

## Russian Decorative Art

### THE NEW MOVEMENT IN RUSSIAN DECORATIVE ART. BY NETTA PEACOCK.

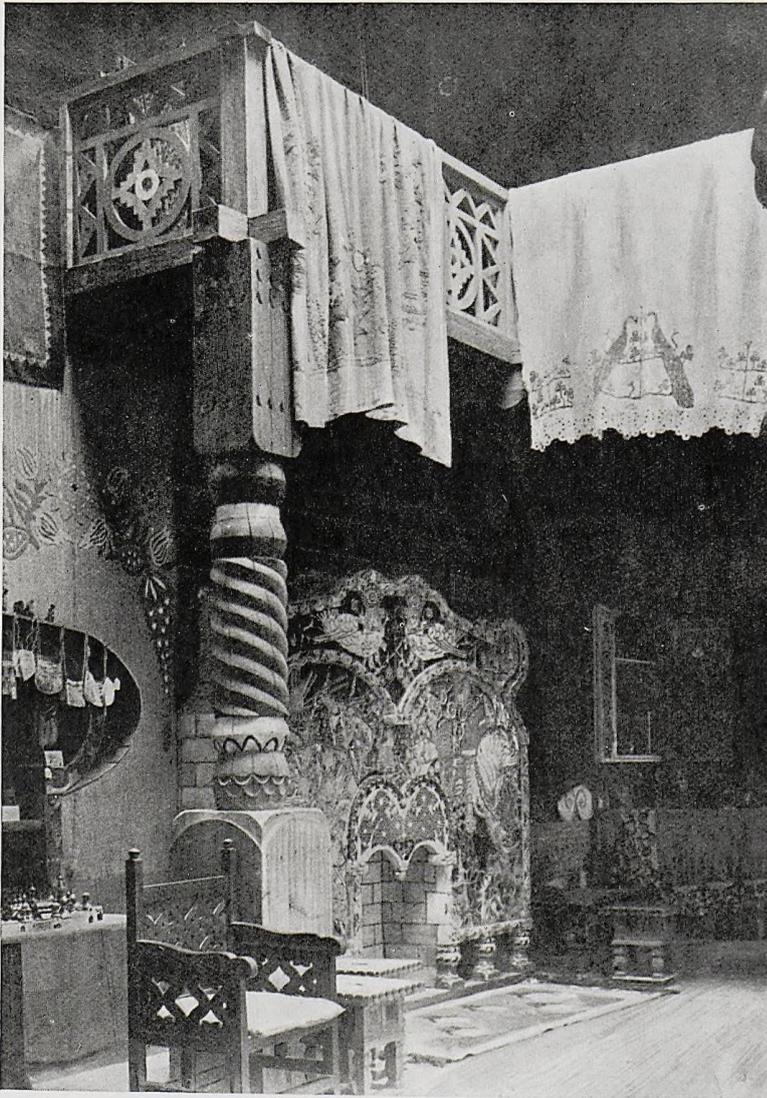
UNTIL last summer, when one of the artistic successes of the Exhibition in Paris was scored by the Russian Rural Industries and—what one must call, for want of a better term—the New Russian Decorative Art, the majority of Western Europeans had but little notion of the artistic genius of this people. It was a happy idea on the part of the organising committee to exhibit the two side by side, thus giving those interested the opportunity of judging for themselves how perfectly in har-

mony with the decorative feeling of the peasant the new movement is.

Helen Polénoff (whose death two years ago proved so great a loss to Russian art) was the first to realise that the decorative art of a country should express popular thought in popular language, and that if not expressive of the instinctive feeling of a people it lacked distinction and was of value only as suitable design, but not otherwise. With the knowledge she possessed of the history and archæology of her own land, she soon made herself mistress of the peculiarities and characteristics of peasant production, and thoroughly imbued her own original compositions with the national stamp.

