

Classicism in Russian Interiors of Historicism Period

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ABSTRACT

The article deals with the Neoclassicist line in Russian interior design of the second third of the 19th century. Classicism that formed part of the polyphony of the revival décor in the historical vein, such as Gothic, rocaille, Moorish, Turkish, etc., was often viewed as a fading extension of the traditions of the preceding period. However, analysis of concrete projects and monuments has made it possible to show a different aspect. In the eclectic period the classicist line remained relevant, primarily in the décor of the main palace premises, and, moreover, cardinally transformed. The classicist style came to be recognized and realized as a historical style. In equal measure that was characteristic of the Empire style of the reign of Nicholas I with its emphatic imperial splendour and of the elegant Pompeian style.

Keywords: *eclectics, historicism, "Empire style of Nicholas I", Pompeian style, Winter Palace, Tsaritsyn pavilion in Peterhof, Auguste Montferrand, Alexander Briullov, Andrei Stackenschneider*

I. INTRODUCTION

The second third of the 19th century was of fundamental importance to the history of the decorative and applied arts in Russia. Tendencies towards a cardinal change in the role and understanding of the spatial and substantive constituent of the interior and, in broader terms, the human environment as such that had developed throughout the period of Alexander I by the mid-19th century became an established cultural reality with specific features which have determined the attitude to the art of objects to our day.

The essence of that change can be largely characterized as the destruction, to quote V.V. Zgura, of "the massive feeling of unified form", which underlay "the uniform stylistic expression of all the preceding periods" [1]. Indeed, stylistic polyphony, to various degrees typical of art of the earlier and later periods, emerged as a formal characteristic of the period under review. It was not only a matter of the outstanding diversity of the stylistic nuances of that period. The primary reason was that in the second third of the 19th century that quality came to express the main purposes of the artistic process and found detailed aesthetical substantiation in contemporaneous writings [2]. The evident emancipation of structures and décor, both exterior and interior), let alone the filling of the interiors with substance, emerged as one of the decisive purposes. It could be said, with a certain degree of schematization, that starting with the second third of the century architectural space began to be seen as an indifferent enclave that became a living interior only through the efforts of decorators and owners. However, the notable fact was that, starting with the 1830s, the

fragile balance between the spatial and substantive constituents characteristic of the preceding period was upset in favour of the latter in Russian and, for that matter, European halls. Objects began to predominate. They assumed the functions of architecture, singling out various spatial zones and defining the scale and stylistic solution of interiors. What is more, they filled space to capacity and huddled together, forming a sort of cocoon that offered shelter from the admittedly hostile outside environment.

The new principles of organising private rooms were first clearly manifested in the Peterhof Cottage Palace that the architect Adam A. Menelaws built in 1826-1829 as a gift of Nicholas I to his wife, Empress Alexandra Feodorovna. The palace was designed in the Gothic style, which largely due to the efficacy of the imperial example became widespread in Russia in the 1830s-1840s. As distinct from Gothic projects of the preceding period that had added fantastic yet natural objects to the amusing curiosities of the Gallant Age, created as everything in that epoch – be it an individual piece or a pavilion – in the unbreakable plastic unity of structures and décor, the neo-Gothic style of the 19th century from the outset was of a pointedly decorative nature. It found expression in the predominant use of planar solutions in wall decoration and in the look of individual pieces of interior design, the simple classicist structure of which was concealed by the superimposed Gothic décor, and more importantly, in the very range of objects, most of which just had not existed in the Gothic period.

