



Julia Kostsova

GALLERY ON FIFTH

Naples, Florida

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RUSSIAN TRADITIONS

Exhibition dedicated to 400 anniversary of Romanov's Dynasty

Russian Traditions

Russia is indeed a unique country, which, along with highly developed modern culture carefully preserves the national traditions deeply rooted not only in the Orthodox religion but also in paganism. The Russians still celebrate pagan holidays, many people believe in numerous omens and legends.

Christianity gave Russians such great holidays as Easter and Christmas, and Paganism - Maslenitsa and Ivan Kupala. Old traditions are passed on from generation to generation.

Easter

Easter is the day of the resurrection of Christ. The holiday came to Russia from Byzantium together with Russia's christening in the end of the 10th century. Since then, this Christian holiday has been widely celebrated all over Russia.

Christmas

Christmas is the holiday of the birth of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world, whose advent gave people hope for mercy, kindness, truth and eternal life. The Orthodox Church observes Christmas according to the Julian Calendar, on January 7, while Western churches celebrate it on December 25, in accordance with the Gregorian Calendar.

Ivan Kupala

Even in the time of the ancient pagan deity Ancient Russians used to have Kupalo, the God of summer fertility. In his honor people sang songs and jumped over the bonfire. This ritual act has become an annual celebration of summer solstice, combining a pagan and Christian traditions. Kupala got the name Ivan after the baptizing of Russia, when he was replaced by John the Baptist (the way he was perceived by common people), who baptized Christ and whose birthday was celebrated on 24 June.

Maslenitsa - Old Russian Tradition

In the old days Maslenitsa was for remembrance of the dead. So the burning of the figure of Maslenitsa means her funeral, and blini (pancakes) - coliphia. But with time the Russians longing for fun and entertainment turned the sad holiday into jolly Maslenitsa with blini - round, yellow and hot as the sun, sledding and horse sleigh riding, fistfights and mother-in-law chatting. The rituals of Maslenitsa are very unusual and interesting because they combine the end of the winter holiday rituals and the opening of new spring festivals and ceremonies, which were to promote a rich harvest.



Julia Kostsova is one of the youngest and the most gifted artist on the Russian art scene. A graduate of the famous Repin's Art Academy in Saint Petersburg, she was born in Yekaterinburg, Siberia and from very early age devoted herself to painting. Colors and shapes were always intriguing for her. The Siberian nature - majestic and powerful: vast plains, rugged mountains, untamed rivers - ever changing, illusive and eternal landscapes made powerful imprint on her mind. Later came the fascination with the movement: dance, horse riding, and wind blowing... The challenge was to capture the moment in all its immediacy and transfer it to the canvas. Julia studied rigorously, mastering all styles and media, developing her own fluid, but energetic style.

The second passion for Julia was Russian traditional dance, folk songs, musical instruments, beautiful traditional holidays and rituals. Here and there, far away from capital cities these traditions survived, and were celebrated.

After graduation Julia stayed in St. Petersburg, intensively traveling and exhibiting in Russia, Europe, and China. Her large, joyful, energetic paintings earned her a reputation of one of the top artist-monumentalist. Julia tirelessly researches traditional Russian costume, embroidery, ornaments, and domestic objects - employing them in her magical works. She masterfully reflects the atmosphere of traditional Russian life, relations between people and nature.

Julia's paintings are well known sought for in many parts of the world; numerous public and private collections are proudly exhibiting her unforgettable masterpieces.

... When I was just a little girl, maybe ten years old, I decided to choose my future occupation. Three options appealed to me: writer, ballerina and artist. I decided to start with the first one - writer. I spent the whole day sitting with the pencil and notebook, trying to think about what to write. The plot was not shaping out; the characters were weak. At the end of the day I understood that writing wasn't as easy of a task as I thought. Next day I tried to become a ballerina. Needless to say that the story repeated itself. It became clear that painting - something that I was doing naturally and with joy - was my calling. Being an artist became my life, my journey - always exciting and challenging.

The art school for children was my first step to learning the skills of the trade; then, the Yekaterinburg Art College named after J. D. Shadr. I was always a very diligent student, striving to perfect my skills and master every technique.

I recall that at the time when I was defending my graduation work, I was telling the commission about what I meant to express with my work. At that very moment, I painfully realized that my artwork was not conveying the meaning that I intended.

It was a bitter insight, but it encouraged me to push myself even harder, to set the standards as high as the best masters of the Russian School. I decided to move to Saint Petersburg, and enroll in the Imperial Academy of Arts.

It was my long dream to live in Saint Petersburg - walk along its streets, breath its air, listen to its music. My dream came true: I was admitted to the Academy!

I graduated from the workshop of S.N. Repin, and studied under Professor A. A. Mylnikov. I earned the highest grades for my diploma work "Gulliver", which received special recognition from the examination committee. Later I was honored with a membership to the Artists' Union of Russia. Currently, I am exhibiting extensively and regularly participating in competitions. I have achieved a certain level of recognition, which encourages me to strive to reach new horizons and to find my own unique style in art as well as my own view of the world.

I want my art to be real; I want it to speak about beauty, poetry, and the essence of life. I believe that art should be alive, and should speak to the soul. It must fill the heart with feelings of inner harmony, reveal the best qualities in people, and give hope, faith and love.

There is no limit to perfection and I will always strive to reach new heights. My art reflects my thoughts and feelings that I want to share with people...



