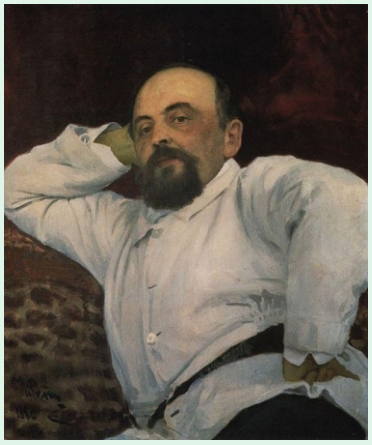
READING MUSEUM SERVICE

Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

MOVING WOODEN TOYS FROM RUSSIA G65



Perhaps the most famous Russian wooden toys are the matryoshka nesting dolls (right). These dolls are actually not very old, the first being made in 1890, in the artists' colony on Abramtsevo estate near Moscow. The owner of Abramtsevo was Savva Mamontov - an industrialist and a patron of the arts (left). The artists that Savva Mamontov supported sought to recapture the quality and spirit of medieval Russian art. Several workshops were set up there to produce handmade furniture, ceramic tiles, and silks imbued with traditional Russian imagery and themes.



Sergei Maliutin, a painter from a folk crafts workshop in the Abramtsevo estate, saw a set of Japanese wooden dolls (below right) representing Shichi-fuku-jin, the Seven Gods of Fortune. The largest doll was that of Fukurokuju - a happy, bald god with an unusually long chin - and within it nested the six remaining deities. Inspired, Maliutin drew a sketch of a Russian version of the toy. It was carved by Vasiliy Zvezdochkin in a toy workshop in Sergiyev Posad and painted by Sergei Maliutin. It consisted of eight dolls; the outermost was a girl in an apron, then the dolls alternated between boy and girl, with the innermost a baby.







In 1900, the wife of Savva Mamontov, showed the dolls at the World Exhibition in Paris and the toy earned a bronze medal. Soon, many other places in Russia started making matryoshki of various styles. Today, many thousands of these dolls are sold around the world. Although they are still usually decorated in the form of an apron and headscarf-clad Russian babooshka (which means grandmother/old lady in Russian), satirical dolls decorated with the faces of George Bush or Hollywood film characters (left) are also made.

Reading BOROUGH COUNCIL

Heritage Lottery Fund

Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

MOVING WOODEN TOYS FROM RUSSIA G65

Matryoshka dolls were made in a period when, all over Europe, people from different countries were emphasising the distinctive cultural 'traditions' of their country. This movement is often called Romantic Nationalism. For example, in nineteenth century Norway the composer Edvard Grieg wrote lots of music based on Norwegian folk music and wearing 'traditional costume' became popular among people who previously would have shunned it.

In Russia this tendency was strong before the Russian Revolution, but it also continued afterwards, although some elements of Russian folk tradition (particularly the religious) were suppressed. The Soviet state like to idealise 'peasant culture' and toys like the ones in this box were popular with them because they could be presented as genuine working class art.



The wooden moving toys in this box are usually referred to as Bogorodskoe toys. They are usually made from lime tree wood and, unlike the Matryoshka dolls, are left unpainted. Carved figures of this kind were made in the nineteenth century. They were not always moving figures, although they were often humourous. The very fine carving on the right is called 'How the Mouse Buried the Cat' and shows a scene that is very similar to the story told by Beatrix Potter in *The Tale of Samuel Whiskers*, in which Tom Kitten is caught by some rats.



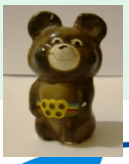
Nineteenth century carvings of this kind are often made by a named wood carver and it is not clear how much they owed to anonymous peasant culture. The biggest producer of carved wooden figures in the nineteenth century was the workshop at the Troitse-Sergiev Monastery at Sergiev Posad, a town north of Moscow (left). The soviet authorities suppressed the monastery and its workshop and renamed the town Zagorsk, after the nineteenth century revolutionary Vladimir Zagorsky.

The Bogorodskoe Wood Carver Cooperative was set up in 1923. The village was on the land of the Troitse-Sergiev Monastery and the cooperative used craftsmen from the monastery, but purged their carvings of any religious associations.

Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

MOVING WOODEN TOYS FROM RUSSIA G65

Many of the Bogorodskoe carvings draw on figures from Russian folk tales. Folk tales were seen as a product of peasant culture and were much encouraged by the soviet authorities. New 'folk tales' were also produced. The famous musical story of *Peter and the Wolf* by Sergei Prokovief is a good example. In the original version Peter is a Young Pioneer, the soviet Russian replacement of the Scouts.



One of the moving toys in this box features a bear. This is perhaps the commonest animal of all in such carvings. Although the bear features in folk tales, it has also been used since at least the nineteenth century as a symbol of Russia itself. In the 1980 Olympics in Moscow the official mascot was Misha the bear (inset left) and in more recent times it has been used as the symbol of the Nationalist United Russia party of President Vladimir Putin (left).





One of the most popular Russian writers is Ivan Krylov (1769-1844). He translated many of Aesop and La Fontaine's fables into Russian and also made up many of his own. One of the most famous fables is the story of *The Fox and the Crow*, in which a fox tricks a crow into dropping a piece of cheese by pretending to want to hear the crow sing. This tale is sometimes depicted in the form of a Bogorodskoe carving (right). The carving on the left, in which a fox wags its tail while a ball wobbles on top of a post, looks as though it is a variation of this scene.



In tales and fables the fox is often depicted as something of a lovable rogue. The wolf is usually a more frightening character, as in *Peter and the Wolf*. Is this knitting wolf (right) a reformed character? Or, like the wolf in *Little Red Riding Hood*, is it just pretending to be nice and biding its time before it makes a grab for another victim?



Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

MOVING WOODEN TOYS FROM RUSSIA G65

The carving of the mushroom-hunting hedgehog (right) reflects the popularity of this activity in Russia. After a heavy rain during the mushroom season whole families often venture into the nearest forest, picking bucketfuls of mushrooms, which are cooked and eaten for dinner upon return or alternatively dried or pickled for later consumption (left). The activity is so popular that many people either get lost or poison themselves by picking deadly mushrooms by mistake. In 2003, for example, over 120 people got lost in the St Petersburg area. In the same year 34 people from the Moscow area died of poisoning and 457 cases were reported across the whole country.





The rabbit cleaning the floor with a rather strange looking brush (right) perhaps represents a break with some of the more traditional scenes. In recent years Bogorodskoe toys have also featured a bear programming a computer (below).



