

ETHNOLOGY

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WOOD PAINTING TRADITION OF THE UPPER VYCHEGDA KOMI IN THE LATE 19TH – FIRST QUARTER OF THE 20TH CENTURY*

Based on collections housed in the Russian Museum of Ethnography and the National Museum of the Komi Republic, as well as previously published materials and results of field studies from 1989–2013 in the Komi Republic, the article discusses the local ethnic traditions of peasant wood painting among the Upper Vychegda Komi Zyryans. These traditions were in practice at the turn of the 19th–20th centuries in the villages of Ust-Sysolsk and Yarensk Uezds of Vologda Guberniya (the modern Ust-Kulom and Kortkeros Regions of the Komi Republic). In particular, study addresses the decoration of the Upper Vychegda wooden distaffs and brakes. It is hypothesized that this decorative style originated from a blend of Finno-Ugric and Russian traditions in overlapping or adjoining regions of Russian, specifically Old-Believer, and Komi settlement. Painting technique, decoration, and coloring of artifacts from the area of Vychegda differ from those seen elsewhere in northern Russia or in the Kama region.

Keywords: *Vychegda Komi, wood painting, technique, composition, folk wood painting, Komi Old Believers, ethnographic mapping.*

Introduction

One of the key problems in ethnography and history of folk art of the Russian North is the role played by region and location in the history of peasant artistic centers. They emerged in the late 19th century in the cohabitation and border zones of the Russian and Finno-Ugric populations of the European Northeast (Bernstam, 2008: 144–151;

Dmitreyeva, 2006: 78–79; Putilov, 1994). This study presents an analysis of the materials characterizing the local ethnic artistic tradition of wood painting, which prior to the beginning of the 20th century was common among the population living in the Vychegda River basin, in the northeastern region of European Russia*.

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*Since 2009, an initiative of the Russian Ministry of Culture has worked to compile a catalog of the intangible cultural heritage of the peoples of Russia. As a part of this project, in 2012, the authors of this article prepared a register of traditions related to peasant wood painting through the early 20th century in the Vychegda River basin (Elektronnyi katalog...).



Fig. 1. Vycheгда painted distaffs; early 20th century. Ust-Kerchyomiya village, Ust-Kulom Region of the Komi Republic. Field drawings by P.G. Mikushev, 1999.



Fig. 2. Vycheгда painted distaff (1) and brakes (2). Photograph by V.E. Sharapov, 1989.

1 – early 20th century, Kerchyomiya village, Ust-Kulom Region of the Komi Republic; 2 – early 20th century, Don village, Ust-Kulom Region of the Komi Republic.

The interest in Vycheгда painting is largely due to the fact that Komi Krai* with the exception of the Lower Pechora basin (Taranovskaya, 1968) remains an uncharted territory in the history of peasant painting in the Russian North, the Urals, and the Kama region (Sheleg, 1992; Sevan, 2007; Bernstam, 2007; Baradulin, 1982, 1987). Ethnographic maps published in 1980–1990 in the studies by V.A. Sheleg (1992:

*The territory of the current Komi Republic, formerly a part of the Vologda and Arkhangelsk Guberniyas.

129, 137, 142) and V.A. Baradulin (1982: 31) may serve to illustrate this point. The current academic literature often reinforces the view that “the traditions of woodcarving and wood painting are not historically typical for the population living in the basin of the Vycheгда River” (Sheleg, 1992: 140; Bernstam, 2008: 152). However, these studies do not specify which part of the basin of the Vycheгда is in question, nor whether this claim concerns the traditions typical of the Vycheгда Komi. Additionally, it is known that the artistic treatment of wood, specifically free brush painted decoration, existed in the basin of the Upper and Lower Vycheгда on the territory of the Komi Republic in the late 19th century (Kandinsky, 2008). A number of works on ethnography and folk art of the Komi, published in the second half of the 20th century, repeatedly mention this distinctive artistic tradition (Belitsker, 1958: 343; Korolyova, 1969: 16; Gribova, 1980: 58–59).

The Vycheгда decorative style

The traditional decorative canon of Upper Vycheгда painting on wooden weaving tools (distaffs and hand brakes for processing fibers), can be described as follows: geometric multicolor tripartite compositions consisting of multicolored circles, inscribed into each other and often mirror-symmetric with respect to the vertical axis, as well as four-, six-, and eight-rayed rosettes inscribed into the center of multicolored circles, framed with points in a contrasting color along the perimeter (Fig. 1, 2). Upper Vycheгда wood painting is typified by beautiful geometric compositions painted over carved contour decoration, pre-



Fig. 3. Vycheгда painted distaff; early 20th century. Kerchyomiya village, Ust-Kulom Region of the Komi Republic. Photograph by V.E. Sharapov, 2013.

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