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...).
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 Vychegda River” (Sheleg, 1992: 140; Bernstam, 2008: 152). However, these studies do not specify which part of the basin of the Vychegda is in question, nor whether this claim concerns the traditions typical of the Vychegda 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 Vychegda 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 (Belitsir, 1958: 343; Korolyova, 1969: 16; Gribova, 1980: 58–59).

The Vychegda decorative style

The traditional decorative canon of Upper Vychegda 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 Vychegda wood painting is typified by beautiful geometric compositions painted over carved contour decoration, pre-

*The territory of the current Komi Republic, formerly a part of the Vologda and Arkhangelsk Guberniyas.
made on a wooden object with tools such as cutters and a carpenter’s compass (Fig. 3, 4).

First the artisan produced a contour outline of the ornamental composition in the form of concentric circles inscribed into one another, followed by the addition of dots along the perimeter of the circles. The decorations were made with a cutter using the technique of dihedral incisions – contour dihedral lines with clear relief outlines. Subsequent primer and multihued contrasting coloring highlighted the various elements of the complex geometric carved composition and enriched the piece with fine details using the technique of brush painting. There is evidence that some painted geometric compositions on the surface of wooden objects were produced by a special “finger” technique, without the use of brushes. The creation of a relief border between the different colored elements of the composition had a technological basis: the border allowed the artisan to apply oil paints more evenly without infringing on nearby circles of other colors*.

History of research on Vychegda wood painting

The discovery of the Vychegda wood painting among the Komi is associated by many researchers with Vassily Kandinsky who, while traveling on the Vychegda in 1889 (Avtonomova; Aronov, 2010: 44–94; Kandinsky, 1889), made sketches of examples of house painting in the Komi villages of the region (Weiss, 1995: 10–26). The ethnographic album, Travel of V. Kandinsky to the Zyrians in 1889, published in 2013 by the National Museum of the Komi Republic, shows some parallels between the paintings of the artist and folk art of the Vychegda Komi (Puteshestviye Kandinskogo..., 2013). However, assumptions about the “Zyryan palette” in the art of Vassily Kandinsky present in popular articles (Sivkova, 2009, 2013) remain only a hypothesis, in need of confirmation by art historians.

In the 1940s, well-known ethnographer V.N. Belitser identified the distinctive tradition of wood painting among the Vychegda Komi. Her field diaries contain descriptions of compositions and motifs typical of house painting, as well as drawings of painted distaffs, typical among the Upper Vychegda Komi (Belitser, 1946, 1947). According to V.N. Belitser, the development of the artistic tradition of wood painting on the Vychegda was associated with the activities of the Vyatka and Cherdyn artisans, who would come to the region for seasonal work before the beginning of the 20th century. In her book, Essays on the Ethnography of the Komi Peoples she refers to F.E. Popov, one of the Komi artisans engaged in wood painting in the village of Kerchyomiya until the early 1940s (Belitser, 1958: 343).

In the mid-1960s, ethnographer M.A. Braun was the first to compile a detailed ethnographic description of the set of painted and carved wooden tools (distaffs, stands for sewing, brakes, loom parts, spindles), typical among the Vychegda Komi (Kolchin, 2007). During her fieldwork in the Komi villages on the Upper Vychegda, M.A. Braun collected a rich and unique collection of painted weaving tools (over 30 items), which is currently housed in the Russian Museum of Ethnography in St. Petersburg (Fig. 5) (Braun, 1967).

The term “Vychegda wood painting” was first introduced by prominent art historian N.S. Korolyova, who worked on the Vychegda in the early 1960s. In her dissertation research, Folk Art of the Permian Finno-Ugric Peoples (Komi, Komi-Permyaks, and Udmurts) in
the 19th–20th Centuries, she highlights the originality of technique and composition of Vychegda painting, and notes that the artisans of wood painting in Komi villages were local dwellers also skilled in the crafts of carpentry and joinery (Korolyova, 1969: 16). It should be noted that the studies of M.A. Braun and N.S. Korolyova led to the exhibition of exemplary pieces of Vychegda wood painting for the first time in Moscow and Leningrad, as well as the reproduction of these works in museum catalogs and art albums on folk art of the peoples of Russia (Narodnoye iskusstvo Rossiiskoi Federatsii..., 1981: 89).

**Fig. 6.** Ethnographic map, “Territories of woodcarving and birch bark processing traditions” by V.E. Sharapov.

1 – contour woodcarving; 2 – trihedrally-notched and contour woodcarving; 3 – birch bark stamping; 4 – birch bark utensils; 5 – wicker utensils; 6 – carved utensils; 7 – carved calendars; 8 – tools for spinning and weaving.
After analyzing the materials from expeditions on the Vychegda in the late 1970s, ethnographer L.S. Gribova identified several centers of artisan production of painted wooden utensils in the basin of the Vychegda, namely the villages of Don, Kerchyomiya, Nizhnyaya Voch, Ruch, and Vomyen. L.S. Gribova recorded the names of those inhabitants of the villages engaged in wood painting in the first half of the 20th century: Mikhail Gichev (died in 1945, mute), Semyon Popov (died in the 1960s), Stepan Tarabukin (1895–1940), Dmitry Tarabukin (died in 1975), Dmitry Timushev (died in the 1930s), and Ivan Samarín (died in the 1930s). The artisans in the village of Derevyansk were Alexandr Chuvyurov (died in 1962) and Pavel Mozymov (Gribova).

