A Style Without a Destination: Fyodor Schechtel’s Art Nouveau Interiors in Photography

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or an audience living a century later, Fyodor Schechtel will always be a controversial figure. His Art Nouveau interiors are, by and large, idiosyncratic examples of the temporary integration of European ideas with the traditional Russian school of arts and crafts, merging at once with new technology, social status and the new sense of aesthetics. He is a person capable of crossing geographic, artistic and social boundaries of his time.

The study of Schechtel’s interiors through photography, and his short-lived relationship with the Moscow-based photographer Ivan Aleksandrov, can contribute to an integrated history of new photographic media and architectural novelty. This episodic encounter may also facilitate a better understanding of photographic practices at the zenith of Russian Art Nouveau.

Photography, introduced to Russia in 1842, was nothing short of a sensation. Its rapid proliferation challenged the other arts, including crafts, architecture and literature, as well as the very integrity of the self. If art and architecture critics at first greeted the camera with scepticism, Russian architects and artists themselves welcomed it with a warm embrace. As many works of architectural photography demonstrate, the varied scope of the genre including architectural exteriors and interiors, “indoor portraiture”, or extraordinary constructive details, reshaped not only architecture’s photographic practices but also the sphere of photography itself.

For many Moscow Art Nouveau architects, a single photograph or a photograph as illustration of an architectural object was never an endpoint; their designers’ practices continually transformed and animated the frozen moment. But just as they used drawings to shape the reception of their travels, their experiences and themselves, Russian photographic studios used images to shape the reception of the new stil’ modern. From diaries to photographic reproductions, the design world of many architectural personalities was photographically interlinked and captured moments within their personal life stories — framed and reframed within the writing of the Art Nouveau history of Moscow.

Early twentieth-century architecture is a great wizard of photographic tricks. It is perhaps the only artistic discipline where photographer and designer marched in parallel: the great architects designed and built while photographers observed and recorded their work. By contrast, Art Nouveau, a period of fragile, decadent, frivolous and often personally tailored architecture, offers us a rich cache of architectural details and stories in return. It was a golden age of details, which served as a text for an imaginative photographic eye to read and interpret. The notion that an architect is the best photographer of his own work held a grain of truth during the Belle Époque. What were the primary features valued by the Art Nouveau photographers? The functionality and comfort of all the interiors, technological innovations that helped to improve construction and constructive materials, and the idea of multiculturalism and the aesthetic application of all human values, emotions and needs.

Before embarking on their impressive careers, it is important to note that a great majority of the Russian Art Nouveau architects had already acquired some knowledge of European Art Nouveau. They had earned impressive reputations as designers at the World Exhibitions, and carried out significant commissions in Russia, although European projects consistently eluded them.

With the arrival of Art Nouveau, realism went out of fashion, as architects such as William Walcot, Ivan Zholtovsky, Ilya Bondarenko and Ivan Fomin

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1 Russian chemist Sergei L. Levitzky (1819–1898) experimented with daguerreotype, and studied with the academic Julius Y. Fritsch during the inspection of the Caucasus in 1842, where he worked on improving that early technique. The year 1842 is held to be the official birthday of photography in Russia. Subsequently, Levitzky left his job at the Home Ministry in St Petersburg and went to Paris to devote himself to photography.
shifted towards fabulism (storytelling) or other forms inspired by visual sources, personal convictions and artistic theories. The group "World of Art" (Mir Iskusstva) had just made an appeal for a politically and artistically radical forms of aesthetics; Dmitri Filosofov, a critic aligned with the group, called Moscow architecture thin and empty, exhausted by its social seriousness. Sergei Diaghilev (1872–1929) wrote in the first volume of the almanac "World of Art": "Beauty in art is temperament expressed in images, and therefore is it of no concern to us where those images are taken from, as a work of art is not important in itself except as an expression of the personality of its creator." Under Diaghilev’s baton, the dreams of the Age of Decadence into which Art Nouveau happily falls, transforming the age of realism and naturalism, began to emerge in accordance with the latest modernist aesthetics.

