mamontov’s Private Opera, and traces a direct link between them and Sergei Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes productions, such as *Prince Igor* (1909), *The Firebird* (1910), *Scheherazade* (1910), *Petrushka* (1911), and *The Golden Cockerel* (1914), all of which “would take Europe by storm” in the early twentieth century with their “flamboyant” and heady “Oriental” exoticism. Taking these arguments as a point of departure, the present article investigates the pervasiveness of Eastern motifs, themes, and subjects in the works of a number of prominent artists of the Abramtsevo circle, including Korovin, Polenov, Repin, Serov, Viktor Vasnetsov, and Vrubel.

Mamontov himself took a keen interest in the art and culture of the East. As a young man, he had lived in Central Asia and Persia for nearly two years. In 1862, his father had sent him on a trading mission to Baku, Shahrud, and Mashhad on behalf of the Trans-Caspian Trade Society. In his letters and diaries, Mamontov recorded memorable encounters with the historical sites, inhabitants, and customs of the region. He was impressed with the spacious caravanserais and the “fiery eyes” of the native women. He even adopted a number of local practices, such as hiring several “ferashes” and dining on the roofs of buildings, where it was cooler and breezier in the evenings. These youthful experiences had clearly made a lasting impression on Mamontov, who proceeded to write an entire play in the 1880s about a mythical Khan Namyk and his harem, titled the *Black Turban*, and which will be discussed in more detail below. Even as late as 1910, Mamontov had himself photographed in an imposing, feathered turban, standing in front of a display cabinet full of gleaming Oriental ornaments and antique trinkets (fig. 1)—testament to his lifelong interest in the culture, costume, and handicraft of the “Other.”

In addition to Mamontov, another key affiliate of the Abramtsevo circle who had visited the elusive “Orient” on several occasions was Adrian Prakhov.

---

8    Ibid.
10 For a detailed account of Mamontov’s life, see Vladislav Bakhrevskii, *Savva Mamontov* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 2000) and Evgenii Arenzon, *Savva Mamontov* (Moscow: Russkaia kniga, 1995).
12 Ibid., 46.
professor at St. Petersburg University and a leading member of the Imperial Russian Archaeological Society, Prakhov was a respected authority on the art and architecture of the Ancient Near East, Byzantium, and medieval Russia, and had voyaged extensively throughout the eastern Mediterranean, North Africa, and the Middle East in the 1870s and 1880s. As a result of these and other travels, he had amassed a significant number of Eastern artefacts and objets d’art, as well as a large collection of drawings, sketches, photographs, and chromolithographs of various architectural monuments from these regions. Prakhov thus acted as a mentor to many of the other members of the circle, who actively drew on his expertise in these areas. For example, in the 1880s, Vrubel had relied on images and objects from Prakhov’s collection to inform his work on the series of Eastern-themed paintings mentioned earlier. Around the same time, Polenov executed two of his major paintings on the subject of the Biblical Orient, namely Christ and the Adulteress (1888) and At the Sea of Galilee (1888), which were based on studies that the artist had produced during his trip with Prakhov in 1881-82 to Greece, Turkey, Syria, Palestine, and Egypt.
Rather than indulging in Orientalist exoticism for its own sake, Polenov explained the motivation behind these paintings as a strong desire to create “in art a living image [of Christ] as he was in reality [...] And this—truthfulness in appearance—is what I was searching for.”\(^{13}\) Some period commentators, such as Aleksandr Golovin, immediately recognized the novelty of these paintings, noting that they registered “as something entirely new against the dull, grey background of the art of the time. His studies—from Palestine and Egypt—delighted the eye with their brightness, freshness, and sunniness. His palette shimmered, and this alone was enough to ignite the artistic youth.”\(^{14}\) However, a number of Polenov’s detractors objected to Christ’s “swarthy,” “muscular,” “deeply sunburned,” and “Eastern” appearance, claiming that the figure was virtually unrecognizable as Christ; they accused Polenov of “nihilism” and of “insult[ing] the religious feelings of the enormous majority of viewers.”\(^{15}\) As Jefferson Gatrall explains, the deep nationalist investment in the canonical, sacred, Orthodox Christ, as he was depicted in ancient icons and by the likes of Viktor Vasnetsov and Mikhail Nesterov in the new revivalist Cathedral of St. Vladimir in Kiev and the Church of the Savior on Spilled Blood in St. Petersburg, made Polenov’s exotic, foreign, and “Asiatic” Christ highly unpalatable and alien to broad swaths of the viewing public. The mixed reception of Polenov’s painting also highlighted the numerous complexities inherent in the Orientalist genre, especially within the Russian cultural context, which was rife with anxieties about Russia’s own partly Asiatic identity and its peripheral position vis-à-vis Western Europe.