In fact, donning historical "costumes" on contemporary objects that grew increasingly numerous

with the appearance of new functions and a new understanding of comfort was a universal feature of all stylistic trends of the historicism period. Oversimplifying the trend, we can say that every retro style even had its own functional line of character that at times had little to do with the literary image of the epoch which it had to conform to. For instance, Gothic presupposed the opportunity for solitude, which was demonstrated by the popularity of Gothic ideas in the decoration of libraries, bookcases and screens that continued to be made "Gothic" even when it had long gone out of fashion. Rococo interiors and objects embodied courtly salon comforts and were preferred for drawing-rooms and conversation pits, especially after the invention of upholstery coil springs (for which Samuel Pratt received a patent in 1828) had led to the manufacture of all sorts of cushioned furniture, including without visible wooden structure (called "overstuffed" in Russia)¹. Depending on the increasingly complicated context of the perception of history and individual cultures and epochs, Oriental décor could be associated with leisure and bliss, or conversely, with military glory and erudition.

All the above examples notably focused on the décor of private chambers that served to objectify new priorities asserting the value of private life and private space. Due to this fact or in view of the memorable forms and expressive solutions of individual ensembles, the aforementioned trends of interior design more than once provoked interest among researchers. This article aims to trace the fate of the classicist line that not only survived during that period, but gained a new stylistic and conceptual dimension.

II. NEOCLASSICISM AS A HISTORICAL STYLE

Scholars have observed that the 1837 fire in the Winter Place marked the end of Neoclassicism in Russia. This may be true: the long tradition going back

¹ In 1838, Dervilliers produced upholstered furniture without visible wooden parts, called *crapaud*, *causeuse*, *bebe*, and *pouf*. In Russia such furniture called "overstuffed" became quite common. The most colourful invention in this sphere was *paté*, a large sofa placed in the centre of a drawing-room. Among the most popular pieces of the period was a *canapé à confidants*, a type of sofa with a common back which had partitions separating the sitting and talking people), and a witty S-shaped *canapé* that enabled people to sit "tête-à-tête", "dos-à-dos", or "vis-à-vis". Based on this structure, one more piece of furniture consisting of three S-shaped partitioned seats at 120 degrees to one another was produced in the middle of the 19th century. Another novelty of the century was the so-called "Siamese twins" *canapé* in the form of twin lounge chairs with a jardiniere or table placed between them. The widely used wheels were another novelty: known from the 1780s, yet rather rare, they were now fitted to practically any piece of furniture intended for sitting. Well-known pieces, such as the sofa that practically ousted former *canapés* owing to its comfortable soft armpads, couch and ottoman, also acquired a new image. Upholstery with tufting buttons, coil springs and formerly not used decorative fringes, tassels and flounces gave them the effect of greater splendour and comfort.

to the 18th century was withering. But one counter argument immediately comes to mind: the Winter Palace itself. The Commission for the restoration of the palace had the task of recreating the burnt-out furnishings, which influenced the decision to choose Vasily Stasov, one of the most consistent and expressive classicist style masters, for the leading architect of the restoration project. Indeed, Stasov took a highly delicate approach to the restoration of Quarenghi's design of the Grand, Concert and St. George Halls, as well as the Main (rocaille) Staircase and Church designed by F.B. Rastrelli. However, the classicist style prevailed in the main imperial residence due to far from merely applied purposes of the restoration project. All the halls of the main Neva enfilade, including the enlarged Armorial Hall, again received a classicist décor. In stark difference from the period of Alexander I, Neoclassicism acquired a fundamentally new tenor – suggestive, loaded and that of bravura. Those halls became the epitome of a new style that came to be called the Empire Style of Nicholas I. It was characterized by heavier proportions, emphatic and dense decorativeness and pomposity that were commonly associated with the personal taste of Nicholas I. It is now known that the Emperor tended to show reserve and tact in his personal predilections. "Heavy and disagrees with the taste of the room"^[3], was the resolution written in his hand on Briullov's first design of chandeliers for the Gothic Drawing room of the Grand Princesses. That is, for all the decisive importance of the ruler's taste to the decoration of the main residence, the appearance of a new approach to the interpretation of classicism can hardly be attributed to the Emperor's will.

