

# Comparative Analysis of Architectural Heritage Preservation: Venetian Villas and Russian Estates

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**Abstract:** *This study investigates the museumification and preservation of architectural heritage, focusing on two comparative cases: the Regional Institute of Venetian Villas in Italy and the Society for the Study of the Russian Estate in Russia. Through historical, legal, and organizational lenses, the article examines differences in funding, cataloging, and cultural management approaches within each organization, analyzing their strengths and limitations in preserving cultural sites. The findings suggest that effective conservation requires a combination of theoretical and practical strategies and highlight potential avenues for experience exchange between the two countries.*

**Keywords:** architectural heritage, cultural preservation, museumification, Venetian villas, Russian estates

## 1. Introduction

The flourishing of villa culture in the Venetian terraferma occurred during the Renaissance and Baroque periods. The policy of land expansion actively pursued by the Venetian Republic starting from the end of the 14th and the beginning of the 15th centuries allowed many wealthy citizens to purchase land on the mainland. The most prominent architects, such as Andrea Palladio, were invited to design the villa complexes. Villa became a place where owners spent a significant part of their time. Rural life in close contact with nature was elevated to a cult and contrasted with the sinful life in the cities (E. P. Igoshina, 2005).

The echoes of the culture of Venetian villas in Russia during the 18th and 19th centuries manifest themselves in the form of estates. The “Manifesto on the Freedom of the Nobility”, issued by Peter III in 1762, exempted the nobility from the obligation to serve in government positions, which contributed to the development of rural noble life (S. A. Kozlov, 2021). The estate culture was born out of the personality of the nobleman, who sought to build his ideal world, arrange the land according to his own preferences, and create a special microclimate, surrounding himself with close people (T. P. Kazhdan, 1997).

However, by the 20th century, the heritage of both Venetian villas and Russian estates fell into a state of neglect. The devastation caused by the two world wars led to the continuous deterioration of the complex of historical Venetian villas. As for Russia, the nobility estates were seriously damaged during the 1917 Revolution: peasant uprisings were often accompanied by arsons of manor houses, while the disappearance of many estates’ owners caused lootings (T. P. Kazhdan, 1997).

As a result, the necessity of preserving and studying architectural heritage arose. In these circumstances two organizations with similar missions were established: The

Regional Institute of Venetian Villas in Italy and the Society for the Study of the Russian Estate in Russia. These organizations are not the only ones; however, they are the oldest and most influential in Italian and Russian practices.

This study aims to explore and compare the approaches of the Regional Institute of Venetian Villas and the Society for the Study of the Russian Estate in preserving architectural heritage, focusing on the unique challenges faced by each institution. The study is based on historical-cultural and comparative methods with elements of an interdisciplinary approach and quantitative methods.

The division into sections is determined by the specifics of the approach, which aims to show the connection between research and study of architectural heritage and practical tasks related to its valorization.

## 2. Preliminary notes

### 2.1 Legal foundations

International legal instruments in the field of cultural heritage, such as the Venice Charter (1964) and the World Heritage Convention (1972), being advisory in nature, set a developmental direction for museumification and conservation processes. According to the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (1972), both Venetian Villas and Russian Estates can be designated as “groups of building”, i.e. “groups of separate or connected buildings which, because of their architecture, their homogeneity or their place in the landscape, are of outstanding universal value from the point of view of history, art or science” (Art. 1).

Within a specific country, the protection of cultural heritage is regulated by the Constitution, federal laws, and regional legal acts. In Italy, the most important federal law in the field of cultural heritage protection is the “Code of Cultural Heritage and Landscape” (2004), while in the Russian

Federation – “Federal Law On Cultural Heritage Sites (Monuments of History and Culture) of the Peoples of the Russian Federation” No. 73 (2002).

## 2.2 Private ownership

The specificity of the Italian context lies in the fact that a large number of Venetian villas (85.58% in Veneto, 80.73% - in Friuli Venezia Giulia) are privately owned (“How many are the Venetian villas?”, 2024). In this regard, the relationship between federal and regional structures and private owners acquires special significance. Point 5 of Art. 1 of the “Code of Cultural Heritage and Landscape” states that private owners are obliged to ensure the preservation of the cultural heritage objects that belong to them. In Articles 32 – 34 of the Code, the process of conservation intervention is described, which may be carried out by authorities in the event that the owner of a cultural heritage monument fails to fulfill their obligations. Point 18 of the Regional Law dated August 24, 1979, describes the procedures that the Regional Institute must follow: if the owners do not carry out the necessary interventions, the Institute can undertake the execution, with costs borne by the owners. Before starting the works, the Institute must draft a regular status report, with prior notification to the owner to be given at least five days in advance.

