Editors' Preface

Just over an hour's drive from Moscow's urban sprawl, not far from the important Orthodox site of Sergiev Posad, lies the peaceful enclave and former country estate of Abramtsevo, now a state-run art and literature museum. Guarded by verdant native forest, criss-crossed by woodland paths, and blessed with myriad views, the place retains a natural charm and sanctity; among a cluster of mainly nineteenth-century buildings, a diminutive white church stands proud at its heart (fig. 1). Beside the church, simple crosses (fig. 2) mark the burial places of members of the Mamontov family, the last owners of the estate before the Bolshevik Revolution. Savva Ivanovich Mamontov (1841-1918) and Elizaveta Grigorievna Mamontova (née Sapozhnikova) (1847-1908)—each one a highly determined and talented artistic “entrepreneur”—had spent many happy years here with their five children (whose initials, tellingly, spell out “S A V V A”). Indeed, despite its prominence and almost mythical status in the history of late nineteenth-century Russian art, Abramtsevo is as much about the people as the place. In seeking to illuminate “Abramtsevo and Its Legacies,” this volume is dedicated to exploring both.

FIGURE 1 Church of the Savior Not Made by Human Hands, 1881-82, forest view, Federal State Cultural Establishment Artistic and Literary Museum-Reserve Abramtsevo, Russia

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FIGURE 2 Crosses in the churchyard, Federal State Cultural Establishment Artistic and Literary Museum-Reserve Abramtsevo, Russia

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The special aura of Abramtsevo—redolent with humanity as well as a more spiritual timelessness (fig. 3)—is most appropriate, for its primary importance was in the rediscovery of the art and culture of the Russian *narod* [folk], with its strong associations with lore and story-telling. Here, artists pursued their interest in tales and traditions of the past, not only in works of painting, but in craft, architecture, industry, amateur theater, and much more. On account of this prolific and wide-ranging productivity the history of Abramtsevo has become something of a legend in itself, summed up in the idea proffered by Camilla Gray in 1962 that it was here that Russian artistic modernism began.¹ Perhaps it was inevitable that an “origin story” would be needed for the Russian avant-garde, which, despite Soviet exceptionalism, gained a salient place on the map of twentieth-century western art history as early as 1936 in Alfred Barr’s oft-reproduced diagram, “Cubism and Abstract Art.”

1 Camilla Gray, *The Great Experiment: Russian Art 1863-1922* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1962) [later republished as Camilla Gray, *The Russian Experiment in Art 1863-1922*, ed. and introduced by Marian Burleigh-Motley (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971)].

FIGURE 3 Path to the Manor House, Federal State Cultural Establishment Artistic and Literary Museum-Reserve Abramtsevo, Russia
PHOTO © 2019 LUDMILA PITERS-HOFMANN

For all that the subject has become well-known due to its association with emerging modernism(s), the aim of this journal issue is to revisit the idea that this ground is too well-trodden, that there is nothing more to be said. Focusing mainly on the period between 1870 and 1900, articles presented here address a variety of topics related to Abramtsevo, its legacies, and the Neo-national movement, and thereby shed light on a number of gaps which remain in the history, as well as opportunities to apply recent methodological developments and explore new areas of academic inquiry.

In an initial section of three selected translations, we seek to convey a sense of the place that Abramtsevo was, and is now. Day-to-day estate life and pithy reports of family affairs were recorded by the Mamontovs and the group of artists who collectively became known as “the Abramtsevo artistic circle” in a handwritten Chronicle, extracts from which have been generously provided by Elena Mokhova of the Federal State Cultural Establishment Artistic and Literary Museum-Reserve Abramtsevo, ahead of a planned publication. We have chosen to illustrate this piece with period photographs taken by Natalia Polenova, a member of the Abramtsevo circle who wrote its first “biography” in 1922.² Life at the estate is summarized from an artist’s perspective by Viktor Vasnetsov in his eulogy to Mamontov upon the occasion of the latter’s funeral in 1918. Finally, a short piece from the present-day Director of the museum, Elena Voronina, emphasizes the enduring legacy of this unique place; we wanted to reflect this by incorporating several of our own photographs from recent visits to Abramtsevo (fig. 4), and with our cover image—a photograph taken by Ludmila Piters-Hofmann in February 2019.

