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Art collections and cultural identity of the Russian exile community in the interwar Prague

“Like the wanderings of some mythical tribe...”

Unlike my dissertation, which will deal more generally with the topic of art production of the Russian and Ukrainian exile of the interwar period, the network of contacts between the exile communities in several European centers and mobility of authors between them, in my presentation at the Forum for doctoral candidates in Berlin I would like to focus more specifically on the strategies of building of two important collections of Russian art, which were based in Prague in the 1920s and 1930s. Interwar Prague was one of the most lively and important centers of the exile from the area of the prewar Russia. Czechoslovakia also became home to a significant number of visual artists: for many of them the city was only a temporary asylum before further emigration to the West, some settled down mostly to assimilate with the local milieu. On examples of art collections and exhibition projects my presentation will focus on the way the exile community perceived its own art traditions and their continuation abroad, after the turning point of the October Revolution and the subsequent civil war.

Two art collections are seminal for this part of my research: Russian cultural-historical museum at Zbraslav (near Prague) and the collection of Slavic Institute in Prague, both of whom were aiming to accumulate artworks and documents about Russian emigration as such – not only its part settled in Czechoslovakia. Valentin Bulgakov, founder of the Russian museum in Zbraslav, planned to return to Russia on some point with the whole collection of the museum, so that it could become part of the Russian cultural heritage. Similarly, Nikolai Okuniev's motivation for building the Slavic Institute's archive and collection of Russian artists was according to his own words in the first place to “keep their work for the history of Russian culture and art”. For their founders, such art collections played a crucial role in preserving the cultural identity of the exiled Russian community.

The peak of Okuniev's attempts to collect and present Russian art was the 'Retrospective exhibition of Russian art of 18th to 20th centuries' which took place in Prague in 1935. Similarly to other exhibitions of Russian art (most notably 'Exposition d'art russe ancien et moderne' in Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels in 1928 or the 'Exposition d'Art Russe' in the gallery La Renaissance in Paris in 1932) the Prague show of 1935 combined artworks from artists of very different approaches in an attempt to present a kind of cross-section of the 'national' art, i.e. Russian art in the exile, in general.

Many of the most celebrated artists of the exile were authors of the generation of the group *Mir Iskusstva* (Boris Grigoriev, Ivan Bilibin, Alexander Benois and many others), which was to certain extent perceived as representative for art of the community of exiled Russians in the West in general. Other exiled authors developed variations on old Russian art (Nikolai Iscellenov) or neo-academic art (Alexander Yakovlev a Vasili Shukhaev). Therefore, my research also focuses on the possibilities of general characteristics of the art production of the exile community from Russia in the interwar period, on the relationships with local art scenes and on a certain orientalism developed by some artists, namely by Serge Mako, founder of the Prague-based group of artists called *the Scythians* and author of numerous depictions of nomads, perceived by the artist in a way as an analogy to émigrés in western Europe.

The research on art production of the exiled Russian artists is characterized by lacking of secondary sources. Therefore, main sources for my dissertation are exhibition catalogues, articles and reviews from the periodicals of the interwar period (among many others from Prager Presse or Volia Rossii), encyclopedias (most importantly the project 'Art and architecture of Russian exile'; <http://www.artrz.ru/>), archival collections mostly on the area of Czech Republic and institutional and private art collections.