

CHAPTER X

ARCHITECTURE

IN the field of architecture Russia has displayed real originality and can point in the churches of her ancient towns and of various remote villages to a number of master-

Architecture. pieces. There have been relapses and breaches of continuity here, too, but the interruptions in development have not been so serious and have not had such lasting effects as has been the case in painting. There is a distinct affinity between certain phases of ancient and certain phases of modern Russian architecture, an affinity independent of any desire to imitate. Perhaps this comparative consistency in architectural development is due to the fact that natural features, scenery, landscape, exercise a more directly determinative influence upon architecture than upon the other arts.

Russian architecture at its best does harmonise in the most striking manner with the Russian landscape. There are no bold crags crowned by beetling fortresses. The *Kreml*, the burg or citadel of the older Russian towns is usually situated on a mound or, at the most, a hill of no great height, and does not stand out aggressively from its natural setting of river and plain. And even where citadels occupy an elevated and conspicuous position as in Kiev and Nizhni-Novgorod, they do not challenge, as the traveller approaches them from the river ; they rather delight by their picturesqueness, and the domination they express over the surrounding plain seems to be rather contemplative than militant. The churches harmonise with the forests in whose shadows they stand, and lying low upon the plain, lacking the stern splendour, the tense aspiration of Gothic cathedrals, they are the fitting temples of a religion that has in it a great deal of warm

humanness ; they are havens of brief refuge from the vast expanse with its problems that have no end and no solution.

Practically all that is left of ancient Russian architecture is the churches. But there are many of these, and they are splendid monuments to the genius of their builders. Byzantine models were soon adapted to Russian taste, and it is **remarkable** that this nationalisation of ecclesiastical architecture by the Russians of the eleventh and twelfth centuries did not lead to degeneration. In fact, judging by the severity of taste displayed in the older churches of Novgorod, the Russians of that period, at any rate in Novgorod, were by no means such barbarians as they are commonly considered to have been. It was in Novgorod that the Russians began to build after their own mind, and the Novgorod of to-day with its scores of white churches by river and lake-side is a veritable museum of Russian ecclesiastical architecture. The sister republic of Pskov also took an active share in the development of this form of art.

The oldest of the Novgorod churches, the Cathedral of St. Sophia, which crowns the Kremlin on the right bank of the river as one approaches from the St. Petersburg side, was erected just before the Norman conquest of England by Greek builders from Byzantium, on the model partly of St. Sophia in Constantinople, partly of the church of the same name erected a few years before that time in Kiev. What most impresses the observer in this ancient church is the arrangement of the five cupolas, the larger dome in the centre being flanked by four others so gently varying in height as to create a delightful effect of free movement tending to a perfect harmony. The interior is that of a typical Byzantine church. The Russian builders who made their appearance in the twelfth century and naturally learned their craft from **Greek masters did not attempt to copy St. Sophia.** The Church of the Nativity of the Virgin in the Monastery of St. Anthony, and the Church of St. George in the monastery of **the** same name on Lake Ilmen, which date from the twelfth

century are, in all probability, the work of a Russian architect, and these churches present the characteristic features of Novgorod architecture, namely, severe simplicity, absence of ornamentation, bold, clear outline and a fine sense of the beauty of line and proportion, with walls that depend for their effect on mere massiveness modified by a straight line or a curve in just the right place. In the churches built in Novgorod and the surrounding region during the following centuries by princes, bishops, abbots, and merchants this type of beauty is strictly adhered to. Sometimes the churches are large and imposing, sometimes they are snug and tiny chapels. But their charm lies in their sobriety, their restraint, in the quiet confidence of their builders in the absolute beauty of bold outlines. This severity has a northern almost a Protestant quality, and the Novgorod churches represent what could be made of Byzantine architecture after its possibilities had been considered by men accustomed to see beauty in the mere whiteness and expanse of snow and an infinity of pale sky.

