Regions at the All-Russian Agricultural and Handicraft Industrial Exhibition, 1923: Geography, Ethnology, and Art

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Abstract. This paper examines regional expositions at the All-Russian Agricultural and Handicraft Industrial Exhibition, which took place in Moscow in 1923. The study aims to reconstruct the geographical, historical, ethnological, and art contexts of these expositions. The objective of the study includes identifying the ambitions of the Bolshevik leaders to publicly demonstrate their national discourse at the exhibition. The focus of the study is on republican pavilions and local departments of the “Village” section of the exhibition. It is shown that one of the goals of the exhibition was to convince the public in the advantages of unification of the “Sovietised” national republics and autonomous regions into the USSR. The other goal was to articulate, along with “global”, “local” context of the show: to display identity and peculiarity of a particular region. The paper argues that the exhibition became a tool for promoting modernisation (both agricultural and social) for the whole territory of the USSR, including its geographically distant parts.

1. Introduction

This paper continues the author’s interdisciplinary research project in which scientific issues are combined with art history for the purpose of reconstructing the All-Russian Agricultural and Handicraft Industrial Exhibition (further – VSKhV) as the crucial event of the Soviet science and technology development in the 1920s. It should be noted, that the abbreviation VSKhV was later used for a more famous exhibition of 1939-1941. VSKhV of 1923 was inspired by the Bolshevik leaders’ desire to demonstrate to the public, first and foremost to the peasantry, the “revolutionary renovation” of the country, to propagate and implement the modernisation in agriculture and village life. Besides, vast and diverse material on the geography and ethnology of the national regions of the country was meant to be displayed. The paper articulates human diversity as an independent scientific and humanitarian value at VSKhV and argues that this diversity was initial point for conversion into the united “Soviet nation”. In particular, the paper examines how the national identity of the region was displayed by means of art at VSKhV. The other focus is on the analysis of VSKhV in terms of interaction of “global” and “local” in its expositions.

2. Materials and methods

This paper is based on the archival documents of the Russian State Archive of the Economy, the A.V. Shchusev State Museum of Architecture, and the Archive of the Garage Museum of Modern Art. The files of these collections, and also published materials of VSKhV, constitute the source of the article’s plot. As the critical approach towards the study of the geographical and ethnological contexts of VSKhV
lays in the interdisciplinary realm, a number of methods of historical and socio-cultural research were used in this study, including the problem-historical approach, methods of historiography, art history, cultural anthropology, the sociological “the global and the local”, “the centre-periphery” approaches, etc.

3. Soviet State on display: global patterns

The Bolshevik government headed by V.I. Lenin, wanted to mark the fifth anniversary of the October Revolution by demonstrating at VSKhV “the achievements and plans of Soviet Russia in the agriculture” [1]. However, the timing of the exhibition was changed due to the famine that hit the Volga region, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan [2]. Besides, during the preliminary stage of the exhibition organisation, in December 1922 the USSR was formed, so the geography and themes of the expositions had to be significantly expanded.

VSKhV officially started its work on the 19th of August 1923 to become the first international presentation of the new Socialist state as a union of Soviet national republics, autonomous republics and regions. The exhibition territory of 100 hectares occupied both sides of the Crimean Valley zone and the Neskuchny Garden. Innovative-minded artists were invited “to express the revolutionary renewal of the country” through the design and decoration of the pavilions; they demonstrated all the contemporary styles of the early 1920s – from neoclassicism and modernism to rationalism and constructivism [3, 4].

According to the organisers’ plan, the visitors were supposed to pass through the gates of the exhibition and immediately find themselves at the vast introductory exposition of the Scientific and Educational Department in the so-called Main House, containing a global overview of the history, ethnology, geography, and natural resources of the USSR [1, p. 3]. The section titled “Population” introduced various historical, ethnographic and anthropological exhibits, among them a map of the ancient settlement of the Russian Plain, an ethnic map of the USSR, and others. The characteristics of the population of the main climatic zones were displayed using models, slides, photographic and film materials. The artists were asked to help the visitors’ imagination and to prepare an artistic concept of the ethnological appearance of an area; as a result, a title painting for each zone appeared [2, op. 1, d. 129b, p. 29].

