

Ivan Argunov's Portrait of Anna Kalmykova¹

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Abstract:

This article examines Ivan Petrovich Argunov's 1767 painting of Anna Nikolaevna Kalmykova, one of many Kalmyk children removed from their families by the Russian military and forcibly adopted by elite Russians and Europeans. Both sitter and painter were, in different ways, unfree: Argunov was enserfed by the Sheremetev family and Kalmykova was their ward. Examining the portrait's many visual antecedents and references, this paper argues that Argunov used the intimate, informal styles of Enlightenment portraiture in a way that enmeshed its subject and author in the harsh social hierarchies of the Sheremetev household and imperial society. The relatively loose facture of the painting and its attention to the sitter's liveliness and youth demonstrate Argunov's skill as a modern portraitist. But although Kalmykova dominates the composition of her own portrait (which makes it unlike most other portraits of Kalmyk people in Russia during this period), Argunov makes clear that she is subordinate to her patron and other members of her "adoptive" family. Mapping the power structures of the household that enserfed him, Argunov combined private and ceremonial idioms in a way that said much about Kalmykova's status and his own – a manner of portraiture that could only be copied by other artists from outside the household.

Keywords:

Ivan Argunov, portraiture, enserfed artists, Anna Kalmykova, Sheremetev family, Kalmyk people, eighteenth-century art, Enlightenment, serfdom

In 1767, Ivan Petrovich Argunov (1729-1802) painted a portrait of a young girl known as Anna Nikolaevna Kalmykova (Fig. 1). The painting shows a smiling child dressed smartly and brandishing emblems of powerful social connections: Countess Varvara Alekseevna Sheremeteva (whom she called her grandmother) and Empress Elizabeth. The portrait is a direct quotation of an earlier Argunov portrait of Countess Anna Petrovna Sheremeteva, Varvara Sheremeteva's daughter. Argunov depicts the child in three-quarters view, seated in an upholstered chair against an indistinct background. Kalmykova sits up very straight, facing the viewer and making direct eye contact, a hint of a smile on her face. Her hair is powdered gray and she wears a red dress with lace trim, a lace bonnet, earrings, and a beaded bracelet. In her hands she holds a fictive print, painted in grisaille, portraying her late "grandmother," the countess, who in turn wears a brooch commemorating her years as a lady-in-waiting to Elizabeth. The print's caption identifies Sheremeteva in French and includes Argunov's Latin signature and the date.

¹ Apart from the many people who helped me with my dissertation research on the Argunovs, I would like to thank Margaret Samu for her help and encouragement, Robert Collis and the editors of *Vivliofika* for their support, and my anonymous reviewers for their very helpful comments.



Fig. 1. Ivan Argunov, *Anna Nikolaevna Kalmykova*, 1767. Oil on canvas, 62 x 50 cm. Kuskovo, Moscow.

The portrait's skillfully painted surfaces and intricate composition reflect elite social signaling, but also record an encounter between two unfree people in Catherinian Russia. Argunov was a "household" or enserfed painter of the Sheremetevs, one of Russia's wealthiest princely families. Kalmykova, who was the Sheremetevs' ward, was one of many Kalmyk children removed from their families in Central Russia by Russian soldiers. Her portrait, with its many layers of representation and allusion, is an extraordinary example of a genre that was relatively new to Russia. Demonstrating attention to what could be called individual, personal, or familial, it simultaneously enmeshes its subject (as well as Argunov himself) within the political hierarchies of imperial Russia.

Both Argunov and Kalmykova moved in elite circles while experiencing legal and social subjugation. Born to parents enserfed by the Cherkasskii family, Argunov was trained as a painter by Russian and foreign teachers, including Georg Christoph Grooth (1716-1749), and was a part of Varvara Cherkasskaia's dowry when she married into the Sheremetev family in 1743. Argunov was one of many enserfed painters active in Russia, though the success he achieved was rare. He attracted notice from foreign commentators such as Jacob von Stählin, who wrote that he "enriched [the Sheremetevs'] gallery" with portraits "of the best taste."² He also received a favorable comment from Empress Catherine II, who did not

² J. Stählin and K. V. Malinovskii, *Zapiski Iacobi Shtelina ob iziashnykh iskusstvakh v Rossii*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1990), 364.

sit for him in person but was pleased with a portrait he painted of her.³ Argunov eventually stopped painting in the late 1780s, after the Sheremetevs made him a household steward, and died still enserfed by the family.⁴ Despite his success, he had been barred from official association with the Academy of Fine Arts and was subject to the whims of the Sheremetevs, who had the power to dominate and punish the people they enserfed.⁵

The Sheremetev family, despite waning political power over the course of the eighteenth century, retained cultural influence in Russia due their interest in the arts and their vast wealth, which included more than one hundred thousand enserfed people. Their extended household represents a microcosm of the multiple forms of serfdom and other forms of servitude during this period. Many of their enserfed workers lived in 37 *votchiny* scattered across Russia, meaning that their serfdom was primarily economic—the profits from their agricultural, industrial, or artisanal labor flowing back to the Sheremetevs.⁶ No matter how distant, this labor was organized, surveilled, and policed by an administrative network, also of enserfed people, who had the power to mete out penalties on the Sheremetevs' behalf, and sometimes at their direct behest.⁷ Closer to the places the Sheremetevs frequented—the Moscow and St. Petersburg houses, and numerous *usadby*—the family had more direct control over the people they enserfed, including artists working in multiple media, architects, an operatic and balletic theatrical troupe, and musicians. Artists and other educated, enserfed professionals sometimes lived in material comfort and were paid well—records show the top actresses in the family's troupe being compensated hundreds of rubles, allocated allowances for clothing and other goods, and living in well-appointed rooms in the family's houses.⁸ But these “elite” serfs were also subject to abuse.

