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WOVEN BLOOMS OF NATIONALISM: RUSSIAN TAPESTRY TECHNIQUE SHAWLS 1825 TO 1855 - ONGOING RESEARCH OF A THESIS

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Russian hand woven shawls of the mid nineteenth century appear to be an understudied textile art in the West and seemingly in European Russia as well. Often considered by Western textile and fashion historians to be a parallel industry to the nineteenth century production of woven shawls of the Kashmir style in France and Great Britain, the Russian hand woven shawl industry is instead separate. Most certainly the Kashmir shawl that crossed Russian lands on its way to the West was inspiration, but it appears that Russia's hand woven, tapestry technique shawl industry did not thrive solely to fill orders for a fashionable accessory to dress. Evidence suggests the shawls central to my original thesis *Woven Blooms of Nationalism: Russian Hand Woven Tapestry Technique Shawls 1825 to 1855* served as marketing tools for the Russian textile industry in the mid nineteenth century.

In the early 1800s, the Russian textile industry was beleaguered by foreign imports. The Tsar's government took prescriptive measures to correct this imbalance by introducing a protectionist tax on imported textiles, thus bolstering Russia's textile industry.¹ Previously imported luxury items, such as Kashmir style shawls, were now produced locally. Hand woven shawls of diverse quality were produced at various workshops located on estates owned and run by wealthy landowners and the aristocracy. Cheap labor was provided by the feudalistic system of serfdom.² The most renowned of such operations was that of Nadezhda Merlina. Russian textile historians address the exceptional quality of Merlina's shawls in this period. A Merlina shawl in the Antonio Ratti Textile Center's collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (MMA 46.180) attests to the manufactory's superiority in artistry and technique. (Fig. 1) The laborious method used to create these shawls (when production by mechanization was possible), and the flourishing of the Russian hand woven shawl industry in the first quarter of the century, should give textile historians pause: Why did this labor intensive industry continue?³ Shawls in the Antonio Ratti Textile Center's collection and an examination of the reign of Nicholas I (1825 to 1855) provide some insight into an industry that propagated after the wearing of such shawls was out of fashion.⁴

¹ Robert Chenciner, *Madder Red: A History of Luxury and Trade: Plant Dyes and Pigments in World Commerce and Art* (Richmond: Curzon, 2000), 74.

² Aristocracy owned workshops proliferated in the nineteenth century. In her memoirs, Catherine Wilmot relates her visit to the village of Kaupakna and the manufactory of Prince Yusupov, whose factory produced shawls and silks that were in Wilmot's consideration, "en par with those of Lyon," see Wilmot, *The Russian Journals of Martha and Catherine Wilmot*, 227 to 228. Estate serfs could eventually buy their freedom after a set period of service in certain sectors of the textile related industries. In the absence of documentation verifying the required length of service to buy one's freedom, it can only be speculated from secondary sources that the range was ten to twenty five years.

³ Russian historians Louisa Yefimova and Rina Belogorskaya give 1823 as the date that the jacquard loom entered into the Russian production of shawls. Nina Biriukova and Marina Kuznetsova give a date of 1820. A jacquard loom was included in the Russian display at the 1851 Great Exhibition in London.

⁴ Monique Lévi Strauss, *The Cashmere Shawl* (New York: Abrams, 1988), 26. The author comments that in 1814, when Napoleon was sent to Elba in exile, and aristocracy that lived in exile during the First Empire returned to France, Comtesse de Boigne commented that she had to walk in the cold without her shawl or pelisse "as etiquette banned these from the château." In 1814, more or less, the shawl fell from grace in France with the fashionable ladies of the aristocracy. The ladies of Russia's aristocracy closely followed French fashion until the reign of Nicholas I (1825 to 1855).



Figure 1. Half view of shawl, MMA 46.180, shawl, Nadezhda Merlina Factory, Russia, 19th century, 1835 to 1855, wool, L. 58 x W. 60 inches (147.3 x 152.4 cm)
Made in: Podriadnikova, Yegoryevsk District, Riazan Province, Rogers Fund, 1946

Note: The Antonio Ratti Center attributes this shawl to the Dmitri Kolokoltzev Factory, Saratov province, ca. 1830.
Source: author's photograph.