The decisive factor that transformed the appearance of classicist projects in the reign of Nicholas I was the fact that at that time the classicist style in its latest, Empire version was not only realized, but also perceived as a historical style. And as any other historical style, it underwent significant metamorphoses aimed forcefully to convey the feeling of a historical epoch rather than to reproduce the chosen model. Just as when interpreted by masters of eclectics, Gothic lost its textbook character and rationale, becoming more irrational and fragile, the Oriental style lost its subtlety, turning ever more exotic and "piquant", and rococo affectedly fanciful, in much the same way the Empire style, while falling short of the model in elegance, became ostentatiously imperial.

The work of Henri Louis Auguste Ricard de Montferrand (1786–1858) was the quintessence of that trend. He came to Saint Petersburg as early as 1816 and proved apparently the first programmatic eclectic on the Russian architectural scene: when commissioned to design Saint Isaac's Cathedral, he prepared 24 versions of the building, among which "... one could find the Chinese, Hindu, Gothic and Byzantine style, and that of

the Renaissance... purely Greek architecture of the ancient and latest monuments" [4] He retained his interest in stylistic experiments and in the late 1820s, according to a contemporary, "did nothing but Gothic drawings" [5] and in 1828–1829 produced the first interior design in the Moorish taste in Russia for Empress Alexandra Feodorovna's Bathroom in the Winter Palace. Still, the designer of Saint Isaac's Cathedral, the main classicist structure of the reign of Nicholas I, perhaps showed his gift for decorative interpretation in the historical vein with special verve precisely in the classicist halls, especially in the Field Marshals' Hall and the Peter the Great Memorial Hall that served as the Small Throne Room of the old Hermitage, which were made five years before the fire. The two latter halls were restored by Stasov, and there is no denying that their interior design determined the image of Neoclassicism of the period of Nicholas I as a whole. A disciple of C. Percier and P. Fontaine, Montferrand accumulated and carried on the line of emphatically decorative fantasy, ornamental opulence and nearly baroque density of decorative fabric established by the founders of the Empire style.

A graphic example is a large suite of furniture for the Empress's Parlour, which was produced by the Gambs Brothers to Montferrand's design and which was decorated with formidable carved mounts that merged with the carcass of the furniture pieces owing to solid gilding. The furniture looked like objects of solid gold. A deep fully gilded armchair reproducing the shape of Roman marble seats looked as the apotheosis of this "monolithic stature". That suite of furniture was salvaged from the fire and subsequently formed part of the décor of the Malachite Room created in lieu of the former Parlour, enhancing the solemnity of its interior design. "Gold, like streams of a magic cascade, spread everywhere, now splitting into tiny spouts, now glowing in wonderful patterns," wrote a contemporary [6].

It is noteworthy that the same author described the Malachite Room (together with the furniture decorating it) as a "Greek type" room [7]. This could be explained by the active use of meander ornament in the decoration of the ceiling, fragments of the entablature supporting it, Corinthian twin columns, acroteria above the doors and murals going back to the paintings on the Sèvres Olympic dinner service that Napoleon had presented to Alexander I in 1807, which had been inspired by Pompeian frescoes and more than once reproduced in Russian palace décor [8]. This description by a contemporary is interesting in that it lays bare the logic of recognition and creation of the historical styles of the second third of the 19th century that least of all presupposed being documental. "Occasionally a thing can be simply copied verbatim. But it will still be nothing more than a replica... but to create something of one's own, absolutely one's own and to divine the

given and required character... something more than slavish copying is needed," *Khudozhestvennaia gazeta* wrote in 1837 [9]. That is, it was a matter of precisely divining and emphasizing some identifiable, eloquent motif, technique, or form, with the accent laid on the creation of something new of one's own that did not exist previously.