³ Writing to Petr and Varvara Sheremeteva, Argunov reported that he had heard that Catherine said “that the execution and the concept were fine and that there was a likeness to the face.” (“что работа и идея хороша и в лице сходство есть.”) Tatiana Selinova, *Ivan Argunov* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1973), 83-84.

⁴ This was a prestigious role within the household; after his death, the Sheremetevs provided for his widow and daughters, receiving a letter from his widow Marfa thanking them for their assistance. See Russian State Historical Archive (hereafter RGIA), St. Petersburg, fond 1088, opis 3, delo 1584, l. 6. Argunov's sons Nikolai and Iakov were also painters and were manumitted after the death of Nikolai Sheremetev in 1809.

⁵ Peter Kolchin estimates that about 5% of Sheremetev serfs were officially punished; this is a relatively low number that indicates administrative distance between the Sheremetevs and most of their workers. See Peter Kolchin, *Unfree Labor: American Slavery and Russian Serfdom* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987), 125.

⁶ The economic interests of the family were diverse and ranged from metal and fabric factories to agriculture and commercial trade. Some Sheremetev serfs owned serfs themselves, while others became extremely wealthy. An example was E. Grachev, who was rich enough to lend to Nikolai Sheremetev tens of thousands of rubles in the 1790s. Jerome Blum, *Lord and Peasant in Russia, from the Ninth to the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 174-175.

⁷ An incident later in the century involving Argunov's son Nikolai, also a painter, and his apprentice Mikhail Zatsepin, showed the degrading possibilities of working in this environment. The younger Argunov was initially fined (although this punishment was cancelled) and Zatsepin was whipped after the two were blamed for breaking a porcelain plate. See, RGIA fond 1088, opis 3, delo 239. See, Varvara Aleksandrovna Rakina, “Nikolai Argunov i problema zakazchika v russkoi portretnoi zhivopisi kontsa XVIII - pervoi chetverti XIX veka” (Kand. diss., Gosudarstvennii institut iskusstvoznaniya, 2005), 109.

⁸ A detailed account of the actresses' living conditions can be found in Douglas Smith, *The Pearl: A True Tale of Forbidden Love in Catherine the Great's Russia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 149-150: Nikolai Sheremetev wrote: “should there be any laziness, negligence, or resistance in their music studies, then they

Some opera performers were denied bread and water as punishment, the apprentice painter Mikhail Zatsepin was sentenced to be whipped after he was blamed for breaking a porcelain plate, and enserfed women were subject to sexual exploitation and abuse – an open secret when it came to the actresses of the family's theater.⁹

Although she was not enserfed, Kalmykova's social position was much more precarious than Argunov's. Russians forced Kalmyks, a traditionally nomadic ethnic minority, into multiple forms of unfree labor during this period, from conscription to enslavement, which remained legal for Kalmyk people long after it had been abolished for white, Christian Russians.¹⁰ In some cases, Russians removed children from Central Russia to St. Petersburg, renamed them, and transferred them among families connected to the court; Kalmykova was one of these children. Caroline of Hesse-Darmstadt, a German visitor to St. Petersburg, wrote to her mother: "The Empress is thinking of obtaining two more Kalmyk children, a boy and a girl, and giving them to me, saying that if the little girl is satisfactory, that she might amuse you, my dear Mama."¹¹ She also characterized these children's faces as being reminiscent of figures found on fans and vases.¹² Her description reveals the extent to which Kalmyk children were treated like property to be passed among courtiers and elite visitors to the capital. The mention of fans and vases suggests that this commodification of the children was also racialized.

Until now, scholars have considered the Kalmykova portrait largely in relation to Argunov's other paintings. The most involved discussion of the painting appears in Tatiana Selinova's illuminating 1973 monograph on Argunov. Her analysis of the painting focuses on Argunov's skills as a colorist and his ability to capture the character and liveliness of the little girl. She convincingly contextualizes the portrait historically (in terms of the situation of Kalmyk children at court and in elite homes) and formally, categorizing the painting stylistically with other "informal" commissions.¹³ More recently, the painting is also mentioned in Rosalind Blakesley's *The Russian Canvas: Painting in Imperial Russia, 1757-1881*, a work that compellingly analyzes the complexities of the portrait's complex

are to be punished by being forced to kneel and put on bread and water, and report to me the slightest incident."

⁹ Petr Sheremetev also had a long relationship with an enserfed woman; their children were semi-legitimated by being given a shortened form of the family name, Remetev, and small retinues. RGIA, fond 1088, opis 3, delo 1550, ll. 35-37. Two of the Remetevs had four servants each in 1802. In contrast, Countess Praskovia Sheremeteva had nineteen "girls" assigned to her during the same year. RGIA, fond 1088, opis 3, delo 1550, ll. 120b-13.