The reign of Nicholas I ushered in a new era with the formation of a new concept: Russian nationalism. The nascent ideology was pervasive not only in government, but also in the arts. Bolstered by the Empire's recent defeat of Napoleon, the time was prime for Nicholas I to rally his subjects to embrace what was unique about Russia and "Russianness". In 1833, the government proclaimed a new ideology of Official Nationality. Its prime goal was to educate the people in the spirit of the Orthodox faith (of which Nicholas was a devout follower), autocracy, and nationality in the hopes of instilling a nationalistic sense of pride.⁵ Russia's history and institutions, such as the autocracy of the Tsar and the Russian Orthodox religion, were stressed as virtues of Russia that should be glorified. Nationality, that is the special character of the Russian people, and the Russian language were what made Russia unique amongst other nations. A very important issue for Nicholas was his intention to promote the Russian language, as his educated subjects had a preference for French. To remedy this, the use of Russian was ordered at court functions.⁶ Nicholas also stipulated the wearing of idealized Russian dress by ladies in waiting to the court, reversing the Petrine decree of 1701 that ordered the aristocracy to appear in purely Western styled fashions. And while Nicholas did little to change the actual well being of his populace during his reign, he did encourage after one hundred and twenty five years of emulation of western tastes, the discovery of a "national" style of decoration. To that end, as early in his reign as 1826, Nicholas issued a decree encouraging the exploration of ancient Russian art via in depth study of its monuments and decorative arts.⁷

⁵ Nicholas Valentine Riasanovsky, *Nicholas I and Official Nationality in Russia, 1825 to 1855: Russian and East European studies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959), 73 to 74. The term "Official Nationality" was not used during the reign of Nicholas I, but has since the late nineteenth century, has become standard.

⁶ Ibid., 130 to 131.

⁷ Ivan Snegirev and Alekseye Aleksandrovich Martynov *Pami'a 'tniki drevni'a'go khudozhestva v Rossii: sobranie risunkov s t's'erkovnykh i domashnikh utvareĭ, sv. krestov, predmetov, ikonopisi ikonostasov, detal'nyi'a' izobrazhenii'a' otdi'e'l'nykh chasteĭ zdanii, ukrashenii'a', obrazt's'y, mebeli i drugikh prinadlezhnostei starinnago russkago byta* (Moskva: Izd. A.A. Martynova, 1850), 10.