III. POMPEIAN STYLE OF ALEXANDER BRIULLOV

Alexander Briullov (1798-1877), who designed the interior of the Malachite Room, was a great master of such free variations on a given subject. He was the second appointed architect of the Commission for the Restoration of the Winter Palace and an outstanding master of the Pompeian style (perhaps, the above-quoted author meant, among other things, the reputation of its designer when referring to the Malachite Room as "Greek"). The appearance of a new version of the decorative style inspired by the excavations of Herculaneum and Pompeii was triggered by a wave of new impressive discoveries². Briullov first saw Pompeii in 1825, and by 1829, when he had painted a portrait of the King of Naples and been granted a special permission to draw rediscovered monuments from nature, he used financing from the Russian czar to publish in Paris an engraved album of measurements and drawings of Pompeian *thermae*³.

However, his Pompeian interiors least of all relied on any archaeological source. Moreover, they are pointedly distanced from both "Pompeian" ouvrages and the authentic specimens he knew so well. In his furniture designs Briullov used just one reference, legs shaped as a sort of lion hermas: an animal muzzle with bared teeth above a puffed-up chest, sharply withdrawn like an *espagnolette* and flowing into a couple of lion's paws. This motif, borrowed from a Pompeian folding table, was to become a hallmark of Briullov's decorative pieces [10]. The artist first used it for console tables and stools in the Small (Pompeian) Dining Room of the Winter Palace, one of the first interiors (and, perhaps, the most exquisite one) in the Pompeian style in Russia.

Today only a Gambs Brothers furniture suite of the 1837-1839 make and K.A. Ukhtomsky's 1874 watercolour (all at the State Hermitage) have remained of the Pompeian Dining Room décor, but they are

² The most impressive were the 1814. 1816 outdoor museum project, *The Last Day of Pompeii*, 1834, a novel by E. Bulwer-Lytton set in the House of a Tragic Poet, *Progulki russkogo po Pompeiam* (Walks of a Russian in Pompeii), 1843; Klassovsky's guidebook of 1848 and so on.

³ Thermes de Pompéi; Par Alexandre Brulloff, élève de L'Académie impériale des Beaux-arts de St. Petersburg, Paris, typographie de Firmin Didot, 1829 (15 pages of text and 9 page-size drawings on the best vellum paper).

enough to get an impression of that amazing masterpiece of Russian interior, which had existed till 1894. Its striking colour scheme was based on a contrast of the Pompeian red and white, and the wall décor reproduced the well-proportioned line of Pompeian frescoes. The furniture suite refined to every detail (including a wood box) was an important component of the spectacular decoration. The furniture of plain wood was all coated with white lacquer that contrasted with the bright red upholstery (with time the lacquer began to turn yellow with a noble terracotta tint) and adorned with ornate compositions on themes of ancient Greek myths and Homer's *Odyssey*. In the times of Antiquity lacquered furniture was unheard of, and chairs on wheels bore but a slight resemblance in outline to the Greek klismos chairs. The stylization was nowhere near the original, but Briullov effectively conveyed the overall atmosphere, rich colour gamut and elegance of Pompeian villas. More important, the interior indeed created a fresh and, perhaps for that reason, convincing impression. "It is a small, but really charming room... as the method of finish goes, there is only one other such rooms in Europe, it's a Scagliolo... Briullov has transplanted Pompeian art with all its charm here; the character has been unswervingly maintained from the main components down to the details, to the excellent furniture in the pure Greek style /.../ There is no gold in the small dining room, but it is none the worse for that and stands out as one of the beautiful flowers in the lush bouquet tied together by A.P. Briullov" [11].

IV. POMPEIAN STYLE OF ANDREI STACKENSCHNEIDER

The elegance of the Pompeian style that Briullov displayed in his projects, which implied an explicit statement by the artist, was one of the reasons for its limited spread. Unlike the Gothic, the Pompeian style became a sort of prerogative of the imperial family and the wealthier and more influential circles. As such, in the 1840s it was carried on by Andrei Ivanovich Stackenschneider (1802-1865), who, like Briullov, did his own drawing-room in the Pompeian style. He also used this method for the main interiors of one of the elegant buildings of the reign of Nicholas I, the Tsaritsyn Island Pavilion in Peterhof (1842-1844).

