

## Introduction: Russo-European Artistic Encounters in the Eighteenth Century\*

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### Abstract:

*The present essay introduces a special forum on the Russian art world and its engagement with Western Europe during the eighteenth century. The guest editor recounts the origins of this international collaborative project, describes the main themes that inform the work of participating scholars, and explains the effect that Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has had on the nature of their enterprise. She concludes by arguing for the importance of both trans-national and post-colonial approaches to the study of eighteenth-century Imperial Russian art.*

### Keywords:

*Eighteenth-century Russian art, Russo-European relations*

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This special issue of *Vivliofika* highlights recent research on the Russian art world and its engagement with Western Europe in the eighteenth century. It arose from an online program in September of 2021 hosted by the Historians of Eighteenth-Century Art and Architecture (HECAA). The program, titled *Russia in Europe/Europe in Russia: Cross-Cultural Connections in a Recentered Art World*, brought together short presentations by five scholars from the US, UK, and Russia, followed by a lengthy discussion.

Our opening statement for the program, “Russia is a European State”—from a chapter heading of Catherine II’s 1767 Instructions (*Nakaz*)—set the tone for the event. Our primary goal was to introduce English-speaking art historians to current scholarship on Russian art.<sup>1</sup> Because much English-language scholarship on eighteenth-century art revolves around Europe (especially France and Britain) and its colonial counterparts, we hoped that focusing on Russo-European ties throughout the eighteenth century would appeal to HECAA’s membership while broadening its cultural and geographic scope.

Since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, our language from the 2021 program about Russian and European interconnections now resonates very differently. Moreover, art-historical research now has new obstacles that are specific to our field. Even as I write this introduction, negotiations for some authors to obtain image rights are complicated by government sanctions. Access to archives, museums, and other image

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<sup>1</sup> Russo-European ties have been a central theme in several issues of *Vivliofika*, see, for example, vol. 1 (2013) on French language acquisition in Russia, <https://iopn.library.illinois.edu/journals/vivliofika/issue/view/71>.

collections has been largely curtailed for researchers outside of Russia, and the Goskatalog image database is no longer accessible to scholars without a Russian IP address.<sup>2</sup> And yet the authors’ research highlights that despite the eighteenth century being a time of incredible difference between nations, it nonetheless witnessed intense, highly productive cultural and intellectual exchange.

When Russia emerged as a truly European power in the eighteenth century, its new connections with Europe became visible in its art world and built environment. The effect on art of this kind of exchange was widely felt. European art and design made their way into the Russian palaces and state institutions; artists were sent abroad to train, bringing back new ideas and iconography. Yet despite these ties, in the eyes of Europeans, the vast Russian Empire continued to be perceived as a quasi-oriental land. As a result, those artists (such as Gabriel-François Doyen) and works of art (such as the Crozat and Houghton Hall collections) that moved permanently from West to East were—and sometimes still are—seen as vanishing into a distant, inaccessible realm. Moreover, Russian adoption and reinterpretation of European artistic ideas has too often been dismissed as derivative art, mere copying. By presenting a panel and discussion of current research on Russian art for HECAA, we hoped to demystify it and show its integration into the broader European art world.

Chronologically, the articles in this issue span the entire century, from the reign of Peter I (sole r. 1696-1725) to Paul I (r. 1796-1801), and address a variety of themes, approaches, artistic media, and practices. Margaret Samu explores Russia’s adoption of allegorical language in art, as well as the practice of sending art students to Europe in the Petrine era, through a close examination of Andrei Matveev’s *Allegory of Painting* (1725). Today the word “hermitage” is associated with one of the world’s largest museums; Anna Korndorf’s article takes readers back to the term’s usage in eighteenth-century architecture to designate an intimate, informal space for elite sociability. Her study helps us to rediscover the hermitages of Elizabeth Petrovna (r. 1741-1762) by emphasizing their personal significance to the empress and their connections to similar structures in Europe. Taking us to the world of printmaking, Zalina Tetermazova’s work uses self-portraits by printmakers as a lens through which to investigate their social status, as well as the role of engraving in the academic hierarchy of arts during the second half of the eighteenth century. Alexandra Helprin focuses on Ivan Argunov’s portrait *Anna Nikolaevna Kalmykova (called Annushka)* (1767) to explore the relative positions of the enserfed artist and Kalmyk child in the Sheremetev family. She analyzes the ways in which European conventions of portraiture took on new meanings under Russia’s particular conditions of serfdom and colonization. Finally, Emily Roy’s article explores Venetian perceptions of Peter I’s founding of St. Petersburg by studying an etching published by Antonio Zatta in 1797 as part of a six-volume biography of Catherine II. Taken together, these articles represent a small slice of recent scholarship on art and the visual world of the eighteenth-century Russian Empire that is being produced in the US, UK, and Russia.

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<sup>2</sup> Государственный каталог Музейного фонда Российской Федерации. (Gosudarstvennyi katalog Muzeinogo fonda Rossiiskoi Federatsii): <https://goskatalog.ru>.

