“Dear citizens and passengers! Under Article 171 of the Russian Penal Code, illegal entrepreneurship is punishable with a fine of up to 500 minimal salaries or up to a three-year prison term.”

The metallic, official voice droned out from the loudspeakers of the packed elektrichka as the train pulled away from Moscow’s Yaroslavsky train station. The objects of this dire warning—the ubiquitous train peddlers, were clearly unmoved. At every stop, more peddlers hop on board to work the cars and hawk their wares.

“Dear passengers! I submit for your consideration a new shoe shine cream which will help your leather footwear survive the hard frost and street slash. If someone is interested, I will approach him.”

While the shoe shine peddler walks the length of the car, a second merchant is already beginning his litany.

“Dear passengers! Here is a unique glue which can stick together pieces of wood, metal, rubber and what not…”

Potato peelers, cotton handkerchiefs, crossword collections, bottle openers, insider’s tips for gardeners … You name it, they sell it on the elektrichka to dacha goers and travelers. Luckily, one vendor offers a more mundane product—bottles of Yarpivo, a beer brewed in Yaroslavl, the terminus of this particular elektrichka route. Another offers a personal favorite: sukhariki, dried pieces of brown bread flavored with garlic—the ideal beer snack.

After my fifteen rubles end up in the pocket of the beer peddler, I realize I should have also bought one of the cheap bottle openers on offer (and, looking at my shoes, slopped from the muddy square at Yaroslavsky train station, some of the shoe polish would not have hurt either). Luckily, two empathetic fellow-travelers bustle to my rescue, popping open the precious Yarpivo with a well-practiced motion—prying it against the metal seat handle. Ah, the pleasures of collective traveling...

by mikhail ivanov

Above: Savva Mamontov, by Ilya Repin (1880). Right: Winter in Abramtscevo, the Church, by Valentin Serov (1886).
An hour and ten minutes out, I disembarked at Abramtsevo station, my mood perfectly softened for the 15 minute walk to the famous estate. A wide, well-trodden path leads from the train station into a fairy tale forest smelling richly of pine and echoing the songs of a winter bird choir. A forested hill on the left shore of the Vorya river is overgrown with old-style dachas from the 1930s-1950s—typical summer homes of the intelligentsia elite. Throughout the Soviet era, the cultural aura of Abramtsevo and its rural atmosphere attracted many artists, such as Igor Grabar and Vera Mukhina. In 1932, a “House of Rest for Creative Workers” was opened in Abramtsevo and many Soviet cultural celebrities came here. The writer Leonid Leonov lived in the former dacha of painter Vasily Polenov; cinema star Lyubov Orlova rested and worked here with her husband, film director Grigory Alexandrov.

In fact, in the late 1930s, Abramtsevo was a prestigious health resort: the sanitarium of Narkompros (the Ministry of Education) was located on the grounds of the former estate. During the Second World War, a military hospital was locat-
ed here. It was not until the 1950s that Abramtsevo was reopened as a museum.

Slowly, the dark forest gives way to the bright vista of a small river valley, accentuated by an immaculate snow. As you come out of the forest to the other, right shore of the river Vorya, you feel like a mole emerging into the sunlight. Cross the Vorya, climb a steep hill and you are standing at the iron facade of Abramtsevo Estate Museum.

Initially, the main purpose of my visit was to look at the nice samples of Russian izby (see story, page 22). The local Teremok and the wooden Artist’s Studio are stylized imitations of real peasant izby. But once I have arrived, a visit to the main mansion becomes unavoidable.

Abramtsevo estate originally belonged to the writer Sergei Aksakov. His family lived here up until 1870 when, due to financial difficulties, the writer’s daughter, Sofia Sergeevna, was forced to sell the estate to the young industrialist Savva Mamontov, for 15,000 rubles. Several rooms in the interior of the house still bear the imprint of the Aksakovs: family portraits, photos, furniture, a library and even the writer’s desk are religiously preserved.

...We are looking into buying a village near Moscow. The thought that you, my dear friend, will occasionally be our guest makes our seclusion much nicer in our eyes,” Aksakov wrote to his literary idol and friend Nikolai Gogol in the winter of 1843. By the fall, Aksakov had bought Abramtsevo.

The Chronicles of the Moscow State of the 16th century speak of “the empty site Obramok.” An obramok, according to Vladimir Dal’s dictionary, is a “frame or border,” in this case the border of a forest, a site on a hill. “Obramok” meant a hill amid thick forests, flanked on two or three sides by a stream or a river.

