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## Abandoned Villas of Russian Nobles in Rural Landscape

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### ABSTRACT

The nobiliary villas of the Russian Empire have been recently considered in the strict sense as an essential part of the Age of Enlightenment. Noble estates with their main houses or palaces, parks, gardens, greenhouses and theaters of serfs, libraries and museums make up a large part of that culture. The architecture of country villas inseparably linked with their rural landscape as unique works of art. Together they make up what is called cultural heritage of Russia, with an equally brilliant history and the same tragic fate.

### *Introduction. Noble country estates in Russia: the history of blossoming and decline*

The phenomenon of Russian manor lies in the fact that it has become a unique cultivation center of Russian national culture. The majority of Russian writers, scientists, politicians, composers, and travelers grew totally in the estates. In the countryside the villa was the center of an agricultural area with villages, plowed fields, pastures, meadows, forests, rivers and lakes. A striking example of such an independent economic unit with a complete architectural ensemble is the estate Otrada in the village Semenovskoe, one of the largest non-royal residences in Russia and the largest in the Moscow region. The first owner of the villa was Vladimir Orlov, who in 1766 was appointed director of the Academy of Sciences (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Unknown artist. View of the estate Otrada, the middle of the XIX century. Source: Russian State Historical Museum. Inv. 61807/K-64



Fig. 2. V. Polenov. Painting «Grandmother's Garden», 1878. Source: Retrieved 30 August, 2016, from [http://www.tretyakovgallery.ru/ru/collection/\\_show/image/\\_id/2233](http://www.tretyakovgallery.ru/ru/collection/_show/image/_id/2233)

In 1714, Emperor Peter I issued a decree on the «real estate» which was based on the property of nobiliary lands, all of them were transferred by inheritance; the land could not be lost at cards or divided into smaller parcels. Through this law the Emperor tried to protect the Russian nobility from poverty. In 1762, a decree of Peter III of the «granting of liberty and freedom for the whole of the Russian nobility» finally liberated nobles from compulsory service, extending their possessors rights.

There was a general strengthening of “privileged class” and at the same time its advanced part, – honored nobles and favorites, won a lot. Their great wealth was created by “awards” of the inhabited estates. The value of noble estates was determined only by the number of serfs. The notable youth of that time has been already widely and comprehensively brought up abroad, studying philosophical sciences and taking a great interest in art. Under Catherine II the mastering of European culture became stronger. Aesthetic culture of the Russian nobility in the late 18th century was particularly high. Annually transports of precious artistic items were conveyed

from abroad by sea and drove by endless roads in different directions landlord Russia at great risk of damage and loss. Houses and manors presented the whole treasury of all branches of art. Priceless art collections, libraries, scientific collections were gathered there. Country villas of imperial favorites stood out notably, they didn't only not inferior to what was done at that time in Western Europe, but sometimes even superior to them in its grandiosity.

Balls, festivals, masquerades, performances, gala dinners with music lasted whole days and ended with illuminations and grand fireworks. The fashion, the luxury and the habit of imitating the imperial court absorbed enormous amounts of money. These funds constantly replenished from the proceeds of the estates.

The liberation of the serfs in 1861 gave rise to the rapid death of the former culture, the ideal of which was – “life for life” and “service to science and art”. The whole aristocratic culture that was created and developed thanks to the gratuitous labor, in the late 18th and early 19th centuries reached its dizzying peak, but collapsed with the abolition of serfdom. There wasn't enough money to support it by wage labor; the splendor quickly created just as quickly disappeared. (Gornostaev, 1914)

Painter V. Polenov in 1878, 17 years after the abolition of serfdom, created the painting «Grandmother's Garden» (Fig.2). Here the grandmother and the granddaughter are the main characters – as the symbols of the outgoing and the new era. The house is a background of the scene; it is a typical noble house of that period, with a plaster and decorative details already flown away. The path leading to the house looks also abandoned. The garden expanded on the both sides of the lane supplements the feeling of neglect. This landscape is not just scenery, but the main participant of a picture and displays changes in society. The monuments value of vanished life was realized at the time only by persons involved in the arts.

### *Basic principles of studying Russian villas*

In the early 20-years of the 20th century in public the broad understanding of the artistic beauty of Russian manor finally appeared. December 22, 1922 in Moscow, a group of researchers headed by V. Zgura (1903 – September 17, 1927) organized the first SSRM (Society for the Study of Russian Manor). In principle activities, the Society advanced the history and problems of Russian architecture of the XVIII and the first half of the XIX century of the monuments of country residences.

SSRM implemented and deployed a systematic and comprehensive study of “Noble Nest” and made a significant contribution to the study of Russian culture of XVIII-XIX centuries. Starting from 1923, the members of SSRM produced and published studies and measurements of the most important monuments of manor architecture (Ostafyevo, Olgovo and others). Their works were published in the journals «Sredi kollektionerov», «Podmoskovnye muzei», «Sbornik Obshchestva izucheniya russkoy usadby». The first printed edition (Zgura, 1923) described the methodology of the research work of the Society. The research was divided into the following sections:

I. Architecture. II. Gardens and parks. III. Theoretical questions. IV. Theater. V. History and life. VI. Painting and sculpture. VII. Applied art.