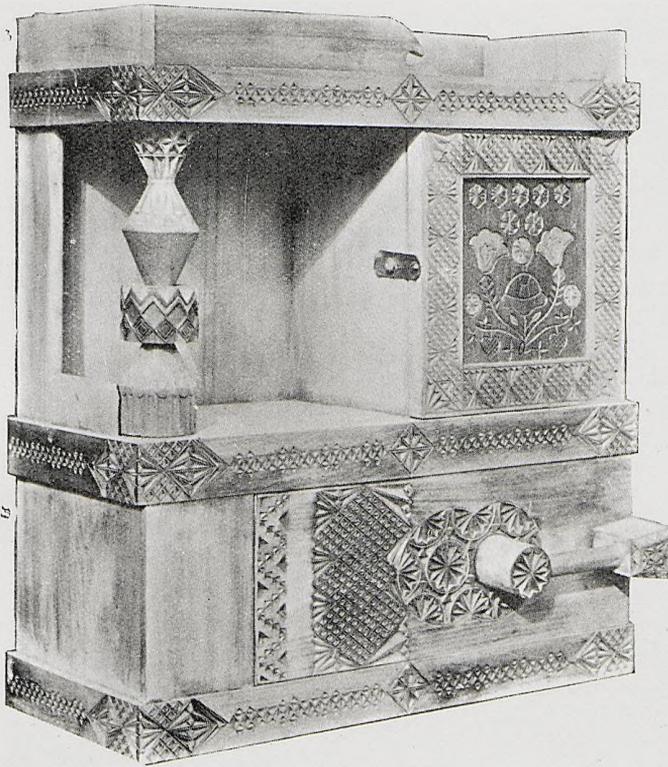
She led the way, and gradually became the guiding and informing spirit of a small group of Moscovite artists who turned their attention towards decoration with such success that the movement they started is likely to grow rapidly in importance and is bound, sooner or later, to make its influence felt beyond its own country.

The future of this decoration, which appeals both to the eye and to the fancy, lies in the fact that it deals more with colour than it does with line, and, with rare exceptions, deals with simple subjects simply treated. It seeks its inspiration in the very heart of life—in nature as seen through the eyes of the peasant, who is free from all the conventionalities of civilisation, and whose eye is unspoilt by the constant contemplation of the ugliness which is so unsparingly distributed around us. The real poetry of life is the peasant's birthright—he is in ceaseless intercourse with the splendour and mystery of ever-changing nature,



INTERIOR OF RUSSIAN BUILDING AT THE PARIS  
EXHIBITION WHERE THE NEW DECORATION WAS SHOWN

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ÉTAGÈRE

DESIGNED BY HELEN POLÉNOFF

thread, the designs over a hundred years old, which are regularly handed down from mother to daughter. It is generally admitted that the embroidery and drawn-thread work furnish what is most characteristic, original, and important in old Russian art; but for quaintness and exquisite appropriateness their wood objects cannot be beaten. In the shape of the various vessels, as well as in their decoration, we feel that wood is a familiar and loved possession of this people, who still remain carvers rather than carpenters, preferring their primitive tools to any modern inventions in the labour-saving direction, when by chance they happen to meet with these.

With more than half of the enormous peasant population turning out domestic utensils and woven materials which are perfect treasures from the artistic point of view—though they are certainly far from “correct,” or what we call “finished”—it is not surprising that the group of Muscovite artists (including such well-known

therefore his art is spontaneous, sane, vigorous, and serene.

It may seem strange when writing of decorative art to refer to the Russian peasant; but, in order to understand the origin of this movement, it is necessary to realise the importance of the Rural Industries to lovers of all that is genuinely Russian. Through these the earliest expression of Russian art has been preserved intact. In some few villages near the large towns modifications may be observable; but in the depths of the country, as the peasant's forefather felt and expressed in by-gone days, so does he feel and express to-day. In other countries the rapid development of machinery and the intrusion of the railway has effectually wiped out cottage industries, except in some remote spots. In Russia the long period of intense cold which prevails all over the northern portion obliges the peasant to have some indoor occupation; instinctively, therefore, he decorates the material at hand, which he turns into the necessary utensils for daily use, disposing of these at the village fair, or, more rarely, at the nearest town. The women spin, weave, and dye their linen and woollen goods with vegetable dyes; they copy on their chemises—high-necked, long-sleeved garments—either in embroidery or drawn-