¹⁰ Willard Sunderland, "The Greatest Emancipator: Abolition and Empire in Tsarist Russia," *The Journal of Modern History* 93 (September 2021): 566-598, 578.

¹¹ "Императрица думает еще пробрести двух детей калмыков, мальчика и девочку, и собирается отдать их мне, говоря, что если девочка будет достаточно, то пусть она развлекает вас, моя дорогая мама." Andrei Nikolaevich Spaschanskii, *Ekaterinskii Peterburg glazami inostrantsev: neizdannye pisma 1770-kh godov* (St. Petersburg: Paritet, 2013), 169.

¹² Spaschanskii, *Ekaterinskii Peterburg*, 169.

¹³ Selinova, *Ivan Argunov*, 54-61. Selinova did not compare the painting at any length with the early 1760s portrait of Anna Sheremeteva discussed later in this paper, which had not yet been attributed to Ivan Argunov. For a complete bibliography of the painting up until 2005, see N. G. Presnova, ed., *Argunovy, krepostnye khudozhniki Sheremetevykh* (Moscow: Pinakoteka, 2005), 49.

“destabilised” hierarchies.¹⁴ This paper is the first to examine Argunov’s portrait of Kalmykova at length (although the complexities of its context of serfdom and imperialism call for even more extensive research and discussion). I argue that the portrait serves as an extraordinary example of inventiveness within the constraints of unfree working conditions, as well as a statement of authorship by an enserfed artist. Blurring the lines between ceremonial and private visual idioms, it remains a remarkable example of Enlightenment portraiture in the Russian context.

Argunov’s background and artistic context

As with many aspects of serfdom, there was a pronounced gap between theory and practice when it came to enserfed fine artists; Ivan Argunov’s life and career reveal how an enserfed painter could find success as a working artist despite practical and ideological impediments. Serfs were initially barred from the Academy of Fine Arts from its founding in 1757; “since all the arts are free,” wrote the Academy’s first president, Shuvalov, “then serfs are not to be admitted.”¹⁵ Serfs nonetheless attended later in the century.¹⁶ Argunov worked in a context that was not conducive to ingenuity, even for free artists (the genre that ostensibly required the most compositional skill, history painting, did not thrive in Russia during the eighteenth century). Furthermore, he was subject to a environment in which his primary patrons also legally owned him, exerting tremendous control over every aspect of his life.¹⁷

Argunov’s work for the Sheremetevs seldom allowed for inventive compositions. He completed a few history paintings, though these were copies of existing works, such as a Cleopatra after Cagnacci.¹⁸ Even as a portraitist, he was often instructed to copy paintings

¹⁴ Rosalind Blakesley, *The Russian Canvas: Painting in Imperial Russia, 1757-1881* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 173. For a more complete bibliography of the painting, see Presnova, *Argunovy*, 49.

¹⁵ Richard Stites, *Serfdom, Society, and the Arts in Imperial Russia: The Pleasure and the Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 288.

¹⁶ Until 1817, serfs were conditionally admitted with the agreement that they would be freed if they successfully completed their training. Stites describes the tension between theory and practice, explaining that the Academy was not an alluring prospect for upper class boys and largely consisted of peasants, serfs, and other members of the lower classes. Enserfed students were particularly vulnerable to exploitation, since their owners could remove them right before graduation, meaning that they did not have to be freed. See Stites, *Serfdom*, 289.

¹⁷ There were some practical advantages to being a “household” artist, such as steady work and income. While Ivan Argunov never had the chance to work as a free man, his sons Nikolai and Iakov were manumitted in the early nineteenth century, and Nikolai became an academician. Interestingly, his most innovative surviving works date from his time as a serf, as he was commissioned to portray the late Praskovia Sheremeteva, an enserfed opera singer whom Nikolai Sheremetev married, freed, and ennobled. The resultant cycle is unique in style and content, and very unlike the polished and conventional society portraits Argunov specialized in after his manumission. Varvara Rakina’s work perceptively examines Nikolai Argunov’s working conditions with the Sheremetevs and afterwards. See, especially, Rakina, “Nikolai Argunov.”

¹⁸ Presnova, *Argunovy*, 23.

or prints rather than composing his own work and painting from life.¹⁹ The result was work that often had an archaic effect, including dull colors and a flattening of pictorial space. A portrait of Field Marshal Boris Petrovich Sheremetev, completed by Argunov in 1753 after a circa 1710 precedent by Karl Schurmann, shows the late field marshal on horseback in front of a military landscape (Fig. 2). As in Schurmann's original, the anatomy of man and beast is awkwardly drafted, and the background is shallow. Although Argunov's other paintings displayed the full extent of his technical skill, here he deliberately copies the visual idioms of Petrine Russia in order to evoke the Sheremetev family's illustrious past.



Fig. 2. Ivan Argunov (after Karl Schurmann), *Field Marshal Count Boris Petrovich Sheremetev*, 1753. Oil on canvas, 88 x 71 cm. Kuskovo, Moscow.

