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Russian interiors of the XVIII century

Abstract. The article presents an illustrative publication about the exhibition “Ornaments from multi-coloured wood...” Russian set furniture of Catherine II”, prepared by the State Museum-Reserve ‘Peterhof’ and the State Hermitage Museum, the history of the creation in Russia of samples of furniture created in the technique of marquetry is described, photos of furniture items kept in museums and the private collection of the Karisalov family are presented.

Keywords: russian set furniture, antique furniture, museum collection, Russian interior, marquetry.

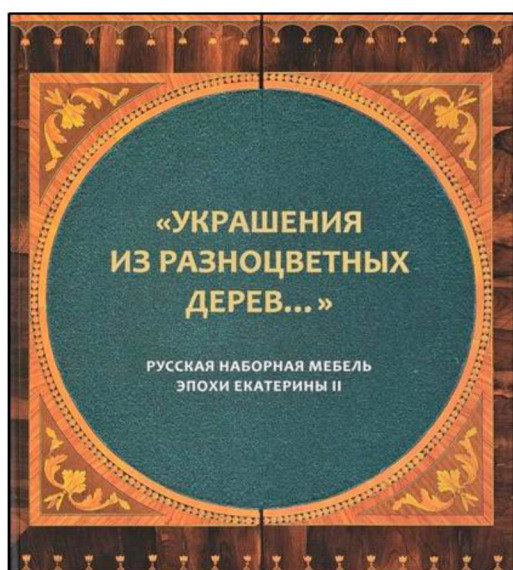


Fig. 1. Book cover “Ornaments from multi-coloured wood...” Russian set furniture of Catherine II”

The Peterhof State Museum-Reserve is a museum of Russian interiors, storing rare examples of furniture of various styles and artistic trends. Museum collections are replenished in various ways, including by private collectors who donate individual items or collections to the Peterhof Museum-Reserve

The exhibition of Russian set furniture of the 18th century was held on the initiative of Mikhail Yuryevich Karisalov, a famous collector and patron of the arts. The exhibition featured previously unknown items of Russian interiors, which had been collected by his family over many years. One of the items from the family collection, a console table by the Gambs Brothers workshop, was donated to the Peterhof State Museum-Reserve collection.

The album-catalogue “Ornaments from multi-coloured wood...” Russian set furniture of Catherine II” [2] (Fig. 1⁵⁰) consists of three sections: “Furniture as an object of collecting”, “Russian set furniture of the 18th century” and “Exhibition

⁵⁰ Fig 1-7. Guseva N. Yu. (2015). «Ukrasheniya iz raznoczvetny`x derev...» Russkaya nabornaya mebel' e`poxi Ekateriny` II: katalog vy`stavki, Sankt-Peterburg, 6 avgusta po 6 noyabrya 2015 goda [Ornaments of Multicolored Woods... Russian Inlaid Furniture of Catherine II's Epoch: Exhibition Catalogue, Saint Petersburg, August 6 to November 6, 2015]. Sankt-Peterburg : Slaviya.

catalogue”, which describe examples of furniture from the Karisalov collection and rare pieces of antique furniture from museum collections.

In the section “Furniture as an object of collecting” the authors quote art historian I. Lazarevsky, who emphasizes the skill and talent of Russian masters of carpentry: “Russian master carpenters have never achieved such beauty, originality and comfort in anything as in these wonderful bureaus with hinged lids, as they, these nameless masters, knew how to arrange a whole labyrinth of the most intricate drawers with various funny and such cunning hiding places...” [2, p. 6].

In the section "Russian set furniture of the 18th century" the authors described the history of the interiors of the 18th century, created in Russia according to the European fashion in the marquetry technique. The marquetry technique is a type of mosaic, when the entire surface of a wooden product is covered with a set of thin figured veneer sheets, cut in accordance with the intended pattern and selected by the color and texture of the wood [1, p. 91]. Furniture made using the marquetry technique is unique, the pattern, plot, decor are never repeated in the furniture, since the pattern of wood fibers is always individual, just as there are no identical trees, there are no identical pieces of furniture made in this way. In Europe, furniture made using the marquetry technique was distinguished by a high level of performance, and has been known since the 16th century. In Russian culture until the 18th century,



Fig. 2. Bureau. 1710-1720s.
Russia. State Hermitage Museum,
Saint-Petersburgh

there was no tradition of decorating furniture using the marquetry technique. Set furniture in Russia came into vogue during the reign of Peter the Great. His agents abroad invited specialists to St. Petersburg to train craftsmen in the manufacture of various pieces of furniture. At the same time as inviting foreign specialists to train craftsmen in carpentry, the tsar sent Russian "pensioners"⁵¹ to study with foreign masters. In the 1720s, they returned to Russia and were given workshops and money to purchase the necessary tools and materials. The emperor ordered the arriving craftsmen to make one piece each "as a test of art" [2, p. 10]. The design of the bureau (Fig. 2) made of ash wood with intarsia on the lid in the form of putti (babies) trumpeting to the glory of the Russian nobility with a folding rectangular board was made

by Russian furniture craftsmen during this period.