In the year 2013, the Union of Artists of Saint Petersburg organized an Exhibition dedicated to 400th anniversary of the Romanov's dynasty. The exhibition was held under the auspices of Her Majesty The Grand Dutchess Maria Vladimirovna, a descendant of the Romanov family. Julia Kostsova's painting "Royal Hunt" received the highest honor from the Russian Imperial House of Romanov and she was awarded a Presidential medal in commemoration of "The Anniversary of Heroism of Russian People: 1613-2013".

Russian Hunting Traditions

Russia is a true last frontier of hunting, presenting some of the most spectacular trophies nature has to offer. In ancient Russia hunting and fishing were in general a work. But gradually the work changed into entertainment for tsars. At that time the falconry was very popular activity, this kind of hunting was popular in Russia only.

History knows only few Russian rulers who loved hunting with passion: Vladimir II Monomakh, Aleksey Mikhailovitch, Petr II and Alexander II. The most successful in hunting among the Russian rulers was Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich, who spent the most of his 30-year reign in travelling and visiting shooting-grounds. His uncle a boyar Morozov has mentioned Tsar's love for birds. Then the boyar made Alexei Mikhailovich keen on falconry.

Many Russian national character traits like bravery, courage and recklessness show themselves on hunting with dogs. Hunting with Borzois was a popular pastime for the Russian aristocracy in Tsarist Russia. It became particularly widespread in the 18th and 19th centuries after the reign of Empress Anna, Peter the Second and Empress Elizabeth. The Borzois were particularly favored by the Tsar and his entourage. The dogs could not be purchased, but only given as gifts by the emperors. Generally hunting with borzois and hounds throws back in 15th century and earlier times.

The painting depicts the Tsar Nikolai II hunting with Borzois.



Royal Hunt, oil on canvas, 48" x 72", 2013

VLADIMIR and SUZDAL

These two artistic centres in central Russia hold an important place in the country's architectural history. There are a number of magnificent 12th- and 13th-century public and religious buildings, above all the masterpieces of the Collegiate Church of St Demetrios and the Cathedral of the Assumption of the Virgin.

The ancient city of Vladimir, founded in 1108 by the Kiev Prince Vladimir Monomach, contains an important group of religious and secular monuments. The Cathedral of the Assumption (1158) was intended by Vladimir Monomach's son Andrei Bogolyubskii to be the religious centre of all Russia. It was built in the town Kremlin and is a single-domed structure constructed on six piers: the three naves are surmounted by a delicate drum and a helmet dome. It is 17.7 m wide by 22 m long and 32.3 m high overall. The facade is divided into five sections by embedded columns and is notable for its carved reliefs. The interior decoration is important in Russian art. Most of the 12th-century frescoes were destroyed by Mongols in 1238, but new mural paintings were added in 1408 by the master painters Andrei Rublev and Daniil Chernii, in particular the famous Last Judgement. The iconostasis is a fine Baroque example of 1774.

Suzdal, which lies some 25 km north of Vladimir on the bank of the Kamenka River, was the site of a settlement in the 9th and 10th centuries AD which became a fortress in the 11th century. A civil settlement (posad) developed around it, housing craftsmen and shopkeepers, and monasteries were attracted to the area in the 13th and 14th centuries. Despite some regularization in 1788, the street pattern remains much as it was in the earlier period.

The Kremlin (fortress) is surrounded by earthen ramparts. Within, dominating the whole town, stands the Cathedral of the Nativity, built in the 13th century and reconstructed in the 16th century, with its five-domed top and 13th century Golden Doors.

Important monuments in the posad include several cubic churches of the 16th and 17th centuries with tent roofs, such as that of the Convent of the Deposition of the Holy Robe and the Refectory Church of the Assumption, a number of 18th century churches, often in pairs, such as those of the Convent of the Intercession, and several monasteries. The most important of the last-named is the Monastery of Our Saviour and St Euthymius, founded in 1352, with its Cathedral of the Transfiguration built in the 16th century but in the 12th century tradition of Vladimir.



Winter in Suzdal, oil on canvas, 16 "x 23", 2013

The Wreath

The wreath (Russian "venok") is a type of wreath which is worn by girls and young unmarried women. The wreath may be part of a tradition dating back to the old East Slavic customs that predate the Christianization of Rus.

On the day of Ivan Kupala, young women placed their wreaths in the water with a lit-up candle, foretelling their romantic future by how the wreath flowed down the river or lake. From the wreath's direction, the girl could tell whom she would marry: if the wreath stayed in one spot and did not float down the water, she would not marry; if it went under, she would die; if the candle went out, misfortune would follow. The young men would dive into the water, trying to retrieve the venok of the girl each loved. One of the ritual Kupala songs says, "Who will catch the wreath will catch the girl, who will get the wreath will become mine." It dates back to pre-Christian times when it was thought that the headdress would protect girls from evil spirits. The ceremonial, religious value diminished, and was later replaced as a national character of girlhood: to lose a wreath in folk songs and traditions means for a maiden to transition into womanhood.



Braiding of the Wreths, oil on canvas, 47" x 69", 2013

Khorovod

The khorovod is not only the most popular, but also the most ancient of Russian folk dances. Most commonly, it is a round dance - people stand in a circle (resembling the solar disk) and move from east to west, as does the Sun in its movement across the sky. These steps are traced back to ancient pagan rites and Slavic festivals, during which people worshiped the powerful God of the Sun, Yarilo.

Girls were considered the backbone of every khorovod. This pastime was a good opportunity for young girls to meet young men and attract a future husband. Therefore, parents of two or more girls often prohibited their younger daughters from going out to dance in a khorovod, believing that the eldest should be given priority in choosing a husband and getting married. Younger daughters were deliberately shielded from the attention of young men until the eldest daughter had married.