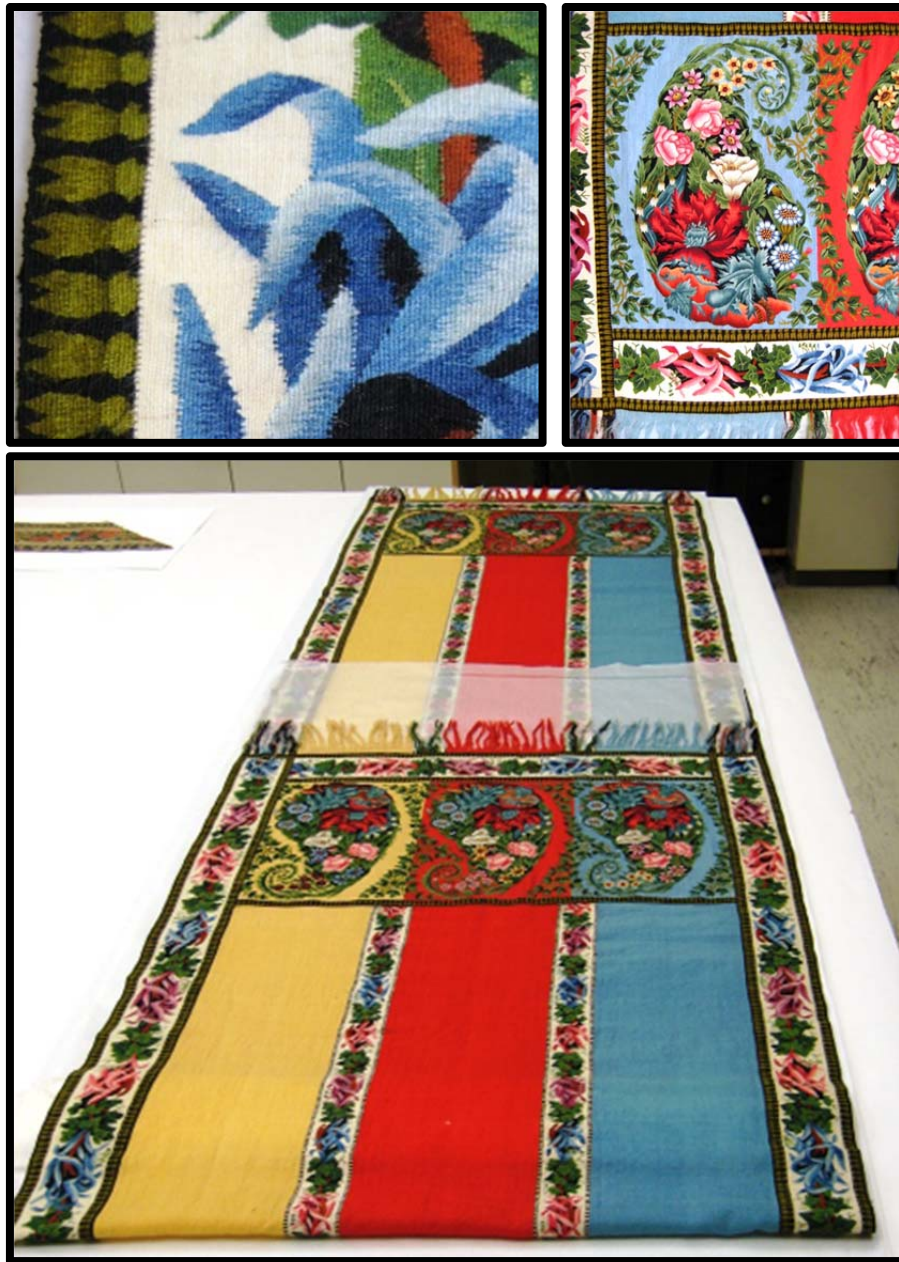


Figure 2. *Folded view, shawl or scarf, MMA 65.919.1, Russian, 19th century, 1820s to 1850s, wool
L. 95 x W. 23¾ inches (241.3 x 60.3 cm), Rogers Fund, 1965*

Figure 3, top left and right. *Details of MMA 65.919.1 Elaborate Russian flowers bloom in the Eastern influenced boteh of this tri color, striped shawl. Although unattributed, the workmanship is outstanding; the fine dovetailing is imperceptible. Truly two sided, this shawl could have accessorized Empire styled dress of the early 19th century, but more probably it was woven after 1825. The extremely bright colors recall the color schemes of triumphant interiors in the Russian Empire style, still fashionable in aristocratic homes during the reign of Nicholas I.*

Source: author's photograph.

The national style that developed from this research still incorporated European influences in the beginning, as artists and graduates of the Imperial Academy of Arts in St. Petersburg searched to create a formal Russian artistic style. Neoclassical motifs prevalent throughout Europe and a revived interest in early Russian ornamentation, influenced by Persian and Arabian motifs, combined on various decorative

art items in the 1830s and 1840s.⁸ These combinations disseminated a Russian stylistic vocabulary that continually changed to reflect new discoveries in Russian history and culture and what seemed illustrative of Russian civilization prior to the Petrine reforms.⁹ Motifs recalled Byzantium, Old Russia, Muscovy (sixteenth to eighteenth century Kremlin style) and folk art. Colors inspired by bright enamels, precious metals and opulent jewels were predominant.¹⁰ An example of this early Russian stylistic vocabulary is found on an oblong shawl in the Antonio Ratti Center collection, MMA 65.919.1. (Fig. 2 and Fig. 3) At first glance, the oblong shape indicates early manufacture, as elongated shawls accessorized the simple silhouette of neoclassical or Empire dress. The motifs and colors reflect the Russian interpretation of the Empire style, often characterized by juxtaposed bright colors and certain opulence. Here, the trilogy of saturated colors—blue, yellow and red—seems distinctly Russian, recalling the brilliant pigments of fourteenth century icons or polychrome enamels. The highly stylized *boteh* acknowledge oriental influences, their plump forms filled with realistic blooms. The thin tapestry bands of the shawl show neoclassical motifs as well. Such a bold color combination displayed via broad stripes does not seem conceivable in a Kashmiri or European produced shawl of this period and this, along with the mélange of motifs, displays attributes of a shawl made after 1825, its motif pan European, but somehow Russian, possibly stimulated by the tenets of Russian nationalism.