EMBROIDERY

DESIGNED BY N. DAVIDOFF

EXECUTED BY THE WOMEN OF SOLOMENKA

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COLOURED CARVED WOOD PANEL

BY CONSTANTINE KOROVIN

names as Helen Polénoff, Marie Jacouchikoff-Wéber, Nathalie Davidoff, Victor Vasnietzoff, Constantine Korovin, Alexander Golovin, M. Vroubel, and Sergius Malioutin) should have been roused to enthusiasm and fired with the desire to strike out on new lines. Quite unconsciously, for they are no theorists, they were actuated by two motives—the one a genuine love of their popular art, and the other the fear that the building of manufactories in the large towns would gradually kill the art crafts of the villages. By the different

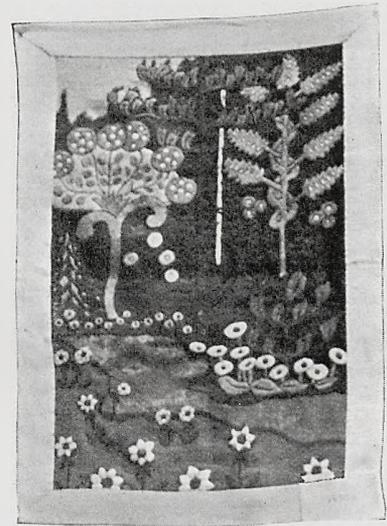
members of this group nearly every form of decoration is expressed (I use the word decoration in its broadest sense, as opposed to applied orna-



EMBROIDERED PANEL

DESIGNED BY V. VANISSETZOFF

(By permission of H.I.H. The Grand Duchess Sergius)



EMBROIDERY BY NATHALIE DAVIDOFF

ment)—frescoes, furniture, pottery, embroidery, enamelling, book-covers and illustrations, wall-papers, toys, etc. Naturally, the artistic expression of each individual artist is largely influenced by his temperament. Some of them have cast off all restraint and indulge in almost riotous design; others accentuate the rugged, strenuous side; while the work of others, again, is remarkable for its reticence and delight of form and tone. So thoroughly have they impregnated themselves with the spirit of legend and fairytale as still told by the poet-peasant, so genuinely do they feel the absorbing charm of that atmosphere of old-world simplicity, with all that it contains of dreamlike and weird reality—its mingled fancy

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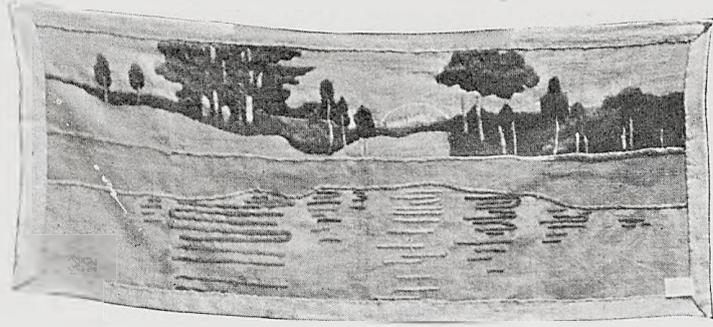
and belief—that their designs are distinctly national both in feeling and colour. This new movement is, in fact, an exaltation of the popular genius; and the designs of the artists are so perfectly executed because they answer to the inborn æsthetic sense of the village artisan.

It was in 1884 that Helen Polénoff first turned her attention towards design. This step was partly suggested to her by the fact that a friend, Mrs.

E. Mamontoff, was starting a school at her country place, Abramtsevo (near Moscow), to train peasant

boys to greater efficiency in wood-carving, so that they might have regular employment during the

winter months. The question arising as to designs for which there would be a demand (the intention being to dispose of the work in Moscow), Mrs. Mamontoff and Miss Polénoff decided to visit the surrounding villages for specimens of old wood utensils. Within a very short time they had gathered together a large and most interesting collection of salt-boxes, spoons, water-scoops, etc., from which Miss Polénoff sought inspiration before beginning her own compositions. So complete was her sympathy with and understanding of the artistic expression of the peasant, that the boys in the school took special pleasure in executing her designs, which were so akin to all they had been familiar with from earliest childhood. Two of her designs for carved wood, executed at the Abramtsevo school, are shown here (pp. 269 and 274). The shapes of étagère and settle are not copies from any existing pieces of furniture—for peasants possess no such luxuries—but they



