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LUXURY TEXTILES FROM FEUDAL WORKSHOPS: 19TH CENTURY RUSSIAN TAPESTRY-WOVEN SHAWLS

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At the 1829 First Public Exhibition of Russian Manufactured Goods in Saint Petersburg, "The public stopped in amazement before an expensive white shawl with a European pattern, priced at 12,000 rubles. On the edges were roses, lilacs and other flowers; in the borders (there) were roses only. You cannot imagine anything more beautiful than this shawl."¹ Sixty different shades of colors were used in the flowers and green leaves. The shawl, an almost-transparent web woven in double-interlocked 2/2 twill, was produced by the serf workshop of Nastasia Andreevna Shiskina. Nicholas I acquired it from the exhibition.²

This paper, an unexpectedly ongoing project, is an exploration of feudal production of the fabled 19th c. Russian tapestry-woven shawls based on previously untranslated Russian sources. It discusses the serf workshops, all in Central Russia, that produced both the unique Russian double-faced shawls, woven in plain-weave dovetailed tapestry, and the remarkable Russian shawls woven in the Indian technique of double-interlocked 2/2 twill tapestry. It briefly describes the characteristic piecing technique used in the manufacture of the double-faced shawls.

These shawls, among the finest, most luxurious textiles ever woven, could only have been produced in a society in which virtual slave labor was available. The process of making them was extremely time-consuming and labor-intensive; a complex border design might proceed at a sprightly pace of about 1/4 in. of weaving per day. The serfs who produced them were owned by the workshop proprietor and sometimes received only their room and board in return for their labor. Even with minimal labor costs, the shawls were so exorbitant in price that only the wealthiest aristocrats and merchants could afford to commission them. Information about both the factories and the shawls is scarce; information about the serf-weavers is non-existent.

The Russian equivalent of John Irwin's pioneering role in Western shawl scholarship is held by Y. A. Yakunina. Her 1941 article "Early 19th-century Shawls of Serf Manufacture" has been translated into English for the first time for me by Ludmilla Trigos. It provides the basis for this paper as it has for the work of the Russian textile specialists from whom these shawls have begun to receive more attention during the past twenty years.

Yet many questions remain unanswered. For example, there is a baffling double-faced shawl in the Philadelphia Museum of Art collection (53-61-1). It is woven in dovetailed plain weave tapestry. It is the only extant long, rectangular Russian double-faced shawl known to me, and the only one with a completely patterned field, astonishingly woven in one piece. It is also the only one with totally flat ornamentation. The absence of shading and naturalistic flowers is remarkable for a Russian shawl. Perhaps the enigma of its creation, and other puzzles generated by gaps in information available in this country, will only be resolved by research in Russia.

The shawl craze which swept Western Europe and America in the late 18th and early 19th c. occurred in Russia too. Shawls became status symbols even before the close of the 18th c. as can be seen in portraits by Borovikovsky, Argunov and others³ and documented by shawls dated 1790 and 1794 at the State History Museum in Moscow.⁴ The Eastern shawls that were first fashionable in Russia were rectangular and were imported from Kashmir, Turkey and Persia.

By 1810 it was apparent that shawls were more than a passing fad, and that huge sums were going to continue being spent for shawls from India. Scarves or stoles of French or English manufacture were being imported, and Russian textile manufacturers were producing shawls domestically.

Shawls soon acquired ceremonial significance, becoming a requisite part of dowries, to be handed down from mother to daughter, sometimes unworn. The influence of the shawl was as pervasive in Russia as elsewhere. A dance called "pas de ch  le" is mentioned in Leo Tolstoy's War and Peace.⁵ The shawl appeared as an essential accessory in popular prints, folk songs, poems, and contemporary prose.⁶

In the second decade shawls of various qualities were used to make dresses, turbans, handbags, women's shoes, and men's dressing gowns as well as upholstered furniture. They were even used as draperies on estates.⁷ In 1828, Turkish and Indian shawls were listed with sugar, tobacco, and pepper as objects of general necessity.⁸

Some insight into the importance of shawls to the Russian aristocracy may be gained from the journal of Lady Londonderry, who traveled to Russia with her husband in 1836-1837.⁹ With access to the Russian Imperial family, they were quickly at home and lived like privileged Russians during their visit. Lady Londonderry wrote of her many encounters with shawl merchants in Moscow; for instance: "My first sortie was to some of the Bukhara merchants where I saw piles of magnificent shawls, one finer than the other, of every shade and pattern."¹⁰ And: "My whole morning was spent among the shawl merchants who made a positive fair of the ante-

room. After seeing hundreds of shawls I finally bought a magnificent one. The merchants flock every morning with heaps of shawls..."¹¹ Thereafter she was visited almost daily by shawl merchants.