Evidence suggests that these types of hand woven, tapestry technique shawls with their stylized motifs and exceptional workmanship, were born from an industry recognized by the government of the Tsar as being outstanding specimens of Russian production that visually expounded “Russianness.” These shawls are excellent examples of the decorative and applied arts that reestablished a distinctive Russian identity. Evidence, although limited, also suggests that those produced, in particular the Merlina variety, served as woven marketing tools for the Russian Empire’s textile and raw product industries in the reign of Nicholas I.

In 1829, the first “public exhibition of goods manufactured in Russia” was held in St. Petersburg. In her history of Russian printed shawls, Galina Akimova Makarovskaya states that shawls produced by the factory of Vera Andreevna Yeliseyeva won top marks at this exhibition, presumably awarded by The Imperial Free Economic Society, the branch of the government that awarded medals for outstanding production.¹¹ Russia’s shawl industry won further imperial recognition in 1834, when the Merlina factory was granted permission to add the Imperial Warrant of the double headed eagle to its Cyrillic initials ‘н’ and ‘м’ on its hand woven, tapestry technique shawls. (Fig. 4) The Imperial Warrant, a nineteenth century symbol of quality, indicated, as was the case with warrants of other royal courts of the period, that Merlina was a purveyor of her goods to the court.¹² In addition to procuring the best of Russia’s

⁸ Neoclassicism did not find its full voice in Russia until the reign of Alexander I (ruled 1801 to 1825), slightly later than Western Europe; therefore it is not surprising that neoclassical elements find their way into the early Russian national style. Caroline Clifton Mogg, *The Neoclassical Source Book* (New York: Rizzoli, 1991), 81.

⁹ Karen Kettering, “Decoration and Disconnection.” In *Russian Art and the West: A Century of Dialogue in Painting, Architecture, and the Decorative Arts*, ed. Rosalind P. Blakesley and Susan Emily Reid (DeKalb, Ill: Northern Illinois University Press, 2007), 62.

¹⁰ For a more detailed description of these styles, see N. I’U’. Biri’u’kova, *Istorizm v Rossii: stil’ i épokha v dekorativnom iskusstve 1820 1890 kh godov: materialy mezhdunarodnoi konferentsii* (Sankt Peterburg: Gosudarstvennyi Érmitazh, 1996).

¹¹ G. A. Makarovskai’a and I’U’. A. Kaver, *Russkie shali* (Moskva: Sovetskai’a Rossii’a, 1986), 76. Little information on Russian exhibitions is accessible and an exploration of this topic in Russia, which goes beyond the scope of this paper, would be useful in fully understanding Russian shawl production in the nineteenth century. For information on The Imperial Free Economic Society, see Chenciner, *Madder Red*, 75.

¹² Riasanovsky, *Nicholas I and Official Nationality in Russia: 1825 to 1855*, 195. Sally West, “Constructing Consumer Culture: Advertising in Imperial Russia to 1914” (Ph.D diss., University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign, 1995), 56 to 78. Since the second quarter of the nineteenth century, the Tsar granted the Imperial Warrant to favored suppliers of the court. This privilege was conferred through the Ministry of the Imperial Court, established by

decorative arts for his personal use, Nicholas I also took a keen interest in the progress and promotion of Russian industry and attended manufacturing exhibitions, such as Moscow in 1835, to inspect Russian manufacture. At this exhibition, yet again, Merlina and other hand woven shawl producers received medals for their work.