When he was not working on commissions for the Sheremetevs, Argunov painted differently. Portraits of the non-noble bureaucrat Cosma Khripunov and his wife, residents of one of the Sheremetev houses in St. Petersburg, are formally distinct from Argunov's usual output (Figs. 3 and 4).²⁰ He has painted his neighbors—and presumably friends—

¹⁹ For example, in 1786 Petr Borisovich Sheremetev ordered Argunov to paint a portrait of his deceased friend, Aleksandr Lanskoï, using the most recent engraving of his likeness. See Russian State Archive of Ancient Acts (hereafter RGADA), Moscow, fond 1287, opis 1, ed khr. 4812, l. 150.

²⁰ According to Gennadii Vdovin, Ivan Argunov's portraits of the Khripunovs were a seminal moment in the development of eighteenth-century portraiture due to the decreased distance between subject and painter and what Vdovin calls "going into the house" of the sitter. Genadii Viktorovich Vdovin, *Persona, individual'nost, lichnost': opyt samopoznaniia v iskusstve russkogo portreta XVIII veka*, Teoriia istorii iskusstv (Moscow: Progress-Traditsiia 2005), 52-53. Iakov Bruk also sees the relationship between subject and painter in this work as indications of a "new type" of intimate, realistic painting. See Iakov Vladimirovich Bruk, "Ivan Argunov i krest'ianskaya tema v russkoi zhivopisi," *Iskusstvo* 2 (1978), 53.

with technical skill not evident in the portrait of Boris Sheremetev. Khripunova's fur cloak looks evocatively soft, and the shading of her skin is subtle and convincing. Argunov has handled the paint a little roughly, leaving sketch-like areas such as Khripunov's hands and the gentle folds of Khripunova's collar, but these passages are communicative and adept. Crucially, he has focused on his sitters' expressions, animating them with attention to the subtle movement of their faces and the liveliness of their direct gaze. These are paintings that are uninterested in mapping the Khripunovs' social connections or their trajectory in elite society. While not classless, they show a similar tendency to what was occurring in France and Western Europe. The *Encyclopédie*, in its entry on portraiture, emphasized the representation of both "*la distinction des états & du rang*" and "*l'esprit en quelque sorte, & le tempérament d'une personne*."²¹ But Daniel Roche has identified a shift during this period "from a social to an individual logic" in French portraiture.²² The facture of the Khripunovs' portraits – just as much as their disinterest in concrete social signifiers – marks them as modern and in dialogue with Western European trends. Argunov would bring a similar freshness to his execution of Anna Kalmykova's portrait, though her situation in life was worlds away from the Khripunovs', something Argunov would make clear through her portrait's composition.



Fig. 3. Ivan Argunov, *Wife of Cosma Khripunov*, 1757. Oil on canvas, 73 x 57.5 cm. Ostankino, Moscow.

²¹ F. B. Félice, "Portrait, Peinture," in *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire universel raisonné des connoissances humaines: Plant - Pouz* (Yverdon, n. p., 1774), 658. The Sheremetevs owned several copies of this work. *Opis biblioteki, nakhodiashcheisia v Moskve, na Vozdvizhenke, v dome grafa Dmitriia Nikolaevicha Sheremeteva, do 1812 g.* (St. Petersburg: Tipographia M. M. Stasiulevicha, 1883), 10.

²² Daniel Roche, *France in the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 545.



Fig. 4. Ivan Argunov, *Cosma Khripunov*, 1757. Oil on canvas, Ostankino, Moscow.

Interestingly, the Khripunov portraits ended up on display in the Sheremetev household, not in the possession of their sitters. Inventories record them hanging on the walls of the “old house” in the Sheremetevs’ palace complex at Ostankino, near Moscow, a building that contained administrative offices and informal living quarters for Count Nikolai Sheremetev and his enserfed mistress, Praskovia Kovaleva.²³ Even if Argunov had painted his neighbors as a private project, the finished work became the property of the family that legally owned him.²⁴ Beyond the difficulty of speculating about Argunov’s motives, the concept of an artist’s privacy or independence was fundamentally constrained by the state of serfdom. Argunov’s painting of Kalmykova further complicates the categories of private and public tendencies in portraiture in this context.

²³ Presnova, *Argunovy*, 32.

²⁴ The complications of property rules or norms came to a head in 1818, several years after Nikolai Argunov was manumitted. Household administrators repeatedly demanded that he return a portrait he had painted of the late Nikolai Sheremetev while he was still enserfed; Argunov refused but offered to paint a copy of it. Despite the apparent outrage of the Sheremetev administrators, one of whom wrote that Argunov was cheating the family that had given him his artistic education and his freedom, they either could not or would not compel him to do as they wished. RGIA, fond 1088, opis 3, d. 1618, ll.1-2.