The khorovod was also a symbol of unity and friendship. Dancers usually held hands, or the little finger of their partner. They could hold the opposite ends of a handkerchief, a shawl, a belt or a garland. In some regions, dancers didn't move in a circle, but in line, keeping at a precise distance from each other. Khorovod patterns largely depended on location, as the dance was popular in all regions of Russia, each of which had its own, unique characteristics of the dance.

In northern regions, the khorovod was distinguished for its gentle, reticent, subdued manner and exceptional melodiousness, as if in allusion to the delicate and austere beauty of the North, as well as some of the inherent characteristics of the Russian soul. Despite its calm and decorous nature, Northern khorovods were expressive and emotionally charged.

In central regions, in the vicinity of Moscow, khorovods were more cheerful, lively and light-hearted. The dance was accompanied by another outstanding creation of Russian folk art - incredibly beautiful folk songs. People would clap their hands, tap their feet and make fast and energetic movements.

Khorovod dances in the south, with their beautiful, balmy weather, were famous for their impetuous, dashing movements and elaborate patterns. Embodying strength, boundless energy and youthful fervour, Southern khorovods usually involved huge crowds of participants.

The khorovod was a popular dance both in rural and urban areas. Without going into too much detail we can say that the city variation of the dance was very similar to that performed in the country. Both variations were performed with joy and expressiveness, and followed an intriguing storylines. Wherever khorovods were danced, they were supervised by a khorovod mistress, a sort of cheerleader - the most cheerful and peppy woman in the neighbourhood, usually middle-aged but youthful in appearance. Bold in manner, talkative, lively and agile, she would be a good singer and dancer. Her role was to observe how people danced and suggest new dance movements and patterns.



Russian folk considered the khorovod an important event. Women and girls put on their best dresses, which were prepared very carefully. Girls would weave, sew or knit to "spruce" dresses themselves, buying ribbons and shawls at trade fairs. Men were usually regarded as guests at khorovod parties, invited to share the joy of the occasion. Upon invitation from the khorovod mistress,

young bachelors would participate in various games with unmarried girls - they looked keeping an eye out for a potential match among the pretty, well-dressed girls. Girls kept their own eye on the ball, observing which of the young men paid most attention to them, or trying figure out who might invite them to be their partner in the following game.

Russian Samovars

Samovars and tea-drinking are an indispensable element of Russian culture. In modern Russia, samovars are rarely used to boil water for tea as originally intended, however many families place samovars in the center of the table during holiday celebrations. Reserving pride of place for a samovar at the festive table is both a tribute that Russians give to their ancestors and a ceremony that embodies warm-hearted hospitality.

What is a Samovar?

A samovar is a device traditionally used to heat and boil water for tea. The word samovar in Russian is derived from "sam" meaning self and "var" meaning to boil. The name can be loosely translated into English as "self-boiler". Samovars are made from metal and consist of a large urn-shaped container and a metal pipe running vertically through the middle. To boil the water inside a samovar, the pipe is filled with solid fuel such as pine cones, charcoals and wood chips which are set on fire. A small tea pot is used to brew a tea concentrate. The tea pot is often placed on top of a samovar to keep it heated with the passing hot air.

The tea is served by pouring tea concentrate into a cup and diluting it with boiled water. The water is released through a faucet at the base of the metal container. Samovars were one of the earliest home appliances in Russia. Families and guests would sit at a large dinner table to have a leisurely talk and discuss the latest events while drinking hot tea.

What is a Samovar singing about?

Russian people believed that the samovar has a soul. This belief was mainly based on the fact that samovars were producing different sounds when being heated with fuel. The shape of the samovar's body accounts for amazing acoustics and water makes peculiar noises when it is being brought to the boil. It was common to say that "a samovar is singing".

Who invented a Samovar?

The oldest pottery samovar-like was found in Azerbaijan. Its age was 3700 years, which is about 1700 older than a samovar discovered in Egypt. There were similar devices found in China but they weren't used for making tea.

In Russia, the first copper samovar was made in 1778 by the Lisitsyn brothers in Tula, a city known for its metalworkers and arms-makers. Within the first 70 years, numerous samovar-makers in Tula were producing 120 thousand samovars every year. Samovars were mainly made from nickel and copper and particular attention was paid to details. The handles and the faucet could be made in the form of vines or the claws of a dragon, while the body of the samovar could be engraved by hand.

The samovar manufacturing process consisted of 12 stages with individual masters specializing on each stage of production. Interestingly, the population of the whole village could be specializing on manufacturing of a single element, such as the handles of the samovar. The final assembly and trimming of samovars was performed at factories. By the early twentieth century there were about 170 different models of samovars. Samovars were sold by weight-the heavier the samovar the higher the price.



On the Terrace, oil on canvas, 35" x 47", 2013

Russian Holidays to Celebrate Seasons

The Russian Government is doing its best to encourage a resurgence of traditional Russian holidays, in order to keep the rich culture and traditions alive in younger generations.

White Nights (Beliye Nochi) - This famous festival celebrates the high-point of summer in St Petersburg, when 24-hour sunshine bathes this beautiful city. Millions of tourists come from all over Russia, and around the world to celebrate this fantastic event! More on White Nights in St Petersburg...

Maslenitsa - Otherwise known as Pancake Week, this is a traditional celebration to mark the start of spring. It involves a week of different celebrations and customs - see more detail about Maslenitsa.

