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## The Lost Narrative of Natalia Shabelsky's Collection of Russian Textiles

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A culturally significant group of textiles gathered in the nineteenth-century by Natalia Shabelsky (Russian, 1841-1904), praised by critics and celebrated worldwide, was nearly lost to history. My paper addresses Natalia herself, the history of her collection, and its current status. While Shabelsky collected a variety of media, I will focus on her textiles, with special attention to those acquired by the Cleveland Museum of Art. In keeping with the theme of the Textile Society of America's 17th Biennial Symposium—*Hidden Stories, Human Lives*—I intend to unravel the narrative of this collection and its hidden story, and to emphasize the necessity of revealing and preserving the histories of women in the arts like Natalia Shabelsky, champion and savior of Russian textiles.

Natalia Leonidovna Shabelsky, née Kroneberg, was born in Taganrog, Russia on the northernmost point of the Black Sea in 1841 and educated in nearby Kharkov.<sup>1</sup> After finishing her studies in Kharkov she married Piotr Nikolaeïvich Chabelsky, one of the wealthiest landowners in the region. She spent the first part of her married life on the *Chupahof* estate in the Lebedinsky district, halfway between Kiev and Moscow. Mary B. Kelly, the late scholar of goddess symbolism and folklore, speculated that it may have been here, near peasant life, that Shabelsky developed an interest in and began collecting Russian folk art and culture. She moved to Moscow in 1870 and her interest in folk arts grew with access to museums in the city. Her collection began with embroidered and woven textiles, women's work with elaborate decoration and motifs, especially the goddess motif in her various guises (Figure 1). Kelly stated "...it is certainly due to [Shabelsky's] beautifully developed eye and her innate sense of taste that we have preserved today so many truly unique examples of goddess embroideries."<sup>2</sup> The exquisite textiles collected by Shabelsky reveal both the collector's eye for quality, and her inclination to preserve a tradition of Russian textiles that may have otherwise been destroyed.

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<sup>1</sup> Alternate name spellings for Shabelsky include Chabelsky (Russian), Shabelskoi (Russian), Chabelskoy (Russian), and Chabelskaya (French).

<sup>2</sup> Catherine Schwoeffermann, Peter Klosky, and Merrill Oliver, *Goddesses and Their Offspring: 19th and 20th Century Eastern European Embroideries*, (Binghamton, N.Y: Roberson Center for the Arts & Sciences, 1986), 46.



*Figure 1. Towel End, c 1700s- 1800s. Russia, Nizhny-Novgorod province, 18th-19th century. Cotton or linen (est.) straight (continuous) bobbin lace (Vologda tape lace). The tape forms figural or plant motifs outlined with gimp (heavy cord) with a monochrome plaited ground (metal thread or linen (est.) linking the tape; applied silk (est.) and metal thread ribbon; overall: 35.5 x 46 cm (14 x 18 1/8 in.). The Cleveland Museum of Art, Purchase from the J. H. Wade Fund 1931.104.*

Shabelsky exhibited her collection on multiple occasions during the last decade of the nineteenth century, including in 1893 at the Chicago World's Fair, in 1894 at the Antwerp World's Fair, in 1896 at the St. Petersburg Nickolai Palace for the Grand Duke Nicholas's coronation, and in 1900 at the Paris Exposition Universelle.<sup>3</sup> It was at the 1892 exhibition in St. Petersburg at the Nickolai Palace that Shabelsky first met V.V. Stasov. Stasov, considered one of the most respected Russian critics and "Renaissance men" of the nineteenth century, published a book of weaving and embroidery designs in 1874, becoming the first person to document folk textiles and their designs.<sup>4</sup> Upon seeing the installation of Shabelsky's collection, Stasov wrote in a review:

Everything in this excellent collection excites me. The collector has utilized her unusual energy and initiative as well as 20 years of her life to gather from all sides of Russia the excellent examples of art works of many generations of Russian women. Where could I find in any other museum an exhibition which is so close to my own thinking?<sup>5</sup>

The two formed a close friendship and Stasov became a mentor to Shabelsky. He greatly encouraged Shabelsky to give part of her collection to the Russian Museum of Ethnography in St. Petersburg, previously known as the Museum of Alexander III, which she eventually did

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<sup>3</sup> Kelly believes that the collection was also exhibited in 1898 in Chicago, though this is not consistent with other sources.

