

Books of the Old House

A Portrait of Russia's Most Important Library

Today, in our Bookshelf section, we focus on the inner workings of our country's most important library, i. e., the Russian State Library (RSL), known from 1925 to 1992 as the USSR Lenin State Library, or simply Leninka. Among dozens of millions of printed and handwritten publications, the RSL, one of the world's largest libraries, keeps a lot of children's books. This publication was inspired by the interactive exhibition "Books of the Old House: Childhood World in the 19th and Early 20th Centuries," which ran from October 23, 2018, to March 3, 2019, in the library's Ivanovsky Hall

A children's book should primarily captivate the child's imagination, which is more powerful than any other ability at that age and therefore needs nourishment and proper guidance more than anything else.

Nikolay A. Dobrolyubov

The general public has always considered the Russian State Library as focused exclusively on scholars. Very few people know that its collections contain a wealth of books for young readers, from the first moralizing stories of the 19th century to modern 3D editions. Preserving children's books is a challenge: they are passed down from generation to generation; they are read in the garden, at mealtimes, or secretly under the blankets. That is why the older the books, the rarer they are.

The organizers of the exhibition "Books of the Old House: Childhood World in the 19th and Early 20th Centuries" brought together the best prerevolutionary children's books featuring works by outstanding illustrators, both Russian and foreign, who were popular among Russian readers. Many of the books "arrived" at the exhibition thanks to the memoirs of famous people – Alexandre Benois, Alexander Blok, Marina Tsvetaeva, Pyotr Tchaikovsky, and many others, who told about their favorite children's books. The key to the exhibition was *Azbuka v kartinkakh Aleksandra*

Illustrations for *The Alphabet in Paintings* by Alexandre Benois (St. Petersburg, 1904). On the left is a painting of a *Dacha* for the Russian letter Д ('D'). In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, summer trips to the dacha with the whole family were very popular

Key words: Russian State Library, exhibitions, children's book, alphabets, encyclopedias, schooling, home schooling



Benua ('The Alphabet in Paintings by Alexandre Benois'), created by the artist for his young son Kolya in 1904. This alphabet is a very special one as the author devised unexpected words and exciting scenes for each letter. The exhibition derived its title as well as format from the image of the house (*dom* in the Russian language) painted by Alexandre Benois on the sheet for the letter Д ('D'). That *dom*, however, was not simply a house but a *dacha*, i. e., an estate, usually in a beautiful countryside, awarded for merit. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it was very popular to make summer trips to the *dacha* with the whole family.

The exhibition visitors found themselves transported to an old manor house of the early 20th century, once owned by a large noble family. One could only guess why and where the owners left. But the house retained memories of those who lived in it, of the three generations residing in this house. The memories were preserved in books, portraits, drawings, photographs, and toys – in the things they loved, in the artworks they admired, and in the treasures they cherished and passed on to their children.

In the various rooms of the exhibition house, one could see books chosen by the adults, who considered them necessary and appropriate, as well as books beloved by the children. There are many books here on display from former estates and personal libraries, including those of the family members of the last Russian Emperor, Nicholas II.

Among the books on display in the Classroom, you could see the still-famous *Detskaya entsiklopediya* ('Children's Encyclopedia') in 10 volumes (published by the I. D. Sytin Partnership, 1913–1914). Although its publishers were criticized for inaccurate scientific data, it became the first detailed Russian encyclopedia dedicated to children. At that time, the majority of popular science books about the Universe were those translated into Russian from German or French.

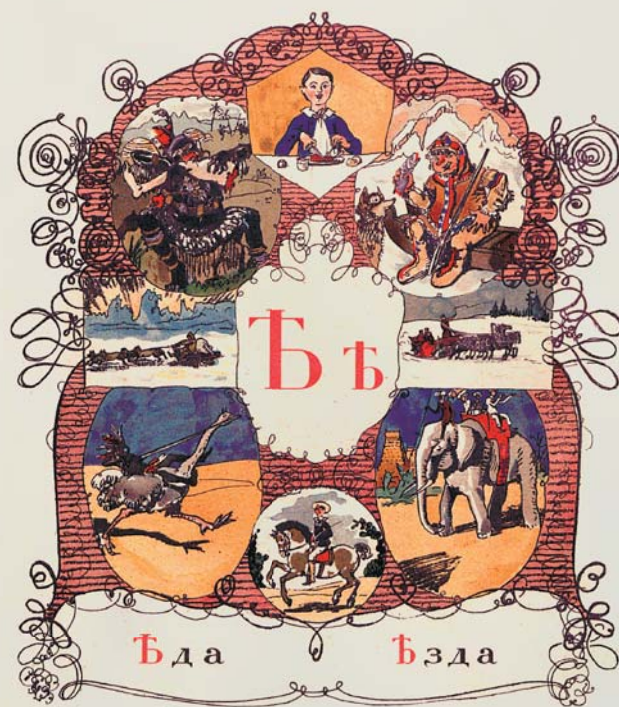
The Classroom also contains teaching aids and visual materials used in schools and gymnasiums as well as homeschooling. Following the abolition of serfdom in 1861, public education sprouted rapidly in the Russian Empire. State and private initiatives in this area led to the emergence of many remarkable and fruitful educational projects, which, in turn, sparked a surge in publishing activity.