EMBROIDERY

BY NATHALIE DAVIDOFF



"THE LOST CHILD"  
BY MARIE JACOUNCHIKOFF-WEBER

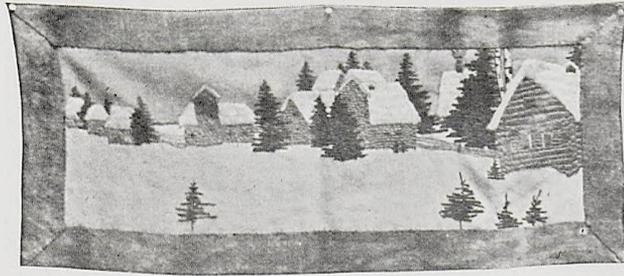
LINEN APPLIQUÉ PANEL

## Russian Decorative Art

are thoroughly Russian in construction, ornamentation and colouring; the latter, unfortunately, black-and-white has no power to convey. The horses' heads, as arms to the settle, are very distinctive;

the horse—the peasant's best friend, the faithful companion of the hero of epic legend—figures constantly on all kinds of objects, in an endless variety of shapes and attitudes, some of the old wood toy-horses bearing a strong resemblance to those met with on old Cypriot pottery.

The peasant-women of the village of Solomenka, in the government of Tamboff, have, so far, executed all the designs for embroidery of the members of this group, with the exception of the large panel



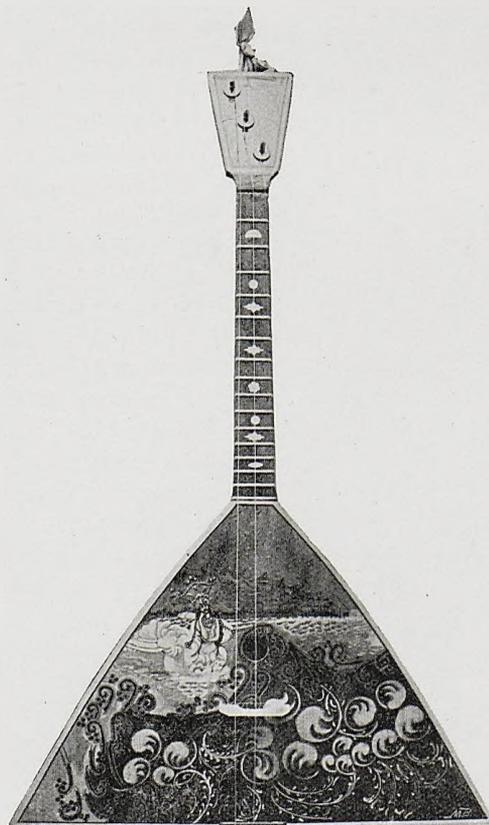
EMBROIDERY

BY NATHALIE DAVIDOFF

(p.270), especially designed for the purpose by V. Vasnietzoff, and worked by the ladies of Moscow for H.I.H. the Grand-Duchess Sergius, President of the Exhibition Committee of Russian Rural Industries.

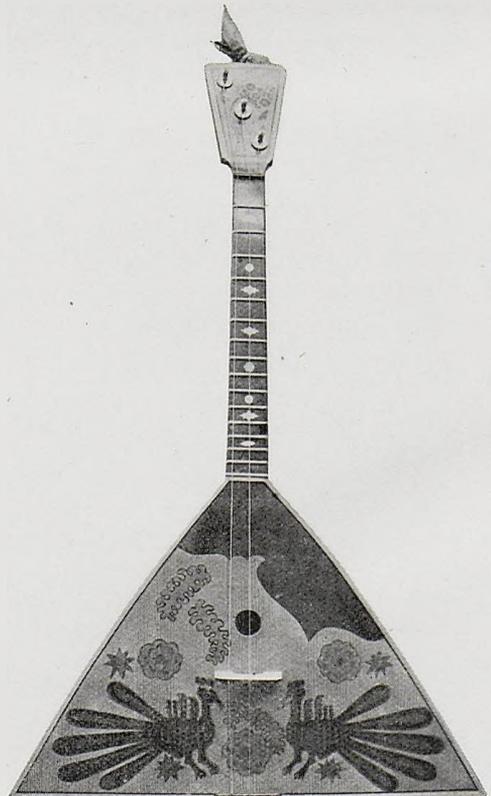
The personal interest taken in the new decoration by the Grand-Duchess and her sister, the Tsaritsa, has undoubtedly contributed largely to its success. Among the many acquisitions of the two sisters was an embroidered panel sent to the late Queen Victoria by her granddaughter, the Grand-Duchess.