The new Russian aesthetes aspired to a sophisticated, pleasing architecture, along the lines of the tremendously popular British Arts and Crafts movement, which introduced unique, contrasting, abstractly sculptural elements in furniture and light fittings, along with floral and geometrical ornaments and graphic motifs.

Although the Miriskussniki had seen Art Nouveau as a visionary movement, popular attitudes began to change dramatically around 1900, at a time of worldwide social and cultural ferment that made Moscow stil’ modern speak to its European counterparts. The young generation of Russian architects, alert to imaginative and expressive qualities long dismissed as pathologically bizarre, especially in architecture, was beginning to shine.

Just as one of these Art Nouveau architects, Fyodor Schechtel, designed a group of wooden pavilions alluding to medieval Russian architecture for the

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4 An explication of the notion of “artistically radical and free” was attempted by the founders of the movement Aleksandr Benois, Dmitri Filosofov and Sergei Diaghilev; a new outspoken generation of young Russian artists and theoreticians in St Petersburg. Their open critique of the official Russian Art Academy and socially inclined cartel of Peredvzohniki were widely discussed in the "World of Art" almanac.

5 Diaghilev, S., Almanakh Mir Iskusstva, Moscow: RIK Rusanova, (1), 1898, p. 3.

International Exposition of 1901 in Glasgow, his Scottish contemporary, Charles Rennie Mackintosh, was preparing to exhibit samples of his furniture at the exhibition of Art Nouveau Architecture, Arts and Crafts in Moscow, which opened on 22 December 1902. Like his Austrian counterparts Joseph Maria Olbrich and Koloman Moser, also invited to the show, Mackintosh was given a separate space for his White Drawing Room while his graphics were exhibited in a room nearby. Both exhibitions were heavily photographed and publicized. Making sense of these mercurial works is not easy, and situating them in such a life as Schechtel’s is even more challenging.

Fyodor Osipovich (Franz-Albert) Schechtel (1859–1926), the second son of a prosperous ethnic-German family, was born in St. Petersburg and briefly raised in Saratov. While Germans predated other Europeans on Russian territories by several centuries, St. Petersburg’s German population reached its height during the reign of Peter the Great under those famous patrons of the St. Peterkirche. The German Petersburgers, to which Schechtel’s family belonged, formed an important merchant class that could worship freely and seek commissions from the courts and wealthy patrons of the arts. Schechtel attended the esteemed Moscow School of Architecture, Painting and Sculpture, a “natural choice” for him.

In Schechtel’s interiors for wealthy Moscow patrons, both modernists and materialists with a strain of deep conservatism in their commissions, the new iconography comes to light as well as Schechtel’s structural genius. Physical lightness and structural imagination are Schechtel’s holy grails. He soars in fantasy, and he lives for light. His interiors for Aleksandra Derozhinskaya, of which more later, are luxurious orchestrations of feverish decoration mingling velvety blues, dusky purples, shimmering greens, rich wood and impeccably cut marble and incrusted details of wrought iron. In his architectural drawings, some of the same colours, presented as isolated elements, become refreshingly austere, something that monochrome photographic prints could not show. If his interiors are uneasy, it is because the combination of his palette and his forms is never easy. He flirts with chromatic chaos and years for spatial catharsis. We never find his gaudy fantasies over-ambitious, because he is an artist who knows how to fill our eyes.

What is therefore disappointing about the photographs of Schechtel’s interiors is that his coloristic genius is so hard to find there. The albumin prints muffle and sometimes neutralize his work. Schechtel’s reputation as the leader of the Art Nouveau moment in Russia can be compromised by photographic reproductions in which there is little ambient light, so that most of the objects disappear into the darkness of the print. When he irked the authorities with the House for Zinaida Morozova (1893–1898) on Spiridonovka street, then the mansion for Stepan P. Ryabushinsky on Malaya Nikitskaya (1900–1902) and the interiors of the Vikula Morozov House on Podsosensky Street (1896–1900), all featuring those deliberately provocative interior details — gigantic central staircase, uncommonly large windows and uninterrupted foyers in the salons, Schechtel approached directly the Moscow photographer Ivan Aleksandrov (life dates unknown) to propose recording his work in albumin. The aesthetic relevance of Aleksandrov’s photographs and their transformation of Schechtel’s interiors highlight the multiple artistry of Schechtel’s architecture. By implication there was a follow-up: armed with Schechtel’s portfolio Aleksandrov took part in the Fifth Exhibition of the Russian Imperial Technical Society in St. Petersburg (1898), a springboard for the future photographers of Russia. He was nominated for a bronze medal and made his name in the Imperial court. Not long afterward
Fyodor Schechtel, S. Riabushinsky House, Moscow, 1900–03, free internet access, photograph unknown.
Aleksandrov was invited to join the Russian Committee of Icons Preservation as a photographer, and moved to the capital. He never saw Schechtel again.