An example of a new educational model was the school for peasant children on Leo Tolstoy's estate. This school



prioritized understanding over memorization. As a result, public schools and gymnasiums as well as homeschools began to use new methods to teach writing as well as new handwriting practice manuals and alphabet books.

Visual aids played an important role in teaching, and Russian artists actively participated in new educational projects. Unique original programs emerged aimed at the development of scientific world view through creativity, for both school and home education. Beautifully illustrated manuals were published that showed cross-section structures of virtually everything, from bees and potatoes to the bodies of horses and humans.



Until 1918, the letter Yat (ѣ) was placed after a consonant at the end of words in Russian. This rule was abolished at the request of publishers, saving up to 8.5 million pages per year. Illustrations for *The Alphabet in Paintings* by Alexandre Benois (St. Petersburg, 1904)



Азбука картинахъ АЛЕКСАНДРА БЕНУА

Издание
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The top section of the cover of *The Alphabet in Paintings* by Alexandre Benois (St. Petersburg, 1904) features some of the artist's most beloved children's books, including *Der Struwwelpeter* ('Shock-Headed Peter') by Heinrich Hoffmann. Benois wrote, "...What a wonderful book, now rejected by experts as antipedagogical." The bottom section of the cover features all the characters of his *Alphabet*, most notably the main character, the African boy, who is taught reading and writing





The first most complete children's encyclopedia in 10 volumes was published in Russia in 1913–1914 by the I. D. Sytin Partnership

The “Books of the Old House” exhibition is now closed, but the books remain, and so does the conviction that things go well in the world as long as parents and children enjoy the same books and their characters. Let us hope that the tradition of collecting books loved by different generations of the same family will continue, and so will the tradition of reading aloud at the large family table and discussing what is read. After all, even a single book from the family library can become a reason to gather together and enjoy conversation – and thus, to better understand each other.



“FOR THE BENEFIT OF THE FATHERLAND AND FOR VIRTUOUS ENLIGHTENMENT,” OR A NEW FORMAT OF THE MODERN LIBRARY

The Russian State Library (RSL), the famous *Leninka*, is the biggest and most important library in Russia. Since the time it was founded more than 150 years ago, it has been getting not only all the printed word published in Russia but also foreign publications from all continents. The RSL is rightfully considered one of the world's largest libraries. Its collections contain over 47 million items (books, documents, and artifacts), and its 36 halls receive by over 800,000 visitors annually. Despite its venerable age, the RSL keeps pace with the times, continuing to seek new ways of reader engagement.

Today, the RSL not only provides rare and valuable collections but also a cultural venue for a wide range of audiences, including young people. Incredible exhibitions, unique excursion tours, concerts and festivals, lectures by theater and film stars... the listings in the Events section on the RSL website are truly striking for the number of activities, all of which are free of charge.

Since 2012, the RSL has been organizing independently large-scale projects such as “Stars of World Literature in Moscow.” This project involved meetings in Pashkov House – the library's main building and the most beautiful classical edifice in Moscow – with renowned authors, including French writers Bernard Werber and Pascal Quignard, British authors David Mitchell and Evie Wyld, and Russian writers Alexander Ilichevsky and Maxim Kantor...

In 2013, the RSL participated for the first time in the all-Russian cultural and educational event *Biblionight*, a reading festival held in April, which attracted a record number of participants (over 2000). Since then, this festival has been an annual event. Following this initiative, the Khimki branch of the RSL in Moscow Oblast held an event called *Biblioday*, which it decided to hold annually in the autumn. This event allowed visitors to see unique printed editions, photographs and drawings, century-old newspaper collections, and other tangible relics of the times bygone, including exhibits from the dissertation department, which started taking shape back in the wartime years.