Medoviy Spas - "Honey Day" is celebrated on the 14th of August. This is the first of three days marking the harvest of crops that have been planted and prepared over summer, and ready for winter. This day marks the end of the bees gathering nectar, and is a signal that the people can begin to collect honey. The traditional custom was to bring honey to the church for blessing, and there were also many stalls displaying a vast array of pleasant tasting honeys.

Yablochniy Spas - "Apple Day" is celebrated on the 19th of August. Apples were ripening around this time, and again the custom was to pick them and bring them to the church for blessing. People eat apples with honey, and then participate in games, activities, and performances.

Orekhoviy Spas - Another 'harvest' celebration, this day is celebrated on the 29th of August, and marks the 'ripening' of nuts and grains. This is the last of the three harvest days, thus closing the time of celebration. It is a good time for all, as the cupboards are full with the harvest.



Gifts of Autumn: oil on canvas, 28"x32", 2011

Maslenitsa

The tradition of Maslenitsa dates back to pagan times, when Russian folk would bid farewell to winter and welcome spring. As with many ancient holidays, Maslenitsa (the stress being on the first syllable) has a dual ancestry: pagan and Christian.

On the pagan side, Maslenitsa was celebrated on the vernal equinox day. It marked the welcoming of spring, and was all about the enlivening of nature and bounty of sunny warmth.

On the Christian side, Maslenitsa was the last week before the onset of Lent (fasting which precedes Easter), giving the last chance to bask in worldly delights.

The name of the holiday, Maslenitsa (derived from maslo, which means butter or oil in Russian) owes its existence to the tradition of baking pancakes (or blini, in Russian). They are essential to the celebration of Maslenitsa.

On the one hand, hot, round, and golden, pancakes, as people believed, embody a little of the sun's grace and might, helping to warm up the frozen earth. In old days pancakes were cooked from buckwheat flour, lending them a red color, making the significance even more evident.

On the other hand, the circle has been considered a sacred figure in Russia, protecting people from evil. Hence is the habit of going on horseback around the settlement several times, decorating a cart wheel and carrying it on a pole along the streets, and dancing the khorovod (round dance). Such ceremonies were believed to butter (in Russian, the figurative meaning of the verb "to cajole") the Sun and make it kinder.

At Maslenitsa pancakes are cooked in very large quantities to be used in almost every ritual, they are given to friends and family all through the week. Pancakes are served with caviar, mushrooms, jam, sour cream, and of course, butter.



Maslenitsa, Tea Party, oil on canvas, 48" x 72", 2013

Dacha

Dacha is a Russian word for seasonal or year-round second homes often located in the exurbs of Russian cities. Cottages serving as a family's main or only home (or districts of such buildings) are not considered dachas, although many purpose-built dachas are recently being converted for year-round residence. In some cases, dachas are occupied for part of the year by their owners and rented out to urban residents as summer retreats.

The 1980s saw the peak of the dacha boom with virtually every affluent family in the country having a dacha of their own or spending weekends and holidays at friends' dachas. Having a piece of land also offered an opportunity for city dwellers to indulge themselves in growing their own fruits and vegetables.

Many dacha owners own a greater land area and can grow the needed amount of fruits and vegetables right on their plot. Many small dacha plots, especially those that were recently purchased, are not used for large-scale fruit and vegetable farming. Instead, they are frequently used for gardening and planting exotic plants.

Due to the high costs of good equipment, even relatively large plots of land are often cultivated manually using equipment such as a spade or a spading fork. In autumn the grown potatoes and other crops are gathered and transported to the city where they are stored in cellars, dugouts (usually located on unused plots of ground), or in personal automobile garages. Many Russians prefer to grow vegetables themselves because of the widespread (especially among the older part of the population) belief in the excessive use of agrochemicals in the vegetables from the supermarkets and grocery stores, and the higher costs of the vegetables in stores. Also, growing one's own food supplies is a long-lived Russian tradition practiced by many affluent Russians.

The most common dacha fruits in cool temperate regions of Russia are apple, blackcurrant, redcurrant, gooseberry, raspberry and strawberry, cherry, plum, pear, sea-buckthorn, blackberry. Popular vegetables and herbs are potato, cucumber, zucchini, pumpkin, tomato, carrot, beetroot, cabbage, cauliflower, radish, onion, garlic, dill, parsley, rhubarb.



Summer Morning, oil on canvas, "x", 2013

Suzdal

Dating back to 990 AD, Suzdal is one of the oldest towns in Russia and the 'jewel' of Russia's famous Golden Ring of ancient villages. In its heyday, Suzdal's Kremlin and monasteries held untold riches and its leaders fought with the princes of Moscow to make Suzdal the most important principality in Ancient Rus.

Following a devastating attack by a marauding Tatar army in the 14th Century, Suzdal's astonishing growth slowed and by the 16th Century, Suzdal had already become a political backwater, known mostly for the wealth of its monasteries and purity of its landscape.

Nowadays the town is filled with busy churches and monasteries and its streets are lined by colourful traditional wooden houses. Having survived the blight of Soviet town-planning, Suzdal looks much as it did centuries ago and is one of the most popular tourist sights in Russia. Fortunately the locals have taken the rise of their town into a tourist hot spot in their stride and life still rolls along at a gentle pace, free from Disney-esque folk shows and filled with rich local traditions.



Suzdal, oil on canvas, 24" x 24", 2013

Palm Sunday

Palm Sunday, also called the Triumphal Entry, is one of the Great Feasts of the Orthodox Church, celebrated on the Sunday before Pascha.