Kalmyk historical context, known details of Kalmykova's life, Fedor Kalmyk and other images

Most of the surviving information about Anna Kalmykova comes from the Sheremetev family archive, which does not contain documentation of her age, her early childhood, or her family of origin.²⁵ Preserved documents include letters from the Sheremetevs to Kalmykova when she was a child as well as correspondence from her adulthood, after she married a Russian officer connected to the Sheremetev family.²⁶ There are also a few mentions of Kalmykova in inventories of the family palaces, including indications that she lived in a suite of rooms in their palace at Kuskovo near Moscow, an arrangement that remained in place after she left the household to marry.²⁷ Surviving letters contain affectionate language as well as details making clear that she was not an equal member of the family. For example, in an undated letter, Varvara Sheremeteva called Kalmykova "my soul" (*душа моя*) and wrote that she prayed to God to be soon reunited with "Annushka," signing the letter "your grandmother, Varvara Sheremeteva" (*твоя бабушка Варвара Шереметева*).²⁸ Letters such as this one were addressed to "Anna Nikolaevna, Countess Varvara Alekseevna's Kalmyk girl."²⁹ Kalmykova continued to write warmly to the Sheremetevs, especially Petr Sheremetev, Varvara's widower, after she married, and she named her own children Petr and Varvara.³⁰

The Kalmyks, the ethnic group to which Kalmykova belonged, are a historically nomadic group who arrived at the Caspian Steppe in the seventeenth century. From that period on, they faced increasing antagonism from the Russian Empire as it expanded in the region, cutting off their ability to move and therefore sustain themselves.³¹ Kalmyks who attempted diplomacy with Russia were met with condescension and racism; in his history of the Kalmyk people, Michael Khodarkovsky relates that Russians characterized Kalmyk envoys as "unwise, silly children" and "lightminded people."³² By the middle of the eighteenth century, Kalmyks lived impoverished on a depleted steppe and were forced to work in fisheries and in the military; in some cases adults were kidnapped into forced service in the Russian army.³³ There is less documentation about the separation of children from parents, whether by capture or, as recorded by Russians in the region, through sale into slavery in exchange for food.³⁴ Kalmyk people taken into bondage by Russians faced a

²⁵ Some of these documents were published by Sergei Sheremetev, a descendant of the family, in 1899, as part of a larger archival project. See Sergei Sheremetev, *Dve Kalmychki (Otgosloski XVIII veka, vypusk VI)* (St. Petersburg: Tipographia M. M. Stasiulevicha, 1899).

²⁶ Presnova, *Argunovy*, 49.

²⁷ RGIA fond 1088, opis 17, delo 69, l. 130b.

²⁸ Sheremetev, *Dve Kalmychki*, 4.

²⁹ Sheremetev, *Dve Kalmychki*, 3-4.

³⁰ Presnova, *Argunovy*, 49.

³¹ Michael Khodarkovsky, *Where Two Worlds Met: The Russian State and the Kalmyk Nomads, 1600-1771* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 215.

³² Khodarkovsky, *Where Two Worlds Met*, 60.

³³ Khodarkovsky, *Where Two Worlds Met*, 206. Russians were also eager to convert the Buddhist Kalmyks to Orthodox Christianity.

³⁴ Khodarkovsky, *Where Two Worlds Met*, 205 and 217.

different legal landscape than white, Christian serfs. Slavery for Kalmyks was still legal, remaining common in Siberia.³⁵ Kalmyks as a group did not gain full emancipation until 1892, three full decades after their Russian counterparts.³⁶

It was in this context that Russians took Kalmykova and other Kalmyk children back to St. Petersburg, an act that today would be considered genocide.³⁷ Empress Catherine II distributed some of these children among noble families, most of whom already owned large numbers of serfs. Serfdom was, at least in theory, a highly regulated institution, which included some rights for serfs, though these rights in practice were often ignored. The treatment of Kalmyk children, however, was not subject to the same norms. Anna Kalmykova left the Sheremetev family and married without any surviving record of being freed, suggesting that the Sheremetevs did not consider themselves to be enslaving her. However, even if she was not legally enslaved, she was a young child who was part of an ethnic group that frequently was enslaved, and she lived under the control of an enormously powerful Russian family.³⁸ Furthermore, at least in her early life, when she was taken from her family and referred to as Varvara Sheremeteva's "Kalmyk girl," she was not treated like a free person.

Caroline of Hesse-Darmstadt's description of the Kalmyk children in court is also suggestive of slavery. A Kalmyk boy taken with her to Germany was initially called Fedor Iwanowitsch Kalmück but later referred to himself as Fedor Ivannoff. Ivannoff studied painting and engraving and later became a successful free artist who traveled throughout Europe. An engraved self-portrait, published in London, bears the caption: "The portrait of Fedor, a Kalmuck Slave [drawn & engraved by himself] who was given by the present Empress of Russia to her mother the Margravine of Baden; having shown a disposition for the arts the Margravine sent him to Rome in order to improve himself in Painting & Drawing; he now resides at Carlsruhe, where he enjoys the reputation of a clever Artist."³⁹ (see Fig. 5) The engraving shows Ivannoff from the shoulders up, slightly turning his head to face the viewer. Unlike the print's caption, this self-portrait provides little information about the artist's personal history.⁴⁰ Instead, a steady gaze and a plethora of finely rendered

³⁵ Sunderland, "The Greatest Emancipator," 575.

³⁶ Sunderland, "The Greatest Emancipator," 568.

³⁷ The UN defines genocides as the "intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group [and to] forcibly transferring children of the group to another group." See "Genocide," United Nations, accessed Nov. 25, 2023, <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/genocide.shtml>.