The main content, comprising twenty articles, is divided into sections for the reader’s convenience, but the truth is that many themes recur and overlap across the issue. Essays by Eleonora Paston and Maria Taroutina seek to position the ideas of the Abramtsevo artistic circle by reference to other contemporary movements—Paston discusses Mamontov in light of the Arts and Crafts ideal of amateurism opposed to an institutional mainstream. Taroutina argues that Orientalist leanings among Abramtsevo artists have been overlooked, while questions of place, specifically the circle’s relationship to nationalism and to spirituality, are tackled in essays by Alison Hilton and Inge Wierda. Darya Manucharova and John Nelson supply new information on the theatrical and musical pursuits of Mamontov and his associates.

Ilia Repin aside, English language scholarship on the individual artists of the Abramtsevo circle is surprisingly scarce; articles in this volume tackle Vasilii Polenov’s architecture (Elena Kashtanova), Mikhail Vrubel’s ceramics

2 Natalia Polenova, *Abramtsevo. Vospominaniia* (Moscow: Izd. M.i S. Sabashnikov, 1922).

FIGURE 4 Distaffs, Abramtsevo Folk Art Collection, Federal State Cultural Establishment Artistic and Literary Museum-Reserve Abramtsevo, Russia
PHOTO © 2019 LUDMILA PITERS-HOFMANN

(Josephine Karg), Viktor Vasnetsov's icons (Wendy Salmond), and his silverwork (Karina Pronitcheva). In their different ways, each author bears witness to the multi-medial approach to art for which the Abramtsevo circle is generally known. Shedding light on the artists' interpretation of Neo-nationalism, Olga Davydova and Ekaterina Vyazova position the Russian movement in an international context—Davydova uses the metaphor of dreaming to suggest the interrelationships between symbolist poetics and folk nationalism, which emerged as Neo-nationalism and gradually evolved into Art Nouveau in the 1890s; Vyazova discusses trends of cross-cultural artistic exchange in Neo-nationalist book illustration, comparing Russian and British designs.

Groundbreaking research by Rosalind Blakesley, Alison Hilton, Wendy Salmond, and other western scholars over the past two decades, as well as the work of Russian experts including Evgeniia Kirichenko, Eleonora Paston, Larisa Zhuravleva, and others, has documented folk art and the *kustar* movement as an Arts and Crafts phenomenon, with reference to furniture and embroidery workshops at Abramtsevo and elsewhere. The importance of women's involvement in the creation and promotion of folk art and industry has also been acknowledged.³ Here we provide Helena Goscilo's interpretation of the enduring legacy of the famed *matreshka* doll, together with three articles responding to the rapidly growing research area of textiles and dress history: on needlework publications (Andrea Rusnock), an Italian collection of *kokoshniki* (Lucia Tonini), and the development of a "national style" in civil and military dress in the late Imperial era (Olga Khoroshilova).

The final section of this volume considers questions of display and reception, presenting new material on the history of Russian Arts and Crafts exhibitions in Paris and St. Petersburg (Louise Hardiman, Ludmila Piters-Hofmann, and Anna Winestein); the closing essay, by Nathanaëlle Tressol, adds new insights on the perception of Russian Arts and Crafts in France.

The unintended omission to this edition is a focused essay on one of the leaders of the Neo-national movement, Elena Polenova, although she is mentioned in some articles. This was because, breaking with *Experiment* tradition, we did not commission essays to address specific topics but issued a widely-framed call for papers to solicit fresh research on Abramtsevo and Neo-nationalism. Naturally we make no claim to being comprehensive, but we have endeavored to achieve a certain range of content. We are grateful to John Bowlt for his

3 Alison Hilton, *Russian Folk Art* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995); Wendy Salmond, *Arts and Crafts in Late Imperial Russia: Reviving the Kustar Art Industries, 1870-1917* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

decision to adopt an inclusive approach and we thus feature scholarship from a diverse group of international contributors, including native and non-native English and Russian speakers, museum professionals, graduate students, and seasoned academics, testifying to the breadth and vibrancy of current research on this period of late nineteenth-century Russian art.

Louise Hardiman, Ludmila Piters-Hofmann, and Maria Taroutina