

Moscow on the Connecticut River: How a Russian Iconic Design Continues to Define an American City

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Abstract

Besides developing the first revolver, 19th century arms-maker Samuel Colt was a brilliant PR man, visiting with heads of state whose armies might become potential buyers of his gun. One of his travels took him to Russia, where he was impressed by the iconic-shaped dome adorning the tops of Russian churches. Colt would crown his new gun factory with such an icon, an eye-catching blue, onion-shaped dome reminiscent of what he saw in Russia. To what degree can a culture successfully adopt the icon of another culture to represent it? The United States and Russia have often had a rocky relationship. Nevertheless, a little piece of Moscow sits comfortably before the Connecticut River outside of Hartford.

Keywords: Samuel Colt, Onion-shaped domes, Icons, 19th century Hartford

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Colt's Armory Complex – Onion Dome
Connecticut State Library

Introduction

History often marks cities by their monarchs, wars, revolutions, inventions, and of course arts. Cities are also marked by specific landmarks that later become iconic. Big Ben comes to mind for London and the Eiffel Tower for Paris. Besides these two examples being iconic structures, they also represent the culture they come from. Big Ben has a stolid, practical stiff-upper lip British quality about it, the same way the elegance, grace, and the airiness of the Eiffel Tower will also strike the visitor as being qualities that are distinctively French. Even if the preceding examples border on stereotypes, these two structures have long since come to comfortably represent their cultures. But what about when a city's iconic landmark is defined by a foreign design? Such is the case with Hartford, Connecticut, USA, where a blue, Russian Orthodox dome atop an old but significant factory dating from the 19th century Industrial Revolution, continues to define a city settled in the 17th century by austere Puritans for whom ornateness was shunned and the simplistic and stark was cherished. Though not a major city like London or Paris, 19th century Hartford punched above its weight with factories that were on the cutting edge of technology such as Samuel Colt's armory, which produced the newly developed revolver. After constructing his factory, arms-maker Samuel Colt decided to grace it with a blue onion dome that continues to define this city in the 21st century. In so doing, a city rooted by Western culture and religion, is defined by a distinct image of the East. The Puritans and later the Congregationalists (with their square white wooden churches dominated by long clear windows and unadorned interiors) may be the roots of this small provincial capital called Hartford, but along the Connecticut River where the Colt factory still exists along with its distinct and panoramically viewed orthodox dome, Moscow defines this small American city.

Body

The story of how an Orthodox dome arrived on the Connecticut River outside of Hartford and has come to dominate this New England landscape ever since, begins with a 19th Century Yankee entrepreneur arms-maker named Samuel Colt. Con artist, double dealer and perhaps double crosser might be a better way to describe the man credited with developing the revolver. Poor family finances led Colt to make his way early in life, which for a time meant traveling the country on "the laughing gas circuit." Pre-fixing a fake medical degree to his name (which he reinvented as "Dr. Coult") the future gun-maker would perform "laughing gas exhibitions" where he

would ask for volunteers from the audience to step on stage, take a few whiffs of the recently discovered element of nitrous oxide, and then sing or perform silly antics much to the amusement of the crowd (Hosley 1996 16). As for the invention that made Colt famous? How Colt developed a cylinder allowing the shooter to repeatedly fire five or six shots before reloading, is more rooted in legend than history. Supposedly young Colt got the idea for such a revolving cylinder when he went out to sea as a young man. After observing how the first mate turned the ship's wheel to steer the vessel, he imagined how this activity might be applied to a handgun. At that time, hand guns had to be reloaded after every shot. "Sam conceived, by observing the ship's wheel, or possibly the windlass, a practical way for making a multi-shot pistol" (Grant 1982 2). Through social networking, Colt was able to finance a factory along the Connecticut River outside of Hartford. What proved to be a tougher endeavor was getting armies and governments to buy his weapon. Despite the deadly prowess of a pistol that could repeatedly fire five bullets, it turned out to be a tough sell with armies and governments secure in the weapons that won the wars of yesterday. In order to convince such governments and armies, Colt would personally visit with foreign ministers or seek an audience at foreign courts to try and sell his weapon. One of those courts where Colt hoped to sell his mass-produced weapon, was Czarist Russia, ruled by Czar Nicholas the First.

When Colt went to the Russian court in the 1850s to present the Czar with his Dragoon Percussion Revolver (the precursor of the more famous Colt .45 pistol that would later show up on the late 19th century American western frontier) Russia was at war with Turkey. Ever the salesman (and double dealer) Colt presented one of these guns "to Czar Nicholas I" and later to "Sultan Abdulmecid I" of Turkey (maviboncuk.blogspot.com/2006). It was in Russia where Colt saw the flame-like domes atop Russian churches and cathedrals, images that inspired him and also appealed to his savvy showmanship that was behind promoting his business ventures. Thus, after completing his new armory along the Connecticut River in 1855, the top of his soon-to-be successful enterprise was "perched [with] an exotic Russian-style onion dome crowned with the company trademark: a zinc-plated bronze statue of a rampant colt on a globe. Besides touting the building's imperial scale and its owner's ambitions, these eccentric architectural details alluded to Colt's recent entrée at the court of Czar Nicholas I" (Braddock 2013 14). This exotic image of Colt's ambitions would also soon dominate the austere Puritan landscape that Colt was born in.