And yet, paradoxically, Orientalism seemed to flourish at Abramtsevo throughout the 1880s and 1890s. We even find Orientalist inflections in the works of artists not typically associated with the genre, such as Korovin and Serov, who are best known for their “Western” Impressionist painterly techniques. Following his 1889 trip to the Caucasus, Korovin had produced a few studies on the subject, such as *Purchasing a Dagger* (1889), and *In the Caucasus. Seated*
Similarly, Serov painted a striking image of a male nude in a multi-colored turban with long tassels, sitting against a brightly decorated pillow with a colorful, patterned Persian carpet hanging in the background (fig. 2), which was kept in Mamontov’s private art collection at Abramtsevo. Both artists subsequently produced stage sets and costume designs for a number of Eastern-themed operas and ballet productions for Mamontov’s Private Opera and Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes, including *Black Turban* (1884, 1887, 1889), *Aida* (1885, 1896), *Lakmé* (1886, 1896, 1899), *Judith* (1898), *Scheherazade* (1910), and *Les Orientales* (1910).

In fact, *tableaux vivants*, plays and operas were especially readily harnessed towards Orientalist themes and subjects. A number of these were first staged at the Abramtsevo estate and in Mamontov’s Moscow mansion on Spasskaia Sadovaia street, and subsequently became part of the regular repertoire of the
Private Opera. These included: *Judith* (1878, 1898), *Joseph* (1880, 1881, 1887, 1889), *Black Turban* (1884, 1887, 1889), *Aida* (1885, 1896), *King Saul* (1890), *To the Caucasus* (1891), *Samson and Delilah* (1896), *Prisoner of the Caucasus* (1899), and *Mandarin’s Son* (1900). *Black Turban* was one of the earliest and most overtly Orientalist of these productions. Written by Mamontov himself as a musical satire in two acts, it was set in a distant “Eastern” land and followed the story of the cruel and tyrannical Khan Namyk, who fell in love with the beautiful and mysterious Fatima. The play starred Mikhail Malinin, Petr Spiro, Korovin, Polenov, Serov, and Ilia Ostroukhov. The latter two participants also designed the stage sets and costumes. The play featured a majestic palace with a harem and included “Oriental” music and “seductive dancing.” A few surviving photographs (fig. 3) show members of the group in colorful Oriental garb, complete with turbans, elaborate moustaches, gleaming swords, and daggers.

A poster for the show (fig. 4) designed by Vasnetsov draws on all the stereotypical tropes of the Orientalist genre. A pale-skinned and bejeweled harem beauty languishes in a domed and ornately decorated tower, below which a vicious executioner with a large moustache beheads several hapless victims. In the top right corner of the image—directly across the page from the beautiful woman—is a startled, severed head, which stares out at the viewer with wild eyes and drips blood all the way down the page onto a large, Persian-style executioner’s axe atop of a beheading block decorated with a sinister skull with streams of blood running over it. Faux Arabic script completes the image.

Here Vasnetsov visualized the archetypal Orient of European fantasies and nightmares, replete with cruelty, violence, indolence, and voluptuousness—a world far removed from the intimate, vivacious, and homely atmosphere of Abramtsevo. In contrast to Polenov’s diligent and painstaking archaeological efforts to recreate a “truthful” portrayal of a historically “accurate” Middle Eastern Christ, *Black Turban* was pure vaudeville comedy, full of caricatures and exaggerations. According to Natalia Polenova, Pavel Tretiakov “cried with laughter over this nonsense” and she herself “never laughed so hard in her