³⁸ Even before 1725, slavery in Russia was an immensely complex institution that, like serfdom, encompassed a variety of legal situations and living conditions. Richard Hellie identifies eight forms of Muscovite *kholopstvo* that he deems slavery, ranging from temporary forms of indentured servitude to full, hereditary slavery, Richard Hellie, *Slavery in Russia, 1450-1725* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 33. As the Russian Empire expanded in the eighteenth century, many different kinds of servitude proliferated, from the incorporation of existing practices in conquered territory, to the export of "slavelike exploitation" across the Pacific to the Aleutians. See Sunderland, "The Greatest Emancipator," 575.

³⁹ Royal Collection Trust, London, RCIN 654416.

⁴⁰ Ekaterina Heath, "Fedor Kalmyk's Self-Portraits" 19v. *Art Seminars* (online presentation, August 17, 2021). Kalmyk led an extraordinary life documented by numerous portraits and self-portraits. The former are often degrading, including a painting depicting him as a page, and an appearance in Lavater's racial studies. His self-portraits show him alone in a series of unusual garments and hats.

details hint at Ivannoff's profession and his particular talents; his best-known work today is an album of drawings of the Parthenon Marbles that show a similar attention to texture.⁴¹

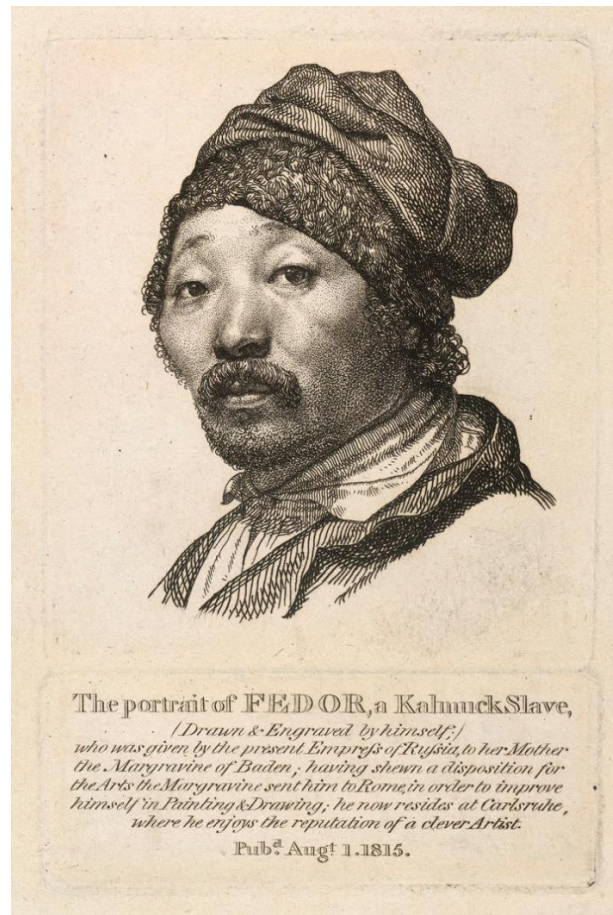


Figure 5. *The Portrait of Fedor, a Kalmuck Slave*, 1815, engraving, 14.8 x 9.9 cm, Royal Collection, London.

In Russia, Kalmyk people rarely appeared in portraits during the eighteenth century. One exception is a painting from before 1707, now in the State Russian Museum in St. Petersburg, showing Aleksei Lenin and a young Kalmyk man (Figure 6).⁴² Lenin, a solicitor, fills up nearly the entire lefthand side of the painting, his curled wig and red brocade coat making his elite status clear. On the right, the Kalmyk youth looks upward toward Lenin. The young man's identity is unknown, but he is painted in a position that casts him as small and ancillary compared with Lenin, not to mention his muted black clothing and lack of a

⁴¹ See Fedor Iwanowitsch Kalmück, "The Elgin Drawings," vols. 1, 3, 4 & 6, British Museum, London, 2012, 5004. For digital images of all the drawings, see "The Elgin Drawings," British Museum, accessed Nov. 25, 2023, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/search?keyword=kalm%C3%BCck&view=grid&sort=object_name_asc&page=2.

⁴² "Portrait of Aleksei Lenin and a Kalmyk," The Virtual Russian Museum, accessed Nov. 25, 2023, https://rusmuseumvrm.ru/data/collections/painting/17_19/zh_3982/index.php?lang=en.

wig. Whether a servant or enslaved, he plays the role of a subordinate in this portrait; Lenin's power over him is instantly clear. A portrait of Catherine II from 1756 by Anna Rosina Lesiewska uses the presence of a child, possibly a Kalmyk page who took care of Catherine's dogs, in a similar way (Figure 7).⁴³ The boy kneels at Catherine's feet, gazing up at her as he holds her spaniel. As these examples show, during the rare instances in which Kalmyk people appear in Russian portraiture in the eighteenth century, they are not only anonymous subordinates to the named subject of the image but are sometimes even equated with animals at the feet of elite Russians. Argunov's portrait of Anna Kalmykova is composed very differently from these precedents; she dominates the full space of the painting instead of being pushed to the margins. But the painting nonetheless makes clear that she is socially subordinate to members of the Sheremetev family.



Figure 6. Unknown, *Portrait of Aleksei Lenin and a Kalmyk*, before 1707, oil on canvas, 89 x 116 cm, State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg.