The work of the first section represented the most valuable material of the history of Russian architecture. Here it is possible to discover a completely new and unexpected types of structures; fascinating data about transformations of manor architecture, reflections and distortions of style, as well as its evolution. The Society was also interested in arts of serfs and in the art of architectural rural landscape, etc. In 1923 for convenience and more successful organization of the SSRM a division of the whole territory of the Soviet Republic by the manor districts with their centers was adopted, where there were authorized members of the Society in charge of the entire district. There were seven districts:

I. Moscow region (province of Moscow. Center – Moscow).

II. Central region (provinces of: Tver, Smolensk, Kaluga, Tula, Ryazan, Orel, Kursk, Tambov, Voronezh, Penza, Vladimir, Yaroslavl, and Kostroma. Center – Moscow).

III. Volga region (provinces of: Nizhny Novgorod, Kazan, Simbirsk, Samara, and Saratov. Center – Kazan).

IV. North region (provinces of: Petrograd, Novgorod, Pskov, Vologda, Vyatka, Perm, and Arkhangelsk. Center – Petersburg.).

V. South region (provinces of: Kiev, Poltava, Kharkov, Ekaterinoslav, and Kherson. Center – Kiev).

VI. West outlying region (province of: Mogilev, Minsk, Zhytomyr, and Kamenetz-Podolsk. Center – Minsk).

VII. Crimean region (peninsula. Center- Crimea).

All scientific activities of SSRM were divided into two parts: research and elaboration. At the initial phase of the work of the Society, the material on Russian manors was very limited. The main focus had to be given to inspection and fixing; this work was assigned to the summer season, which was entirely occupied by the survey, describing and photographing the major



Fig. 3. N. Podklyuchnikov. Manor Ostankino of Sheremetev family, 1836. Source: Shchusev Museum of Architecture. Retrieved 30 August, 2016, from [http://archi.ru/russia/image\\_large.html?id=186775](http://archi.ru/russia/image_large.html?id=186775)

monuments. Travels, explorations and expeditions were carried out in this connection. The Society paid the most serious attention for photography and the accumulation of photography and drawing archives, which, together with the card catalog it became the most important scientific capital. All efforts were applied to the search for pictures of no more existing monuments. The architectural structures of interest were measured and drawn, that was the most valuable contribution to science. At the end of 1930 the activity of SSRM was ceased due to changes in the social-political situation in the country and was resumed only in 1992. Now it is an unregistered Russian historical and educational association of local historians, both amateur and professional art critics involved in the study, in the description and the promotion of the culture of the ancient Russian manor. Members of the Society make their posts with many photos and archival extracts in internet and in online social networks.

### *Noble estates situated in the rural landscape of Moscow region*

In 2005, the Heritage Institute in collaboration with the non-profit partnership «Russian manor» developed a map of noble villas in Moscow region based on materials of A.Chizhkov. The map shows cities, former county towns, rural settlements, roads and estates with an indication of residences and utility buildings, manor temples, parks and names of the same villas. According to the catalog (Chizhkov, 2002), there are 644 fully or partially preserved villas only in the Moscow region. Manors are presented by districts in alphabetical order. An information block belonging to each country estate contains a summary of the history of the monument, the owners, and the number of structures and features of the garden and park area, the state of today's preservation. The type of Russian noble villa was finally formed by the end of the XVIII century. The main house flanked by outbuildings, gardens and utility courts became its center. There was a gradual

