

## Folk Art Tour · Carole Richardson

A small group of six people enjoyed the folk art tour at the end of August. As usual the holiday was arranged through ARSA-F, and Ludmilla Fishchuk was our expert guide throughout. We had been quite worried because of the dreadful conditions in Russia this summer, but in the end we decided to go ahead, and were glad we did. The rest of you really missed a treat.

We spent the first morning of the holiday at the Museum of Decorative and Applied Arts, Moscow. This was my first visit, and I was absolutely stunned by gallery after gallery displaying the life of Old Russia—fantastic examples of



In the Museum of Decorative and Applied Arts

carved wooden window frames, painted furniture, costumes, painted and carved distaffs for spinning, birchbark, samovars (did you know that a samovar for one is called an *egoist*?), as well as fabulous Dimka figures, Khokhloma, Gorodets . . . And that was not all, for this museum was also staging a huge exhibition of lacquer miniature boxes from Kholui, Palekh, and Fedoskino, the best I've ever seen and including many boxes otherwise only seen in books.

In the afternoon we travelled the few miles north to Zhostovo, home of the painted floral trays. In the factory museum we were given an impressive demonstration of the art and an explanation of its history. The designs are painted in oils with

large brushes and sweeping strokes, quite the antithesis of the lacquer boxes, although Zhostovo has historical links with nearby Fedoskino. The museum is breathtaking, a huge room with wonderful trays of all shapes and sizes—including some very early examples—completely covering three of its walls.

The next day saw us in Sergiev Posad, birthplace of the matryoshka nesting doll. In the factory workshop we watched open-mouthed as a very skilled craftsman turned out a stream of doll blanks on his lathe. He worked entirely by eye (not a ruler or tape-measure in sight), hollowing out each cylinder of wood and forming the lip so that the pieces fitted together perfectly.



Turning a matryoshka blank

In the afternoon we visited an equally enchanting place, Bogorodskoe, where wood-carvings are made, and we saw many wonderful examples of toys and other carvings in the museum. We were also able to watch one of the craftsmen at work, and were very pleased to see that there are still young people coming into the traditional crafts.

Our second day was still not over: next stop was Pereslavl, where we were first greeted at the House of Berendey by ladies in traditional costume, bearing bread and salt and singing for us, and next by Tsar Berendey himself. On the steps of his fairy-tale house a traditional wedding ceremony was then conducted. Volunteers were required from the group, and our 'newlyweds' were Alice and Jim Fitzpatrick, many years after their first wedding! Other members of the group assisted with the ceremony, and all had to dress up. It was great fun, a different kind of folk tradition for us to enjoy on our folk art tour. It was followed



Bread and salt

by tea and pancakes, representing the wedding banquet.

Next day—to Rostov the Great, to see the *finift'* enamels. The art came from Egypt originally, by way of Byzantium, arriving in Russia in the tenth century along with the name *finift'*, which is from the Greek for 'shining stone'. The fascinating museum in Rostov contains a huge range—not only jewellery, but beautiful boxes that are every bit as delightful as the lacquer miniatures, as well as many other articles. We visited the workshop, too, to see some of the different procedures involved in producing the enamels, as well as the delicate filigree metalwork in which they are set. After a short visit to the ancient Kremlin of Rostov (which boasts the biggest working bell in



The Rostov Kremlin

the world, at 32 tons) we enjoyed a wonderfully relaxing cruise on the lake and a different perspective on the town's historic architecture. Earlier in the day we had been looking at the traditional *finift'* enamels; later we saw a much more modern approach when we visited the studio of a local artist, Mikhail Selishchev. Modest and unassuming, he showed us around his home, filled with his works; then he demonstrated for us the produc-

tion of a small piece—a beautiful bird—painting each layer and then firing it in his kiln before proceeding to the next.

The next day we had quite a way to travel, and broke our journey in Suzdal. We had been hoping to visit the outdoor museum, but it was closed for repairs. We made up for the disappointment by listening to some glorious singing in the monastery church; afterwards a young singer called German very proudly sold us all CDs of his choir's music.

