

Conference Paper

The Sources of Far-Eastern Motifs in Ural Artistic Iron Casting

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Abstract

Based on the works by the Kasli and Kusa iron factories from the collection of the Yekaterinburg Museum of Fine Arts, this article explores provisional and established sources used as models for the production of cast iron pieces in “Oriental style”, both as standalone images and as decorative details. The article describes historical context and conditions that facilitated the popularity and appeal of the Far-Eastern artistic traditions to the Russian craftsmen, and examines examples of borrowings, feature transformations and perceptions of the “exotic” images by factory workers. Many items found in the museum collection reflect several waves of “oriental” fashion, which reached Russia from Europe. Despite the distance of Yekaterinburg from the metropolitan centres, these influences reached Ural cast iron makers relatively quickly due to the fact that commissions from Moscow and Saint-Petersburg customers constituted the major part of local production. The conclusions presented here are that these works, and their possible sources, provide an evidence of a close connection between the regional Ural arts and crafts and European artistic process.

Keywords: chinoiserie, Japonisme, Art Nouveau, Ural artistic cast iron, Kasli cast iron, Kusa cast iron cross-cultural communication, Yekaterinburg Museum of Fine Arts

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1. Introduction

The history of Ural decorative and applied arts is closely linked to the region’s industrial development and the establishment of its first plant settlements in late 17th and early 18th centuries. The specific ways in which local industry was organized – both in its main industrial products and in artistic objects it created – was based on the continuous contacts with the capital city. The system of commissions created close links and deep influences of metropolitan art schools on Ural crafts – a process that allowed local masters to follow closely the up-to-date developments in fashions, tastes and styles.

The period from mid-19th to early 20th century in European art was marked by the next wave of interest in the Far Eastern cultures, especially China and Japan. While Japanese influence on the European art of this period is well researched, the second wave of chinoiserie often remains overshadowed for contemporary scholars by the

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more explicit Japanism. However, according to the researchers, it is not always possible to determine precisely the sources of inspiration, or even of direct borrowings [1].

There were many contributing factors that launched the new wave of Far Eastern motives in European art. One of the most important was the development of world exhibitions. The story of China's participation in first and subsequent world shows is highly complicated, but, without a doubt, these exhibitions contributed to the more detailed understanding of the Middle Kingdom in Europe. Thus, starting from the very first London exhibition of 1851, official catalogues, accounts and reports of jury committees include rare but succinct notes on the specific features of Chinese decorative art: "grotesque and distorted shapes" [2], "bold lines and shapes" of the Chinese masters described by an author of the official report on 1867 Paris exhibition [3]; an imitation of natural forms was noted by an author who created the description of the Chinese pavilion of 1876 Philadelphia exhibition. [4]

2. Materials and Methods

Decorative cast iron appeared in the Ural region relatively late, in 1820s. However, its fast development, stimulated by the popularity of office and study decorative sculpture, as well as the development of functional decor and methods of mass reproduction of popular models, created conditions for its emergence a leading craft in Russian and international markets. This was largely facilitated by the participation in major Russian and international exhibitions, which inevitably brought high awards to the Ural workshops.

By 1840s–1850s, Kasli Cast Iron Factory, though it started its decorative line later than other plants (in Kamensky, Kushva, Kyshtym, Nizhny Tagil etc.), became a leader in this decorative art. Their considerable success was determined by a number of factors, among which an arrival of the period of historicism, with new demands to the interior design, changing tastes of the public and, as a result, changing market supply. The choice of casting models was equally important. By late 19-hundreds, Kasli cast iron factory, which for several decades based its production line on the works produced by the sculptors who had graduated from the Russian Academy of Arts, began to feel the dearth of the "fresh models" and new offerings in their purchasing catalogues. The board members made a concerted effort to broaden the production line by commissioning Saint-Petersburg sculptors, as well as by purchasing small European plastic works in the antique shops. [5, p.155] As a result, between the late 19th- and the early 20th-hundreds, Kasli factory filled its catalogues with an entire range of new objects that

catered to the more “modern” tastes of its customers: small caskets, trays and ashtrays based on highly popular Japanese motives, as well as on the rarer Chinese prototypes.