The Kiev region did not succeed in its early period in making an important original contribution to the development of Russian architecture. Its churches were built by Greeks, and the consistent warfare with the nomads culminating in the devastating Tartar invasion prevented the rise of a school of native architects. It was in the Vladimir-Suzdal region and later in Moscow that the work begun in Novgorod was continued. The banks of the Upper Volga from Rybinsk down to near Nizhni-Novgorod are dotted with delightful churches of the Suzdal period. The most beautiful of these churches, that of the Intercession of the Virgin, is on the river Nerli near Vladimir, a simple church with one cupola, amazing in its lightness, its fine proportion, and the gracefulness of its outline. In the Suzdal region the severity of the Novgorod style gradually yielded to a taste for ornament, said to be due to French and Italian influences, for the Princes of Vladimir, for all their remoteness,

maintained a certain connection with the West and summoned to their aid Italian masters. Some of the churches in Vladimir and in the quaint little town of Rostov, in the government of Yaroslavl, represent the new developments in ecclesiastical architecture, developments which are reflected again in the churches in the Kremlin in Moscow.

Another very important type of building, the wooden church, had its origin in the northern forests where stone, bricks, and plaster were very difficult to obtain. These wooden churches acquired a style of their own. They were the result of the application of traditional architectural principles to the new material. A considerable number of these wooden churches are still to be seen along the rivers in the governments of Vologda, Olonets, and Archangel. Many devoted, able, and well-known builders must have exercised their wits in devising churches which, built of material so different from that of the mother churches in Novgorod, should yet be worthy of their aim. They did succeed in creating a new and, in many respects, a beautiful type. There are records which show that these buildings awakened ardent popular interest and affection. An interesting story has been handed down of the completion by a "master" unnamed of the wooden Cathedral of the Resurrection in Kola on the White Sea, which was burned down by a British squadron in 1854. When the cathedral was built, declares the legend, the master summoned the people to watch him place the cross in position. He set up the cross in due order, and then descended from the steeple. "Now," he cried, "follow me to the river Tuloma." The people followed him. On the river-bank the master pulled his axe from his belt and hurled it into the river, crying, "There has never been such a master in the world, and now there never will be." After that day he remained deaf to all pleading and never built a church again. There are hints of fierce party struggles and feuds in the matter of architecture in those dense northern forests.

M. Grabar, whose great service it is to have called serious

attention to these neglected wooden churches, points to a group of such churches at Iurom on the river Mezen in the Archangel government, as being particularly imposing on account of the relentless severity of their contours. But this architecture in wood is not only interesting on its own account. It is important as determining a stage in the development of a native Russian style. The necessities of building in wood led to the substitution of steeples usually of octagonal form for the Byzantine cupolas. And the adoption of this type of steeple in the churches of the Moscow region led to the construction of some of the finest monuments of ecclesiastical architecture in Russia, notably the churches in the village of Ostrov and in Kolomenskoe, near Moscow, and much later, towards the end of the seventeenth century, to the erection of that marvellously complex and tantalisingly beautiful product of Russian architectural genius, the church at Fili, also in the neighbourhood of Moscow.

But Muscovite architecture was by no means a pure resultant of the Novgorod style and that of the wooden churches of the North. The taste for external ornamentation was freely indulged in. Oriental influences found their way in from the Tartar East and induced in some cases a barbaric profusion of ornament. There were attempts to return to pure Byzantine tradition, and war was declared on the steeple in the name of the cupola. There was a confusion of taste, and that curious Church of St. Basil, near the Kremlin, with its strange jumble of roofs and cupolas, which is so often regarded as typically Russian, really represents a capricious and disorderly mixture of many styles. The persecution of the Old Believers and the prohibition to build churches for the celebration of their ritual caused a serious check in the development of Russian ecclesiastical architecture, and with Peter the Great the period of impetuous absorption of Western influences began. Ecclesiastical architecture has never recovered the position it lost in Russia at the beginning of the eighteenth century.

The great builders after Peter were Catherine and Alexander I. Foreign architects were imported, and Russians and foreigners brought up in Russia were sent abroad for training. The most famous of the Russianised foreign architects under Catherine was Rastrelli, who built the Tsarskoe Selo Palace, the Winter Palace in part, and also the fine Smolny convent in St. Petersburg. Catherine had a passion for magnificence. She built palaces herself and insisted on her nobles building them, and the result of her efforts was that splendid edifices with Roman columns arose on estates hundreds of miles distant from any centre of civilisation. The taste of the period was for Roman classic architecture, and Roman columns became the rule in the country houses of the gentry. There is a fine example of a colonnade in the Catherine hall of the Taurida Palace built by Starov in 1783. A Scotchman named Cameron designed for Catherine Roman baths and a number of interesting buildings in Tsarskoe Selo and Pavlovsk.