Although shawls with Indian and Turkish decoration were popular at the beginning of the century, realistically shaded flowers, which were much more difficult to weave than the flat Indian ornament, became virtually synonymous with Russian double-faced shawl design. These naturalistic floral designs survived the transition from the stoles worn in the teens and twenties, to the square shawls worn during the thirties and into the forties. Their persistent popularity may have been due to an appreciation among the aristocracy for that which was distinctly Russian.

With the Russian shawl placed in social and historical context, what follows is new information on the workshops, their proprietors and the methods of production. Proprietor is the word used by most Russian sources for the estate workshop owners, who may or may not have taken active roles in the management of their factories.

Russian shawl production began in the first years of the 19th century. In 1804, a factory owned by Prince Yusupov began making shawls with silk warps and merino wool or goat fleece weft patterning. The shawls had patterned fields, narrow lengthwise borders and ends ornamented with bouquets. The factory made kerchiefs with the same designs in pure goat fleece¹² The Prince had three shops in which shawls made in his factory were sold.

A factory existed on the estate of the Princes Enikeev. Shawls, scarves and kerchiefs were woven on small vertical looms with bobbins of the finest angora goat's fleece and silk warps.¹³

On the basis of the number of surviving reports about her, Vera Andreevna Eliseeva was the more prominent of the two female shawl factory owners. We know little about her personally, apart from the fact that she was a Second Lieutenant's wife and that in 1826 or 1827, she was honored by being presented to the Empress Maria Feodorovna. She presented Nicholas I with one of her best shawls and received a jewel-encrusted cross from him.¹⁴

Although no shawls with Eliseeva's mark have been found in museum collections, a swatch survives in Russia, appended to an article about her.¹⁵ It is woven in the Indian technique. A shawl in Moscow's State History Museum is in the style for which Eliseeva was known.¹⁶ It is woven in double-interlocked 2/2 twill, but with a range of colors and use of naturalistic flowers to form "boteh" shapes that is quintessentially Russian. Eliseeva's products might be

called genuine imitation Kashmir shawls.

The degree to which the mania for shawls impacted Russia's balance of trade was taken very seriously: a publisher's note to an article on Eliseeva explains that more than 2 million rubles worth of foreign shawls per year were imported in both 1825 and 1826.¹⁷ On top of this there was smuggling. "If one adds to this secret importation, for which these goods are perfectly suited, then the valuation increases even more significantly. One should also not forget the unfortunate circumstance that since the Asian peoples who bring us the shawls and shawl-fabric kerchiefs have little use for our goods, Russia is required to pay significant sums of gold and silver yearly for their products."¹⁸ Russian data places the annual value of imports for that period at 80 million gold rubles¹⁹; with shawls representing 2.5% of imports, no wonder the State encouraged a domestic shawl industry. So the reason for Eliseeva's acclaim becomes evident: "...if the state spends a huge sum on orders of Turkish and Kashmir shawls, and if these shawls could be prepared to such perfection in Russia, then a significant sum would be saved."²⁰ Unfortunately, as near as can be determined, Eliseeva's factory never produced enough shawls to impact the import balance.

Here, then, is the context in which Eliseeva persevered for over five years in attempts to produce Kashmir shawls in her factory. She was the first to perfect the use of the down of Saiga antelopes and Vigon sheep or goats which live in the Siberian steppes.²¹ In addition, during this period she analyzed a genuine Kashmir shawl, setting a precedent for future C.I.E.T.A. technical sessions by unravelling the shawl thread by thread, "and according to the arrangement of the threads she tried to discern the construction a loom had to have in order to weave this shawl."²² Numerous looms were constructed and destroyed until in 1813 she finally succeeded, and her "full-fledged" shawl factory was established. Prices were structured based on the delicacy of the thread, the complexity of design and the production time; shawls took from six months to 2-1/2 years to make and cost from 500 to 12,000 rubles.²³