Today, the plain, austere, white-spired Congregationalist and similar Protestant churches "seem so integral to the modern-day landscape of rural Connecticut" (Emlen *Winterthur Portfolio* 266). Such religious-styled architecture would also be prevalent in Connecticut's towns and cities such as Hartford. The predominant color for many of these churches was white. Many of these houses of worship were crowned with a steeple, sometimes topped with a plain cross. Early churches were wood-framed; later, many would be built in brick. Some of these churches would even become more ornate in "Religious artifacts ranging from dedicatory sermons and music to upholstery and communion cups" (Emlen *Winterthur Portfolio* 267). More than any other Protestant denomination, The Congregationalist church would influence civic and public space in 19th century Connecticut. "By 1800, a considerable variety of religious buildings dotted the landscape...these structures shared the many functions originally united in the Puritan meetinghouses...Protestant Christianity was a pillar of the republic; impressive churches on the landscape proved the new nation was

thriving—artistically, economically, and most important, morally” (Buggein 2003 167-68). Even though Colt built his Hartford armory in the mid-1850s (when Connecticut strongly reflected its Puritan and Protestant roots in civic and secular architecture) it would have made more sense for him to add an element or two from such architecture to his factory. A white church steeple would seem more fitting on top of his highly visible factory along the Connecticut River rather than an Orthodox Church dome. Such a design was foreign and exotic for mid-19th century Connecticut. The religious significance of a dome is also at odds with the Christianity practiced in Colt’s 19th century Connecticut. The dome “has been described as resembling a bonfire” (Mathewes-Green 2015 16). Such a flame-like design has been interpreted by the Russian art historian Prince Eugene Trubetskoi as “a peak” that “reaches the real point of contact of the two worlds—that is, the foot of the cross” which “unite[s] with the celestial gold” (Alfeyev 2014 57). The dome represents a mystical experience between worshipper and God. The Puritan Meetinghouse and The Congregationalist Church “are proof of a community’s taste and wealth, and a site for moral instruction” (Buggein 2003 168). By crowning his armory with a rectangular steeple, Colt would have at least been acknowledging his culture’s appreciation of wealth. By placing an exotic mystical dome on his armory instead, Colt seems to be showing disdain for his culture’s values. Colt’s armory, however, was more than just a money-making enterprise for him. It was also an enterprise that depended more on foreign courts and armies than on local houses of assembly or civic meeting houses. In placing a dome instead of a steeple on top of his armory, Colt was announcing the importance and success that lay in an America that was more internationally rather than domestically focused. Colt’s dome is a deliberate break from a landscape that he himself left as a young man. His dome also questions his culture’s traditional view of wealth. Success does not depend so much then on one’s morals and virtues as much as it does on one’s ability to engage in business without virtue. (As noted above, Colt offered to sell his early pistols to the Russian and Turkish armies when they were at war with each other. He would later attempt to do the same when the American Civil War broke out, selling his northern-Yankee made pistols to the seceding Confederate government before Union forces blockaded Southern ports). Seen in this light then, Colt’s motive for gracing his armory with a dome seems materialistic, self-serving, and crass—not exactly the more moral and altruistic reasons behind such multi-cultural exchanges. Yet is it that far off to consider how commerce and self-enrichment is behind the cultural expropriation of foreign ideas, imagery, and design? A good place to see how such motivation is behind such cultural appropriation of the exotic is in contemporary Las Vegas.

In Margaret Malamud’s article “Pyramids in Las Vegas and in Outer Space: Ancient Egypt in Twentieth Century American Architecture and Film” the appropriation of Ancient Egypt as metaphor for contemporary American materialistic values is explored. The visual tropes of Ancient Egypt appropriated by Hollywood and particularly Las Vegas is less about the Pharaohs and more about “the entertainment moguls” who created a casino as a giant pyramid, for example, as a way to dazzle gamblers and also to lure in more hesitant gamblers” (Malamud 2001 38). Although La Vegas has long had an identity as a gambling mecca dominated by casinos such as *The Stardust* (which have become part of the American cultural discourse) the city today is dominated by a giant recreation of the Luxor Pyramid (which is also a casino). “No visitor to Las Vegas can fail to notice the Luxor Casino. Whether arriving by air or car, the Luxor is the first sign and promise of the fantasy landscape

