LACQUER AND LEGACY: OPENING THE BOX TO SOVIET NARRATIVES AND POST-SOVIET REALITIES

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ABSTRACT

Russian Lacquer Art:
Peasant artists from Palekh, Fedoskino, Mstera, and Khouli originally painted Christian icons. However, religious censorship following the 1917 Communist Revolution forced icon painters to pivot to folklore lacquer painting. This shift provided Soviet Russia with a much-needed "traditional peasant" identity amid the revolution's earlier cultural upheaval. The Bolshevik regime then restricted the Soviet proletariat's—working class'—access to lacquer art while commodifying it for foreign buyers. This paradox highlights lacquer art's Soviet-era tension between the failure of ideology not reflecting the reality of the everyday lives of its citizens.

Post-Soviet Perspectives:
State-sanctioned intentions and contradictory civilian truths continue to shape the historical, cultural, emotional, memorial, political, and artistic landscape of present-day post-Soviet societies. Latvia, the country of focus, is vigorously implementing de-Russianification policies to sever ties with its Soviet past. As a result, these policies impact one-third of Latvia's Russian-speaking population, directly affecting lacquer art's manifestation in private and public spaces. Yet, existing research solely focuses on Russian lacquer art's role in shaping Soviet identity, largely neglecting its post-Soviet legacy.

Research Focus:
This study examines these evolving narratives projected onto Russian lacquer art and their impact on its display or displacement in private and public post-Soviet spaces. Investigating lacquer art in post-Soviet homes, antique shops, and museums will reveal how art accrues new layers of function beyond its original purpose. This reflects transgenerational narratives between the legacy of Soviet memory, nostalgia, identity, contested memory, and material culture.

Goal:
To curate an accessible, non-commercialized digital collection for lacquer art, countering its historically commercialized and restrictive industry.

The Frog Princess (left), Palekh, USSR, Lacquer, papier-mâché and *The Tale of the Golden Cockerel* (right), Mstera, USSR, Lacquer, papier-mâché.

METHODOLOGY

Ethnography, object-based interviews, and material analysis will provide an interdisciplinary approach. Personal stories and relationships to lacquer pieces will be analyzed and represented through portraits. Photogrammetry will transform participants' lacquer pieces into 3-D models, visually preserving ownership narratives while protecting anonymity. The demographic will include Latvians aged 18-65+ to capture lacquer art's transgenerational role and contested memory. Fieldwork will include visits to antique shops to examine commercial narratives and museums to analyze academic representation. Comparing public and private spheres will highlight the shifting and contested functions of lacquer art.

The Little Humpbacked Horse, Palekh, USSR, Lacquer, papier-mâché.

THEORIES

Thing Theory (Martin Heidegger)
Objects become "things" when they acquire meaning beyond their original purpose. Their presence, use, remembrance, or transformation stablishes their thingness.

Theory of Entanglement (Ian Hodder)
Objects shape human habits, behaviors, and mental processes as much as humans shape them. Further, interaction with a thing entangles individuals in its spatial, historical, and personal narratives.

Universal Glass Case Theory (Sophie Works)
There is a universality to displaying objects, often through a "glass case," that transcends borders, cultures, space, and time. They are not neutral vessels; they impose narratives onto objects, their owners, and the surrounding space.

EXPECTED RESULTS

Russian lacquer art has accrued new layers of meaning beyond its Soviet-era function, evolving into a site of contested memory—heralded in private by Latvia's Russian-speaking population yet deliberately erased from public view under state-sanctioned de-Russianification policies. Through ethnography, object-based interviews, and material analysis, this study will reveal how lacquer art's display or displacement reflects shifting cultural narratives. These findings will contribute to material culture and post-Soviet studies by illustrating how folk art is both a vessel for nostalgia and a target of political erasure throughout history.

REFERENCES

Please scan the QR code for a references list.

Tsarevich Ivan, the Firebird and the Gray Wolf (left), Palekh, USSR, Lacquer, papier-mâché and *The Scarlet Flower* (right), Palekh, USSR, Lacquer, papier-mâché.

EPILOGUE

Future work will be pursued through the HITM (Honors in the Major) thesis program at FSU. This will investigate and curate both a digital and physical collection of lacquer art that additionally examines how the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War affects the global narrative surrounding Russian lacquer.

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