---

16 Although this falls beyond the scope of the present article, it is nonetheless worth noting that virtually all of the “Mighty Handful” composers—many of whose operas were performed by Mamontov’s Private Opera—had also included Orientalist themes and subjects in their works, such as the “Polovtsian Dances” in Alexander Borodin’s *Prince Igor* (1869-87), Mily Balakirev’s *Tamara* (1882), or Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Scheherazade* (1888), to give just a few examples. This suggests that vostok, or the East, was an important component of Russian Neo-nationalism in the visual, performing, and musical arts.

entire life.” The remarkable coexistence of these two very different versions of the Orient under one roof testifies not only to the innate fluidity and malleability of the genre, but also to its capacity to encode multiple—and often competing—meanings.

The same year that *Black Turban* was first staged at Abramtsevo, Vasnetsov made a series of set and costume designs for Aleksandr Dargomyzhskii’s opera, *Rusalka* [The Mermaid] (1848-55), which was based on Alexander Pushkin’s incomplete dramatic poem (1829-32) of the same name. It was the first opera to be performed at the newly inaugurated Private Opera in Moscow in 1885 to great acclaim. In one of Vasnetsov’s preparatory watercolor sketches for the main stage set, entitled the *Underwater Kingdom* (1884) (fig. 5), we see an obvious Oriental derivation. Interestingly, Vasnetsov himself valued this image very

---

FIGURE 4  Viktor Vasnetsov, *Poster for the play Black Turban*, 1884, ink, watercolor, gouache, and pencil on paper, 76 × 55 cm, Federal State Cultural Establishment Artistic and Literary Museum-Reserve Abramtsevo, Russia

PHOTO © FEDERAL STATE CULTURAL ESTABLISHMENT ARTISTIC AND LITERARY MUSEUM-RESERVE ABRAMTSEVO
highly and claimed that it had important “historical significance.” The green seashell dome of the underwater palace appears to be based on Indo-Islamic architecture, complete with a minaret-looking structure on the left hand-side. The predominantly green and blue palette and lush underwater vegetation, with hanging vines and twisting lianas, all invoke a jungle setting. A group of mermaids in flowing, pale blue garments are shown languidly reclining on the steps of the palace, recalling a harem scene.

Although the opera was described as a “national, lyric tragedy” and centered on the story of a rusalka—the Russian equivalent of a mermaid or water sprite, prevalent in Slavic folklore and mythology—Vasnetsov seems to have relied on the visual motifs of the Oriental “other” in depicting the otherworldly, liminal, and predominantly female aquatic realm of the mermaids. Water, of course, is ubiquitously present in nineteenth-century representations of harem scenes and, as Allison Leigh has eloquently argued in her analysis of Karl Briullov’s

Bathsheeba (1832), it functions as a metaphor for “bridging worlds.”

Bodies of water act as separating entities that divide “us” from “them,” with them being those who live beyond—or in this case beneath—the sea. The marine world of the mermaids thus becomes the fairytale “other” to the landed domain of the human protagonists.

Notably, in his earlier painting of Sadko in the Underwater Kingdom (1876), Repin also deployed several Orientalizing tropes in his depictions of the parade of sea princesses who vie for Sadko’s attention. Although this work was begun during Repin’s stay in Paris and was executed well before his official participation in the activities of the Abramtsevo colony, the story of Sadko, much like that of the Snow Maiden, became a staple subject in the art and theatrical productions of both the Abramtsevo circle and Mamontov’s Private Opera, and by the close of the nineteenth century was increasingly viewed as a hallmark theme of the Neo-Russian style. Decked out in bright and exotic garments, embellished headdresses and resplendent jewelry, the underwater maidens in Repin’s painting represent different female types and ethnicities, and in that sense, yet again borrow from the established pictorial conventions of harem scenes, examples of which he would have most certainly seen in Paris.