It was when visiting the village of Solomenka in 1891 (the year of the great famine) to see what could be done for the starving peasants, that Mrs. Vladimir Jacouchikoff, seeing how clever they were with their needles, resolved to help them to



BALALAÏKA

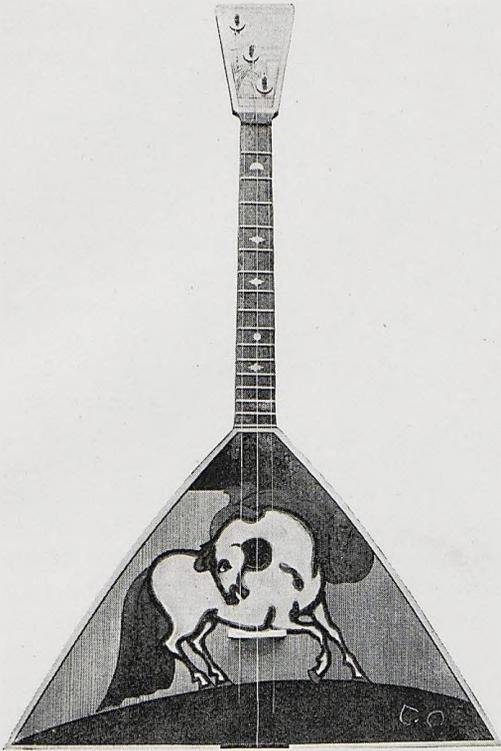
DECORATED BY M. VRAUBEL



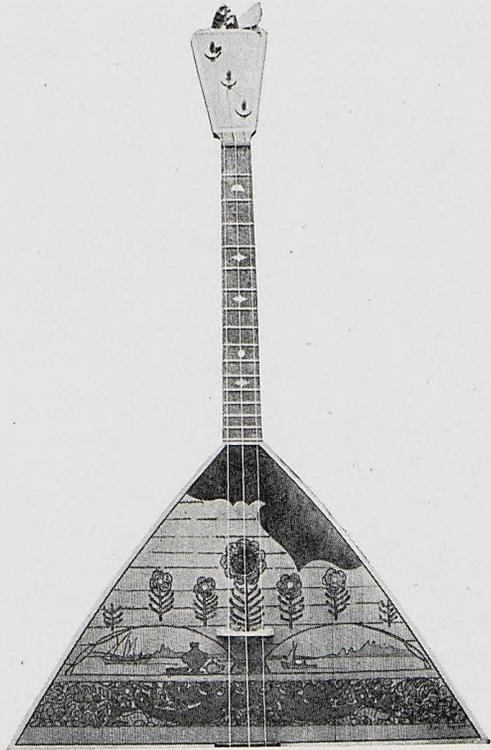
BALALAÏKA

DECORATED BY NATHALIE DAVIDOFF