In Russia, the history of private estate ownership was interrupted by the revolution of 1917. However, in modern Russia, there are examples of estates being acquired from the state by private owners. Moreover, since 2012, a program “1 ruble per square meter per year” for preferential rental of cultural heritage monuments has been in place. Private tenants are allowed to open educational institutions and hotels in the restored buildings. Privatization of estates allows for addressing the issue of insufficient government funding for the reconstruction and maintenance of the monuments. For example, the dilapidated estate “Mamonovo” in the Moscow region was restored by the investment group ASG, while the ruined estate of Stepanovsky-Volosovo in the Tver region was revived by a Russian entrepreneur, the chairman of the board of directors of the investment group “Russian Funds” S.A. Vasiliev.

As in Italy, the legislation of the Russian Federation outlines the possible consequences for failure to fulfill or improper performance of obligations concerning the preservation and maintenance of cultural heritage sites. In accordance with the Civil Code of the Russian Federation, in cases where the owner of cultural property, classified by law as particularly valuable and protected by the state, fails to manage these assets properly, threatening their significance, such property may be expropriated from the owner by court decision through state purchase or public auction sale (Art. 240). In the case of a sale at a public auction, the owner receives the proceeds from the sale after deducting the costs of conducting the auction, as well as the costs of restoration work related to the cultural heritage object.



**Figure 1:** Estate of Stepanovsky-Volosovo in the Tver region (a) before



**Figure 1:** Estate of Stepanovsky-Volosovo in the Tver region (b) after restoration

## 3. Comparisons of two cases: Regional Institute of Venetian Villas and the Society for the Study of the Russian Estate

### 3.1 The history of establishment

From the late 1940s, there have been desperate attempts to preserve the complex of historical Venetian villas, until the moment when finally, in 1958 the Entity for Venetian Villas was born. The organization was founded through collective efforts of the Provincial Administrations for Tourism in the provinces of Belluno, Padua, Rovigo, Treviso, Udine, Verona, Venice, and Vicenza, to which the state has delegated the tasks of preserving the complex of Venetian villas (“Experimental approval of the Performance Plan”, 2012). In 1979, the Entity was succeeded by the Regional Institute of Venetian Villas, established through the efforts of the regions of Veneto and Friuli-Venezia Giulia.

The Society for the Study of the Russian Estate, in turn, traces its history from 1922 (G. D. Zlochevsky, 2002). After the 1917 Revolution, the heritage of Russian estates was in a critical condition. The Law on the Socialization of Land, adopted on January 27 (February 9) 1918, stated that noble estates, along with all their inventory and agricultural enterprises, would pass into the control of county, provincial, regional, and federal councils without any compensation (L. Romanov et al., 2014). The somewhat vague wording of the law allowed local authorities to consider all contents of noble estates, including invaluable

artistic and historical collections, as agricultural inventory. The facts of looting and destruction of estate property made it critically important to establish, on May 28, 1918, the Board (later Department) for Museums and the Protection of Monuments of Art and Antiquities under the People's Commissariat for Education (L. Romanov et al.). In five years of its intensive activity, 540 former estates were inspected. From 150 estates antiquities and entire collections were removed to state museums and repositories (L. Romanov et al.).

In these circumstances in 1922 the Society for the Study of the Russian Estate was established. Organized by enthusiasts led by the 19-year-old art historian V.V. Zgura (1903-1927), the Society did not have any authoritative powers, but it made a significant contribution to the systematic study and popularization of estate heritage. The tragic death of V.V. Zgura in September 1927 was a heavy blow for the members of the Society, who nevertheless continued their work (G. D. Zlochevsky, 2002). However, the repressions of the late 1920s and early 1930s did not spare the Society for the Study of the Russian Estate. The arrests of its members led to the organization ceasing to exist in 1931 (G. D. Zlochevsky). The revival of the Society was carried out through private initiative at the beginning of the 1990s. The main role was played by historian L.V. Ivanova (1928-1999).

### 3.2 Finances

The Regional Institute, being formed through the efforts of Italian regions, is being annually funded from the regional budget (L.R. n. 63, 1979). According to data from 2011, the annual contribution of the Veneto region to the Institute amounts to 100,000 euros, while the Friuli-Venezia Giulia contributes 40,000 euros ("Experimental approval of the Performance Plan", 2012). The legal status and economic treatment of the employees of the Regional Institute are equivalent to those of the Veneto Region (L.R. n. 63). The Society for the Study of the Russian Estate, on the contrary, is a public organization that does not receive any support from governmental bodies (L. V. Ivanova, 1994). This reveals a fundamental difference between the two institutions, which determines both the specificity of their operation and the differences in their opportunities.