<sup>4</sup> Schwoeffermann et al., *Goddesses and Their Offspring*, 45.

<sup>5</sup> Schwoeffermann et al., 47.

before leaving Russia in 1900, taking the remainder of her collection with her, a collection which by now included costumes and accessories, including headdresses.

In that same year Shabelsky exhibited her collection in Paris at the Exposition Universelle; she and her collection then remained in France until her death in 1904 when it became the property of her two daughters. Varvara Petrovna (186?-about 1939), the eldest Shabelsky daughter, appeared in at least two photographs modelling costumes from her mother's collection (Figure 3). Varvara married Alexander Sidamon-Eristoff (1864-1924) from a noble Georgian family. She was his second wife.<sup>6</sup> After her marriage she became known as Princess B. Sidamon-Eristoff, at least in publications associated with her mother's collection, and she answered to the English translation of her name, Barbara. Little is known of Natalia Petrovna (1868-about 1940), Shabelsky's younger daughter, although she appears in at least fourteen photographs modelling costumes from her mother's collection (Figure 4).



Figures 3-4. Varvara Petrovna and Natalia Petrovna. As reproduced in Sidamon-Eristoff, *Princess Alexandre and Mlle. N. de Chabelskoy. "The Peasant Art of Great Russia."* In *Peasant Art in Russia*, edited by Charles Holme, 3-11. London: The Studio, 1912.

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<sup>6</sup> Sidamon-Eristoff, Simon C, and Constantine Sidamon-Eristoff. *For My Grandchildren: The Memoirs of Colonel Prince Simon C. Sidamon-Eristoff: 1891-1964*. (New York?: publisher not identified, 2004), 63-64. Alexander graduated from Moscow University, became the vice governor of Poltava Province, and married the daughter of the richest man in Russia, P. Durnavo. He and his wife, Maria Petrova, divorced after they had two children. They agreed to split the children with the mother keeping custody of the son and the father having custody of the daughter. Leaving his daughter to the care of his brother and sister-in-law, Boris and Katherine, Alexander then led a life of scandalous affair with a woman in Italy whose husband, a colonel of the Chevalier Guards, refused to divorce her. When she died eighteen years later, Alexander returned to Moscow penniless. His brother Boris, worried for his well-being, found him a suitable woman to marry whose family had money, but was not typically aristocratic. This woman was Barbara Shabelsky. Through this marriage, he was able to establish himself back into society as a real estate developer.



The Shabelsky daughters promoted their mother's collection through publications which catalogue many of the objects and provide insight into their patronage. In 1910, Barbara and Natalia published *Antiquités Russes, Collection Princesse Sidamon-Eristoff Et Mlle. N. De Schabelskoi*, (Figure 5) written with the purpose of preserving the textile designs in the collection, detailing object types, regions of origin, and techniques.



Figure 5. As reproduced in Sidamon-Eristoff, V. P., Princess. *Sobranie Russkoj Stariny Kn. V.p. Sidamon-Eristovoj I N.p. Shabel'skoj : Vypusk I-I, Vyshivki I Kruzheva = Antiquités Russes, Collection Princesse Sidamon-Eristoff Et Mlle. N. De Schabelskoi. Moskva, 1910.*

In 1912, the daughters again wrote and published on the collection in a special edition of *The Studio* titled “The Peasant Art of Great Russia.” In the article, they explain that long winters, lack of industry, and difficulty of travel due to poor roads contributed to the tradition of elaborately handcrafted objects. Women were solely dedicated to family life and the home which further promoted an interest in craftwork and traditional motifs, including<sup>7</sup> the *Sirin* and *Aconost*, (Figures 6-7) birds in the form of a woman who, according to the daughters, “live in Paradise and delight the saints with their songs.”<sup>8</sup> Another motif is the *svastika*, borrowed from ancient India and considered “a sign of good augury and especially good luck.”<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Sidamon-Eristoff, Princess Alexandre and Mlle. N. de Chabelskoy. “The Peasant Art of Great Russia.” In *Peasant Art in Russia*, edited by Charles Holme, 3-11. London: “The Studio,” 1912, 5.