If these themes reflect our priorities back in 2021, we are now publishing at a time when sensitivities are heightened on all sides and new imperatives for scholarship are evident. Just as scholars of European and American art are increasingly coming to terms with the legacies of colonialism and slavery, so too are art historians working on Russia's imperial era more actively addressing the similarly complex issues of imperialism, colonialism, serfdom, and cultural violence, as well as the significant contributions of non-Russian ethnic groups. For example, artists and scholars from Kyiv such as Iosif Turoboiskii, prefect of the Slavic-Greek-Latin Academy in Moscow, played an essential role in Russia's assimilation of European Baroque imagery in the early eighteenth century. Decades earlier, engravers such as the brothers Oleksandr and Leontii Tarasevych, who had trained and worked in Catholic Vilnius and Augsburg in the 1670s and 1680s, introduced Counter-Reformation iconography and Baroque visual language into Orthodox icons and engravings produced at the Kyivan Cave Monastery.<sup>3</sup> They also brought to Kyiv the technique of engraving on copper plates that helped to disseminate this imagery. The large collection of European prints and iconographic sources they imported to Kyiv continued to provide visual material into the nineteenth century. Under Peter the Great, scholars from the Kyivan Mohyla Academy—patrons of artists from the Lavra—were then recruited to teach in Moscow, at the Slavic-Greek-Latin Academy, as their activities in Kyiv were being suppressed. Their familiarity with both Latin language and European iconography made them uniquely suited to navigate between Orthodox tradition and the classical imagery of the new imperial era. These scholars planned triumphal events and celebratory fireworks, and created program books that explained their meaning. Historians have already traced this transfer of cultural information; the imagery itself and its new uses deserve further study by art historians, especially for a non-Slavic-language readership.<sup>4</sup>

Not only ideas, but also artists came to Russia as a result of imperial expansion. Aleksei Egorov (1776-1851, birth name unknown) was taken from his home, a Kalmyk nomadic settlement east of the Volga, to study and work in the imperial capital when he was a young boy.<sup>5</sup> He grew up to become a pillar of the Imperial Academy of Arts—an influential painter and pedagogue whose work shaped future generations of artists. Forcibly transferring children in this way, which ultimately destroys their culture of origin, is today considered a form of cultural genocide. But what about Anton Losenko (1737-1773, born Antin Losenko in Hlukhiv, the capital of the Ukrainian Hetmanate after the deposition of Ivan Mazepa)? After being orphaned as a small child, he was recruited for the imperial choir in St. Petersburg, then trained as a painter when his voice changed. He went

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<sup>3</sup> Elena N. Boeck, "Claiming and Acclaiming Peter I: Ukrainian Contributions to the Visual Commemoration of Petrine Victories," in "Poltava 1709: The Battle and The Myth," ed. Serhii Plokyh, special issue, *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 31:1/4, (2009-2010): 278-279.

<sup>4</sup> Among the numerous studies by historians, see Boeck, "Claiming and Acclaiming Peter I," *ibid.*, 271-308; and Richard S. Wortman, *Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy* vol. 1 *From Peter the Great to Nicholas I* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 46-47. For work by an art historian, see E. A. Tiukhmeneva, *Iskusstvo triumfal'nykh vrat v Rossii pervoi poloviny XVIII veka* (Moscow: Progress-Traditsiia, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> "Egorov Aleksei Egorovich," in *Gosudarstvennyi russkii muzei. Zhivopis': Pervaia polovina XIX veka. Katalog tom 2, A-I*, ed. Grigorii Goldovskii (St. Petersburg: Palace Editions, 2002), 179.

on to make important contributions to the nascent Academy of Arts. Losenko's removal from Hlukhiv is usually seen as a recognition of his talent, an opportunity to thrive in the imperial capital.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, many young men were recruited for, or attracted to, the new teaching seminary, university, medical schools, and civil service positions in Russia's capitals—a phenomenon that one author described both as Ukrainians "taking advantage of the opportunities to move northward" and as "central government exploitation of the Ukrainian educational tradition."<sup>7</sup> If Losenko's childhood displacement from Hlukhiv is seen as part of this larger trend, then it certainly constitutes a significant drain of talent that would leave his homeland depleted.

Finally, with the expansion of serfdom during the eighteenth century, enserfed artists became a new feature of imperial palaces and aristocratic estates. The vast wealth accumulated during this era would have been impossible without their unpaid labor. From mining raw materials to working as artists, copyists, architects, and builders, enserfed individuals shaped the visual world and built environment of elite culture throughout the empire. Serfdom in the arts naturally loomed large in Soviet-era scholarship, but it is worth examining again with the more nuanced and less ideologically driven approaches of the twenty-first century.<sup>8</sup> While some articles in the present issue deal with these themes that decolonize and recenter the field (particularly Alexandra Helprin's work), it is now more important than ever to address them in studying the art of the Russian Empire.

As the essays in this issue demonstrate, the eighteenth century was a dynamic period of interaction during which Russians traveled to Europe for extended periods, and Europeans went to live in Russia. If such travel is virtually impossible at the present time, and institutional collaboration largely suspended, this issue brings together individual scholars working in Moscow, New York, and Cambridge. Continuing the kind of collaboration and communication that produced the present issue of *Vivliofika* remains incredibly important and will be vital to rebuilding new relationships in future.

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<sup>6</sup> See A. L. Kaganovich, *Anton Losenko i russkoe iskusstvo serediny XVIII stoletia* (Moscow: Academia khudozhestv SSSR, 1963), 26-27.

<sup>7</sup> David Saunders, *The Ukrainian Impact on Russian Culture 1750-1850* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, 1985), 57.

<sup>8</sup> For examples of Soviet-era scholarship on enserfed artists, see E. S. Kots, *Krepostnaia intelligentsiia* (Leningrad: Seiatel', 1926); T. V. Alekseeva, *Khudozhniki shkoly Venetsianova* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1982). For more recent work, see Richard Stites, *Serfdom, Society and the Arts in Imperial Russia: The Pleasure and the Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 332-43; and Alexandra Helprin, "The Sheremetevs and the Argunovs: Art, Serfdom, and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century Russia" (PhD. diss., Columbia University, 2017).