The shawls produced by the Eliseeva factory in 1827 had "wide borders...with splendid bouquets. Some of these articles have European flowers in their design, but the large majority of them are made with genuine Asian patterns since the latter are purchased more readily by the public."²⁴ This is an important distinction between most of Eliseeva's work and that of Merlina, the other woman proprietor. Because Eliseeva was using the Indian twill tapestry technique, it is logical that she would try to compete head-on with the Indian designs. The article about Eliseeva tells of Bukharan merchants offering her high prices for her cloth to which they would affix Turkish borders so that the shawls might be

sold as genuine Kashmirs. This would only be possible if she were producing fine imitations of the Indian style.²⁵

Eliseeva's factory comprised six buildings: one contained the dyeworks, pressers and pressing machines, and storage; the building next door to it housed carding and combing machines, spinning machines and storage; another, larger building, housed storage for surplus material and weaving looms; spinning and weaving took place in a rather small shed, apparently near, but not in, the village Eliseeva owned; nearby, 3 rooms were used for factory work; her fulling mill was located on the Vedu river. Whether this arrangement is typical of the landowner's factories cannot be readily determined.²⁶

Eliseeva used only her own capital for this venture. "Moreover, combining her business interests and social benefit, she tries to guarantee the well-being of the serf women used in her factory, who number from 36 to 50 in the summer and up to 100 in the winter. Specifically, in addition to full upkeep all women receive significant extra pay from her, which in the course of 10 years comes to a decent amount of capital. After 10 years each woman receives full freedom and is issued her money."²⁷ Considered an enlightened landowner, Eliseeva also founded a home for weavers who were going blind, an all too common affliction for these young women.²⁸ By 1829 Eliseeva's sister Nastasia Andreevna Shiskina had, in the words of the sources, succeeded to her factory.²⁹ We are not certain of Eliseeva's fate.

In 1806, the serf workshop of Nadezhda Appolonovna Merlina, which was founded in 1800 to produce kilims, turned to the manufacture of shawls. Her logical, but visionary, application of the plain weave tapestry kilim technique to shawls led to the creation of double-faced shawls. The Russians called them summer-and-winter weave because they were, in fact, worn summer and winter, indoors and out. Several signed examples of these splendid shawls have survived as testaments to the exceptional talents of the serfs who produced them.

We do not know which workshop produced the two more-or-less triangular fragments in Cooper-Hewitt's collection, (1960-234-1,-2) but they are fine illustrations of the most difficult part of the process, making the shawl reversible.³⁰ Producing a completely reversible shawl entailed weaving the ends of the pattern wefts back into the fabric, as well as darning in the warp ends, both intricate and time-consuming procedures. The warp ends of the fragments have been darned in but not yet cut, creating what appears to be a fringe. When the threads are cut, they will be practically invisible on both sides, so that the shawl into which this cornerpiece is sewn will be reversible.

All Russian double-faced shawls were woven in several separate pieces which were then assembled. Whereas solid color fields were often woven in one piece, usually in 2/2 twill, striped stoles were woven in bands then joined together in the same way as the various border components. The bands forming the stripes were sometimes woven in 2/2 twill, as is the case in a red, yellow and light blue striped unsigned stole from the Metropolitan Museum of Art (65.91.1, see Fig. 1). The decorative elements are woven in reversible plain weave tapestry. Especially notable is the way that European flowers are used to form a boteh shape.

The assembly method can be just barely be seen in another, very similar stole from the Metropolitan Museum of Art (CI 1972.175) which consists of 21 pieces, all joined together edge to edge with tiny overcast stitches. This red, yellow, light blue and white striped stole bears Merlina's early signature, H.M. The "H" is a Russian "N". Curiously, the signature is part woven and part embroidered in couched work. The main, boteh-ornamented border was woven in one piece. The warp ends at the top and bottom of the stripes were darned in so that the field could be invisibly attached to the already assembled horizontal border.

To purchase a fine Merlina shawl, one needed not only to be sufficiently wealthy; but apparently also to be Russian. The Marquis de Caulaincourt, who was the French Ambassador to the Russian Court, made the journey from St. Petersburg to the province of Nizhny Novgorod, specifically to visit the famous Merlina factory.³¹ The Marquis was so dazzled by what he had seen that he decided to purchase the most beautiful of the shawls to present to the Empress Marie Louise, despite its 10,000 ruble price.³² He was astonished when Madame Merlina, who was a fervent patriot, refused to let one of her most beautiful pieces leave Russia.³³

Prince Dolgorukii, who furnished the original report of this incident, paid a rare indirect tribute to the serf weavers: "I do not know if it is fun for those who make shawls and scarves, but I do know it is lovely to look at their work."³⁴ It is exceptional to find even an oblique reference to the weavers, because the serfs were chattels. These essential and gifted workers were simply there, like the other equipment required for shawl weaving, needing minimal maintenance.