<sup>8</sup> Sidamon-Eristoff et al., “The Peasant Art of Great Russia,” 4.

<sup>9</sup> Sidamon-Eristoff et al., 5.



Figure 6. Towel End, c 1700s- 1800s. Russia, Nizhny-Novgorod province, 18th-19th century. Plain weave linen (est.) with polychrome wool (est.) and metal thread chain stitch embroidery; applied silk (est.) ribbon and metal thread trim; overall: 38 x 43 cm (14 15/16 x 16 15/16 in.). The Cleveland Museum of Art, Purchase from the J. H. Wade Fund 1931.132.



Figure 7. Border, c 1800- 1825. Russia, Nizhny-Novgorod province, early 19th century. Plain weave silk (est.) ground with polychrome silk (est.) and metal thread chain stitch embroidery; applied silk (est.) ribbon and metal thread trims; overall: 28 x 93 cm (11 x 36 5/8 in.). The Cleveland Museum of Art, Purchase from the J. H. Wade Fund 1931.137.

Though the textiles were embellished with embroidery and lace, all were functional. Bed curtains adorned the bed, and decorated “the backs of the sledges and wedding conveyances, or on the occasion of the traditional carnival processions, and in this case the decoration was completed by towels attached to the *dougas* (bow of the shaft).”<sup>10</sup> Prior to the 13<sup>th</sup> century in the pagan period, towels were used in religious worship, decorating temples and sacred trees. In the nineteenth century, the towels were used in peasant homes or *izba*, “for draping mirrors and images; or, spread out along the walls...form[ing] a kind of simple art gallery for the Russian peasant.”<sup>11</sup> Embroidered towels became wedding presents (Figure 8), given from the bride to her groom, which she made by herself “as a proof of her ability and industry.”<sup>12</sup> The headdresses, and the

<sup>10</sup> Sidamon-Eristoff et al., “The Peasant Art of Great Russia,” 5-6.

<sup>11</sup> Sidamon-Eristoff et al., 6.

<sup>12</sup> Sidamon-Eristoff et al., 7.



embroidered panels attached to them, were significant because a married woman was supposed to cover her hair. If she did not, she “was considered to be lacking in modesty.”<sup>13</sup>



Figure 8. Towel End, c 1800- 1825. Russia, Nizhny-Novgorod province, early 19th century. Plain weave linen (est.) ground with polychrome wool (est.) and metal thread chain stitch embroidery; applied silk (est.) ribbon and metal thread trim; overall: 37 x 43 cm (14 9/16 x 16 15/16 in.). The Cleveland Museum of Art, Purchase from the J. H. Wade Fund 1931.133.

A 1904 memoir based on the accounts of Prince Simon Sidamon-Eristoff, Barbara’s son-in-law and nephew-by-marriage, includes a brief account of the Shabelsky family. Prince Simon and his wife, Tamara, Alexander’s daughter, lived in the family house for many years, along with Barbara and her sister Natalia. The large, two-story house had at least four great halls filled with “museum pieces.” He wrote,

Actually, it was quite a collection, a display of all kinds of lamps and china and bronze and Russian things, European too. Beautiful. The inside of his house was considered by the Moscow aristocracy at that time as being one of the best there. My stepmother-in-law was busy collecting Russian antiques and she had many big boxes and trunks containing all kinds of ikons, and boyar costumes embroidered with pearls, and eventually she wrote a book or a book was written about her collection, and I believe that at that time the British Museum offered her 600,000 rubles for the collection, but she refused to sell.<sup>14</sup>

This account provides intimate details of Barbara’s involvement with and investment in her mother’s collection, and her recognition of the collection’s worth.