Hence the name of this place—Obramkovo, which, at the end of the 18th century, became the phonetically softened “Abramtsevo.”

The estate does not attract visitors for the beauty of its palaces or for splendid, European-style parks. Instead, there is the simpler, more sublime beauty of unpolished nature here. The ancient mansion where Sergei Aksakov lived from 1843 until his death in 1859 stands watch over the picturesque river Vorya.

Прекрасно местоположенье:
Гора над быстрою рекой
Заслонено от глаз селенье
Зеленой ощею густой.

“A great location, a hill upon a rapid river, a village hidden from the eyes by a thick green forest,” wrote Aksakov in an 1843 poem. “The little village of Abramtsevo is a nice corner on the shore of the river Vorya, near Khotkovsky monastery and not too far from the Troitse-Sergiyev Lavra,” the writer’s son Ivan later added.

Here in Abramtsevo the hospitable Aksakov hosted Gogol, Ivan Turgenev, the slavophile poet Aleksei Khomyakov and other cultural luminaries. Gogol (whose portrait hangs on the wall of the central mansion) visited Abramtsevo for the first time in 1849, and for the last time in 1851, just four months before his death. Gogol was deeply attached to Abramtsevo and Aksakov. It was here that he read a chapter from his second volume of Dead Souls, which he later burned. A copy of Dead Souls inscribed to Aksakov for the latter’s birthday is kept in the mansion-museum.

Turgenev visited Abramtsevo often in 1854-5, and he and Aksakov became close friends. The two writers shared a fervent love for hunting and Turgenev agreed to participate in Aksakov’s “Hunting...
“Almanac,” a collection of literary works on that theme.

Aksakov wrote his famous book Notes on Fishing (1847) here. The volume’s bright yet simple language won him many fans, even among readers who never held a fishing rod. In Maxim Gorky’s novel, Life of Klim Sangin, one of the heroes says: “You go read Aksakov’s Notes on Fishing—it’s addicting. An amazing book ...”

Aksakov’s other books included Family Chronicles, The Childhood Years of Bagrov the Grandson, and Memoirs, which was highly praised by Turgenev and Nikolai Nekrasov.

Aksakov was an honest and candid writer: as he admitted, he did not “possess the gift of pure invention” and could “write only based on reality, following the thread of true being.” He deprecated himself as a second-rate writer and felt his true vocation was to prepare the ground for “first class writers, great writers.”

Perhaps it was fitting, then, that Abramtsevo—Aksakov’s estate—became, after the author’s death, one of Russia’s most fertile grounds for artistic talent.

Under the ownership of Savva Mamontov, the famous Russian entrepreneur and art patron who also initiated the construction of several historic monuments in Moscow (namely the Metropol Hotel), Abramtsevo became a flourishing center for Russian culture and the visual arts.

The two writers shared a fervent love for hunting and Turgenev agreed to participate in Aksakov’s “Hunting Almanac.”

Turgenev (above, in a portrait painted by Vasily Perov, 1872) visited Abramtsevo often in 1854–5. He and Aksakov became close friends. The total artistic freedom and the warm atmosphere reigning in the Mamontov house, combined with the magnificence of the surrounding environment, were all conducive to the creation of artistic masterpieces. Polenov painted his famous landscapes here, Vasnetsov worked on his magical “Alyonushka,” Repin worked on his “Unexpected Guest.”

Last and certainly not least, in the canteen of the house, a young Valentin Serov painted a portrait of Mamontov’s elder daughter, Vera—a painting which
would become famous simply as “Girl with Peaches.”

The atmosphere in which this and other great works of art were created is religiously preserved at Abramtsevo. A copy of Serov’s painting hangs in the self-same canteen (the original is the State Tretyakov Gallery), outfitted with the same mahogany chairs; in the corner, by the entrance to the red guest room, is the statue of the grenadier, made by Sergiyev-Posad craftsmen and painted by Serov. On the wall hangs a majolica saucer by Vrubel.
Mamontov did more than simply preserve the estate he had purchased, enlarging the old _usadba_ considerably. In the park near the mansion, architect Viktor Hartman designed the Art Studio where Vasnetsov, Serov, Polenov and Repin all worked, but where, in later years, Vrubel reigned. In summer, this _izba_ became a sort of dormitory.