The operation of Merlina's factory was typical: most raw materials were bought in bulk at the fair in Nizhny Novgorod. These included pigments, dyestuffs, and the fleece from which the weft yarn was made. The silk for warps was purchased in Moscow.³⁵ Once the materials were acquired, all the work was done on the feudal estate. A good worker could produce only 5 pounds of yarn in a day; it was exceptionally fine, glossy and soft. The man in charge of the dye shop obtained a wide

range of colors, and 30 shades might be used in a simple shawl with 60 in a more complex one.³⁶

A red shawl belonging to the Metropolitan Museum of Art (46.180, see Fig. 2) and a black shawl at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, Alberta, Canada (C6193) are examples of a distinctively Russian style of double-faced turnover shawl which incorporates curved inner cornerpieces with typically superlative floral designs. Both these shawls are woven with Merlina's later crest in the left corner, indicating that they were produced after she won a Gold Medal for shawls in the 1829 St. Petersburg exhibition; at that time she acquired the privilege of adding the two-headed Imperial eagle to her monogram.³⁷ As a tour-de-force to illustrate the minute detailing which yarn finer than hair made possible, Merlina added the Order of St. George³⁸ to the chest of the eagle, which is itself only 5/8 in. square (see Fig. 3).

The serf-weavers were young women between the ages of 17 and 27 who worked, probably at horizontal or low-warp looms³⁹, with fine wooden needles instead of shuttles, each needle carrying a different color thread.⁴⁰ The shawls they produced have a thread count of at least 250 wefts to an inch. In 1828 Merlina's 60 or so factory workers of both sexes had an annual output of 16 shawl kerchiefs with borders of different colors and 5 shawl scarves with borders.⁴¹ Please note that no mention has been made of the origin of the vivid floral designs which typify Russian shawls; their painters remain as anonymous as the weavers. Books of shawl designs have survived in Russian museum collections and may reveal information about the designers.

According to several sources⁴² the double-faced shawls were often known as Kolokol'tsev shawls after Dmitri Kolokol'tsev, a Major-General and State Councillor who was the proprietor of a shawl workshop. There are no documented Kolokol'tsev shawls in collections, but there are several pieces believed to have been made by this factory, including a border with somewhat geometricized design at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum. Perhaps it was a combination of inherent sexism and tribute to his position in society as well as the prominence of his factory that led to the use of Kolokol'tsev as a generic name for the double-sided shawls despite Merlina's accomplishments in the field.

The last time Merlina's shawls were exhibited, at the Crystal Palace Exhibition in London in 1851, she received a Prize Medal for a white shawl with a center woven in the Indian technique and a double-faced border with a "modern" floral design. The jury commented: "It is a novel and extraordinary production of high merit, and though scarcely to be considered an object of trade, it may lead to one of importance hereafter."⁴³ This prediction never came true. Instead, no Merlina shawls nor any other Russian tapestry-

woven shawls were exhibited after 1851. The serfs were not proclaimed free until 1861. The expected evidence of economic or societal upheaval in the years around 1851 which affected the production or demand for the shawls was not forthcoming. Research uncovered no serf uprising, nor change in the Imperial Court, nor any new tax or law which would have negatively impacted the trade in tapestry-woven shawls. Rather, their popularity was eroded by more subtle social changes: changes in fashion. Square shawls gave way to long and large rectangular shawls which were worn with renewed fervor. These shawls, however, had very large scale designs with flat Indian-style ornamentation that covered almost the entire field; only a small portion of the center remained a solid color. It would have been a great advantage to produce a double-faced shawl with such a design, but three problems were insurmountable.

Plain weave tapestry was particularly well-suited to shaded floral designs. It was unlikely to yield successful designs in the flat Indian ornamental style, which was dependent on the effects of twill weave.⁴⁴ Price was another problem. With costs already so high for a typical bordered double-faced shawl, the estimated cost of a virtually all-over-patterned field boggles the mind. Most compelling is the fact that each such shawl would have to take literally several years to produce at a time when fashions in shawl design and color changed by the season. And assuming a design so classically Russian that it transcended seasonal fashions, the severely shrinking market probably would no longer support such an enterprise.