Under Alexander I Russian architecture rose to the highest point it has reached in modern times. It was in this reign that St. Petersburg became a really beautiful city. Most of what delights the eye by its majesty, its splendid proportion in the streets and squares and buildings near the Winter Palace and the Neva owes its origin to the powerful impulse given in this reign. The Kazan Cathedral with its Doric colonnade and the columned portico of the Institute of Mines, both the work of Voronihin, originally a serf of Count Stroganov's, the imposing St. Petersburg Bourse by Tomon, and Zaharov's Admiralty, unique in its combination of grace and strength, are worthy monuments of a brilliant epoch. The impulse given in Alexander's reign continued to operate in the reign of Nicholas I, and expresses itself in such buildings as Rossi's Senate and Alexandra Theatre, and to a much slighter extent in the massive St. Isaac's Cathedral, the work of Monferrant. The architects of the period of Catherine and Alexander I, whatever their origin and their training,

were all caught in a powerful movement which was essentially Russian and which caused them to create out of various elements a style that was distinct from them all.

But in the reign of Nicholas I this thoroughly sound and genuinely national movement was checked by the rise of a pseudo-Russian tendency in architecture. Official nationalism insisted on a return to purely national models, with disastrous results. There was a sudden collapse in taste. A German named Thon covered the Empire with churches in a would-be Russian style, many of which disfigure the landscape to this day. In Moscow where, after the Great Fire, a number of fine private houses had been built by such architects as Bove and Gilardi, the pseudo-national tendency not only marred the quaint harmony of the ancient churches by the erection of such buildings as the Church of the Saviour on the Moskva river; it brought into existence a number of merchants' residences that are depressing in their unintelligent parade of fragments of hopelessly incongruous styles. In St. Petersburg the mere gaudiness of pseudo-nationalism had little place. Dullness prevailed, and street after street of square buildings wholly devoid of any architectural interest whatever bore witness to the failure of genuine national impulse in architecture. This melancholy state of affairs lasted until about the beginning of the present century.

Happily the general revival in art has wrought a change in architectural conditions, and the streets of the capitals are losing their monotony of cheerless fronts. There is no sign of a real revival in ecclesiastical architecture, indeed such a revival would clearly be impossible apart from the return of an age of faith. But a new spirit is making itself felt in the construction of private houses and business buildings. Many new private houses in Moscow reflect a refinement of taste, and a number of handsome bank buildings have been erected in St. Petersburg. In many streets the elegance of the new buildings only serves to emphasise the heavy dullness of those erected in the 'eighties and the 'nineties.

Moscow is fortunate in having very fixed popular habits and clearly-marked tastes of its own, and the very determination of the Muscovites to live in the way they find most comfortable, whatever the aesthetic watchword of the day may be, gives the average Moscow house, hidden away in some narrow winding side street, the charm of sheer naturalness and makes Moscow the most picturesque city in the Empire.

There is one melancholy feature in the history of Russian architecture, and that is the surprising indifference shown until very lately to the relics of the work of devoted artists that lie scattered about over the plain. Even distinguished architects like Guarengi, who was employed by Catherine, have not escaped incomprehensible neglect, and of the magnificent palace he erected for Count Cyril Razumovsky in the Chernigov government only the ruins of a gigantic portico remain. Palaces and country houses are forsaken, rifled and suffered to fall into ruin. Unique specimens of the work of a talented architect are repaired out of all recognition. Quaint churches are pulled down to make room for the futile creations of the pseudo-nationalist schools. Efforts are being made to check this vandalism. The Imperial Archaeological Society maintains a constant search for ancient treasures. But it is the period nearer at hand that suffers most, the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, and it seems impossible to hope that the indifference displayed towards the more obscure but valuable work of this period will disappear until the general level of taste has been very considerably raised. Fortunately, there is a very strong movement amongst artists with the object of rescuing what still remains, and an admirable monthly, called *Starie Gody* (The Years of Old), is specially devoted to the work of arousing a real and intelligent interest in all the art of the past from architecture to embroidery.