A mere few days before His crucifixion, Jesus Christ was received by adoring throngs at his entry into Jerusalem on the back of young donkey. The crowds threw palm branches (a symbol of victory) in his path in jubilation, and even the children shouted praises to Him. The Orthodox celebrate this day with joy, but with the realization that very sad events are soon to come. Orthodox peoples who live in areas without palms, including the Russian Orthodox, use pussy willow branches rather than palms in the celebration of this event. Therefore in Russian Church this feast and is called (Pussy Willow) (Sunday). Some churches give small crosses made of palms at the end of the service and are then kept in the home icon corner.

"Now we worry about a piece of bread, about a roof over our heads, about our social conditions. And it seems to us that the meaning of life consists of this. But the Church says, Look at the pussy willows: leaves will sprout and later flowers and fruit. So it is even in a Christian soul." - Archbishop Andrei (Rymarenko, 1893-1978)



Palm Sunday, oil on canvas, 28" x 32", 2013

Russian Christmas

Russians do not celebrate Christmas on December 25, but instead do so on January 7 according to (Julian calendar). Christmas Day in Russia is official holiday. It follows on the heels of the New Year holidays which are also days off and form a mega-holiday that this year lasts from December 30th to January 8th.

While for many this long period of winter holidays is the time of revelry and lots of delicious food, religious Russians are observing the 40-day fast. It ends on the evening of January 6th, the time known as "Sochelnik" - Christmas Eve.

The word is rather unusual. Unlike the English-language "eve", "Sochelnik" is only used to describe Christmas Eve. Days before any other holidays or events are called "kanun" (eve, night before), although the word can also be used for Christmas Eve. Stores sell the most sparkling wine in the days before the New Year.

Perhaps you've noticed that the word "Sochelnik" sounds close to another Russian word, "sochnyi" (juicy). Indeed, the two words share the same root, (juice). The day before Christmas is the day of strict fasting and reflection. Traditionally, the fast lasts until the first star appears. And the traditional dish served at this point is "sochivo", also known as "kutia", a dish of cooked wheat grains with walnuts, raisins and honey. Hence the word for the Christmas Eve - "Sochelnik" - the time when "sochivo" is eaten.

Russia has many beautiful Christmas traditions. Many years ago, one of the most beloved traditions took place on Christmas night. After breaking the 40-day fast with family, people used to stay up all night, walk from house to house and sing Christmas carols. As a reward, those singing would get generous refreshments. This tradition is resurging.

Many of the carolers would disguise themselves by putting on costumes and masks. These masks would, in addition to caroling, play pranks on those who were not very generous with the reward for the singing or costumes.

The Christmas night begins a period known as "Sviatki" (yuletide), a time for "gadanie" (yuletide fortune-telling). Young girls would try to read fortune in tea leaves, mirrors, candle wax, barn noises, and such. Most of such fortune-telling had to do with guessing what "suzhenyi" (Mr. Right) would look like, when he would appear in a girl's life, and whether the married life would be happy one.

One of the most famous works of Russian classical literature, Pushkin's "Eugene Onegin" has a scene where the young heroine, Tatiana Larina, tries to foretell her future husband's name as she walks out to the road in the middle of the night to ask the first passerby for his name (which, according to the belief, would also be the name of her future husband).



Winter wonderland, oil on canvas, 32"x 40", 2013

Russian Orthodox Beliefs

Theocratic notions of Russian identity date to the Byzantine theory of Symphonia, in which the church and the state should ideally function as distinct but harmonious entities. Early Russian Tsars who portrayed themselves as divine right rulers, and Russian state theorists promoted Moscow as the Third Rome. After the fall of Rome to Visigoths and then Byzantium to the Ottomans, it was left up to Russia to preserve the one true faith. As Western governments separated church from state, Russia moved in the other direction. Nicholas I (1825-1855), summarized Russia's church-state identity in the phrase "Orthodoxy, Autocracy, Nationality." This trinity became the guiding concept of Russian national identity through the Russian Revolution of 1917.

The word orthodox means "right believing" and was adopted to signify the true religion that faithfully followed the beliefs and practices defined by the first seven ecumenical councils (dating back to the first 10 centuries). Orthodox Christianity claims to have fully preserved, without any deviation, the traditions and doctrines of the early Christian church established by the Apostles. This is why they believe themselves to be the only true and "right believing" Christian faith.

The primary disputes that led to the split between the Eastern Orthodox and the Roman Catholic Church centered around Rome's deviation from the original conclusions of the seven ecumenical councils, such as the claim to a universal papal supremacy. Another particular conflict is known as the Filioque Controversy. The Latin word filioque means "and from the Son." It had been inserted into the Nicene Creed during the 6th century, thus changing the phrase pertaining to the origin of the Holy Spirit from "who proceeds from the Father" to "who proceeds from the Father and the Son." It had been added to emphasize Christ's divinity, but Eastern Christians not only objected to the altering of anything produced by the first ecumenical councils, they disagreed with its new meaning. Eastern Christians believe both the Spirit and the Son have their origin in the Father.

One clear distinction between Orthodoxy and Protestantism is the concept of "Sola Scriptura." This "Scripture alone" doctrine held by Protestant faiths asserts that the Word of God alone can be clearly understood and interpreted by the individual believer and is sufficient on its own to be the final authority in Christian doctrine. Orthodoxy argues that the Holy Scriptures (as interpreted and defined by church teaching in the first seven ecumenical councils) along with Holy Tradition are of equal value and importance.