Such imperial accolades suggest hand woven tapestry technique shawls were destined to serve as marketing tools promoting Russian manufacture of luxury goods. Russian products displayed at the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London support this theory. Objects on display concentrated on the use of raw materials and the “elaboration of those materials into artistic form.”¹³ Minerals, metals, vegetable dye stuffs and agricultural products such as cotton, flax, silk and wool were displayed alongside extravagant artistic endeavors such as coins, colossal vases and furniture of malachite and ormolu, precious jewelry, silk gloves and a Merlina shawl.¹⁴ The Merlina shawl, although not an example of Russia’s premier Industrial Revolution technology, illustrated one of the celebrated achievements of the emperor’s decree of Russian Official Nationality. It exemplified Russia’s excellence in design and production, and the merits of a textile industry not completely machine driven. Beyond being a fashionable accessory to dress, as an advertisement, the Merlina shawl surely seduced foreigners and the Russian aristocracy alike into considering the purchase of luxury goods conceived and crafted in Russia.

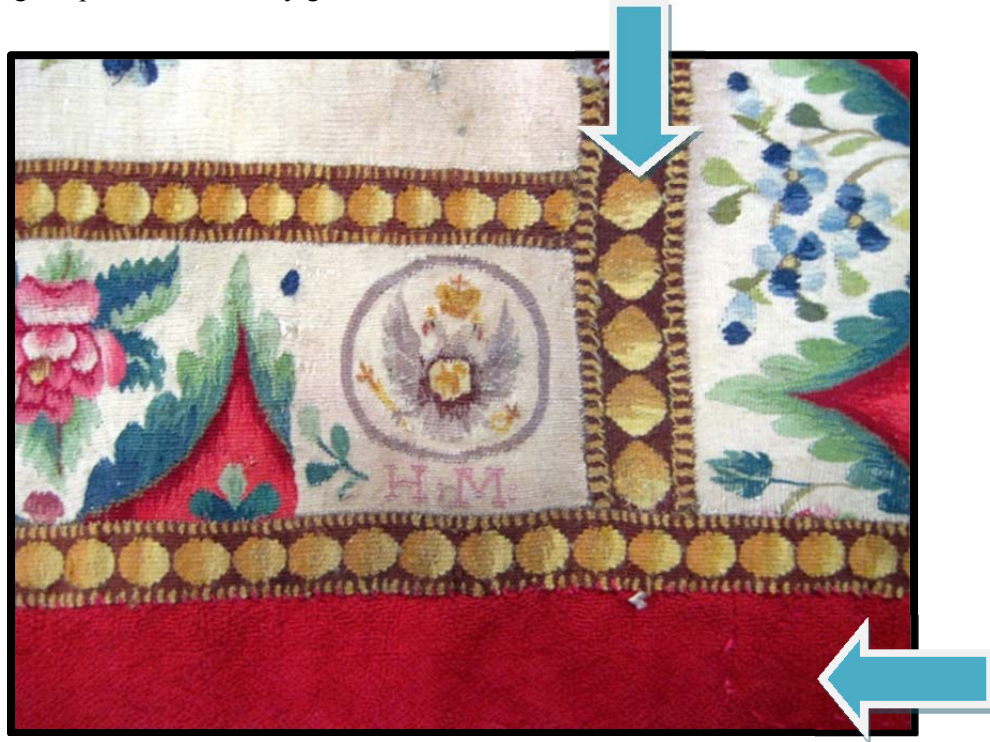


Figure 4. Detail of Fig. 1, MMA 46.180, Nadezhda Merlina manufactory mark with the Imperial Warrant, granted in 1834. The blue arrows illustrate the warp directions of the tapestry borders. These types of bands can be as slim as one quarter of an inch in width. The weaver uses an apparatus that keeps the warps very taught while she works the thread back and forth with a curved needle shuttle. Finely formed fingers also facilitated the work.

Source: author's photograph.

Nicholas I in 1826, and was awarded to merchants that had consistently and satisfactorily delivered goods to the court. Throughout the nineteenth century, the regulations for this warrant were modified. By the reign of Alexander II (reigned 1855 to 1881), it was less encompassing, and was granted to vendors that supplied only the Emperor and Empress. I am grateful to Karen Kettering for bringing this dissertation to my attention.

¹³ Great Exhibition. *Official Descriptive and Illustrated Catalogue of the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations, 1851*, Vol. 1 (London: Spicer Bros, 1851), 1361 to 1362.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1375.

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