Just as in the pavilion's architecture, which duplicated the layout units of the Pompeian villa, in its finish Stackenschneider tried to follow the model as closely as possible. The furniture in the Fountain Hall (as the atrium was called) consisted of wooden stools painted in imitation of patinated bronze (at the time bronze furniture was known from archaeological excavations). Table supports and bracket arms were also painted that way and chandeliers were "patinated" to make them look antique. The semi-circular sofas in

the drawing room adjoining the atrium, designed like the ancient oikos, were done in the image of the sigma-shaped benches of Antiquity. Seeking to convey the colour intensity of the antique interiors, Stackenschneider emphasized the colour in upholstery: crimson cloth was trimmed with green cord and the light blue and dark cherry colours were actively used.

The materials making it possible to reconstruct the painting of these interiors, done in the distemper technique and resembling the Third Pompeian Style, and also significant décor elements demonstrating examples of the inclusion of authentic archaeological artefacts in interior décor have survived as well. Particularly valuable among them was a large mosaic dated the 1st century BC – 1st century AD from Joséphine de Beauharnais's Malmaison collection. In 1844 it was bought for the Tsaritsyn Pavilion from Joséphine's grandson, Maximilian, 3rd Duke of Leuchtenberg and spouse of the elder daughter of Nicholas I, Maria Nikolaevna. The mosaic covered the floor of the pavilion's dining room like a carpet, just as in the triclinium of the noble Romans' homes. Another example is whorled uprights inlaid with smalt that by the Emperor's will were used in the décor of the Tsaritsyn Pavilion Study. When including pieces of 12th -14th century Byzantine art in the interior, Stackenschneider backed them up by a conched niche, the dome of which is decorated, in the Oriental style, with octagonal caissons with rosettes painted gold and purple.

We cannot help observing that this focus on as accurate compliance with the chosen historical or stylistic model as possible illustrates the onset of a new stage in the eclectic trend. An understanding of the critical importance of time, including its irreversibility, made people realize that phenomena from other ages and cultures, once nothing more than a source of fantasies for decorative purposes, were in themselves unique. Hence the growing importance of direct and implicit references [12].

The Pompeian style also prevailed in the décor of the Mariinsky Palace, presented by Nicholas I to his elder daughter, Maria Nikolaevna, as a gift for her wedding to Duke Maximilian of Leuchtenberg. The palace on Saint Isaac's Square ⁴ became Stackenschneider's first major project in the Russian capital. Apart from technological innovations, such as iron floor slabs, the architect introduced several innovative planning solutions to create a more functional and habitable space. The winter garden with a central fountain gushing up to a height of 8 meters was a special pride of the project. The ramp, too, was a

⁴ The palace got its name Mariinsky after its consecration on 25 January 1845.

sort of winter garden: strolls on it were like walks in the Crimean Mountains.

The classical Rotunda was the crossing point of the bel-*etage* enfilades. Behind it was the Pompeian Hall, the decoration of which included pieces reproducing archaeological finds. For example, in 1843 and 1847 on Maria Nikolaevna's commission the Imperial Glassworks produced "Greek" floor lamps on lion's paws with the figurine of Mercury on the ball topping the lamp and chains between the candleholders; compositionally they were similar to the floor lamps unearthed in Pompeii. "Pompeian lamps" done as patinated bronze vessels with three hollow burners after Pompeian oil lamps adorned the library⁵.