Based on the analysis of coloration and composition of Vychegda paintings, L.S. Gribova identified a specific Lower Vychegda free brush style of wood painting (with a predominance of plant motifs), which, according to her work, significantly differed from the Upper Vychegda distinct geometric style (Gribova, 1980: 58). The conclusions made by L.S. Gribova are supported by the results of ethnographic mapping of traditional Komi carving and wood painting, as the distribution of Upper Vychegda wood painting clearly coincides with that of geometric contour woodcarving, traditional among the Komi (Fig. 6, 7).

Carved distaffs, identical to painted distaffs both in their structure and shape and in the geometric contour line decoration on their vertical pieces, are widespread in this area. Based on the dates of some of these objects, carved distaffs made according to the “Vychegda canon,” appeared on the Vychegda much earlier than painted distaffs. The earliest known painted weaving tool dates back to 1889, while some objects with carved decoration can be dated even earlier, to 1860. It is noteworthy that the traditional “architecture” of Upper Vychegda carved and painted distaffs, with a typical leaf-/oar-/lotus-like vertical piece that symmetrically narrows at the top and base, has no parallels in the Russian North, the Kama region, or in the Urals (Fig. 8).

### Origins of the Upper Vychegda wood painting

From 1980–2010s, examples of Vychegda wood painting from the collections of the National Museum of the Komi Republic and the Institute of Language, Literature, and History (Komi Scientific Center, Ural Branch of RAS)
were published in various art albums, museum catalogs, and encyclopedias on the history and culture of the Komi Republic (Gribova, 1973: 31; Narodnoye iskusstvo komi..., 1993; Entsiklopediya..., 1999: 19; Pryalki..., 2009: 20–23). These publications contain attempts at ethnographic mapping of wood painting of the Komi (Zhenovskaya, 2001; Sharapov, 1997a, b; 2001: 167; 2011), which make it possible to advance some hypotheses on the origins of the Vychegda artistic tradition.

The study of several collections containing Vychegda wood paintings, which were assembled in 1960s–1980s in the Komi Republic and kept in the Russian Ethnographic Museum and the National Museum of the Komi Republic, and field research conducted by the authors in the 1990s–2000s suggest that this artistic tradition was widespread at the end of the 19th and the first quarter of the 20th century in the Komi villages located in the basin of the Vychegda in Ust-Sysolsk and Yarensk Uezds of Vologda Guberniya, or the present-day Ust-Kulom Region (villages of Anyb, Don, Kerchymyi, Nizhny and Verkhny Voch, Ruch, Pomozdino, Derevyansk), Ust-Vym Region (Aikino village), and Kortkeros Region (Vomyn and Nyobdino villages) of the Komi Republic. Literature on art history and ethnography has repeatedly emphasized “the link between the northern artistic centers and the activities of Old Believers artisans” (Bernstam, 1992, 2007, 2008). These observations are confirmed by the Komi tradition of artistic wood painting. According to field research, wood painting in the villages of the Upper Vychegda in the late 19th–early 20th century was practiced by the Komi artisans (carpenters and joiners), who came from the families of the Priestless Old Believers of the Spasovsky wing (Sharapov, 1997a, b; 2000). In ethnographic terms, the basin of the Vychegda is of particular interest as the area of interaction between various ethnic, religious, and cultural traditions (Zherebtsov, 1960: 55–57). It has been established that since the 18th century the incoming and subsequently assimilated Russian Old Believer population made a significant impact on the traditional culture of the Komi living in the Upper Vychegda region. Already by the middle of the 19th century, the Komi Old Believers constituted a significant part of the population on the Upper Vychegda, and by the beginning of the 20th century, the carriers of Old Believers’ traditions in this region were predominantly the indigenous Komi (Gagarin, 1978: 170–171; Vlasova, 2010: 30–31).

The earliest known examples of Upper Vychegda wood painting are reliably dated, using inscriptions on the objects, to the 1880s through the end of the 1920s. The appearance of the original wood paintings in Komi villages on the Vychegda chronologically coincided with the process of extinction of rural crafts related to artistic treatment of wood, present throughout the Russian North from the mid-19th century (Bernstam, 2008: 153–154). Painted objects of Komi artisans are rarely, if ever, found outside of the Vychegda basin. According to the testimony of community members, local craftsmen painted wooden utensils only for relatives and fellow villagers. It is likely that the works of local artists could not compete with those produced in the large Northern Russian and Kama wood painting centers, and therefore were not taken for sale at fairs.

**Conclusion**

The Vychegda style of decorative wood painting, practiced in the southwestern region of what is now the Komi Republic in the late 19th and early 20th century, belongs to the northern Russian peasant tradition spanning the area from Karelia to the western Urals. The painting style provides a link between the artistic traditions of the Severnaya (Northern) Dvina and Kama, distinct from the artistic styles of northern Russia and the Urals at large in terms of technique and stylistic character. The Vychegda tradition appears to have originated in areas of overlapping or adjacent Finno-Ugric and Russian (specifically Old Believers’) settlement. “Cultural bilingualism” enhanced the otherwise original artistic tradition.

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