



BOOK REVIEWS

LITERATURE AND FINE ARTS

Shcheboleva, E. G., ed.

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One of the most impressive signs of the revival of Russian art history in the post-Soviet period is the ongoing publication of the massive

(Compilation of monuments of architecture and monumental art of Russia), a nationwide survey of architectural monuments and related art in the eighty-nine territorial divisions (oblast, republic) of the Russian Federation. Projected eventually to reach some two hundred volumes, the survey is administered by the State Institute of Art History (Institut iskusstvoznaniia), a major research institution supported by the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation. In scope the project can be compared to the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS), also a national survey of architectural monuments, albeit on a smaller scale. In both cases teams of researchers and photographers compile field data that is filed, edited, and prepared for publication. (In the case of HABS, the related series is published by Oxford University Press.)

The Russian national architectural survey is a genuinely collaborative project, whose origins date from the Soviet period. Individual monument files gathered during the past several decades have been reviewed and updated by specialists who write the respective articles under the supervision of an editorial board. This board includes scholars with a broad knowledge of Russian architecture, such as Aleksei Komech (director of the State Institute of Art History) and Evgeniia Kirichenko. Although funding problems in the years immediately surrounding 1991 delayed publication of the initial volumes, the series now seems to have achieved a measure of financial stability with the support of the Russian Foundation for Fundamental Research. Major factors currently affecting the publication schedule include the scrupulous editorial standards in preparing each work. Published regions now include Smolensk, Tver', Kursk, and Ivanovo. It would be something of an understatement to say that Ivanovo oblast is not known as a tourist destination. A major industrial (textile) region to the northeast of Moscow, this relatively small oblast seems more a “filler” between centers of historic culture and architecture such as Iaroslavl', Kostroma, and Vladimir. All the more remarkable, then, to see in this three-volume edition the variety and density of the region's architectural heritage, from seventeenth-century churches to industrial design of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The structure of this edition, as of the project's other oblast editions, is a model of clarity and logic. After a foreword with acknowledgments and comments on methodology, the first volume includes an extensive (117 pages) introduction to the architectural history of the oblast. This is followed by almost four hundred pages devoted to the oblast capital, Ivanovo, with welcome attention given to industrial and administrative buildings from both pre-Soviet and Soviet periods. This material will be particularly valuable to students of Constructivism and Soviet factory planning, including workers' housing. In addition to an exhaustive collection of articles on individual monuments, Ivanovo, like each major city in the project, has its own introductory survey. As for the articles themselves, major monuments are given priority, while secondary monuments (predominantly houses) in densely built urban areas are arranged by street, with a general plan for each street. Many of the articles conclude with brief references to



published literature and archival holdings on their specific structures. The volume concludes with a detailed bibliography and indices of monuments and personal names.

The second volume begins the survey of Ivanovo oblast beyond the city of Ivanovo itself. The basic organizing principle here is the *raion* (roughly equivalent to county), of which there are twenty-one, arranged in alphabetical order with a map at the head of each section. Towns and villages within each *raion* are presented in alphabetical order, with the exception of the district's main town, which comes first and has its own historical survey. Among the high points of this volume is Palekh, one of the major centers of Russian icon-painting. Like the first volume, the second concludes with indices and a bibliography related to specific areas and monuments within the book. The third volume is organized along the same principles, which could not, it seems to me, be clearer or easier to use.

This is, in short, a reference work of the highest order, astonishing in its depth and variety. Equally astonishing, however, is this edition's view of the widespread vandalism and despoliation inflicted on the architectural heritage of this region, which, it should be emphasized, was never occupied by the enemy during the Great Fatherland War. Although the quality of the photography varies from the competently professional to the amateurish, the visual documentation is unrelenting: page after page of desecrated and decapitated churches, ransacked church interiors, and dilapidated houses.

Of course these scholarly volumes are not intended for promotional purposes, and the documentary approach is just as it should be, unpretentious and direct. Nonetheless, in paging through these volumes one gets the sense of an exhausted, impoverished land in the aftermath of a series of unrelenting catastrophes. Anyone familiar with twentieth-century Russian history understands in the abstract the reasons for this impoverishment: the sacrifices required to create a military-industrial superpower, the material drain of World War II, and the continual attacks on organized religion. The editors mention some of these issues (particularly the last) in the foreword. They also note that with few exceptions the documentation and photography largely end with the 1980s, so that one can assume improvement in the appearance of some of the churches. (The caption under each image wisely includes the photograph's date, and in a number of cases the editors have included prerevolutionary photographs for contrast.)

In this regard, my one major criticism of all the volumes in the series is their continuation of the Soviet practice of describing churches as though nothing had happened in the twentieth century, while the visual evidence is howlingly obvious. Individual articles should at least include the date of a church's closing by the Soviet authorities and, where possible, information on major damage inflicted on the shrine. Is there any legitimate reason why even a state-supported reference work should withhold this information? To those nervous about the litany of desecration, the editors might add a notice on the restoration of specific churches. But to ignore the damage in such a fundamental reference work is simply unacceptable.

However much we might rationalize Russia's devastation in the twentieth century, the overall visual impact of these volumes still has the power to disturb and gives rise to questions with no ready answers. How could a nation act so barbarously toward its own culture? Will the situation improve in a new Russia often indifferent to historic preservation? Should one even expect the resources to preserve anything more than a fraction of the buildings so thoroughly compiled in these volumes? My own experience, as a photographer and an architectural historian, suggests that a number of these buildings will soon exist only in photographs. At least this magnificent series of books will serve as yet another requiem to Russia's past.

**William Craft Brumfield, Tulane University,
Russian Academy of Architecture and Construction Sciences**