⁴³ The child was previously thought to be Paul, who would have been too young in 1756. Catherine mentions the Kalmyk child in her memoir. See Catherine II, Empress of Russia, *The Memoirs of Catherine the Great*, eds. Mark Cruse and Hilde Hoogenboom (Random House Publishing Group, 2007), 70.



Figure 7. Anna Rosina Lesiewska, *Peter III and Catherine II of Russia*, 1756. Oil on canvas, 207 x 143 cm. National Museum, Stockholm, Sweden.

The portrait

As with most of Ivan Argunov's work, there are few surviving documents relating to the commission and execution of Kalmykova's portrait. The painting was completed soon after Varvara Sheremeteva's death; in the next decade, the Sheremetevs would have two more portraits of Kalmykova made. One of these was an oil painting by Nicolas Delapierre that is almost an exact copy of Argunov's original. The second is a wooden medallion showing Kalmykova in profile, holding a print with an indistinct portrait of Varvara Sheremeteva.⁴⁴ The repetition of the portrait print detail suggests that it was important for the family to include a representation of the late Varvara in their imagery of Anna Kalmykova. Argunov's original was hung in the private bedchamber at Kuskovo alongside portraits of Varvara Sheremeteva's children. These paintings remained in this location until the revolution and can still be seen there today.⁴⁵ The similarities with Argunov's earlier portrait of Anna Sheremeteva (Figure 8) would therefore have been unavoidable. Each girl

⁴⁴ V. Iu. Matveev, ed., *Teatrum Machinarum: ili tri epokhi iskusstva rezby po kosti v Sankt-Peterburge* (St. Petersburg: Galereia Petropol', 1993), 74.

⁴⁵ Presnova, *Argunovy*, 49.

is represented in the same pose, each wearing a bonnet and a red dress trimmed with lace, though Kalmykova's portrait is slightly smaller and her clothing less ostentatious.



Figure 8. Ivan Argunov, *Anna Petrovna Sheremeteva*, before 1768. Oil on canvas, 72.5 x 56.7 cm. Kuskovo, Moscow.

Each painting also situates its sitter within a hierarchy of social power. Sheremeteva's is less conspicuous but more direct; her diamond brooch displays the monogram of Catherine the Great to emphasize the family's connection to imperial power. Argunov's portrait of Kalmykova, however, situates her within what Blakesley has called a "constellation of complex relationships and identities."⁴⁶ The print held by the child depicts Varvara Sheremeteva; it is a copy of Georg Grooth's portrait of the countess (Figure 9). Although her likeness is tiny and painted in grisaille to evoke a fictitious print, Sheremeteva is seen to be wearing a miniature brooch depicting a cameo of Empress Elizabeth (r. 1741-1762), for whom she served as lady-in-waiting (Figure 10). While Elizabeth's image is too small to be legible, the relationship is explained by Argunov's French caption: "*La Comtesse Barbara Cheremetoff, Dame d'honneur de Sa M. I. [Sa Majesté Impériale des toutes les] Russies.*" Kalmykova would therefore not only be linked to the Sheremetevs but to an

⁴⁶ Blakesley, *The Russian Canvas*, 171.

empress, albeit indirectly and through a paper print rather than the more durable and precious jewelry that Anna Sheremeteva wears.



Figure 9. Georg Grooth, *Varvara Alekseevna Sheremeteva*, 1746. Oil on canvas, 132.2 x 105.5 cm. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.



Figure 10. Ivan Argunov, *Anna Nikolaevna Kalmykova*, detail.

Like the portraits of the Khripunovs, Argunov's painting of Kalmykova is notable for its relatively loose, free facture. Kalmykova's bonnet, for instance, is painted with visible globs of oil that evoke rather than painstakingly record the starched wings of lace over her powdered hair. The effect is livelier than Argunov's earlier depiction of Anna Sheremeteva's bonnet, whose lace pattern is carefully reproduced throughout, a uniformity that leaves it a little flat. More conspicuously, Argunov has painted Kalmykova with an attention that suggests close observation, perhaps even sessions from life. As with the Khripunovs, her facial muscles are engaged as she makes eye contact with the viewer, suppressing a wider smile. Unlike the flatly painted field marshal, her skin consists of luminously blended layers of oil paint, adding depth to and animating her face. This does seem to be a portrait interested in the "individual logic" of its sitter, but at the same time it fixes her as inexorably within social hierarchy as any of the Sheremetevs' official parade portraits, archaizing or not.