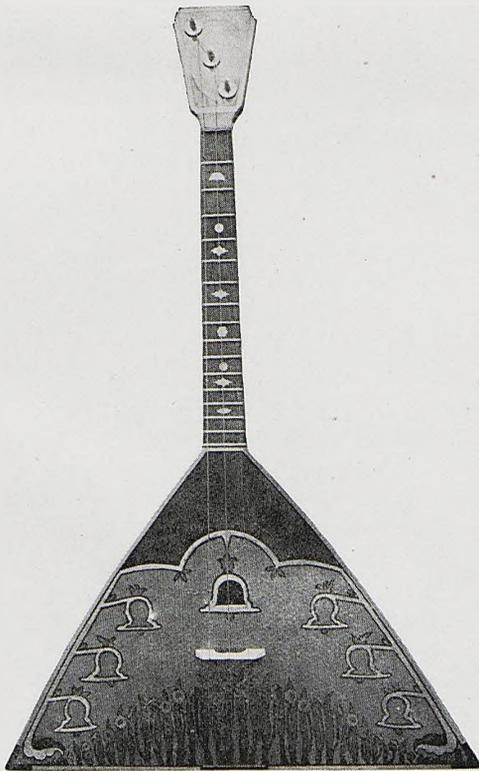
*Russian Decorative Art*



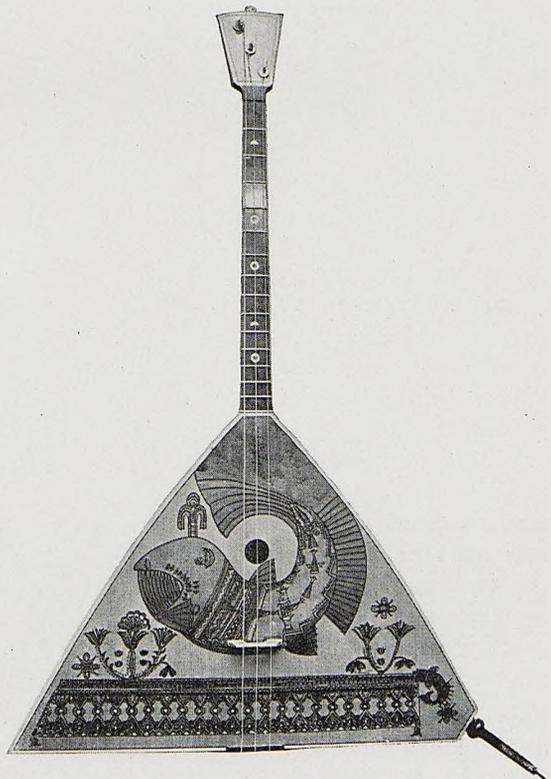
BALALAÏKA DECORATED BY SERGIUS MALIOUTIN



BALALAÏKA DECORATED BY CONSTANTINE KOROVIN



BALALAÏKA DECORATED BY PRINCESS TENICHEFF



BALALAÏKA DECORATED BY SERGIUS MALIOUTIN

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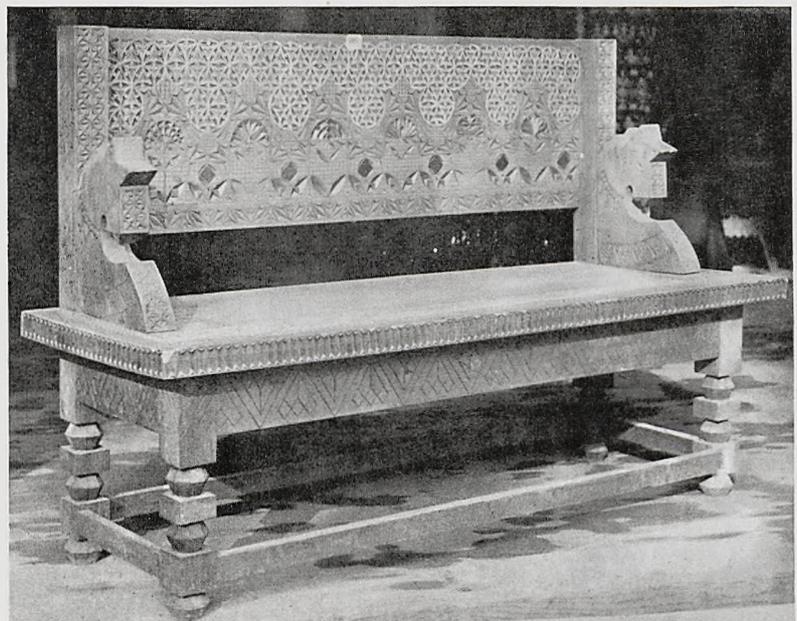