In the first instance Schechtel found Aleksandrov's photographs brilliant and audacious, yet highly respectful of his architectural verity. He again approached him personally just after finishing the interiors of Zinaida Morozova's house, motivated by the photographer's sensitivity to the house's spatial rhythm and movement. Does Schechtel's choice of Aleksandrov suggest that his photography achieved a more rigorous formulation of architectural concepts, providing a clear, perceptive, intuitive reading of the architect's ideas? The answer escapes us because we lack sufficient evidence of Schechtel's encounters with photographers. However, the alleged compatibility between the physical and representational properties of his work is clearly found in Aleksandrov's work.  

Better than any other photographer of architecture of his time, Aleksandrov grasped the significance of the emergence of a new style (Art Nouveau), a new genre (architectural photography), and a new cause not commonly associated with modernity: aesthetic reason, not tradition or the word of the official censor, is the only trustworthy tool for investigating the inner world of architecture, and the photographic image is the best foundation for any subtle, rapid changes within it. Aleksandrov's camera truly set out to question everything.

Although Aleksandrov is alert to Schechtel's penchant for constantly increasing the speed of his own train of thought, his photographic emphasis on practical logic puts forward the role of aesthetics in everything Schechtel touched, not just in his architectural designs but in writing, too. As a consequence, Schechtel was also fascinated by dreaming and the capacity of the arts to throw people into a kind of dream state. Dreaming features in many of Schechtel's writings and ideas, but it lies at the heart of the designs for the Derozhinskaya and Ryabushinsky commissions. Aleksandrov seems surprised by Schechtel's quest for a moral-emotional foundation for the fine arts, but this is only surprising if one fails to recognize that aesthetics was crucial to the transfiguration of World of Art's views underway in his time. The true, the good and the beautiful were necessarily connected, but now with materialist reasoning. Aleksandrov's photography affirms this in his irreverent way.

There have been numerous studies of Schechtel's many sources of influence, especially the authoritative Viennese architect and theorist Otto Wagner, whose combination of eclectic historicizing motifs and modern industrial materials is everywhere evident in Schechtel's oeuvre. But there is a psychological complexity to the Moscow master that sets him above and apart, not only from other European practitioners of the time but also from his most talented contemporaries in Moscow.

Schechtel, who greatly admired the Wagnerschule and Otto Wagner's architectural portfolio, certainly had a quietist side, reflected in the sensitivity with which he designed darkened interiors, shadowy glades, and fantastical water monsters in the shimmering light of Moscow. He was a man of many parts. Even in his own day the public did not always find it easy to embrace his ideas. An art critic once observed that Schechtel's was the strangest fate of any architect of his time, for he was both misunderstood and celebrated.

Vienna motifs became prominent in Muscovite architecture of the late nineteenth century. The hotel Metropole (1899–1905, by V. (William) F. Walcott and Lev N. Kekushev) in the heart of Moscow, with the Kremlin on its left and the Bolshoi Theatre on its right, may be the best example. Indeed, it was the perfect product of the first multicultural centre of the old Russian capital.
Fyodor Schechtel, Drawings for the Dining room of the Riabushinsky House (commissioned by Stepan Riabushinsky), Malaya Nikitskaya Street, Moscow, 1900–03, watercolour on cardboard (State Architecture Museum under the name of Aleksei Shchusev, Moscow), free internet access.
Conceived by Savva Mamontov, who praised Gesamtkunstwerk and saw the hotel as a perfect Russian incarnation of the "total work of art", the Metropole was made to exceed the size of the Wiener Staatsoper. It featured myriad, albeit modified, Wagner motifs such as bel-étage, majolica plates, glass cupola and lampshades on the roof. Architectural wagneriana was carefully copied from Wagner’s classical examples of Vienna’s Ring (1895–99), including the Majolica-and-Ankerhaus (1895) and transferred onto Moscow’s Garden Ring. 20