The central section titled “Nature of Russia” offered the presentation of “the geography and the environment in which agriculture develops”, and “the natural resources and the forces which it relies on” [5, p. 10]. Dozens of maps, charts, graphs were exhibited, most of which the experts in charge of VSKhV specially prepared for the exhibition. For example, “Soils” subsection presented the soil profile along the meridian through European Russia, as well as renovated soil map of 100 versts (appr. 66 miles). In the subsection “Geology” on display was a new geological map with a scale of 60 versts (appr. 40 miles), maps of groundwater and artesian waters, minerals of European Russia which had agricultural importance. In the “Climate” and “Sea” subsections, visitors could observe maps of climatic zones and regions, diagrams and graphs reflecting the distribution of various elements in the marine area, etc. To explain the graphic exhibits, short essays were prepared [2, op. 1, d. 3, p. 4]. The visual demonstration was supposed to be supplemented with qualified verbal explanations and briefs. A significant number of guides and the so-called “explainers” recruited from young agronomists and students of agricultural colleges worked at VSKhV.

4. National republics’ expositions: geography and local identities

During the setting up of the exhibition, the USSR emerged, which tremendously increased the scope of the project and, accordingly, the volume of construction work. The problem of “global” and “local”, of the “centre” and “periphery” which was always articulated in the Russian society and significantly influenced it’s economic and agricultural development [6], became the most discussed at the VSKhV organizers’ meetings [7]. The crucial question was how to show the integrity of VSKhV as an exhibition of the whole country, on the one hand, and the unique identity of its diverse regions, on the other. According to the national policy of the USSR, all republics were meant to be of equal importance as the constituents of the “unbreakable union”. Therefore, in addition to thematic pavilions of VSKhV, the
organisers had to arrange republican and regional buildings of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus’, Georgia, Kirgizia (Kirrepublic, as it was called at that time), Turkestan, Crimea, Ukraine, the Far East Region, Jewish Commune, the Abkhasia AR, etc. Most of them were located on the central axis of the exhibition parterre and formed a united group that symbolised the geographic vastness and ethnic diversity of the Soviet Union. The architects, who constructed the republican and regional pavilions, were expected to experiment with national styles and motifs in their design. Many outstanding artists like Ilya Golosov, Fyodor Shekhtel, Ivan Fomin, Moisey Ginzburg participated in the VSKhV “republican project”.

As the director of VSKhV A.G. Bragin suggested, each region must find its own “key element” to demonstrate, such as regional cultural traditions, natural resources, technologies of agriculture, etc. [7, p. 5]. For example, the Far East pavilion (arch. I.A. Golosov) was designed in the eclectic romantic style with a combination of Chinese and local ethnic motives characteristic for the region’s history and culture; the building’s main entrance, for instance, constituted a stylised yurt. Expositions of the pavilion included numerous exhibits that presented local crafts and nature: the domestic life material objects of the Far Eastern small nations such as Chukchi, Eskimos, Evenks, Nanai, and others; the survey of natural resources and biodiversity of the region, including fishing and forestry [2, op. 20, d. 2, p. 19–24].

The Ukrainian exhibition committee initiated a separate competition to select the design for the national pavilion, that was won by a Ukrainian architect Viktor Trotsento. Originally his project included a group of buildings which represented a farmstead with a model residential house and other farm buildings. However, after the corrections made by the chief architect of VSKhV, Aleksey Shchusev, the pavilion took the form of much simpler peasant house. Among various exhibits, the production of beet-sugar industry, including the results of the innovative researches of the experimental stations, were on display in the pavilion [8].

The Pavilion of Turkestan (one of the last projects of arch. F.O. Shechtel) presented original cultivation technologies of rice, cotton, melon, etc. Another special exposition was irrigation projects created to meliorate agricultural arable land in the region. The idea was to demonstrate that the design of giant hydraulic structures and settlements could be rooted in the local culture. For example, exposition “The Golodnaya Steppe”, included dams, administrative, public, residential buildings designed according to the traditional architecture of Central Asia [9, p. 21].