BOOK-COVER

BY MARIE JACOUNCHIKOFF-WÉBER

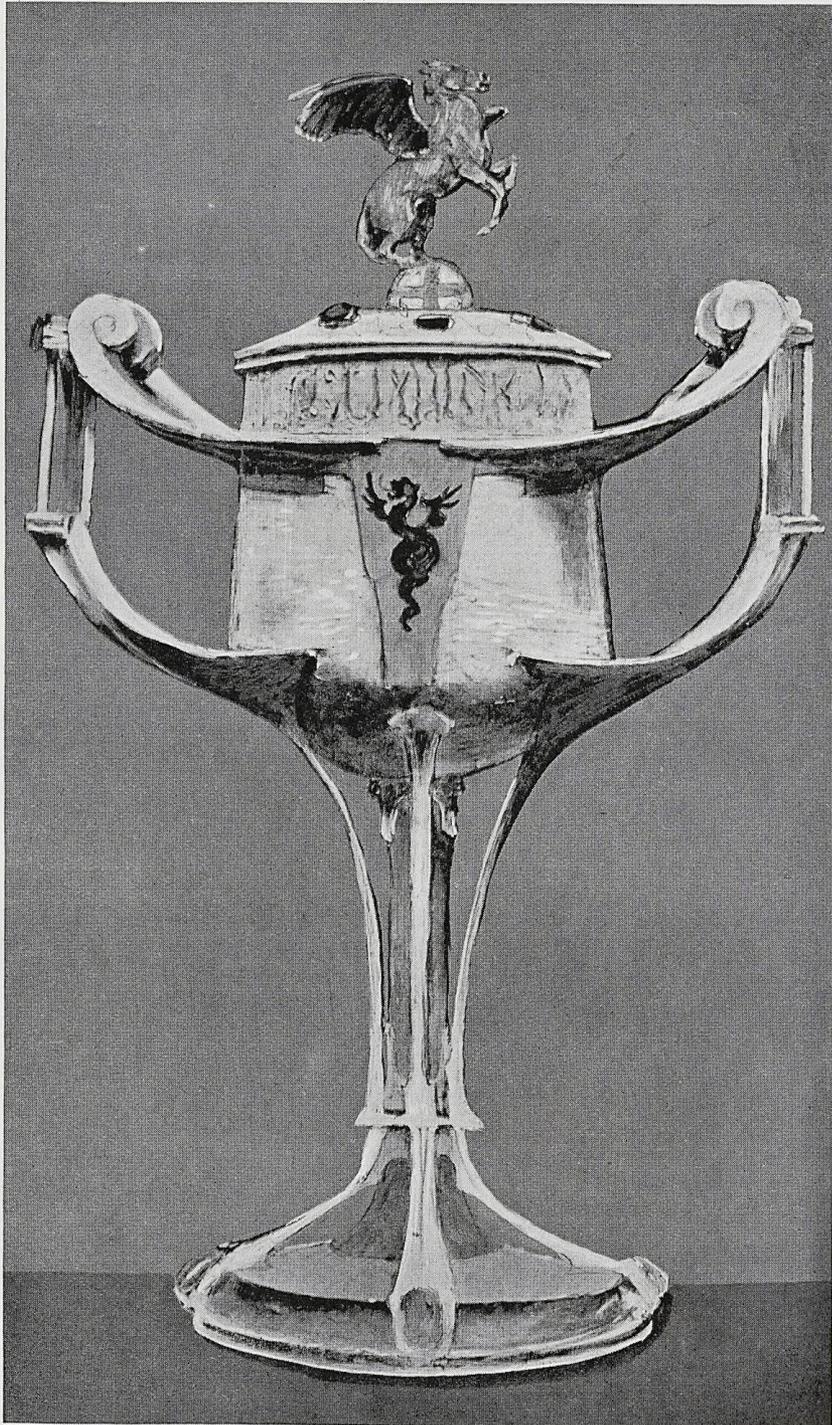
white they left its natural tint. Towards the end of 1891, Miss N. Davidoff was induced by Mrs. Jacouchikoff to go to Solomenka, and so delighted was she with the natural taste displayed by these women, and their facility in plying the needle, that she, then and there, started to design portières, panels, reticules, etc., for them to execute. This modern element naturally led to the introduction of new colours (always obtained from vegetable dyes), and the revival of many stitches which had fallen into disuse. The panels by Nathalie Davidoff, here illustrated, give a good idea of the range of her artistic vision. For charm of colouring and a certain naïveté of expression it would be difficult to surpass her designs. She invariably uses two or three different colours of linen as foundation for her