Another less apparent distinction between Eastern Orthodoxy and Western Christianity is their differing theological approaches, which perhaps is simply the result of cultural influences. The Eastern mindset is more inclined toward philosophy, mysticism, and ideology, whereas the Western outlook is guided more by a practical and legal mentality. This can be seen in the subtly different ways that Eastern and Western Christians approach spiritual truth. Orthodox Christians believe that truth must be personally experienced and, as a result, they place less emphasis on its precise definition. Worship is considered the very center of church life in Eastern Orthodoxy. It is highly liturgical, embracing seven sacraments. It is characterized by a priestly and mystical nature. Veneration of icons and a mystical form of meditative prayer is commonly incorporated into their religious rituals.



Road to Cathedral, oil on canvas, 20" x 24", 2013

Birch Tree is an Emblem of Russia

The emblem of middle region forests of Russia is white-trunk birch. White-trunk birch became a symbol of spring, light and love to the fatherland. The word "birch" is very ancient and is connected with the verb "to keep, to take care", since the Slavs considered the birch as the protecting people gift of God. The year began with spring and people celebrated it not with fir, but with the birch.

The birch was necessary planted near the houses, people tried to surround the village by "protecting" belt of birches, as they believed that "birch spirit" can guard against cholera and another diseases. The birch was planted near the gate, there was a bank and people could speak with a tree and ask it to give them might and strength. Birch forest is light and clean and is always full of birds, berries and mushrooms.

It is really hard to imagine the Russian sauna without the birch broom. Phytoncides out of leaves and buds sterilize the air. Especially successfully they cope with pathogens of typhoid fever, tuberculosis and diphtheria.

The birch was widely used in a peasants' life, and first ways of Slavs' written language was made on the birch bark and was preserved in the ground till now.

Birch sap is the sap extracted from a birch tree, such as a North American Sweet Birch or a Silver Birch. The sap is often a slightly sweet, thin syrupy-watery liquid. The tree sap contains sugars, proteins, amino acids, and enzymes.

The healing properties of the birch are known from time immemorial. There are many pieces of advice in different herbals of the XVI - XVII centuries.

This tree gives everything to people for their health: juice, catkins, leaves, bark, new branches, tender thin roots, birch coal, tar. Also it has bioenergetic therapeutic effect. A man feels himself sprightly, calm and full of strengths of life in the birch forest.

Since olden days the birch bark considered as very important medicinal raw material, with the help of which people treated the diseases of joints and nervous systems. The Slavs sprinkled the wounds with the ground birch bark for its fast healing.



March, oil on canvas, 35" x 37", 2013

The Cuckoo Holiday (kumlenie) - May 27

In the last week of May, the Slavs celebrate the cuckoo birds. The main feature of this festival - the establishment of the spiritual connection between girls or young women, who had no children, - for mutual help and support. Young women, gathered in the forest clearing, danced, sang funny songs about spring and Zhivu - the deity of Life, jumped over the ritual fire and staged a small symbolic feast. The cuckoo was supposed to be a link between the Zhivu and young women.

On this day, young women promised to each other to be friends for life. From now on they will call each other KUMA. They would have to kiss each other through a birch wreath (birch - a symbol of love and purity of the Slavs) and say the following words:

Kumis, kumis, rodnis, rodnis, we have for two - a common life.

No joy, no tears, no words, no trouble will separate us.

Kumlenie accompanied by special "kumitnymi" songs:

"Kuma with godmother, pokumimsya!

In order for the whole year we have no troubles"

The girls will hold in their hands the symbolical cuckoo birds - to appeal to the bird to be a witness of their oath and to tell Zhivu about their friendship. From this day on the girls were like sisters, helping and supporting each other through the lifetime.



Folk Song ("Kumlenie"), oil on canvas, 47" x 69", 2013

Traditional Russian Village

Russian villages consisted of wooden houses, the church, the bathhouse, windmills, storage sheds and other outbuildings spaced to prevent the spread of fire.

Hills, woodlands, rivers, sun and prevailing winds affected village layouts. The linear arrangement is the most ancient type with the buildings set in lines along the bank of a lake or river, or along side a road.

Bathhouses might be built in a cluster near the local body of water. Storage sheds and crafts workshops were often grouped at the edge of the village. Crafts were often done communally.

The farmland was divided into narrow strips with each household assigned several strips spread among the village's land holdings. These lots were rotated among the households, usually based on the number of taxable people in each family. This made equitable distribution of the arable land, but made farming less efficient. This distribution of farmland is essentially identical to the method used in medieval England.

The houses were constructed of logs and were not very variable in layout, but they did have special architectural features that could be embellished. These included the ridgepole of the roof (konek), the gable ends (or pediments), and the frames of windows and doors (nalichnik). Decorative plant and animal forms, mythic and magical creatures, or initials and dates were among the personalizing motifs.

Wood was the most common building material. All parts of the building were cut and joined using a handaxe. Saws were rarely used. Archaeological excavations of Novgorod show how wood was used to pave streets, and make drains and gutters.

The classic peasant house is known as an izba. The dominant feature of any izba was the large clay oven or pech' that occupied a corner to the left or right of the main door. The adjacent area, the chulan, was the women's side of the house and contained the water barrel, table for food preparation, and storage cupboards for dishes and cooking supplies. Raised sleeping platforms, polaty, fit next to the oven, sometimes extending over the entrance area to the opposite wall. Low benches, lavki, were built along the other walls and used for seating, sleeping, or sometimes to support freestanding cupboards. The large decorated loom usually stood in the center of the room. Wrought-iron lighting fixtures held wooden splints to provide light for evening and winter tasks.