3. Discussion

European bronze or porcelain works often served as models for the cast iron sculptures. One of the earliest examples of the Far Eastern theme in Ural decorative casting is a “Chinese Man” paper weight (casting 1870s–1880s, Accession Number П-233, Yekaterinburg Museum of Fine Arts). In the catalogue prepared by O.P.Gubkin and G.P.Shaydurova the authors list the source as the “German bronze model of 1830s”. However, the authors have not confirmed their hypothesis by concrete examples. Exploring this item, we have found several possible sources of its composition reminiscent of 18th-century chinoiserie. First, it is important to consider the tradition of various ethnic figurines, as well as the typical “Chinese” figurines of this kind, made either as standalone statuettes in characteristic cross-legged pose (called “pagodas” in the 18th century), or as handles on top of the porcelain vessels (for example, *Chinese Couple*. Ca. 1837. Accession Number 1982.60.319,.320. The Metropolitan Museum of Art). However, it is more likely that its sources were the works by European or Russian bronze artists who copied porcelain figures and produced numerous objects featuring “Chinese people” or “Japanese people” (for example, *A Chinese with an Umbrella* ring stand. France, 1810s–1820s. Bronze, mother of pearls, gold plating. Accession number П-1064. The Arkhangelskoye State Museum Estate).

The interest in the “exotic” Far East grew even more under the influence of modern style, which was based on the preservation of organic shape and introduction of vitalist dynamism in the shapes and silhouettes. The fact that during this period the classical Far Eastern art “rhymed” with the most cutting-edge ideas of European artists created considerable interest in these “oriental” artistic techniques, themes and mythological subjects, as well as led to the copying of major iconographic and stylistic principles.

Endowing strictly decorative items with functional qualities became a hallmark of Ural casters, together with their refusal to use compositional or iconographic principles which the artists could not understand.

Importantly, purchasing catalogues and price lists of the time list all items with Far Eastern motives as made “in Japanese style”. Among them, we can find works that were actually inspired by the Japanese art. Sometimes Kasli castings were based on genuine works of Japanese craftsmen. One example of this can be found in the collection of

Yekaterinburg Museum of Fine Arts: it is an ashtray called *The Birds* (Yekaterinburg Museum of Fine Arts. Accession no. П-20, cast in 1911). [6]

More often, the author created an interpretation of the motif. For example, *The Cranes* tray (Yekaterinburg Museum of Fine Arts. Accession no. П-19, cast in 1930s, listed in pricing list as a “Tray for pencils and pen nibs in Japanese style, relief – cranes”) interprets famous motif of Japanese bronze artists of Meiji period in a manner reminiscent of modern style. Clearly inspired by the same source, the artists also created such models as *Vase with Violets* (cast in early 20th c. Accession number П-388. Yekaterinburg Museum of Fine Arts) and *Vase with a Branch, a Woodpecker and a Frog* (cast in 1901, Accession number П-391. Yekaterinburg Museum of Fine Arts).

The *Japanese village* (cast in 1904. Accession number П-30. Yekaterinburg Museum of Fine Arts) and *Japanese house* trays (Accession number П-1995. Yekaterinburg Museum of Fine Arts) explore the “flowers and birds” (*kacho-ga*) genre of Japanese graphics. These items of museum collections are represented by the 1900s casts from the bronze models made in the previous decades [6, pp. 185-187]. One more item, a plate in relief titled *Landscape in Japanese Style* (Yekaterinburg Museum of Fine Arts. Accession number П-34, cast in 1915, plate *Relief in Japanese Style*) is made in silver and decorated with the landscape featuring Mount Fuji that resembles the images by Hiroshige or his students.

Among the examples of the fantastical interpretations of Far Eastern mythological images are a tray for pen nibs (Yekaterinburg Museum of Fine Arts). Accession number П-40, cast in 1912) and a candleholder (Yekaterinburg Museum of Fine Arts. Accession number П-83, cast in 1908) “in Japanese style”.