Republic of Georgia demonstrated, among other things, the subtropical agriculture and horticulture, including viticulture and tea-growing. A special section displayed various visual objects like models, maps, charts and photographic materials connected with the geography and wild nature of the Caucasus [9, p. 22–23].

The Crimean pavilion (arch. M.Ya. Ginzburg) was designed in the style of the Bakhchisarai palace; the key element was the interior country yard with the collection of local flora. The exhibition halls that were grouped around the yard presented, inter alia, rich historical and archaeological survey of the region [9, p. 24].

5. The peasantry at VSKhV: ethnology and regional agriculture

Each peasant who came to the exhibition obligatorily visited the “Villages” section with “The Old Village” and “The Village of the Future” subsections. The expositions were to encourage the peasants to compare their current backward life to life in the modernised and Sovietised “village of the future”. The organisers of VSKhV put the questions to the scientific experts: how to show the contrasts between current and future everyday life and technologies in a way that once the peasants have witnessed these contrasts, they would consciously choose the future? First of all, how to display the contemporary village, “to showcase ... the peasantry economy, so diverse within the vast Russian territory, its climatic, soil and economic differences?” [10, p. 7].

The experts decided to select dozens of “typical” regional farms, as well as the “improved farms” for the northern, middle, and southern climatic regions [10, p. 11–12]. For the particular agricultural area, they proposed “to exhibit a hut with household items, a yard with all the equipment, horses, cattle and other animals” [2, op. 1, d. 70, p. 1.]. The huts selected for display – from Ukraine, Belorussia, Central and North Russia, Volga region and the Urals, were carefully measured and reproduced according to the
blueprints at the exhibition. The owners brought all their belongings, pets and farm animals with them. Ostyak yurts from the Tobolsk and Murmansk provinces, dwellings of Uzbeks, Bashkirs and Kyrgyz were also added to the list [2, op. 1. d. 159, p. 159–160; d. 129b, p. 47–48]. These “peasant-residents” with all members of their families would stay in their huts for the entire period of the exhibition [2, op. 1. d. 13, p. 8]. They were supposed to continue to look after the cattle, feed poultry, serve hives in the apiary, weave canvases and mats, knit baskets, cut spoons, and manage other everyday practices. The “Old Village” can be considered a unique ethnographic undertaking in the history of the exhibitions. In essence, the traditional way of life was shown unconventionally by objectivated involving the peasants as “living exhibits”. The “performance” of the “Old Village” was a success: the public was examining the households with interest and gladly bought what was being made right before their eyes. “A parade of the nations of the USSR” became another example of “living ethnographic performance” [2, op. 1. d. 129b, p. 80–82].

“The Village of the Future” was represented by the expositions demonstrating modern electrified dwellings, public buildings, as well as agricultural technology, innovative materials and land cultivation techniques. “New peasant” was positioned as master of the machinery, electricity and the innovative methods of melioration, selection, agrochemistry, etc. “The Future” was also illustrated by the avant-garde architecture of the village pavilions and design of agitation posters, performed by A.A. Ekster, V.A. and G.A. Stenberg, K.S. Melnikov, and others [4, 8]. This “global” pattern’s appeal seemed to contradict the local diversity of the peasantry of the beginning of the 1920s [11]. Human diversity as an independent scientific and humanitarian value was an initial point for conversion into the “new man” of the united Soviet nation, as the ideologists of the early 1920s believed [12].

6. Conclusion
The All-Russian Agricultural and Handicraft Industrial Exhibition became a tool for promoting agricultural and social modernisation for the whole territory of the USSR. More than 1.5 million people visited VSKhV; it served a model for 6 thousand local exhibitions all around the country with the total number of visitors approaching 6 million. In this sense, VSKhV had fulfilled the global task to demonstrate the advantages of the unification of the “Sovietised” national republics into the USSR. As to the other goal: to articulate “local” context of the regions that comprised the USSR, VSKhV organisers managed to display identity and peculiarity of the particular region employing skilful artistic design of the national pavilions and expositions. Public interest to VSKhV was fueled by a combination of innovative technologies and peculiarities of local peasant life and practices.

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