help themselves by providing all necessary material, and by finding a market for their work in Moscow. She began by encouraging them to copy the old designs from their chemises on to squares of linen which could be used for table-covers, or on to lengths which could be made into curtains. They wove their own linen, spun their own thread, colouring these with vegetable dyes, principally indigo and marena red (the colour of their skirts); the only other colour they knew was a green, extracted from saw wort;



SETTEE

DESIGNED BY HELEN POLÉNOFF



SKETCH DESIGN FOR  
RACING CUP. BY  
GILBERT BAYES

*(See London Studio-Talk)*

## Studio-Talk

embroideries, employing these in a semi-realistic way with great effect. The snow-scene with the izbas has its lower portion in white linen, while the upper is of a soft rose colour. The framing of the panels with linen bands is a quaint conceit.

The panel in linen appliqué designed by Marie Jacouchikoff-Wéber, *The Lost Child* (p. 271), deals with the popular superstition that the "laishii," or genii of the woods, lure the children on until they lose their way. Hiding behind the trees, they call, "Here, here!" until the child wanders deeper and deeper into the tangle of tree and luxuriant undergrowth in trying to reach the spot whence the voice calls. Most artistic in its entire absence of any appeal to the emotions made through the story side of the subject is this panel; it depends entirely upon its æsthetic fitness for the genuine feeling of sympathy evoked by it. Mrs. Jacouchikoff-Wéber superintended the dyeing of the linens, the difficulty of obtaining the exact shades of green required being most successfully overcome. The

cutting-out and placing of all the pieces necessary to the carrying-out of this large piece of work seems an almost impossible task, looking at it from the purely technical point of view: all of this the artist did herself, leaving simply the outline to be worked by Nastasia Ivantchouka, of Solomenka. The balalaikas illustrated are the property of Princess Ténicheff—a fervent adherent of the new movement—for whom they were decorated by the different artists. The balalaika—the Russian peasant's guitar—is of very ancient Slavic origin, its peculiar triangular shape showing its primitive character, and lending itself admirably to decoration. The peasants sing their popular songs, so full of melancholy charm, to its accompaniment, or recite in verse old stories, fairy tales, and occasionally extempore poetry. Except for the lack of colour, which, as in all the work done by this group, is extremely fascinating and subdued in tone, the illustrations render the decoration of these instruments most satisfactorily, so that no further comment upon it is needed.

NETTA PEACOCK.



MODEL FOR A YACHTING TROPHY BY MARY WILCOCK  
(See *London Studio-Talk*)

## STUDIO-TALK.

(From our own Correspondents.)

LONDON.—Although in its general aspect the Exhibition of the Women's International Art Club, lately held at the Grafton Gallery, was a little depressing by reason of the low tone in which the majority of the pictures were painted, a number of interesting things sufficient to make the collection well worthy of note were to be found on the walls. Miss Anna Nordgren's grim but powerful studies of types of rugged humanity, Miss F. Moloney's landscapes, the pastels by Mrs. Jopling and Miss F. de Lisle, and the studies of animals by Miss L. Kemp-Welch, all deserved to be singled out for particular attention. Among the water-colours, too, there were to be noted clever drawings by Miss E. K. Burgess, a delightful little sketch of a dog's head by Miss Fairman, some designs by Miss A. B. Giles, and a dark, suggestive landscape by Madame Mesdag van Houten. The presence of these works certainly justified the existence of the show.

It was by no means the habit of Sir John Millais to make, as many other painters do, elaborate and careful drawings by way of preparation for the working out of his pictures. Except in quite his early years he limited his preparatory