

Country seat landscape of Russia

It is hard to overestimate the importance of country seats for Russia. It is much bigger than the importance of country seats for Western and Central Europe. Tens of thousands of country seats formed a life frame of the society in huge spaces of Russia. Russian idea is born here; Russian culture is born and maintained here.

Country seats were a source of spread of all kinds of knowledge, the school of economic management and relationship with nature. Along with the capital, the country seat was a traditional hearth and home for artistic forces. And now, the highest rise of the creative activity means the word "Boldino's autumn", based on the name of Alexander Pushkin's country seat "Boldino".

Many country seats are adorable artistic monuments. They were built by prominent architects and talented bondmen, who deeply learned professional commandments of ancestors and bring them into their creations. Manor houses, churches, gardens and parks have become the organizing forms of Russian landscape. This landscape views have become familiar to the eyes of Alexander Pushkin, Leo Tolstoy or Nikolay Gogol in their wayfaring.

Country seats concentrated Russian history, Russian nature and Russian culture; and get to know them means to learn about Russia a lot.

Setting a culture of classical Russian country seat happened at the end of the XVIII century. The prerequisites to mass country seat construction were the Manifesto on the Freedom of Nobility of 1762 abolishing the mandatory service of the nobility and economic benefits granted to them by the Empress Catherine the Great.

The builder was a gentleman, who started to feel a taste for independent rural life, but who was already civilized by the ideals of The Age of Enlightenment with its requirements of reasonable and natural.

He believed in the possibility of creating a beautiful and perfect world, and he equipped the country seat in accordance with his own ideas about it. Of course, this country seat model of ideal world was deeply controversial, because it was based on serfdom. But the country seats are valuable specifically in this way, because it is very rare case for Russia when a dream of the ideal came true.

Country seats arrangement show individual aspirations of its owners, but hundreds or even thousands of them have common features. These similarities are due to the fact that the development of Russian country seat fortunately coincided with the development of classicism in Russia.

Classicism with its ethical themes of freedom, history and harmony has fully answered the mentalities of "enlightened" landlords. Thanks to its universal art system, classicism was understood by everybody, it has spread from the magnificent royal residences near St. Petersburg to modest country seats of landed gentry, "scattered Greek porticos among the northern birches and firs". Classicism predetermined highly artistic image of Russian country seats and the unity of its style in the period of rising.

What are the landscape features of classical Russian country seat? First of all, a beautiful and privileged place on a hill by the river, near the confluence of the creek. The ensemble is based on the planning axis

oriented to the river perpendicularly. The house dominates on the hill. Its first facade is facing to the front road, and another – to a gentle slope above the river. A front yard with a regular layout, outhouses or outbuildings on each side is organized on the side of the road. On the other side the garden is formed, sometimes with a small regular part near the house, and almost always with a big part of the landscape, decomposing into natural environment.

In a garden paths are drawn, there is a chain of cascading ponds formed on the basis of a creek's stream, there are arbors, small hills, ruins and other structures, bringing back often to different countries and eras. The river at the foot of the slope is converted into a pond of free lines, and behind it the villages of this country seat are situated.

Of course, the described scheme of classical Russian country seat varied infinitely, and in the era of Romanticism and later it has changed significantly. But with all the differences it received the overall landscape has a number of unique characteristics, which have passed the test of time and formed its national identity. At least the following features should be mentioned.

First, it's an openness of the forms of the garden and the spatial coherence with its surroundings. The beauty of the surrounding landscapes is always taken into account. The views on the environment are opened from many points of the garden.

Second, it's a large area and density of plantations. It is extremely rare case you can stand in the open space and see another open space through the wood pulp. Relatively narrow alleys with frequent step of planting trees and so quite dark became a symbol of Russian country seat.

Third, it's a combination of intimacy and spaciousness. It is caused by the first two features. Landscape compositions are usually built on the contrast between the small spaces of lawns, glades, ponds, tree-lined avenues and vast spaces of fields.

Fourth, it is active combination of economic and artistic features, including the organization of orchards, fish ponds etcetera, using also for the decoration of the country seat.

Fifth, the lyricism of the country seat landscape. The flowing lines, rounded shapes, soft combination of tones that are transmitted from the Russian nature. Cozy spaces of the glades with drowsy shadows from the trees, restful linden alleys and refreshing oakwoods. Ponds shores shaded by willows and "encouraging" alleys of silver birches. Gloomy caves and lightweight, light-filled rotundas. All this provides Russian country seat landscape with special, "minor- major" lyricism.

Of course, these characteristics, which form Russian national identity of country seat landscape, are not exclusive. They could be found in the country seats landscapes of other countries, but not every time, not so clearly expressed and presented in other combinations. National identity of the landscape is one the most important achievement of Russian country seat and its testament to the future of Russian landscape culture.