### 3.3 Territorial boundaries and the number of complexes

Another fundamental difference lies in the territorial boundaries of the organizations' activities. If the Regional Institution operates within the territory of Veneto and Friuli-Venezia Giulia, with a total area of about 26,000 km<sup>2</sup>, the Society positions itself as a nationwide entity. This leads to the fact that while the Regional Institution manages to control the whole complex of Venetian villas (4,000 monuments), the Society for the Study of the Russian Estate cannot, for objective reasons, account for all Russian estates in its work. Thus, catalogization and control over the state of preservation in case of Russian estates are seriously constrained. It is worth mentioning that initially, the members of the society planned to establish the study of the noble estate on a national scale, dividing the territory of the country into 7 "estate districts" with centers in cities

like Moscow, Saint-Petersburg, Kazan, Kyiv, Minsk and one of the cities in Crimea (V. V. Zgura, 1923). However, this initiative has not been realized in either the 20th or the 21st century.

### 3.4 Cataloging

In Italy, the role of cataloging is defined at the national level in Art. 17 of the "Code of Cultural Heritage and Landscape", according to which the Ministry, with the cooperation of the regions and other local public entities, ensures the cataloging of cultural heritage and coordinates the related activities. In the Regional Institute, the collection of information has been carried out systematically for decades (*Venetian Villas: The Province of Rovigo*, 2001; *The Province of Treviso*, 2001; *The Province of Padua*, 2001; *The Province of Verona*, 2003; *The Province of Venice*, 2005; *The Province of Vicenza*, 2005; *Friuli Venezia Giulia*, 2006). Catalogs dedicated to individual provinces have made it possible to publish an anthology of Venetian villas, which consolidated the material gathered over 10 years of the institute's work (*Catalogazione delle ville venete*, 2010). The information collected by the institute is gradually being uploaded to an online catalog, where basic information about each Venetian villa is available (<https://irvv.regione.veneto.it/index.php?wp=INDEX>).

However, the use of this resource by foreign specialists is hindered by the fact that the catalog is currently available only in Italian.

The Society for the Study of the Russian Estate, in its original form, also regarded catalogization as an integral part of its work. The organization has published works such as "Estates of the Moscow Province: An Attempt at a Bibliographic Index" (1927) and "Monuments of Estate Art: Moscow District" (1928). In the latter study, 163 estates were described. Even though the society, re-established in 1991, consistently emphasizes its continuity with the organization that existed in the 1920s, the process of systematic cataloging of Russian estates has not been initiated to this day. What the society continues to do is collecting bibliographic information about Russian estates. Under the society's aegis, bibliographic indices by G. D. Zlochevsky, such as "Russian Estate: Historical-Bibliographic Overview of Literature (1787-1992)" (2003) and "Old Estates and Dachas of the Moscow Region: Bibliographic Index (1992-2006)" (2008), have been published.

### 3.5 Publications

In addition to the catalogs, the Regional Institute of Venetian Villas has published several other scientific works, all of which aspire to provide comprehensive coverage. These are studies that, in essence, also serve as catalogs, compiling information on specific components of the villa complexes.

From 2008 to 2015, the Regional Institute focused on the collection of materials regarding the fresco ensembles of Venetian villas (*The frescoes in the Venetian villas. The*

*Sixteenth Century*, 2008; *The Seventeenth Century*, 2009; *The Eighteenth Century*, Vol. 1, 2010; *The Eighteenth Century*, Vol. 2, 2011; *The Nineteenth Century*, 2015). In 2014, the Institute published a study that concentrated on park sculptures, which act as a connecting link between architecture and the natural landscape (M. De Vincenti, 2014). Following the research on the sculptures of Venetian villas, a publication that can be termed a “catalog” of the landscaping solutions of the villa ensembles was released (G. Rallo et al., 2016).

The publishing efforts of the Society of the Russian Estate have a fundamentally different nature. Since 1994, the collection of scientific papers under the title “Russian Estate” has been published, which reflects the results of new research and the chronicles of the association's activities. The publication of the collection can be considered as a continuation of the open meetings organized by the society each month, where the scientific reports on the topic are presented. The publication of materials by the Society does not have a systematic character and reflects the wide range of research directions in the field of Russian mansion culture.