As an architect, Schechtel was a supreme storyteller. Trained as a theatre designer, he imagined buildings as stages for performance [FIG. 3]. When designing interiors, Schechtel wanted the story he was telling to retain a life of its own — not a late-nineteenth-century life but one that exploited the trappings of his own time and place. In his unpublished book Tales of the Three Sisters of Painting, Architecture and Sculpture (1918), he spoke of "architectural rights", of the stroke of improvisation, musical rhythms and powerful spiralling movement. 21 All of these can easily be found in the Stepan Ryabushinsky House, the most classical example of the Moscow stil’ modern [FIG. 4]. He had carefully studied the principal design ideas in the Viennese rooms of Otto Wagner, Josef Olbrich and Josef Hoffman, and reinterpreted them in many of his other Moscow designs, including the reconstruction of the Moscow Art Theatre with the active collaboration of Ivan Fomin (1902). Although the translation of Vienna’s Burgtheater into this project had been made infinitely easier by Schechtel’s intuitive understanding of historicizing motifs and modern industrial materials, there is a world of difference between the sharply rendered parts that emerged from the process of integrating Secessionist ideas and Gustav Klimt’s legacy, and the more spontaneous results Schechtel was able to coax from artisans on site. Anna Golubkina’s modernist bas-relief that topped one of the stage designs offers a fine example [FIG. 5].

Few mainstream architects of Moscow’s Art Nouveau dared emulate Klimt directly. But artists in other mediums responded to Klimt’s examples more...
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boldly. Although it remains unclear how much the Moscow-based architects knew about Klimt, there is no question that Schechtel’s other Moscow landmark, the Derozhinskaya House and its interiors, bear a striking resemblance to Klimt’s art.

It seems that Schechtel’s multifaceted personality was imbued with a charisma that captivated many of his fellow men, and of course patrons, too. In many ways Schechtel’s life was one of astounding contradictions — between his great success as an Art Nouveau architect, exploring a completely new style of practice, as a writer and a semi-professional photographer, and his subsequent loss of esteem in his own country.

Astonishingly, given his current status, Schechtel languished in critical limbo for several decades after his death. The architectural historians of Russia focused on Schechtel’s decorative impulse but largely ignored his considerable structural achievements. For all his stunning ingenuity, Schechtel did not emerge from a cultural vacuum, and he was but one — albeit the most extravagantly gifted — among an extraordinary generation of local architects who espoused the innovative credo of the New Style, the distinctive Moscow variant of Art Nouveau, which drew heavily on Romantic revivalism, Russian folklore and the Neo-Russian style which emerged in the late nineteenth century. This brilliant cohort included the above-mentioned Walcot as well as Fomin, the modernist genius and later widely celebrated Constructivist who designed the city’s notable mansion for Wilhelmina Reck in Skaterny Lane, and Ivan Mazyrin (architect of the neo-Moorish house for Arseniy Morozov, 1895–99, on Vozhdvizhenka).

The architect himself lived for many years in one of the Art Nouveau villas he built in the old quarter of Moscow (Ermolaevsky Lane), until he was moved by order of the new Soviet Government into “makeshift quarters”, the communal apartment, since the Bolsheviks insisted on “high density co-habitation” (uplotnenie). Increasingly disillusioned, this great talent was looked down upon in old age as an outdated master.

It is hard to view his Art Nouveau interiors as a final statement. We should emphasize that in a time of trouble this complex spirit stood up for life in all its variety — its beauty and its loose ends, precisely what Art Nouveau as a school stood for. In this regard, Russian Art Nouveau is a style without a destination. It was a proud if temporary subscriber to the European school.

In retrospect, the fleeting meetings between an architect and a photographer failed to affect Soviet aesthetic policies toward architectural photography, or to elucidate the significance of photographing buildings. But these meetings demonstrate the perils of skewing that research to reach desirable outcomes. ▲

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