In 2014, Pashkov House became the central venue for the international online marathon “*Karenina. A Living Edition*,” supported by Google. For two days, excerpts from the great novel were read here aloud by famous actors and directors, cultural figures and politicians, athletes, and simply Leo Tolstoy enthusiasts. For the next years, this same historic building was the central venue for the annual international educational event *The Total Dictation*. The text of the dictation was read here by such cultural figures as Vladimir Pozner, Igor Yasulovich, Sergei Dorenko, and Irina Muravyova...

Irina Kovalenko: “*Leninka* is a very special world! It’s a time machine that allows you to travel through different epochs and countries. When people ask me, ‘Do you really keep every book published today, even those by Dontsova?’ I say, ‘Yes, because this way, future generations will gain a true understanding of our time.’ In the main building, we offer tours for children aged seven and above to fascinate them and get them accustomed to this place, so that they wouldn’t get bored and knew they’re always welcome here.”



The RSL also regularly participates in the nationwide events *The Arts Night* and *The Music Night* as well as the international cultural and educational event *The Great Ethnographic Dictation*. The library's excursion program, successfully implemented at the library for many years and very popular among both Moscow residents and visitors, also deserves special attention. General and thematic tours of the library's historic buildings offer access to the areas closed to the general public, revealing treasures stored in the library's collections and a panoramic view of the architectural history of Moscow.

A new chapter in the RSL's history is associated with the Ivanovsky Hall, a modern exhibition space, which opened its doors to visitors in December 2016. It regularly displays treasures from the RSL collections: rare books, unique manuscripts, ancient geographical maps, engravings, visual materials, and,

of course, artifacts stored in the library from the times of the Rummyantsev Museum and those received during Soviet times. Thanks to the Ivanovsky Hall, the number of exhibitions at the library has grown to nearly two hundred per year.

The exhibition “*Books of the Old House: Childhood World in the 19th and Early 20th Centuries*,” held in the Ivanovsky Hall, was closed in the early March 2019. Visitors had the opportunity not only to see prerevolutionary children's books and periodicals in Russian and major European languages from the RSL collection and enjoy the 19th- and early 20th-century paintings from the Novgorod Museum but also to meet writers, artists, and cultural figures who work for children today.

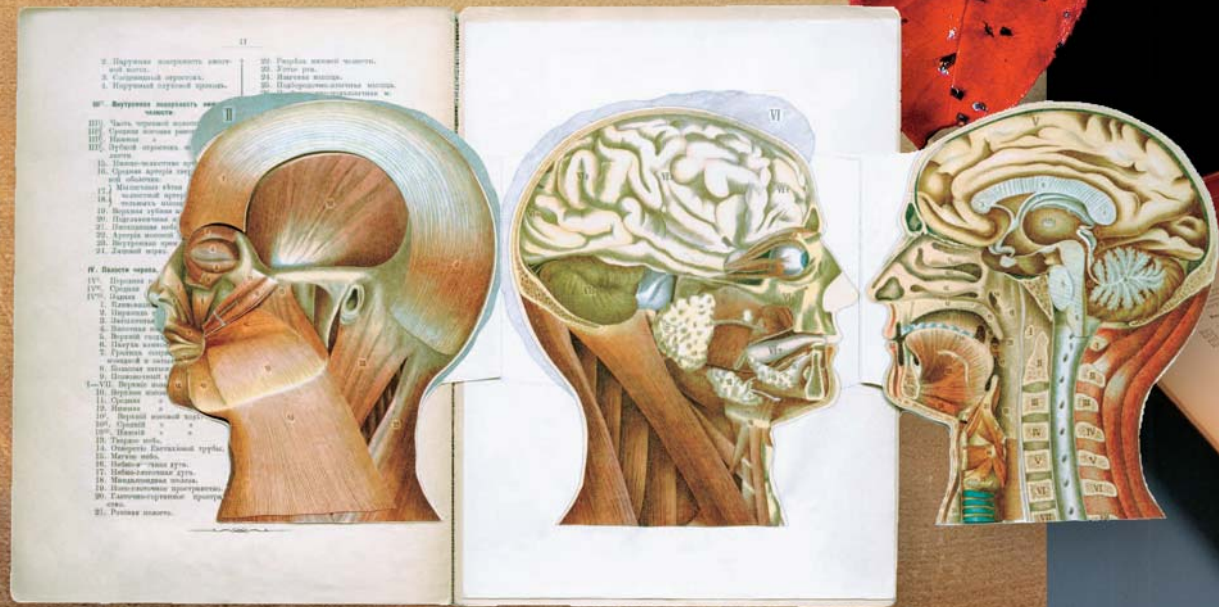
The RSL services are available not only to the residents of Moscow. The RSL digital library contains about 2 million documents, including early printed books, manuscripts, scientific and educational literature, a unique dissertation library, and much more. The RSL electronic catalog, the largest one worldwide, contains 9.6 million records. The RSL offers its readers the opportunity to use network remote resources (NRR), i. e., databases hosted on remote servers and accessible online: <https://www.rsl.ru/en>. The system of virtual reading rooms (currently 652) allows patrons of the RSL's partner libraries from around the world to access publications from this digital collection. To do so, they simply need to use the computer in their library.