At closer glance, then, it is difficult to agree with Yakunina that "estate production, essentially, could not stand its ground before the growing competition of the significantly more powerful capitalistic factory."⁴⁵ The estate factories which made tapestry-woven shawls were not competing with Russian "capitalistic" factories; rather they were competing with the import luxury market: the most fashionable French jacquard woven shawls and the Indian hand-woven and pieced shawls, which themselves emulated the Jacquard designs.⁴⁶ In light of this, although it is not immediately evident, neither is it surprising that the demise of the Russian tapestry-weave shawl workshops predates the abolition of serfdom.⁴⁷

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Notes

1. Excerpt from Journal of Manufacture and Trade, 1929, no. 5, pp. 108-109.
2. Excerpt from Journal of Manufacture and Trade, 1929, no. 5, pp. 108-109.
3. L. I. Yakunina, "Early 19th-century Shawls of Serf Manufacture," in Papers of the State Historical Museum, vol. 13, Moscow, 1941, p. 233. According to Yakunina, E. A. Avdeeva's Old Russian Dress [On Ancient Russian Attire], 1853, states that shawls came into fashion in 1792 but offers no documentation or basis for that date.
4. Yakunina, p. 234.
5. Leo N. Tolstoy, War and Peace, Moscow: 1911, vol. II, part I, p. 325.
6. Yakunina, p. 249.
7. Yakunina, p. 236.
8. Journal of Manufacture and Trade, 1828, No. 2, p. 13.
9. Russian Journal of Lady Londonderry, 1836-37. W. A. L. Seaman and J. R. Sewell, eds. London, 1973
10. Russian Journal of Lady Londonderry, 1836-37, pp. 63, 74.
11. Russian Journal of Lady Londonderry, 1836-1837, p. 64.
12. F. Derzhavin, On the Production of Shawls in Imitation of Expensive Turkish Shawls. Moscow: 1842.
13. Yakunina, p. 237.
14. "On the Shawl Factory of Voronezh Landowner Vera Andreevna Eliseyeva" in Journal of Manufacture and Trade, 1827, no. 9, pp. 17-22. The author would like to hear from any reader who knows the whereabouts of this J.M.T. article with the swatch still appended.
15. "On the Shawl Factory of... Eliseyeva", footnote, p. 22.
16. See illustrations in Olga Gordeyeva, introduction, Russian Kerchiefs and Shawls, Leningrad: Aurora Art Publishers, 1985, pl. 52 and Ye. V. Arsenyeva, Russian Kerchiefs and Shawls. Moscow: State History Museum, n.d., p. 13. The Gordeyeva book attributes the shawl to "Vera Yeliseyeva's [sic] Manufactory (?)" while the Arsenyeva brochure refers to it simply as "... Cashmere-type shawl, Russian-made".
17. "On the Shawl Factory of...Eliseeva", p. 17.