After the death of Peter the Great, under Catherine the First and Elizabeth rule, the construction of imperial palaces and new buildings in St. Petersburg continued, which significantly increased the demand for furniture manufacturing. In the 18th century, a "taste for luxury" began to form among the nobility, expressed in the decoration of interior spaces with expensive furnishings. In 1762, a decree was

⁵¹ Pensioners of the Academy of Arts (in Latin pensio – payment) – Russian artists who receive the right to state support at the Russian Academy of Arts [3].

issued in Russia – "On the Freedom of the Nobility", which freed the nobles from compulsory state service. The owners of estates, having returned to their estates, began to improve them, which contributed to the demand for master carpenters and furnishings. The nobles sent talented serfs to improve their carpentry skills in large cities. Contemporaries noted the skill of Russian furniture makers, in particular the Okhta artisans, who created furniture for city houses and country estates. I.-G. Georgi wrote: "Every resident of St. Petersburg knows that the Okhtanians are truly excellent carpenters and that they work so well that the best craftsmen in the capital, such as Tur and Gambs, use their labor to sell products for which they were paid a pittance at exorbitant prices" [1, pp. 97-98].

The names of the creators of unique interior items remained unknown in most cases, since it was not customary to label furniture in Russia. The name of Nikifor Vasiliev, one of the outstanding cabinetmakers, was established by experts based on the stylistic similarity and nature of the decor of the furniture items he made, now stored in museum collections. The chest of drawers (Fig. 3), unusual in decor and shape, was made by him in the form of a French ladies' bureau with a folding front lid. The top board of the chest of drawers is decorated with the marquetry technique. The panel depicts a panorama of the city of Tver created based on an engraving by the artist-engraver N. Ya. Sablin. Catherine II became an active customer of expensive furniture. In the main residence of the empress - the Winter Palace, most of the interior was made up of furniture decorated using the marquetry technique. The chest of drawers with the empress's monogram, made using the set, intarsia and inlay techniques (Fig. 4). Researchers have suggested that several craftsmen were involved in the work on the chest of drawers, since different marquetry techniques were used to decorate the top of the chest of drawers and its body [2, p. 95].



Fig. 3. Chest of drawers. Set furniture. N. Vasiliev (?). Late 1770s – early 1789s. Karisalov family collection, Saint-Petersburgh



Fig. 4. Chest of drawers with the set coat of arms of Siberia and the monogram of Catherine II. Around 1770s. State Hermitage Museum, Saint-Petersburgh

The reign of Catherine II is the "golden age" for Russian set furniture. In the last quarter of the 18th century, large country residences were built: Ostankino, Kuskovo, Arkhangelskoye. Outstanding architects were engaged in the construction

of country palaces and the creation of interiors for noble Russian families: Kvarnegi, Kazakov, Bazhenov, Cameron, Starov and many others. Cabinets, tables, chests of drawers and bureaus made by Russian craftsmen during this period in the marquetry technique are diverse in the nature of the decor and composition. The decor in furniture items is represented by large and complex plots.

The final section of the publication - "Exhibition Catalogue" in illustrations presents examples of furniture of the 18th century that participated in the exposition of the exhibition. The exhibits, previously unknown pieces of furniture from the Karisalov family collection, were studied by leading experts in the study of furniture art: Natalia Yuryevna Guseva (State Hermitage Museum), Olga Sergeevna Kislitsina (Peterhof State Museum-Reserve).

The largest group of furniture in the presented edition consisted of tables for games and handicrafts, card tables, tables with a bean-shaped tabletop.

The table shown in Figure 5, made by a Russian craftsman, from the Karisalov family collection, is one of the early examples of tables for handicrafts. The craftsman created a unique pattern on the surface of the table from pieces of walnut wood, bordered by frames of dark and light shades (Fig. 5⁵²).

The pair of card tables with two pull-out legs were in the collection of the Yusupov dukes before the 1917 revolution (Fig. 6), and in the 1930s the tables were sold at auction. In 2014, the unique pair of furniture was acquired by the State Hermitage Museum and returned to Russia. The tables are decorated with maps in the center, framed in meander, and the edge of the tables is decorated with a trellis mesh ornament with rocaille cartouches in the corners using the marquetry technique.



Fig. 5. Craft table. Russia, 1760-1770s. Karisalov family collection, Saint-Petersburgh



Fig. 6. Card tables. Russia, 1760-1770s. State Hermitage Museum, Saint-Petersburgh

⁵² Fig 5-7. Guseva N. Yu. «Ukrasheniya iz raznoczvetny`x derev...» Russkaya nabornaya mebel' e`poxi Ekateriny` II : [katalog vy`stavki, Sankt-Peterburg, 6 avgusta po 6 noyabrya 2015 goda] / N. Yu. Guseva, O. S. Kislicyna ; [avtory` vstupitel'ny`x statej: E. Ya. Kal'niczkaya, M. Yu. Karisalov]. – Sankt-Peterburg : Slaviya, 2015. – 271 s. il., czv. il., portr. – ISBN 978-5-9501-0226-4. – Tekst : neposredstvenny`j.



Fig. 7. Secrétaire. 1790s. Russia, Karisalov family collection, Saint-Petersburgh

A rectangular secretaire with a folding board was made by a Russian craftsman at the end of the 18th century (Fig. 7). A characteristic detail of the secretaire is the beveled corners of the front edges. Above the folding board there is a drawer decorated with ornamental decor. Inside the secretaire, behind the folding board, there are drawers, and below is a cabinet with two doors, the facades of which are decorated with two medallions with set compositions made of light wood, decorated with bows and garlands. The plots of the images on the medallions are thematically related. The two medallions depict people engaged in rural work. Their faces and hands are highlighted with ivory inlay.

Furniture of the 18th century, made using the marquetry technique, is an interior decoration and a source of information about the history of Russia, art

and people who lived during this historical period.

References

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