The brief mention of Shabelsky’s daughters in this memoir offered further insight into the next movements of the peripatetic collection. Barbara had no children, this is confirmed by the House

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<sup>13</sup> Sidamon-Eristoff et al., “The Peasant Art of Great Russia,” 9.

<sup>14</sup> Sidamon-Eristoff et al., *For My Grandchildren*, 76.

of Sidamoni family tree, and presumably neither did Natalia, living with her sister and brother-in-law. With no heir to inherit, in 1930 the daughters entrusted their mother's collection to Count and Countess B. M. Pushkin for exhibition in the United States. Documentation on the Pushkins is limited, especially the exact nature of their relationship with the Shabelskys. Count Pushkin, or perhaps the Countess, likely descended from a prominent noble Russian family, perhaps related to Alexander Pushkin, the Russian Romantic period novelist, playwright, and poet.

The Pushkins had fled St. Petersburg during the Russian Revolution in 1917.<sup>15</sup> According to a newspaper article, they relocated to upstate New York, the town of Cazenovia southeast of Syracuse, because it had "a great appeal for the countess, who [said] it [was] more like her home country than any place she [had] visited."<sup>16</sup> The same article mentioned that the Count was considered an author and lecturer in the United States.<sup>17</sup>

Between 1930 and 1931 the Pushkins exhibited Shabelsky's collection at the Brooklyn Museum, the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the Memorial Art Gallery at the University of Rochester, New York. In the exhibition catalogue, Pushkin stated that these objects were

mainly rare specimens of old national typical embroideries, weavings and laces of [Great Russia], very rich in original primitive designs and ornaments, brightly reflecting the Russian folk's genius and offering, in addition to the archeological interest, an unlimited source of patterns for artistic industry.

Later he expressed admiration, and stated, "this collection is the result of a tenacious labour of accumulating during many years the quite disappearing articles of ancient national embroideries in the forlorn corners of spacious Russia and was gathered by a known collector of Russian antiquities, Mrs. N. de Shabelsky."<sup>18</sup> After the collection had gained exposure through the travelling exhibition, the sisters decided to sell their mother's collection in small batches to select museums. The files at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston include a letter from Pushkin to the textile curator, dated February 7, 1931 to support this. Two women, Gertrude Townsend, textile curator at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and Gertrude Underhill, textile curator at the Cleveland Museum of Art, agreed to split one box of textiles.<sup>19</sup> On March 30, 1931, Townsend wrote to Pushkin that she had chosen 34 pieces, and shipped the remaining 35 to Cleveland. In late May 1931 the Cleveland Museum of Art would purchase 37 additional Shabelsky textiles with monies from the J.H. Wade Fund.

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<sup>15</sup> *The Cazenovia Republican* (Cazenovia, New York), Thursday, January 30th, 1936, 1.

<sup>16</sup> *The Cazenovia Republican*.

<sup>17</sup> *The Cazenovia Republican*.

<sup>18</sup> Count B. M. Pushkin and Mrs N. Shabelsky, *Exhibition of National Russian Art, 17th, 18th and Early 19th Centuries: Peasant Embroideries, Costumes, Headdresses, Hand-Woven Materials, Laces, Ikons, Articles of Silver, Copper, Etc* (New York?, 1900).

<sup>19</sup> The curators divided the textiles as equally as possible and also split the total cost in half.



Upon entering the Cleveland Museum of Art's collection, the object records created indicated the textiles were purchased from B. M. Pushkin. Shabelsky's name was not included in the records. Without the inclusion of Natalia Shabelsky's name, all contextual evidence of the collection's significance and Shabelsky's role in the collection's formation was lost. In 1954, a new curator of textiles at the Cleveland Museum of Art, Dorothy G. Shepherd, succeeded Gertrude Underhill and ostensibly little knowledge transfer took place. Over the years the original provenance information was completely lost.<sup>20</sup> More than two decades later, in fall 1965, Shepherd wrote to Cleveland Museum of Art Director Sherman Lee, and stated,

I am anxious to transfer—and Miss Dunlavy is anxious to acquire—the following groups of peasant embroideries [for the education collection]. We would like to have your approval and that of the Trustees so that this transfer may be completed as soon as possible.<sup>21</sup>

In late November 1965, all 72 textiles were transferred from the Permanent Collection to the Extensions Department, originally a branch of the education department, which used their collection to promote public education. Inevitably, this action further erased the history of Shabelsky's collection.