### 3.6 Tourism and cultural management

The International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites states: “The conservation of monuments is always facilitated by making use of them for some socially useful purpose. Such use is therefore desirable but it must not change the lay-out or decoration of the building” (Art. 5). The work of the Regional Institute aligns with this approach, as its activities are not limited to cataloging and studying of Venetian villas. In equal measure, the organization is interested in the economic and tourism valorization of the villa complexes.

The work of the Regional Institute is based on three areas of activity that aim to increase the attendance of the villas (A. F. Mrics, 2014):

1. Cultural and educational activities;
2. Organization of leisure and entertainment at the villas;
3. Offering premises within the villa complex for rent to tourists.

The importance of valorization lies in the fact that not all Venetian villas are regularly visited by tourists. The reason for this is that these ensembles are often difficult to reach, as they are frequently located far from the cities. The seriousness of this issue is illustrated by a 2014 study: out of 300 villas in public ownership, 100 were inadequately visited or not visited at all (A. F. Mrics, 2014). In this case, organizing events at the villa becomes the only way to address the situation.

One of the most important events at the Venetian villas is the annual Day of the Venetian Villa. In 2024 it took place on October 19-20. During these days, villas in the Veneto and Friuli-Venezia Giulia regions organized a variety of activities, among which cultural and educational events hold a significant place. For example, the Tiepolo Passi Villa hosted a conference dedicated to the projects on

restoration and enhancement of the villa's historic parks, while the Barbaro Villa held an evening of the historic reconstruction of the costumes from the second half of the 16th century. During the celebration, the Venetian villas also became places for leisure and relaxation. The gardens of the Villa Pojana hosted yoga classes, while the Villa Francanzan Piovene organized a wine tasting. Lastly, the Tiepolo Passi Villa offered tourists the opportunity to stay on their premises, allowing them to enjoy nature while gaining insight about the villa and its surroundings. The entire list of events was available on the website (<https://www.giornatavillevenete.it/>), which significantly simplified the search for information and the selection of activities.

It is noteworthy that Russia has a similar celebration, known as the Day of the Russian Estate. However, unlike the example of the Day of the Venetian Villa, such events in Russia tend to be organized quite sporadically. For example, in the Mariyno estate in the Leningrad region, the Day of the Russian Estate was celebrated for the sixth time on May 19, 2024: a horse show and a concert by a vocal-instrumental ensemble were prepared for the audience. On the contrary, in the Shakhmatovo estate in the Moscow region, as in many others, the Day of the Russian Estate is not celebrated in any way. Thus, participation in the celebration depends mostly on the initiative of the owners and managers. The Society for the Study of the Russian Estate does not participate in this matter due to insufficient resources and the vast territory over which the villas are located. In fact, in recent years, the Society's activities have focused on organizing open meetings and publishing the collection “Russian Estate”, even though the organization's initial goals included not only study but also the preservation, restoration, and integration of estates into the contemporary cultural and economic environment (L. V. Ivanova, 1994). Field trips, which were originally an integral part of the organization's work, have not been conducted since 2018 (<https://oiru.org/expeditions.html>).

### 4. Conclusion

Approaches to working with cultural heritage can be theoretically oriented (cataloging and study) and practically oriented (valorization and management). The integration of both aspects into work contributes to greater efficiency. The Regional Institute, established through the efforts of the regions of Venice and Friuli-Venezia Giulia, has the resources to carry out activities in both directions. Control over the preservation conditions of the cultural heritage sites is impossible without gathering information about the villas and their careful classification, while the search for funding essential for conducting conservation and maintenance activities depends significantly on the development of tourism.

However, in the case when the organization does not have such an opportunity, another viable strategy for working with cultural heritage is research-oriented. This approach can be illustrated by the Society for the Study of the Russian Estate, a nationwide public organization, which does not receive any support from the governmental bodies. It represents a community of scholars who study various

aspects related to the history of the Russian estate by organizing open meetings and publishing the collection "Russian Estate".

While the value of the Society's work cannot be underestimated, we tend to believe that the example of the Regional Institute can serve as a basis for the establishment of similar institutions in Russia. Clearly defined boundaries, funding from the regional budget, and established contacts with private owners these are the features that enable the Institute to effectively manage the 4,000 villas under its control.

The perspective of the presented research may involve examining the systems for the protection of cultural heritage monuments in other countries and comparing them with Italian and Russian cases. It is also worth noting the practical prospects of work in this field within Russia: the creation of a catalog-archive of historical estates and the organization of student conferences in the residences to explore new perspectives on the problem of preserving architectural heritage within the country.

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