One last pertinent example of a Slavic mythological character—once more from the Sadko tale—who is represented in quasi-Orientalist terms is Vrubel’s Princess Volkhova. In the painting Sea King Parting with the Princess Volkhova (1898), the sea princess is rendered in extravagant jewelry and a turban-styled seashell headdress that markedly departs from the more traditional Slavic kokoshnik. Similarly, in one sculptural version of Volkhova (1899), she is shown wearing an ornamented metallic belt around her waist and a tall cylindrical crown, similar to those worn in Ancient Assyria or Scythia. Much like Repin and Vasnetsov, Vrubel visually equated the enchanted, underwater world of the mermaids and mythical sea creatures, with the inscrutable “Orient,” no doubt conditioned and mediated by the artist’s own reading of the One Thousand and One Nights, where magic and the supernatural abound. Consequently, the

21 Mikhail Vrubel, The Sea King’s Parting with Princess Volkhova, 1898, pastel, gouache, and bronze powder on paper, 60 × 152 cm, State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.
22 Mikhail Vrubel, Princess Volkhova (1899), glazed earthenware, 68 × 29.5 × 26.5 cm, Novgorod Museum of Fine Arts.
23 According to Adrian Prakhov’s son, Nikolai, Vrubel was inspired to paint his first cycle of Orientalist works in 1886 after an evening reading of a French version of One Thousand and One Nights at the Prakhov family’s home. Nikolai Prakhov, Stranitsy proshlogo; ocherki—vospominaniia o khudozhnikakh, ed. Viktor Lobanov (Kiev: Derzhavne vydavnytstvo obrazotvorchogo mistetstva i muzichnoi literaturi URSR, 1958). Reprinted in Vrubel:...
ostensibly Neo-national works of Repin, Vasnetsov, and Vrubel were not simply straightforward adaptations of Slavic folklore, but were instead enmeshed in a complex triangulating exchange of influences between Russia, Europe, and Asia.

Of all the Abramtsevo artists, Vrubel had embraced the most diverse range of Eastern artistic sources, including Chinese brocades, Persian carpets, Assyrian statuary, and Egyptian wall-painting. He executed numerous works on the subject of the Orient and the Ancient Near East, such as his illustrations to Lermontov’s Hero of Our Time (1839) and Caucasian poems, for example, Kazbich and Azamat (1890-91), The Parting of Zara and Izmail (1890-91), and Jewish Melody (1890-91); his set and costume designs for King Saul (1890), The Demon (1896), and Prisoner of the Caucasus (1899), and finally, his series of majolica objects: The Assyrian, The Egyptian Girl, The Pharaoh, and the Libyan Lion, all dating from the 1890s. Throughout his lifetime Vrubel maintained that the best and most genuine artists were “the Egyptians and the Assyrians,” and claimed that he was “a big admirer of India and the East,” attributing this interest to his “Tatar Basagrin blood.”24 Such statements dramatically complicate the self/other binary that typically structures Orientalist representations and give some credence to Napoleon’s quip, especially if we recall that—much like Vrubel—many members of the Russian aristocracy, and the military and cultural elites, such as the Usupovs, Sheremetievs, and the Bagrationi, had either Georgian, Armenian, or Tatar ancestry.

In a letter from 1886, Vrubel thanked his sister Anna for sending him a number of books, among which he listed Helena Blavatsky’s “delightful” account of her travels in India, From the Caves and Jungles of Hindustan: Letters to the Homeland (1883-86).25 Vrubel read this work with great interest and it may have inspired his little-known and undated work entitled Indian Tale (fig. 6), which was most likely created in the late 1890s.26 Another possible source of inspiration was the highly publicized ten-month trip that Nicholas II had undertaken to India, South East Asia, and the Far East in 1890-91, and which was accompanied by a flurry of poems, artistic tributes, and a large exhibition entitled of Objects Brought Back by the Crown Prince and Heir From His Journey

---

25 Ibid., 49.
26 To the author’s knowledge, this work has never been published before. According to the records of the Vladimir Dal Russian State Literary Museum in Moscow, where it is currently kept, the work was in the private collection of G.P. Beliakov until 1969, when it was gifted to the museum.
to the East that opened at the Winter Palace in the winter of 1893-94.\textsuperscript{27} Lastly, in November of 1896, Mamontov’s Private Opera had staged Léo Delibes’s Indian-themed opera, Lakmé, with set designs by Korovin, which had caused a “furor” with their “exotic” scenery.\textsuperscript{28}