The spiritual focus of the home was the icon corner, located diagonally across from the oven. It was called the krasnyi ugol (beautiful corner) and had at least one icon, sometimes an icon case (bozhnitsa or kiot), embroidered linens and usually a small table with candles and family mementos. Anyone entering the izba would bow to the icons before greeting the hosts or speaking. Guests of honor were seated in the icon corner, and matchmaking rituals and parts of the marriage rites took place there. When a family member died, the body was laid out so the head lay toward the icon corner and the feet lay toward the door.

In prosperous houses, important features were enhanced by carving or painting. Decorative painting included geometrical accents of structural features, freehand plants, animals and genre scenes, and trompe l'oeil wood and marble. Oil-based paint with ochre or red tones was preferred for contrast. The combined effect of the bright-painted wood, carved utensils, textiles and candle-lit icons could be strikingly beautiful.



In the Village, oil on canvas, 32" x 47", 2013

Ivan Kupala Holiday

Before the Baptism of Russia, Ivan Kupala Day marked the summer solstice and was celebrated between 20th and 22nd June, according to the old, or Julian calendar. When Russia adopted Christianity, the holiday marked the birthday of St. John the Baptist - Ivan in Russian - and its celebrations were shifted to 24th June according to the old calendar.

Numerous traditions and legends associated with plants are an important part of Kupala Day celebrations. Flowers and herbs are gathered while the dew is still on the ground. They are then dried and kept preciously, for such flowers and herbs are believed to have stronger healing properties than plants gathered on other days.

Girls make wreaths from herbs and flowers, which are then set afloat on a river, with burning candles or wooden splinters placed inside the garlands. Such wreaths were used for fortune-telling. According to popular beliefs, if a wreath sinks quickly, it means that a girl's intended husband loves her no longer and she will not marry him. The girl whose wreath will travel the longest distance, will get the most happiness during the year; and the one whose wooden splinter or candle will burn the longest, will live a very long life. Married women also weave wreaths and gave them to their husbands.

Another highlight of the holiday are bonfires. Their flames symbolise purification. Revellers dance around bonfires and jump over them. The person who will jump the highest, will get the most happiness during the year. The holiday culminates with a ceremony near a huge bonfire called kupalets - the most important bonfire of the festival, which is built before midsummer celebrations kick off.

According to ancient popular beliefs, one must not sleep during Kupala Night, as it is time when all evil spirits, such as witches, werewolves, water nymphs, sorcerers, witches, boggarts, water sprites, and wood goblins become particularly active. Therefore, people stay up all night, performing various rites and playing traditional games near the huge burning bonfire.



Ivan Kupala Night, oil on canvas, 35" x 37", 2013

Ivan Kupala Holiday

In pre-revolutionary Russia Ivan Kupala Day was one of the most important and revered religious holidays of the year. It was universally celebrated with the tradition demanding active involvement of each member of the celebrations into all rituals and the strict observance of a set of rules, prohibitions and customs. The merriness and fun of people affirmed their unity with nature, its ultimate heyday and earthly beauty. People who live in deep provincial areas, far away from the urban centers of modern life, still preserve certain elements of the ritualism of that day.

In the annual calendar cycle the Kupala day symbolizes maturity. The Sun reaches its zenith in the sky as well as the culmination of its creative life-giving power and after this begins to gradually lose it, lose its royal power over the entire nature, descending from the celestial mountain, with days becoming shorter and shorter. The Kupala night is the shortest in the year and no-one is supposed to sleep during this night for it is a charmed night. Trees walk from one place to another talking to each other through the rustle of their leaves; animals converse with each other as well, and even herbs are imbued with special, magical, miraculous power.

The essence of the ritualism connected with this date is the mystical matrimonial union between the Earth and the Sky, the Sun and the Moon, Fire and Water, the Masculine and the Feminine. The main form of this mystical matrimony is the merging of the realms of Fire and Water. The culmination of their "wedding" is the rolling of a burning wheel (symbolizing the masculine) from a steep slope down into water (symbolizing the feminine). If Kupala is celebrated on the day when the summer solstice and the full moon coincide, this is in itself a symbol of a mystical union of the Sun and the Moon.

Ivan Kupala, oil on canvas, 79" x 55", 2013



Berezka - Russia's Tree of Life

If you see a Russian tenderly hugging a birch, do not be worried; there is no need to call an ambulance. Sometimes a tree can be much more healing than the best doctors.

A symbol of Russian nature and Russian beauty, the birch tree ("bereza" or "berezka" in Russian) has a very special place in the country's culture.

The tree was once worshipped as a goddess. It was believed to ward off evil spirits and make wishes come true. Tributes to the birch are found in Russian art, songs, poems and folk tales. Ancient Slavs used its bark to make everything from writing paper to footwear, and birch bark crafts are one of Russia's biggest traditions.

"Traditional birch footwear is something people used to wear every day. And many still use these shoes at home," Tatyana Oleinik, from the All Russian Museum of Decorative and Folk Arts, told RT. "Birch bark was also used for making toys and musical instruments."

No wonder that when in 1948 a new Russian dance group was created, Berezka happened to be the first name that came to organizers' minds.

The name proved a success. Since the 1940s, Berezka has dazzled audiences around the globe. For over six decades, each of its performances has begun with a special dance, featuring birch tree branches and the group's trademark step - so smooth that the girls seem to float.