Not far from this beautiful example of a Russian _izba_ (with all the requisite wood carvings—a _konyok_, a _nalichnik_ and so on), stands the magical _Banya-Teremok_ (Teremok Bathhouse, photo center), conceived by the architect Ivan Ropet. In fact this _teremok_ is called a _banya_ because it was built on the site of Aksakov’s old bathhouse; it actually only ever served as a lodging. The interior features carved furniture designed by Polenov and his sister Elena.

As William Brumfield wrote in his book _A History of Russian Architecture_, “in its fanciful manner, the Teremok is a foretaste of the free-style, sculpted architecture at the turn of the century; and in this, it prefigures the design of the church at Abramtsevo, which unified the colony’s creative diversity.”

This Church of the Savior, more precisely “Savior-Not-Made-by-Hands” (Spas Nerukotvorny, see pages 45 and 46) exemplifies how concentrating the efforts of several artistic geniuses can create a true masterpiece. Vasnetsov designed the church and Polenov worked on the Icon of Christ the Savior above the entrance to the church. The museum guide makes a point of mentioning that the church was unveiled in 1882, on the day of Polenov’s wedding to his wife Natalia.

Vasnetsov used the design of a 12th century church near Novgorod, the Savior in Nereditsa, as his starting point for the Abramtsevo church. Yet he built on this tradition by incorporating into his design crafts and decor from different schools of architecture: stone carving typical of Vladimir, majolica decoration along the lines of Yaroslavl churches, and windows in the Moscow style. The church is small and cozy, and features the work of many artists: Repin worked on the Icon of the Savior, Polenov on the Annunciation Icon and The Last Supper; Vasnetsov painted the Icon of the Virgin (there is said to be a resemblance to the artist’s wife and two-year-old child in the work) and that of Saint Sergei Radonezhsky, in addition to designing the mosaic-tile floor; Antokolsky created a bas-relief in stone of the head of John the Baptist.

In 1891, a small chapel was added to the northern facade of the church following the tragic death of Mamontov’s son Andrei in his early 20s. Andrei was a talented youth who had graduated from the Moscow School of Art and Sculpture and Architecture and, together with Vasnetsov, painted the frescoes of the Vladimir cathedral in Kiev. He was buried in this chapel, as was Mamontov, who died in 1918.

As hard as it may be to believe, the contributions to Russian culture made by the Abramtsevo Art Colony go well beyond painting and church architecture. There were also contributions to woodworking, ceramics and the theater. Mamontov’s wife Elizaveta, together with Elena Polenova (the artist’s sister), worked actively in woodworking workshops Elizaveta set up here in 1885. Elizaveta’s two major goals were to help peasants’ children learn a profession—and thus secure additional sources of income (they were also given a full set of carving tools.
after graduating from a four year course of training), and to revive dying folk crafts. Elena became artistic director of the wood-carving workshop.

Many of the furniture pieces created in Elizaveta’s workshop—namely a desk given her as a birthday present by young craftsmen—now stand in the main mansion of the estate-museum. The success of the workshop was so great that wood carvings and furniture from Abramtselsevo became very popular with the Russian intelligentsia; a cupboard made in Abramtselsevo can be seen in the study of Anton Chekhov’s house in Yalta.

In 1890, Mamontov established a ceramics workshop in Abramtselsevo headed by technologist-ceramist P. K. Vaulin. Today, the estate displays Vrubel’s amazing ceramic works—his colored sculptures unite form and colors into a singular expression of his chosen theme. Vrubel also created original stove tiles for the main mansion. Many of his other ceramic masterpieces, such as Sadko, Lel and the Snow Maiden, were inspired by the music of Rimsky-Korsakov.

Yet it was in theatrical stagings that the multifaceted talents of these great Russian artists all flowed together into a sparkling river of talent. The artists would often gather in the mansion’s red guest room and read aloud the dramatic works of Pushkin, Lermontov, Tolstoy or Shakespeare. The local theater grew out of these readings, performing such works as Alexander Ostrovsky’s “Snow Maiden,” with stage decorations by Vasnetsov.

While Mamontov was himself often the director of these productions, it was the cousin of Mamontov’s wife Elizaveta, the young Konstantin Alexeev (the future Stanislavsky), whose participation might be said to have been most historic.
“Usually, plays were held during Christmas holidays,” Stanislavsky later recalled in an obituary to Mamontov read at a special ceremony at MKhAT in 1918. “Then, for a week or even two, the whole house was turned into theater workshops. ... In one room a canvass was unfolded for Vasily Polenov and he, helped by his young aide Konstantin Korovin, would prepare the decor for the first act. In the second room, Ilya Repin with an aide, say, Serov, would paint decorations for the second act. In the third room Viktor Vasnetsov and Vrubel would bustle ... Savva Ivanovich Mamontov would write the first act of the play, whose staging was hastily prepared upstairs ...” How interesting it is to hear “helped by his young aide Konstantin Korovin ...” from this vantage point in history, when the smallest sketch by Korovin could steal the show at any art auction ...