It is unclear whether Vrubel’s relatively small watercolor was simply an imaginative response to Korovin’s stage sets, a study for a larger painting or monumental panel, or a design for a ceramic piece, decorative screen, book, or balalaika. The unusually symmetrical image portrays a monumental, female—supposedly Hindu—deity, who sits cross-legged on a gilded throne and wears an elaborate, pointed headdress, while two diminutive supplicants kneel beside her. One holds up a tall jar, while the other holds a scroll with enigmatic markings, presumably in Sanskrit script. The female figure holds a fern-like plant in her hands that looks like a branch from the sacred Ashoka tree. She is surrounded by a plethora of exotic plants and stylized lotus flowers, all of which suggests that her identity might be that of Aranyani, the Hindu goddess of the forest.

The entire image is rendered with vivid colors, strong lines, and bold patterns, seemingly borrowing the formal language of South Asian pictorial conventions, not unlike the graphic works of Ivan Bilibin, which adopted elements of the Japanese Ukiyo-e tradition. Nothing is known about either the inspiration behind or the execution of Indian Tale, and one can only speculate about Vrubel’s visual or literary sources. There is, however, one strange and

\begin{figure}[h]
  \centering
  \includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure6.jpg}
  \caption{Mikhail Vrubel, \textit{Indian Tale}, undated, watercolor on paper, 24.7 × 10.5 cm, Vladimir Dal Russian State Literary Museum, Moscow}
  \end{figure}

\textsuperscript{27} For more information on this exhibition see: Olga Sosnina, “Bringing Asia to the Halls of the Winter Palace,” in \textit{The Russian Avant-garde: Siberia and the East}, 45-49.

\textsuperscript{28} Golovin, \textit{Vstrechi i vpechatleniia}, 25. I would like to thank Louise Hardiman for bringing this connection to my attention.
incongruous detail that immediately catches the eye: the conspicuous presence of two semi-human birds in the top right and left corners of the image. Although they could conceivably be representations of the legendary Hindu bird god, Garuda, in actuality they look much more like sirins from the Slavic folk tradition, whom we find in some of Vrubel’s other works from the period, for example on his ceramic bench at Abramtsyevo (1910s), or, more famously, in Vasnetsov’s painting, Sirin and Alkonost. The Birds of Joy and Sorrow (1896), and in the latter artist’s decorations on the façade of the Tretyakov Gallery building (1903). Accordingly, it is safe to assume that in addition to non-native artifacts, Vrubel must have also relied on indigenous sources, such as lubki, in fashioning this whimsical image.

Such a peculiar amalgamation of exotic, purportedly Eastern elements with Slavic mythology and folkloric motifs appeared in various other fine and applied artworks, stage sets, and costume designs that were produced at the Abramtsyevo estate in the course of the 1880s and 1890s. Indeed, as this article has endeavored to demonstrate, although the Abramtsyevo artistic circle is traditionally associated with the ascendance of National Romanticism, Slavic folklore, and the Neo-Russian style in theater, painting, architecture, and the decorative arts, Orientalism likewise emerged as a distinct subgenre within the creative output of the group, one which—in its multivalence, complexity and hybridity—reflected the diverse interests and backgrounds of its members. Conceived and partially executed on the estate, works such as Polenov’s Christ and the Adulteress (1888), Vasnetsov’s Underwater Kingdom (1884), and Mikhail Vrubel’s Princess Volkova (1898) and Indian Tale (1890s) blurred the boundaries between the native and the foreign, the local and the global, the self and other, and Slavophilia and Orientalia. By the same token, it is important not to overstate the case, as the Abramtsyevo artists looked to a number of other cultures and time periods for inspiration, including ancient Greece, medieval France and Germany, and Renaissance Italy, among others. However, keeping in mind Napoleon’s claim that underneath every Russian lurks a Tatar, any discussion of identity, Neo-nationalism, and Slavophilia in Mamontov’s circle necessitates a consideration of Abramtsyevo’s Orientalism, which in turn helps us to better understand the subsequent artistic practices of twentieth-century artists such as Natalia Goncharova, Vasily Kandinsky, Kazimir Malevich, and Ilia Mashkov, among others.

**Acknowledgment**

I would like to thank Vasilisa Egorova for providing invaluable research assistance during the writing of this article.