Moving forward another two decades to 1987, (Figures 9-10) many of the Shabelsky textiles were included in "Goddesses and Their Offspring: 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Eastern European Embroideries," an exhibition at the Roberson Center for the Arts and Sciences in Binghamton, New York, and later that year at the Beck Center for the Cultural Arts in Lakewood, Ohio.<sup>22</sup> This exhibition and its accompanying catalogue shed light on the significance of Russian folk textiles, specifically the prevalent goddess motif which reoccurs in the textiles, as well as those in the Shabelsky collection. Mary B. Kelly, one of the driving forces behind the goddess embroideries exhibition, stated in the catalogue, "perhaps the cream of the Shabelsky collection in this country is housed in the Cleveland Museum of Art."<sup>23</sup> This wealth of gathered research and opportunity to recognize Shabelsky and her collection was once again not added to Cleveland Museum of Art's object records.

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<sup>20</sup> "Shepherd, Dorothy G. Payer," Encyclopedia of Cleveland History, <https://case.edu/ech/articles/s/shepherd-dorothy-g-payer>. Dorothy Shepherd (1916-1992) was the Curator of Textiles and Near Eastern Art at the Cleveland Museum of Art from 1954-1981.

<sup>21</sup> Dorothy G. Shepherd to Dr. Sherman Lee, 5 October 1965, Memorandum, Ingalls Library & Museum Archives, Cleveland Museum of Art. This memorandum lists that the Russian embroideries 1931.66 through 1931.137, which were "purchased by Income J.H. Wade Fund from B.M. Pushkin" be transferred.

<sup>22</sup> The objects exhibited were 1931.91, .94, .110, .112, .113, .115, .117, .118, .119, .121, .123, .125, .126, .127, .132. Of the objects exhibited, the Cleveland Museum of Art still has 1931.110 and 1931.132. In addition to works in the Cleveland Museum of Art's Extensions Division, textiles were lent from institutions such as the Smithsonian Institution, Brooklyn Museum, and Ukrainian Museums in New York and Canada.

<sup>23</sup> Schwoeffermann et al., *Goddesses and Their Offspring*, 50.



*Figure 9. Exhibition View, Roberson and Beck Center, 1987, GTO067, Cleveland Museum of Art Archives.*



*Figure 10. Exhibition View, Roberson and Beck Center, 1987, GTO015, Cleveland Museum of Art Archives.*

In 2006, the Shabelsky textiles were included in a survey and subsequent deaccessioning of textiles from the education collection. Six of the textiles remained in the education collection, one was transferred to the primary collection (Figure 11), 16 were donated to a Cleveland Museum of Art friends group, and 46 were sold at auction in 2008. In 2017, a serendipitous conversation between a curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the textile conservator at Cleveland Museum of Art brought to light the existence of these textiles. As a graduate art history student at Case Western Reserve University at this time, and as part of my second year curatorial internship at the Cleveland Museum of Art, I was given the seemingly impossible task of tracking down the Shabelsky textiles sold at auction.