"Since the very first time this dance was performed, the audience has always fallen under its charm - not only because of our trademark step, but because this dance captures the very spirit of Russian beauty, of Russian women," Mira Koltsova, artistic director of the Berezka state academic dance company, told RT.

However, Russians' love for birch is not just about art. For centuries, berezka has been famed for its healing qualities.

Just strolling in a birch grove is thought to help you stay happy and healthy, and touching a birch tree is believed to restore emotional balance and reduce stress levels. So those of us living in the hustle and bustle of big cities might be in need of a lot of birch-tree hugging - or drinking of birch tree juice.

"We have an advertisement that says we offer freshly squeezed birch tree juice," the chef of the Expedition restaurant, Aleksandr Gavrilichev, told RT. "A lot of people were baffled by this. Of course we did it for fun. But you know, those who live in big cities often forget that there's nature out there - so we try to remind them of it!"

If you're up for some outdoor thrills, here is how to tap yourself a glass out in the wild.

"First you pick a place where you're going to drill, place your bottle, then you drill a hole - and the juice will now start to leak," birch tree juice fan Ivan Koren told RT. "This way of gathering juice doesn't harm the tree. Some people use an axe, but that's very bad, whereas a small hole like this can be easily healed. You plug it with a piece of wood, then cover it with some earth - and next year there won't even be a trace left!"

The tapping season only lasts for a few weeks, before the leaves come out in early spring - after that the sap stops leaking.



First Warm Day, oil on canvas, 24" x 35", 2013

Russian Basket Weaving

Birch bark crafts have a long history in Russia and Siberia, but the boxes that you see now have a relatively recent history. In the Taiga forests, the birch tree provides a useful and important local material - birch bark.

Birch is a symbol of the Russian soul. This slim and subtle tree with a white trunk associates with Russia and its traditions. Since ancient times birch groves inspired not only Russian poets and painters, but also masters of carving.

Birch bark has many useful properties. It is relatively abundant, is easily workable, is waterproof and like most wood products, has antibacterial properties. The word "Birch" is very old and in most European languages it etymologically derives from Indo-European "white, pure". Birch-bark is not an accidental material. It has been used in Russia for making various things, for writing and for making works of art for many centuries. No one exactly knows how long, but basic traditions of manufacturing the birch-bark (known as beresta) have remained without essential changes up to now.

The birch bark is collected only during a brief interval in June and from trees that have been marked for logging. Birch bark as a medium has properties in between paper and wood. Like paper, the bark can be made into sheets, printed or bent into flexible shapes. Before you get a cream-colored surface as the front side of the work, you must take the birch-bark off the tree (you may do it only in a particular season), and then clear it from the white surface, and turn it inside out.

But like wood, the bark is durable, waterproof and can be carved. The boxes are still hand carved using a variety of special tools. A finished piece is coated with a thin layer of paraffin wax. The boxes are made in turn-of the century style workshops.

For many thousands of years, the birch tree held a central place in the Russian psychos. The birch tree certainly dominates the Russian and Siberian countryside with it's white bark and delicate leaves. Tributes to the birch tree are found in Russian songs, art, poems and folk tales. In Russian folk wisdom, it was believed that touching a birch tree restored the emotions and helped reduce stress.

Parents made from birch bark special talismans for their children, called igrushki-oberegi, to ward against evil spirits. Russians and other Central Asian peoples used birch bark for everyday utensils and waterproof containers. Slowly, the craft turned from purely utilitarian to become more decorative.



Sunny Day , oil on canvas, 36 "x 43 " , 2013

Russian Traditional Home

The classic peasant house is known as an izba.

Izbas came in three regional types.

Northern izbas, in the heavily forested areas of had living areas raised off the ground over a cellar, called a podklet', or over stables (to take advantage of the animals' warmth). The structures tended to be arranged in an L or U shape around a courtyard, to hold extended family, livestock, storage for hay and grain, a bath house and a well.

Central Russian izbas, between the Volga and Smolensk, were smaller, with attached or separate sheds for storage and livestock arranged a variety of ways.

Southern izbas, around Kaluga, Orel, Kursk, Voronezh, and Tambov, usually lacked basements and had adjacent sheds and enclosed yards for livestock.

In the north and in the Volga area, the arrangement of the outbuildings provide many areas for decoration, such as the covered stairs and passages between buildings. Carving, in the form of openwork tracery, embellished the eaves, the window frames and the balcony. Painting was sometimes added under wide eaves and balconies where it would be protected from the weather. Another important architectural element in the north was the okhlupen', or konek, a large figure carved from the root end of the larch tree and used as the house's ridgepole. They took the form of a horse, duck, chicken or deer, and probably represented an ancient Slavic or Scandinavian form, perhaps once representing a nature deity or protective spirit.

Along the Volga, houses were simpler and the facade facing the street was broader with the entrance at the front rather than the side. They were built of two-foot-thick pine logs and so the design of a simple izba was dominated by strong horizontals and the notched corners. Around Gorodets and Nizhnii Novgorod, elaborate carving set off the architectural elements. (The development of architectural carving in this region may be connected with Peter the Great's expansion of boatbuilding here. The Hilton book goes into more detail, but since that is definitely OOP, I won't go into it here.)

The Ukrainian peasant house, khata, was built of wood, stone or clay, usually covered with plaster and whitewash, with an earthen floor and thatched roof. Walls inside and out were often painted with bright designs.



Warm Evening, oil on canvas, 24" x 24", 2013



A Glance into Julia's creative process









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