



*The painted wooden door, 92x 67cm, with an image of a lion, is a fragment of the Komi-zyranian housing interior with a painted decoration.
Image: Irina Zemtsova*

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A Unique Finding of a Lion, that had been Hiding for a Long Time

Our life sometimes surprises us. In May 2018, while taking part in the summer school, I have made a unique finding: a painted wooden door with an image of a Lion. The unusual finding was made on an unusual occasion. This was a cold day with a strong northern wind and the working programme did not include the search for ethnographic material. We travelled to one of the villages of the Knazhpogost District, Komi Republic, Russia, to meet local people and to visit the local attraction: the wooden chapel of the Entry of the Holy Theotokos, which was build in 1838. After a tour through the village and a photo session, all the participants assembled in one of the houses to meet the oldest inhabitant of this village. I did not stay there for a long time because the house, clean and freshly painted inside and outside, could not give me anything in terms of visual ethnography. I had been slowly ascending a dirty road toward our bus, when my eyes caught a pink spot against a dark wooden wall of another village house. When I came close, I saw a wooden door which closed the entrance to the basement. The owner of the house, a nice woman whom I already know, came out of the house and said: "You can take the door if You need it". Since that time, I kept being impressed by this amazing occasion which did not only gave me new ethnographic material, but also provided me an opportunity to meet the past.

The item I found is a fragment of the Komi-zyranian housing interior with a painted decoration. The decoration of this kind was widely spread in the North of Russia since the 18th till the early 20th century. It is still poorly studied, particularly in the territory of modern Komi Republic. Many researchers of the traditional folk art even insist that this kind of decoration have never existed here.

It was only in July, when my classes in the University finished and I took my vacation, that I had a chance to study my finding in more details. With a help of my daughter Tatiana, a professional furniture renovator, I managed to fix the ink layer: this layer was partly lost and continued to flake. The careful examination of the item has shown the following:

The door 92 X 67 cm was made of 3 wooden planks fixed "in quarter". These planks were 3 cm thick and they were kept together by another 2 planks. The item is in satisfactory condition: the construction is strong, and the planks do not fall apart. The lower part of the door has been cut of: a part of their

decorative framework is missing. The painting was in unsatisfactory condition. The layer of ink was flaking, and the background painted in dark red was visible. The careful study, which I was able to do after the ink layer was fixed, revealed elements of another ink layer over the painting. This probably means that the painting was over-painted by a layer of brown ink. The long-term environmental impact (rain, snow, temperature fluctuations) caused this layer to flake and now we can see the original painting which was hidden under this upper layer for a long time.

The painting was made by a Free-Brush-Method. It features the graphic image of a Lion as the central element. The composition consists of a floral motive: a “tree” which grows from the lower part of the door making 2 symmetrical branches making up a circle, a kind of wreath surrounded by a several other circles of different colours. This so-called compositional circle is situated in the lower half of the door.

A Lion image is situated above the circle just described. The Lion is jumping, its mouth is open wide showing the blue tongue. The image is made in graphic manner using a black contour line and painted



The composition consists of a floral motive: a “tree” which grows from the lower part of the door. Image; Irina Zemtsova

white inside. The details of tail brush and of the mane represent small black semicircles. Despite the threatening open mouth, the image looks more like a domestic dog protecting its territory. The painting is made against a dark red background and put into a blue framework with semicircles in the corners. The branches of the tree have yellow and turquoise brushstrokes on them probably depicting leaves. The additional details in all parts of the composition are drawn with black colour. The technical and artistic techniques show the high level of professionalism of the artist. I suggest that the painting was made by a traveling artist who came from another region, probably from Vyatka or Kostroma. In 2009 I accompanied students in a practice tour to the Kirov area and had a chance to visit the local museum. There I saw fragments of house interior paintings made by the local folk artists. These paintings had much in common with my finding.

It is interesting to speculate about the semantic meaning of the Lion and of the floral motive, so-called “tree of life” in the painting. In Russia, the Lion image originally signified the orthodox faith. The Lion, the strong and horrible king of animals, signifies the power of church and the Tzar. On the other hand, this is a rather ambivalent symbol which, on one hand, signifies Christ the Protector, but on the other hand, can be related to the dark negative force: the Lion is closely related to the concept of death and to the image of Satan.

The lion images on church walls, window covers, entrance doors, wardrobes and chests had a protective function. Here the “king of animals” is often depicted in threatening postures: it is often standing on its hind legs, its mouth full of sharp teethes is open wide, sometimes it is smiling. However, the image hardly can scare someone: the lion’s body shape looks like that of a dog: of course Russian artists met dogs much more frequently than lions (if ever). Such images are particularly abundant in the stone décor of the St. Dmitry Church in Vladimir, where lions represent heraldic symbols together with centaurs, griffons and eagles. This church was built in 1194 – 1197 by the great prince Vsevolod Yurivich the Big Nest to celebrate his heaven patron st. Dmitry of Solun. Later the image of lion came to be used as one of the symbols of the Tsar power.

The second element, the floral motive, was also popular in folk paintings. The images of a tree branch or a sprout coming out from the lower part of an item (i.e. from the ground) have been used everywhere in Russia, from Onega till Siberia.

The finding from the Middle Otlá village represent the second unique item of folk art I have found in the Komi Republic in the last few years. The fragments of the peasant house interior in the collections of the National Museum of the Komi Republic and the Vazhgort historical museum differ significantly in their compositions, colour palette and drawing techniques. The rarity of such finding is explained by the fact, that, since the early 20th century, the villagers used wallpaper. Later it became fashionable to paint interior of the house and many decorations of the house interior are now hidden under layers of the new ink. Therefore, these decorations are inaccessible for an examination. The new findings open new pages of the traditional folk art of northerners. The mysteries that have been hidden for so long time need to be exposed and carefully studied.