*Figure 11. Towel End, c 1700s- 1800s. Russia, Nizhny-Novgorod province, 18th-19th century. Cotton or linen (est.); straight (continuous) bobbin lace (Vologda tape lace). The tape forms figural or plants motifs outlined with gimp (heavy cord) with a polychrome plaited ground linking the tape; applied silk (est.) ribbon and metal thread trim; overall: 45.7 x 42.9 cm (18 x 16 7/8 in.). The Cleveland Museum of Art, Purchase from the J. H. Wade Fund 1931.110.*

After much research, reading an online article titled “Farma Karma” by Angelica Hicks, led me to Nathalie Farman-Farma, a London-based textile designer and founder of the fabric line Décors Barbares, who had “the walls of her dining room...decorated with framed textiles, originally part of Natalia de Shabelsky’s collection.”<sup>24</sup> I recognized the Shabelsky textiles that had once been in the Cleveland Museum of Art collection, reached out to Farman-Farma and she responded enthusiastically (Figure 12), stating in a correspondence that Natalia de Shabelsky “needs to be heralded as a great savior of Russian textiles.” Farman-Farma purchased about 25 textiles from the New York textile dealer Cora Ginsburg over the course of many years. Again, records detached from objects led to more confusion, because the dealer believed the textiles were deaccessioned from the Cleveland Institute of Art (an art school), rather than the Cleveland Museum of Art. Farman-Farma wondered how Cleveland had the textiles that she believed had all been gifts to the Brooklyn Museum, and did not know the hidden story of Shabelsky textiles in U.S. collections. Out of the 46 textiles which were sold at auction, the location and provenance of 25 can be accounted for in the collection of Nathalie Farman-Farma. The whereabouts of 21 of the auctioned-textiles are unknown, as well as 12 of the 16 donated to the Cleveland Museum of Art friends group. Three have been repatriated from the friends group and another was incorporated into an artwork, which the Cleveland Museum of Art’s textile conservator was able to document. As a result 13 of the original 72 Shabelsky textiles purchased by the Cleveland Museum of Art are now back in the museum’s permanent collection, with their corrected and secured attribution to Natalia Shabelsky.<sup>25</sup> The Shabelsky textiles at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston remain in their collection, while those from the Brooklyn Museum have

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<sup>24</sup> Angelica Hicks, “Farma Karma,” Décors Barbares.

<sup>25</sup> 1931.104, .106, .107, .108, .109, .110, .111, .132, .133, .137 remain in the collection of the Cleveland Museum of Art.

now become part of the Brooklyn Museum Costume Collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Figure 12. Author viewing Shabelsky textiles in the home of Nathalie Farman-Farma in London, collection of the author (Photograph credit: Nyderah Williams).

The Shabelsky collection has found new life in the twenty-first century. In 2009, the exhibition *Le costume populaire russe*, on view at the Musée Yves Saint Laurent in Paris,<sup>26</sup> created in partnership with the Russian Museum of Ethnography, featured traditional Russian costumes from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Many of these costumes were originally part of Shabelsky's collection, which she donated to the Ethnographic Museum at the advice of V.V. Stasov. A catalogue was published, *Collection Chabelskaya: Une Russie Fin De Siècle : Portrait De Femmes En Costume Traditionnel*, in connection with the exhibition; that catalogue included photographs and information on the Shabelsky collection originally published in the special edition of *The Studio* in 1912.<sup>27</sup> These photographs were presented at the *Le costume populaire russe* exhibition alongside the costumes themselves.

Shabelsky's lost narrative is likely one of many histories yet to be uncovered. It is necessary that these rich histories of women in the arts be preserved, so that we may have a better

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<sup>26</sup> The exhibition was on view from March 18 to August 23, 2009 and curated by Jeanna Chistakovia and Elena Maldevskaia.

<sup>27</sup> Sidamon-Eristoff et al., "The Peasant Art of Great Russia"; Grusman, V M, Elena Madlevskaiā, and Karina Solov'eva. *Collection Chabelskaya: Une Russie Fin De Siècle : Portrait De Femmes En Costume Traditionnel*. Paris : Éditions de La Martinière, 2010.



understanding of our past and the significance of the objects that remain as evidence of their discernment. Museums can play a significant role in this process. Shabelsky was a Russian anomaly. This determined twenty-year old woman traveled through rural Russia to collect textiles which represented the regions of her country, and then proceeded to promote them to the world. Her daughters were resolute in preserving their mother's collection. Shabelsky's innovative efforts to preserve the traditions of Russian textiles production that may have otherwise been destroyed deserves celebration, and at the very least, acknowledgement in object records.

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