18. "On the Shawl Factory of...Eliseeva", p. 17. The same problem existed in Western Europe and gave impetus to the rise of shawl industries there.
19. Michael T. Florinsky. Russia: A Short History. New York: The Macmillan Co., 1964, p. 281.
20. "On the Shawl Factory of...Eliseeva", p. 17.
21. It was someone named Sikerin who first experimented with this wool in 1802, according to Yakunina, p. 238.
22. Yakunina, p. 238.
23. "On the Shawl Factory of...Eliseeva", p. 19.
24. "On the Shawl Factory of...Eliseeva", p. 19
25. "On the Shawl Factory of...Eliseeva", p. 20.
26. Excerpt from "The Status of Factories and Mills of Voronezh Province in 1828," JMT, no. 11, pp. 53-54.
27. "On the Shawl Factory of...Eliseeva", p. 22.
28. Yakunina, p. 250.
29. Journal of Manufacture and Trade, 1829, No. 5, pp. 107-113.
30. One side of each piece is curved; the piece is intended to be set into the corner of the inner border of a square "turnover" shawl.
31. Anonymous. Châles tissés par les Serfs Russes. Lyon, n.d. P. 4 of this four page document notes that the information contained in it is taken from Yakunina's 1941 article, op. cit., and Prince I. M. Dolgorukii, "Travel Journal to Nizhnii in 1813" in Readings of the Society of Russian History and Antiquities, 1870, book I, pp. 83-84, as reported in Yakunina, footnote 39.
32. This was enough for the purchase of a splendid property, according to the anonymous author of "Châles tissés...", p. 1.
33. Châles tissés... and Dolgorukii, op. cit.
34. Dolgorukii, op cit.
35. "The Condition of Factories and Mills in Nizhegorod Province," in Journal of Manufacture and Trade, 1830, NO. 10, pp. 55-56.
36. Gordeyeva, p. 11.
37. By 1834 her factory was situated in the village of Podryandnikovo, in Riazan province.
38. The coat-of-arms of Moscow.
39. Châles tissés ... p. 1.
40. Yakunina, p. 250. Yakunina confuses the weave structures used in the weaving of horizontal-warp tapestries and Indian shawls, but correctly points out certain similarities in the way they were woven, one of which is the use of wooden needles or bobbins instead of shuttles.
41. "The Condition... ." Yakunina places the number of shawls produced annually at 46 shawls and 5 stoles, citing the same article.
42. Including Russian Applied Art, Eighteenth to Early Twentieth Century: The Russian Museum, Leningrad; Leningrad, Aurora Art Publishers, 1976, E. Ivanova, introduction, and I. Yasinskaya, notes on plates 149 and 150, and Yakunina, op. cit., pp. 250-251.
43. Reports by the Juries of the Great Exhibition, London, 1851.

44. The Russian shawl at the Philadelphia Museum of Art is an exception in these respects as well: its flat ornamentation was brilliantly conceived, and by virtue of its all-over-patterned field, it must have cost the proverbial "King's ransom." It is tempting to speculate that it was created as a gift from the Imperial family to an Eastern potentate.

45. Yakunina, p. 251.

46. If the estate factories had been producing Jacquard-woven shawls, Yakunina's conclusion would be entirely appropriate.

Additional References

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T. Kourchounova, The Art of Costume in Russia--18th to Early 20th Century, The Hermitage, Leningrad, Aurora Art Publishers, 1979.

T. Kourchounova, Costume in 18th to Early 20th Century Russia in the Hermitage. Exhibition Catalogue. Moscow, Leningrad: 1974.



Fig. 1

Copyright: Metropolitan Museum of Art
Stole (detail), Russian, 1820's
Purchase, Rogers Fund, 1965 (65.91.1)

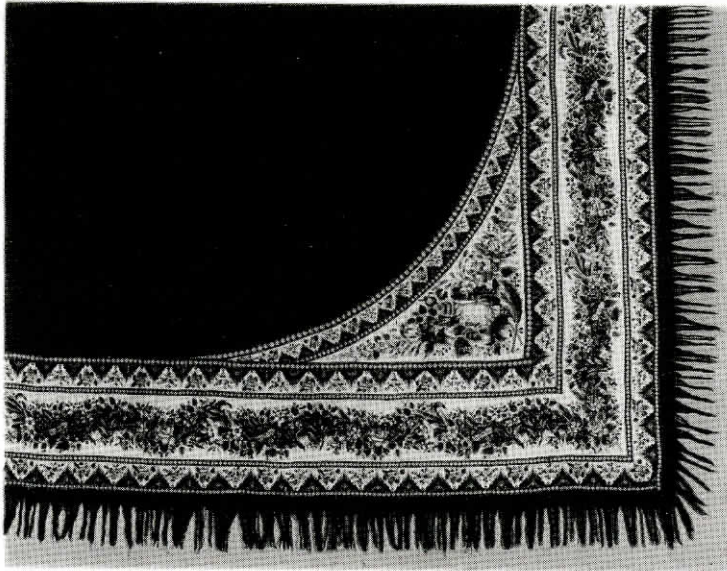


Fig. 2

Copyright: Metropolitan Museum of Art
 Shawl (detail), Russian, 1830's, signed H.M.
 (Nadezhda Merlina)
 Purchase, Rogers Fund, 1946 (46.180)



Fig. 3

Copyright: Metropolitan Museum of Art
 Detail of shawl, 46.180, showing 2-headed Imperial eagle
 (5/8" wide) with Order of St. George on its chest,
 and Merlina monogram H.M. (Russian for N.M.)