Irina N. Kovalenko, Head of the RSL Department of Sociocultural Projects, Moscow



In the early 20th century, educators began to pay special attention to visualization. Special aids appeared that allowed students to see various living organisms and objects in cross-section to understand their structure.

Bottom left: a spread from the book *The Man. The External and Internal Structure of Individual Organs* (Moscow, 1907). Right: a spread from the magazine *Detskii muzeum* ('Children's Museum'), published since 1815 in three languages (French, Russian, and German)



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Books of the *Living Work* series, possessed even by the children of the last Russian emperor, Nicholas II. These books explained sophisticated questions of natural sciences such as botany, zoology, and geography through drawing, cutting, sculpting, and other creative activities. Above: pages from the book *Living Work from Multicolored Paper* by A. F. Andronov (Moscow, 1915)

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Illustration for the book *The Adventures of Khristian Khristianovich Violdamur and His Arshet* by Vladimir I. Dal (St. Petersburg, 1844)

“WHAT IS THE USE OF A BOOK,” THOUGHT ALICE “WITHOUT PICTURES?”

No one would deny that aesthetic education of children in a civilized society is a must. The most natural means of such education has always been the “book with pictures.” Today, despite new, fantastic information technologies, the illustrated children’s book remains one of the primary channels for conveying educational and artistic content, playing a vital role in the development of children’s creativity. Being a virtually independent art form, such a book requires that its creators be endowed with special skills.

In different historical periods, society had varying views on how to influence personality development in children, which largely affected the work of writers, artists, and publishers as well as their choices regarding what and how to publish for young readers. Many great works, now familiar to everyone since childhood, were originally intended not for children. Robinson Crusoe and Gulliver were born out of their authors’ desire to express their views on the political or social organization of society. The story of Baron Munchausen was actually written for the men’s magazine *Sputnik Veselchakov*. Numerous children’s versions of the books featuring these characters appeared later, when publishers saw the enormous potential of these stories for a young audience.

The first books for children were Bibles and literacy primers. It was Jan Amos Komensky (Johannes Amos Comenius) who paved the way for children’s illustrated books with his groundbreaking 1658 textbook *Orbis Sensualium Pictus* (‘The Visible World in Pictures’). Modern educators consider Komensky their teacher – more than three centuries ago, he created the truly revolutionary *Didactica Magna* (‘Great Didactics’) and *Janua Linguarum Reserata* (‘The Open Door to Languages’), the first books for life learning.

Over the next three hundred years, young readers were treated to a veritable treasure trove of primers, atlases, educational and informative literature, encyclopedias, playable paper books, and simply books for family reading. Many of these editions were illustrated by the finest artists of their time – the professional bar was very high for children’s book creators. Thus, Johann Bernhard Basedow’s famous *Elementarwerk* (‘Elementary Work’) (1774) was illustrated by Daniel Chodowiecki, one of the finest European engravers of the time. The British, in turn, consider the 1744 publication of John Newbery’s *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book* with its engaging illustrations to be no less important than the Norman conquest of England in 1066. Unfortunately, like any industry in our life, children’s book illustration has experienced periods of flourishing and decay. Thus, the advent of lithography in the 19th century, which made production cheaper for large print runs, proved fatal for mass-market picture books. But there have always been publishers who continued to release excellent children’s books.

One can hardly overestimate the significance of the RSL exhibition “Books of the Old House: Childhood World in the 19th and Early 20th Centuries.” It showed us that, a hundred years ago, children’s books lived, too, during the life of many generations in every room of the house. Being an integral part of both the house and the lives of its inhabitants, the books were truly intelligent and beautiful. And this could teach a valuable lesson for us today