Next was the Raphael Gallery (Proletny Hall), painted in the style of the Raphael Loggias of the Winter Palace. A set of four floor lamps made by the Imperial Porcelain Factory, most likely from Stackenschneider's designs, gives an idea of the nature of these paintings. The lamps have a bright varicoloured ornament of arabesques and figures referencing Pompeian frescoes against a thick black background (currently at the State Hermitage)⁶. A unique monument that is currently in the Museum of the Imperial Porcelain Factory was done in the same style: it is a unique door all faced with porcelain tiles, supposedly intended also for the palace on Saint Isaac's Square [13].

V. CONCLUSION

As illustrated by the above examples, the interest in the exquisite classicist creations in the Pompeian vein gave rise to a new stylistic vector as a spinoff of the classicist line that came to be known as "à la Renaissance". All the living quarters of the palace and several main entrances were done in that fashion. The term first crops up in documents of the Gambis Brothers workshop, which was commissioned to make a furniture suite to Montferrand's designs (1836-1846) for the dowry of the Grand Princess.

The Mariinsky Palace in Saint Petersburg became a compendium of the development of interior design in the second third of the 19th century and a central monument of the reign of Nicholas I in palace architecture. Its interiors spanned the entire stylistic range of mature eclectics: Gothic and rocaille furniture, the traditional Turkish Study, and new-fashioned Louis Quatorze interiors furnished "en boule" (the furniture suite for the study of the Grand Duchess made by Franz

Xaver Voertner in Munich)⁷. However, characteristically, the main reception enfilades were still dominated by the classicist line in different versions that were evolving continuously over twenty years and becoming more and more differentiated as the understanding of the inexorable march of historical distance sank in.

References

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- [7] *Ibid.*, p. 111.
- [8] The Olympic dinner service paintings served as a model for the décor of the walls of the Porcelain Study in the Yelagin Palace (Carlo Rossi, 1815) and White-columned Hall in the Mikhailovsky Palace (Carlo Rossi, 1819-25).
- [9] *Khudozhestvennaia gazeta*, Issue 1, 1837.
- [10] See I.K. Bott, M.I. Kaneva, *Russkaia mebel: Istoriia. Stili. Mastera* [Russian Furniture: History. Styles. Masters], Saint Petersburg: Iskusstvo-SPB, 2003, p. 261.
- [11] A.P. Bashutsky, *Op. cit.*, p. 161.
- [12] For details on the reference phenomenon in 19th-century culture see N.V. Sipovskaya, "Tsitata v russkoi kulture XIX" [References in 19th-century Russian Culture], in XIX vek: Tselostnost i protsess: Voprosy vzaimodeistviia iskusstv [19th Century: Integrity and Process: Questions of Interaction of the Arts]. Moscow: 2003, pp. 99-107.
- [13] This supposition was first made by T.V. Kudryavtseva. See T.V. Kudryavtseva, *Russkii imperatorskii farfor* [Russian Imperial Porcelain], Saint Petersburg, 2003, p. 132.

⁷ A similar suite was made by him to the design of Leo von Klenze for Queen Theresa's Toilet Room. The technique employed by the renowned furniture maker of Munich had nothing to do with the genuine technique of A.-C. Boulle, who used ebony, inlays of tortoiseshell and silver or gilt metal, and relief mounts of gilt bronze. From the 1840s this technique was imitated in various ways. Instead of expensive wood, stained pear tree wood or coloured walnut were used while tortoiseshell was replaced with coloured horn or even special synthetic paste. What is more, the term "Boule furniture" was applied at that time not only to furniture made in the traditional (albeit imitation) technique, but also to sheesham wood furniture with inlays of light wood and metal of two or three shades reminiscent of the French cabinetmaker's works in the density of the ornamental décor. That was precisely the technique employed by Voertner.

⁵ A dozen of lamps replicating the form of antique oil lamps, but with Kitner burners, adorned the gallery of Golitsyn-Stroganov Palace on the Maryino estate (currently at the State Hermitage).

⁶ The floor lamps were presented to the Grand Duchess for the 1844 Christmas. Originally intended for the Dance Hall, they were installed in the Raphael Gallery.