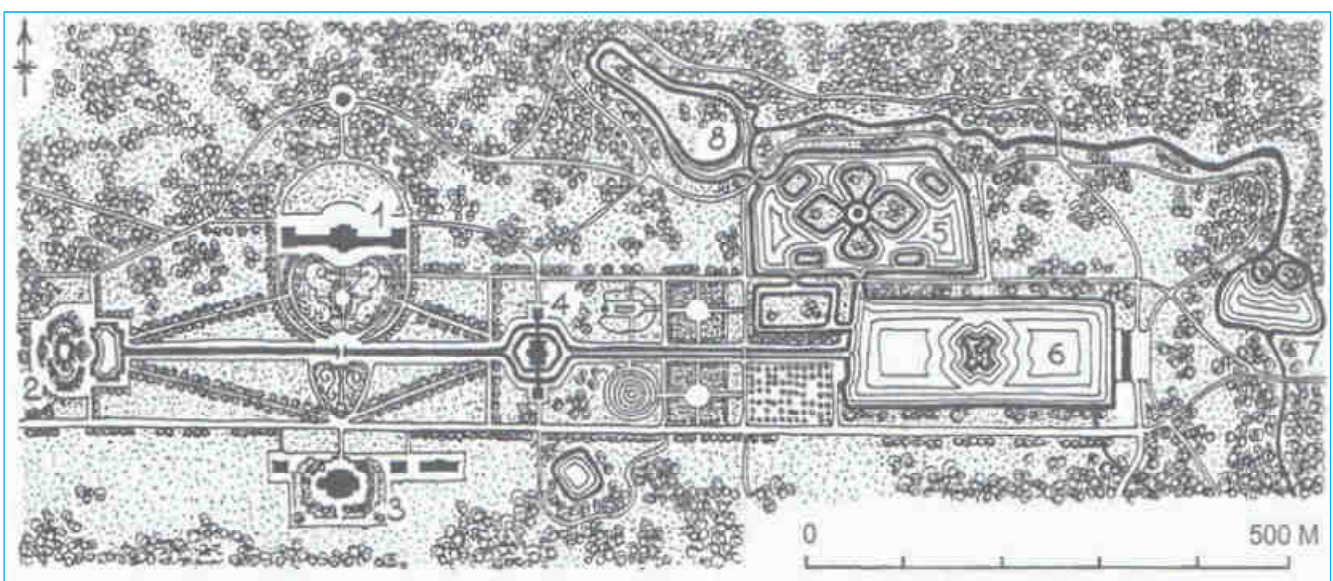


Fig. 4. Almazovo. The end of the XVIII – the beginning of XIX centuries. 1-Manor Houses; 2 – Mount Zion; 3 – The Church and the clergy house; 4 – The House on the Island; 5-Swan Pond; 6 – The Big Pond; 7 – Triangular Pond; 8 – The Menagerie. Source: Ozhegov, 2003, p.153

accumulation of experience in the construction of stone residential buildings, displacing traditional wood. Artistic principles of baroque and classicism are mutually enriched and complemented each other. There were new elements of the garden in the form of regular, clear geometric shapes of flower beds, ponds and fountains. Manor gardens started with regular “French” parterre (cour d’honneur), adjacent to the house and passed into the “English” landscape park. The sizes and compositions of estates varied endlessly. In the simplest of them “French” part could be referred as flowerbed, and “English” park limited to the clearing glade in front of the house opening onto a view of it. Large estates, owned by a wealthy aristocracy, in its scope and luxury palaces approached of neighborhoods of St. Petersburg. These include estate Otrada of Count Orlov (Fig. 1), the manor Ostankino of Counts Sheremetev (Fig. 3) now is in the limits of Moscow city.

The main elements of such estate is the manor house and the church, standing, usually on a high place. Alley, ponds or river with the indispensable pavilion over it every time were included in the composition with a new unexpected idea. Much attention is paid to the architectural ensemble, which is subject to layout of the garden. A group of trees geometrically clipped serves as a harmonious continuation of the architectural masses. Tracks performed by ruler and compass, they form a variety of geometric shapes, sites and confusing “labyrinths”. They are bordered by clipping trees



Fig. 5. Villa of merchant Aigin before and after restoration. Source: Retrieved 30 August, 2016, from <http://ru-travel.livejournal.com/32085725.html> and from <http://deadokey.livejournal.com/15619.html>

in distant “perspective”, and sometimes consist of long, shady hidden track, or “arched corridors”. The geometric form with elaborately lined beaches also was attached to the ponds and canals. Sometimes this garden was divided in the form of ledges or terraces with stone stairs and slopes, with a barrier of balustrades decorated with rows of antique statues, busts and vases. There wasn’t a single tree in these fine gardens being remained in its natural form; all elements are subordinated to the artistic idea, remodeling and adapting nature to the refined aesthetic and decorative forms. Another interesting system of Landscape Park is located in the estate Almazovo of nobles Demidov in Moscow region (Fig. 4). At the end of XVIII – early XIX centuries a group of architects and gardeners, headed by V. Tkachev created there a unique composition of ponds and canals. Mount Sion was sprinkled on of the ground, obtained after the digging of ponds. Such mountains, named also Parnassus, were ordinary fashion tribute to the romanticism of that time.

### *Problems of conservation and prospects for reuse of country noble villas. Conclusion*

Now in Russia, there are about 7000 villas of nobles, which are monuments of architecture and history, only one third of them is not in ruins. Italian architects Rastrelli, Giraldi, Rinaldi, Quarenghi, Camporesi left their big names here. The desire to conserve the landscape, to reconstruct the historic environment of architectural monuments more and more clearly revealed. The memorial parks occupy a prominent place in a circle of green areas for special purposes. Many of them could be regarded as parks and museums destined to preserve the sites associated with great people and events. There are museum-reserves in Boldino of Aleksandr Pushkin, in Melikhovo of Anton Chekhov and others. The Russian Historical Society developed a number of proposals for an integrated approach to the restoration of destroying monuments in Russia. It was considered the possibility of privatization of the abandoned villas of nobles for one ruble; new owners could restore them and open access to tourists. The proposal was supported in the initiative of private entrepreneurs and investor companies. In Moscow region they started to restore several estates: a manor Olgovo of nobles Apraksin, manor Pushchino on Nara of princes Vyazemsky, manor Cherkizovo of princes Cherkassky. The villa of merchant Aigin in the village Talitsy has been already restored and has a function of hotel complex (Fig. 5).

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