As I walked out of the mansion, overwhelmed by impressions, a group of rowdy high school students reminded me of my own teenage years as they shouted: “Let’s go see the izbushka na kurnikh nozhkakh!” The “izba on hen’s legs” is a mystical house that figures in many Russian fairy tales; it is the “headquarters” of the witch Baba Yaga who, before entering the izbushka would pronounce the same magic formula: “Izbushka-izbushka turn your back to the forest and your front to me.”

This fairy tale corner of the usadba not far from the Teremok was conceived by Viktor Vasnetsov with so much taste that the little izba became inseparable from the surrounding landscape. The izbushka has been a place of mirth, imagination and games for many generations of Abramtsevo residents and visitors.

I departed Abramtsevo with a feeling of light sadness, mixed with regret. The young guys I watched climb the fairy tale izbushka were about the same age as my children and here I had neglected to invite along my daughter Yevgeniya—a first year student at the Stroganov Art School by the way—to accompany me on this trip to the magical land of Russian art. Deep down, I guess I felt she would refuse the invitation, but then, that’s no excuse. Initiation to culture, as they say, sometimes takes a portion of pressure.

It is a sad commentary on our times that most Russian teens know less about Viktor Vasnetsov than about the “heroes” on the tasteless video-voyeur TV-program here, “Behind the Glass” (“Za Steklom”). That TV program, which followed the lives of teens with hidden cameras, was recently cancelled due to the “financial difficulties” of TV-6.

How quick we are to savor the sweetest, lowest-hanging “fruits” of Western culture, only to find out too late that they have such a bitter after-taste. How hard it seems to be to borrow the higher-hanging fruits, while building on our centuries-old cultural heritage. How quickly we forget our own folklore and the names of the talented ones who walked the pathways of Abramtsevo a century ago ...

What set me ruminating on these “heavy” themes was a framed quote hanging in the mansion (reprinted opposite page, top). It was by Alexander Koshelev, a noted slavophile and editor of Russkaya Beseda who frequently visited Aksakov. He wrote these words even before Mamontov gathered together the artist’s colony in Abramtsevo. They summarize well some of the tensions that have existed in Russian art and society for the last 200-odd years.

The elektrichka stopped abruptly during our return trip. Someone had pulled the

In sidebar at left, a collection of portraits of some of the Abramtsevo artists, done by their colleagues. From top: Konstantin Korovin, by Valentin Serov (1891); Valentin Serov, by Ilya Repin, Konstantin Stanislavsky by Valentin Serov (1908). Right: “March, 1895,” by Isaac Levitan.
emergency stop-kran because of a brawl in the neighboring car. The ticket controllers were calling for the militia, because a Russian “hare” (ticketless passenger) was trying to get off the train en route to Moscow without paying the fine. Needless to say, this woke me from my philosophical meanderings and led me to search frantically for my own round-trip ticket (which cost me all of 48 rubles — $1.50).

In point of fact, it is pretty difficult to travel like a “hare” on the elektrichkas traveling to and from Moscow these days. There are entry and exit turnstiles that open only on insertion of special, bar-coded tickets. It is a smart innovation borrowed by our railway system from Western Europe which, despite high initial costs, is surely paying for itself.

This is what I call “making the best use of what was developed in the West” to solve a specifically Russian problem — cracking down on unscrupulous passengers who would not buy a ticket unless state-of-the-art equipment forced them to. And it is an innovation that Savva Mamontov, railway entrepreneur, would surely smile upon. RL

*Ivan Rybakov’s In the Land of Radonezh was an invaluable resource in the author’s preparation of this story.*

“They were expecting light to come only from the West; they sang praise to whatever existed there, tried to imitate whatever was established there, but then forgot that we have our own mind, our local, time-related spiritual and physical specifics and needs ... We never refused the great discoveries and perfections made in the West; we did find it necessary to learn everything they developed there and to make use of quite a lot from this. But we do find it best to filter everything through our own reason...”

—Alexander Koshelev