Where to next? Oh, yes: we couldn't have a Folk Art Tour without visiting one of the lacquer miniature villages, so we went to Mstera. As it's a familiar place to most of us, I will just mention briefly that we again enjoyed visiting the museum and the workshops, and then our friends there organized a delicious picnic lunch for us by the river. As usual, some of the artists had spent all morning preparing it for us, and it was one of the highlights of the trip—a relaxing few hours on a sunny riverbank in the beautiful Russian countryside, with good food, good vodka, and good company.

However, Ludmilla did have one surprise for us in Mstera. Earlier in the morning, we were taken to a small house just down the road from the workshop, the home of Kotyagin, one of the founding artists of the Mstera school, whose work we had just been admiring in the museum. What's more, a member of his family was there to greet us: none other than Irina Kuznetsova, who has visited us twice in England this year. We know her as a Kholui artist, because she grew up in Yuzha and married a man from Kholui, but her antecedents are from Mstera. She has preserved her ancestor's house, and took us to a delightful little room on the first floor which she has kept exactly as he had it. Here she and her son entertained us to tea and cake, and showed us photographs from the old days.

We were slowly moving eastwards: the most easterly point we reached on our tour was Nizhny Novgorod, one of the oldest cities on the banks of the Volga river. We all fell in love with this place and its 'lively European feel', from the café where we had coffee and *pirozhki* when we arrived to the wonderful streets with their life-size bronze statues.

We were there to meet Nikolay Gushchin, a top Khokhloma artist. This is the nearest we could

get to the area where these gorgeous red, black, and gold wares are painted, but he had had to travel 100 km from his own village to get there. In another folk art museum—if possible even better than the one in Moscow—there was an extensive collection of early Khokhloma ware, and our guide explained that it had first appeared in the seventeenth century, in villages near the town of Kovrnino. The gold appearance is produced in the firing process: it's actually aluminium powder coated with linseed oil. Nikolay briefly demonstrated by painting a design onto a china plate, using the traditional oil paints and a brush with a very long, thin point. It was amazing to watch



Nikolay Gushchin

him produce the design from nothing, with deft and masterly strokes that some of us tried, rather falteringly, to emulate later.

Before leaving Nizhny Novgorod we visited another artist, Aleksandr Yurkov. His work is unique: he produces pictures using nothing more than autumn leaves. These stunning works decorated the walls of his simple gallery, and we spent ages there examining them all. You would not believe it was possible, if you hadn't seen them for yourselves—landscapes, animals, people with such vivid expressions, all created from a mosaic of leaf fragments. One that made a particular impression on me was a picture of his mother carrying one of her small sons and holding another by the hand. She spent many years in

a labour camp, and in fact the artist himself was born there. Somehow he had managed to convey so much sadness yet stoicism and motherly love in this picture, even though his materials were so unconventional.

On leaving Nizhny Novgorod (with much regret and determination to return for a longer visit), we headed back west through one of the scariest and ugliest rainstorms I have ever known. Many thanks to our driver, Andrey, for his skilful driving, and for delivering us safely back to our hotel.

We enjoyed a delightful interlude on our way back to Moscow the next day. We stopped for refreshments as usual at the Russkaya Skazka restaurant, with its minute tea room behind. Our trip to Russia this year was characterized by the number of weddings we saw, and here was another one. The wedding banquet was being held in the tea room. It was, to say the least, a squash, but nevertheless they shuffled closer to make room for us (thank goodness, as it was pouring with rain). I think they were as fascinated by us as we were by them; we will certainly feature largely in their wedding video! The newlyweds very generously presented us with a bottle of champagne, which they had signed with their best wishes. So, Oksana and Aleksey, here's to you, and many thanks!

Our last visit was to some old friends of the Friends, the Orlovs, at their studios in Noginsk, where they welcomed us with a delicious lunch (much of it grown in their own garden) and then treated us to a display of their work—Marina Orlova's breathtaking batiks and Viktor Orlov's splendid and evocative oil paintings.

There are many more things I could say about this wonderful holiday, but I've already taken up far too much space. So I will just end by saying that anyone who has been on a lacquer miniature tour will know what a difference it makes to see the artists at work, producing their art, in their own environment. On the folk art tour we had the opportunity to do this over a whole range of Russian crafts. There was so much to see and to learn, and the work was of such high quality that we were constantly amazed. And yet the artists were so modest about their skills, and so friendly, and so happy to share their time with us. This was a truly unique holiday, and it was a real privilege to be able to discover a little bit more about the traditional art and craft of Russia. ➡