Books

If These Dolls Could Talk

The Art of the Russian Matryoshka, by Rett Ertl ’74/’86GSAS and Rick Hibberd. Vernissage, 2004. $40.00.

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When Western tourists used to return from the Soviet Union, they would fill their suitcases with souvenir matryoshki, or nesting dolls. For one thing, there was nothing much else to buy in the USSR; for another, those dolls seemed so Russian. But as Rett Ertl ’74 and ’86GSAS (who has an MA in Slavic language and literature) and Rick Hibberd tell us *The Art of the Russian Matryoshka*, matryoshki may have their origins in Japan. As the story goes, a Russian merchant brought a nesting doll home from Japan in 1899. He copied the idea and started producing them in a village north of Moscow, creating employment for local artisans and leading the way to what would become a national industry.

“For some reason,” according to the authors, “the early dolls depicted what appears to be a family without a father,” although unfortunately this observation isn’t developed further. The dolls’ popularity as an export item took off in 1904 when what must have been an enormous order came from Paris. Several workshops combined to produce the dolls, leading to a simplification and uniformity of design as the dolls were mass-produced. During the Soviet era artists were allowed to paint only benign figures such as peasant girls in scarves, but after the fall of Communism, artisans began to rejuvenate the craft. One of the first modern variations was the now- famous Gorbachev doll that opened up to re-veal Chernenko, An-dropov, Brezhnev . . . down to a tiny Lenin. The outermost doll has since been superseded by Boris Yeltsin, and now Vladimir Putin. Popular too was a Bill Clinton set, which makes its way through his paramours and wife and finally a cigar. By far the most appealing, though, are those dolls that depict traditional Russian themes or tell folktales, from newly acceptable religious motifs to easily recognizable images from *The Nutcracker*. Hundreds are depicted in *The Art of the Russian Matryoshka*, along with photographs of rustic artisans producing the dolls early in the twentieth century and contemporary factory workers turning the dolls on

automated lathes.

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