

Bringing Traditional Russian Art to the States

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Anastasia Gudkova, an instructor at the Vladimir Municipal Children's Art Institute, spent two weeks this past summer in the U.S. teaching American students and teachers about traditional Russian art and its role in Russian culture. She conducted programs at Mahomet-Seymour High School in Mahomet, Illinois, and at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The program, entitled "Bridging Cultures Through Art," was made possible by a grant from the Mahomet-Seymour Schools Foundation and coordinated through the American Home. The Russian, East European, and Eurasian Center at the University of Illinois provided additional support for teacher instruction.

The idea for "Bridging Cultures" was conceived by me and my fellow Mahomet-Seymour teacher Sherri Polaniecki after we both returned from Fulbright trips abroad in the summer of 2004. I visited Vladimir Oblast, where I stayed with Ms. Gudkova's family, and Sherri Polaniecki visited areas of Japan and China. We were impressed with how the rich cultural heritage of the regions we visited had been preserved through art, and felt that American students could learn about those cultures through exposure to that art. We were successful in securing grant funding for a two-week summer program for which art teachers from Russia and China would come to Mahomet and provide instruction in the traditional art of their respective cultures. Visa difficulties prevented the Chinese artist from participating, but through the guidance and expertise of Alexei Altonen and Oxana Ustinova of The American Home, Anastasia easily obtained a visa and arrived in Illinois for her two-week stay in June.

Classes focused on traditional art such as matryoshka dolls, folk art embroidery, and painting techniques for Gzhel-style pottery and Khokhloma serving ware. Each style was introduced through an explanation of its origins, purposes, and artistic techniques. Anastasia also explained to the older students how recent changes in Russia have begun to alter traditional art. She cited the example of how, until the increased effort to sell to foreign tourists in the late 1980's, matryoshka dolls were produced in a few very distinct styles that included reds, yellows, black, and glazed natural wood colors which were used for painting traditional maidens dressed in scarves and flowered blouses and skirts. She explained that in recent years the traditional doll themes have given way to representations of fancily dressed figures, politicians, and even Western sports stars, hastily painted for the tourist trade.

In part because Americans have fewer traditional folk art themes than Europeans, students found experimenting with Russian folk art to be a rewarding experience. Students ranged in age from nine to fifteen, and came from Mahomet, Champaign, and Urbana. Five of the students were originally from Russia, and came to the classes seeking to learn more about the art of their culture of origin.

Anastasia also gave a presentation as a part of a curriculum workshop sponsored by the Russian, East European, and Eurasian Center at the University of Illinois. This is a six-

day program held each summer in which Social Studies and Art teachers from all over the U.S. gather to develop ideas for incorporating Russian history and culture into their curriculum. Her presentation focused on how traditional art is being taught in Russia today, but also included explanations of the origins of various forms of folk art. Teachers showed great interest in her presentation. However, as one might expect from a group of Social Studies teachers, one of the first questions was not about art, but rather, what she thought of Putin.

A four-day stay with watercolor artist Charlotte Neismith Brady and trips to Chicago and Indianapolis rounded out Anastasia's American visit. She toured the Eiteljorg Museum of Western and Native American Art in Indianapolis, where exhibits ranging from Native American ceremonial objects to works by Georgia O'Keef and C.M. Russell were on display. Brady is a well-known Midwestern artist whose work has been displayed throughout the U.S. and in Italy. She is also a former art teacher in the Mahomet-Seymour school system.

The Bridging Cultures program was a success, with those participating expressing satisfaction over their newly acquired knowledge and skills. Anastasia did an outstanding job of condensing information into the time allowed for each session, so students could get the most out of their experience. Through her efforts, Russian art now means far more to these students than just pictures in books. Anastasia's contribution to cultural instruction will continue through the large collection of instructional resources she left with the Mahomet-Seymour Schools, and through her teacher workshop. It is hoped that she will be able to return and once again share her knowledge with American students and teachers.