The most vivid example of Japanism in cast iron was created at the Kusin Cast Iron and Ironworks Factory, one of the first of the Ural factories to introduce decorative casting. Just like the Kasli plant, in early 20-hundreds, Kusin factory turned to the popular themes of the day. The Yekaterinburg Museum of Fine Arts collection has a candleholder titled *Ibis on a Turtle* (cast in 1902–1914 based on 1902 model from the Japanese original. Accession number П-3423. Yekaterinburg Museum of Fine Arts). Between the centuries, images of cranes or ibises on turtles, which in the Far Eastern cultures symbolised longevity, became widely popular in Europe thanks to the Chinese and Japanese bronze sculptures. For example, a Chinese bronze sculpture identical to the candleholder from the Yekaterinburg collection was published in 1907 by Anglo-German researcher and philosopher Paul Carus (1852–1919) in his book *Chinese thought; an exposition of the main characteristic features of the Chinese world-conception*. [7]

The listings “in Japanese style” in production documentation and catalogue descriptions were applied also to the themes directly borrowed from the Chinese applied art. An example of this is a casket *Liu Hai on a Toad* (Yekaterinburg Museum of Fine Arts. Accession Number П-292, cast ca. 1900). In the factory’s price listing, this item was listed as a “Japanese Man on a Toad (in Japanese style)” [6, p. 143]. Liu Hai (Liu Haichan) in Chinese Daosist tradition was an immortal associated with money and with the gold of wealth Tsai Shen. In this case, we see an image of the god of coins often used in Chinese folk painting. Liu Hai is depicted as a laughing man sitting on a toad; his hair is free flowing, symbolizing freedom from worldly life; his chest and belly are bare. The fine quality of casting reproduces not only an uneven texture of the toad’s skin and the smoothness of human skin, but also the details of the old man’s smiling face. Importantly, the Kasli master rejected one of the main iconographic features of the toad in this composition – he gave the toad four legs.

Similarly, the image of shishi was also given a functional spin being turned into a casket titled *Fantastic Animal Shishi* (Yekaterinburg Museum of Fine Arts. Accession number П-185, cast in 1915, “Fantastic animal in Japanese style”). Shishi (Buddha’s lion) is one of the most important Chinese images. In China the lion image had been transformed over two thousand years – first from a phantasy animal to a recognisable animalistic lion, and then, back again, to a “lion dog” that symbolizes courage, internal resilience and wishes of success. [8] This led to its popularity in the Chinese art: in porcelain works, stone cutting, wood cutting, bronze, folk painting, etc. The example of Ural crafts presented here depicts an “official” shishi image used since the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) as part of architectural decorations, where it is presented as a guardian of entrances (at the palaces, temples, state buildings) and later of bridges and staircases. While depicting the lion’s bared teeth and the details of its mane, the artist clearly followed either a concrete Chinese example or its European reproduction.

The nib tray *Ducks* (Yekaterinburg Museum of Fine Arts. Accession number П-374, cast in 1914, “Small Tray for Pencils and Pen Nibs, relief – ducks”) shows influence of the “bird-and-flower” (“huaniao hua”) tradition of the Chinese painting. The tray’s composition is framed by a decorative framing whose relief combine the floral ornament with the ancient Chinese artefacts, the jade “bi” disks.

4. Conclusions

The examples described above illustrate the specific ways in which Far Eastern motives and images were introduced in Ural art of casting and confirm again the close connections between the Ural cast iron factories and the metropolitan, as well as European, artistic developments. These connections determined the development of cast iron at the turn of the centuries and its role in propagating Chinese and Japanese images in the remote regions of Russia. In turn, the Far Eastern tradition, albeit in an oblique way, not only produced concrete models that helped to expand local production lines, but also encouraged local artists to experiment with the new artistic techniques and expressions.

Based on the examples described above, it is possible to identify several main strategies used by the Ural cast artists who borrowed the Eastern motives: from the faithful reproduction of a “Far Eastern” model (usually introduced through its European copies) to the introduction of individual elements, their transformation and adaptation to a particular purpose (for example, by turning an originally decorative item into a functional object, as exemplified by various boxes and caskets).

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