that is contemporary Las Vegas” (Malamud 2001 34). In addition to this enormous recreation of the largest pyramid at Giza, there is also an equally impressive rendition of The Sphinx nearby, and from which “Laser lights shoot from its eyes at night, illuminating the grounds of the casino, and the light which beams from the top of the pyramid can be seen by pilots flying into Los Angeles, two hundred and fifty miles away” (Malamud 2001 34). While contemporary Las Vegas has re-rendered Ancient Egypt, a modern American city has allowed its identity to be represented by a foreign, exotic image. Previous iconic images of this city were represented by the large neon cowboy towering the old Pioneer Club casino to the large statuesque woman’s shoe atop the Silver Slipper casino. Las Vegas’ exchange of its native-made identity for a historical and foreign one has less to do with exotic cultural fascination and more to do with announcing a new stratospheric-like mega-layer of wealth. Just as ancient Egypt superficially represents decadent splendor propped up by a seemingly endless supply of gold, Colt’s dome represents a new a level of power and money from the court of a Russian Czar. Certainly, the Puritan Meeting House and the Congregationalist church that influenced Connecticut architecture and design during Colt’s day signified power and wealth, but not at the level that Colt aspired for in his armory that was willing to sell its weapons to combatants engaged against each other in the same war. The owners of the Luxor casino in Las Vegas spared nothing in trying to recreate what an Ancient Egyptian experience might be like for its visitors and (more hopefully) gamblers. “At the Luxor, visitors float on barges on a miniature Nile River which meanders its way around...a scaled-down temple of Isis” (Malamud 2001 34). Beyond creating a significant Russian Orthodox dome atop his Hartford factory, Colt did nothing more to pay homage to or recreate the court or culture of Imperial Czarist Russia. Just the same, Colt’s exotic dome was meant to impress his native landscape but also to dominate it (and through it, perpetuate his name and entrepreneurship). And just like The Las Vegas Casino shaped like a giant Egyptian pyramid, Colt’s dome was initially at least about America. As Malamud argues about the recreations of the Sphinx and Giza, they are “about America” and its “celebrations of consumption, excess, and technological showmanship” (Malamud 2001 38). Such showmanship is what draws in millions of recent or freshly printed U.S. dollars each day through a casino’s doors. The Luxor Casino in Las Vegas is an *active* casino. Should its slot machines and poker tables someday close up, will its iconic building get torn down the way previous iconic casinos were? Such a question must be addressed because today much of what was once the Colt Arms Manufacturing company in Hartford is torn down, and what remains of it no longer manufactures weapons. Yet the dome that once represented the manufacturer’s success, remains and continues to define a city that today has long since lost its allure as the birthplace of a fabled weapon.

Conclusion

Colt died in 1862. His legacy and weapon would still continue with his wife Elizabeth. She would direct the business for the next several years, where Colt’s handgun would be improved and eventually become the more-well known revolver that has come to be associated with the conquering of the American Frontier in the late 19th century. But in 1864 the armory along the Connecticut River burned; the dome also was destroyed. Samuel Colt was no longer alive. The American Civil War was being waged which included a steady supply of Colt’s revolvers for the Union Army. There was no more need to pay homage to the Russian court. Yet Mrs. Colt

rebuilt the armory with a replica of the original dome “with its brilliant blue color and gold stars, with the major gold orb and ‘Rampant Colt’ at the top, the Colt emblem” (www.thefrontdoorproject.com/2015 accessed 9/18/2018). There was no need to recreate this large exotic object de-rooted from its earlier business connections association unless such an image had already begun to take root in its 19th century New England landscape. After Mrs. Colt’s death the company would continue to manufacture guns at the Connecticut River plant until the late 1960s. Machinery was stripped, offices or lofts moved in, and the dome remained (and now commanding a more prominent position with a major interstate built along side of the old armory). And the image of Russian mystical religious faith continues to dominate a small New England city that has been undergoing hard times for the past few decades. Colt built the dome as a “tribute to his Russian business connections who were the first major Colt customers” (www.thefrontdoorproject.com/2015 accessed 9/18/2018) With such business connections long ended, does the dome hold more of a mystical presence? At the very least, the dome has become synonymous with Hartford’s identity, showing up more and more on various advertisements, RSVPs, announcements, and other documents. In a similar way, the history of Colt’s Eastern-Orthodox dome taking root in a Western landscape has parallels to the way icons and eastern Orthodox architecture and imagery has had in some Polish churches in the 20th century. As Jerzy Uscinowicz notes in his 2010 article, “New Life of Icons in Architecture: Applications Versus Synthesis,” an Eastern influence has taken root for less than spiritual reasons. “True icons descend from the heavens” Uscinowicz writes, but then notes how the influence of this Eastern iconography was due to “a more physical than spiritual nature” (Uscinowicz 2010 289). Part of what propelled the icon to cross the Orthodox East into the Latin West was partly due to its rediscovery by secular, fine artists in early 20th century Russia. “Because of the ‘rediscovery’ of the icon and its consecutive journey through its native Eastern Orthodox world, both the Christian East and West became artistically prepared to receive it” (Uscinowicz 2010 290). For the Orthodox dome that remains atop of the former Colt armory today, its journey to the land of austere, white steeple-topped churches is less esoteric. The dome that defines a small provincial city in America today is due to a smart entrepreneur’s business acumen. Yet long after guns have stopped being manufactured in Hartford, Colt’s business-based decision on how to define his arms-making empire will most likely continue to define this city. And in so doing, a little piece of Moscow will define an American city, the same way an American businessman recreated a monumental Russian icon to define his successful business.

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