The Kalmykova portrait also suggests that Argunov did not consider himself artistically constrained by the act of copying. The portrait within the portrait—of Varvara Sheremeteva—serves a visually and biographically resonant role. Argunov had initially been ensnared by the Varvara's family of origin, the Cherkasskiis, and was part of Varvara's dowry when she married Petr Sheremetev. The original painting of Sheremeteva, reworked by Argunov in black and white, was by Grooth, Argunov's teacher. The Latin caption included in Kalmykova's portrait, "*Argunow pinxit*," might be a claim of partial authorship if he assisted Grooth with the painting, or perhaps a playful comment on his transformation of the image from painting to grisaille print within the context of another oil portrait. Argunov alluded to copying in another work as well. In a painting thought to be a self-portrait, Argunov depicts a man once thought to be an unknown sculptor holding several tools (Figure 11). Selinova has convincingly identified these tools as implements for copying paintings and drawings.⁴⁷ If this painting is indeed a self-portrait, it suggests that Argunov was at ease depicting himself as a copyist first and foremost, even as he completed an original painting of himself. Selinova also observes that Argunov has arranged the tools to form the letters of his own initials, strengthening the case that this is indeed a self-portrait, and also showing the creative possibilities he was able to find even in the most concrete signs of copying other images.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Selinova, *Ivan Argunov*, 47-50. The painting is also identified as a self-portrait in N. P. Sharandak, *Ivan Argunov: 1727-1802* (Leningrad: Khudozhnik RSFSR, 1977), 14.

⁴⁸ Selinova, *Ivan Argunov*, 51.



Figure 11. Ivan Argunov, *Portrait of an Unknown Artist (Self-Portrait?)*, late 1750s—early 1760s. Oil on canvas, 83 x 64 cm. State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg.

The question of Argunov's freedom to compose is complicated by the existence of a later portrait by Nicolas Benjamin Delapierre, a French artist active in Russia (Figure 12). Delapierre's painting shows a young girl in the same pose as Kalmykova, holding another fictive print of Grooth's 1746 portrait. The identity of the sitter in this painting is unclear since she looks dramatically different from Kalmykova. The painting has sometimes been referred to as a portrait of Ekaterina Borisovna, another Kalmyk child who arrived with Kalmykova when she began living with the Sheremetevs, but this is unlikely because Ekaterina Borisovna soon left to live with another family. Letters between Kalmykova and the Sheremetevs mention her, but Kalmykova is frequently asked to convey their best wishes to Ekaterina Borisovna, suggesting that they were not in touch with her to the same extent.⁴⁹ So the portrait does seem to be Kalmykova, an identification strengthened by Selinova's observation that a portrait of Kalmykova in a "round, oval frame" is mentioned in Kuskovo inventories.⁵⁰ It is possible that Delapierre had only a verbal description or a sketch of the original, and took liberties with Kalmykova's likeness.

⁴⁹ As an adult, Anna Kalmykova ended many of her letters to Petr Sheremetev by saying that Ekaterina Borisovna sent her best regards. See RGIA, fond 1088, opis 1, delo 32.

⁵⁰ Selinova, *Ivan Argunov*, 58. It is worth noting that the inventories were not always correct.



Figure 12. Nicolas Delapierre, *Anna Nikolaevna Kalmykova (Ekaterina Borisovna?)*, 1772. Oil on canvas, 61.5 x 50 cm. Kuskovo, Moscow.

The fact that the Sheremetevs commissioned a version of the portrait from a French painter might seem like a dismissal of Argunov's work, if this is indeed Kalmykova and the painting was intended to replace or update the earlier version.⁵¹ If this were the case, the prestige of a French portraitist would prove to be valued more than the work of an enserfed artist. But on the other hand, it can also be interpreted as a compliment to Argunov's originality; this composition clearly conveyed what the Sheremetevs wished it to. Delapierre copied the essentials of Argunov's portrait, changing little except the girl's clothing (and, oddly, her facial features). Argunov's original must have been deemed perceptive enough to instruct the foreign artist how to depict Kalmykova's unusual social circumstances. Argunov had already worked out how to portray the child using visual cues from his own prior work and from other family portraits; Delapierre, an outsider, copied these strategies.

Argunov had painted Kalmykova with the perceptiveness of his more private projects while still making clear her place in the household—and national—hierarchy. One generation later, Argunov's son Nikolai would paint an equally resonant series of portraits of Countess Praskovia Ivanovna Sheremeteva, a formerly enserfed opera singer in the

⁵¹ This would not necessarily have been the case, since the Sheremetevs owned multiple copies of many portraits.

Sheremetevs' theater company who was manumitted and ennobled when she married Count Nikolai Petrovich Sheremetev. Nikolai Argunov's three posthumous portraits of her, completed shortly after her death in childbirth, in 1802, depict her in stately dress, heavily pregnant in a striped housecoat, and dead in a coffin, respectively. Referring to the pregnancy portrait (and incorrectly attributing it to Ivan Argunov), Iurii Lotman wrote:

Even if the client ordered a portrait of him- or herself or family and the picture was intended to be hung in the family home, the sitter had to be shown wearing dress uniform with all medals and regalia; in other words, the viewer was presumed to be a "stranger." On the other hand, late in the century, Count Sheremetev's serf-artist, I. P. Argunov, painted an outstanding portrait of the count's mistress and later wife, his serf Parasha Zhemchugova-Kovaleva, in her negligé and—an unheard-of boldness—pregnant; the viewer had to identify him- or herself with one person only, Parasha's lover and husband.⁵²

Lotman zeroes in on the extraordinary intimacy of the painting but overlooks the presence of the medals and regalia of parade portraiture—in this case adorning a fictive bronze portrait bust of Nikolai Sheremetev to Sheremeteva's left. Nikolai Argunov painted an unusually frank depiction of pregnancy's effect on the body but at the same time preserved the conventions of formal portraiture: "*la distinction des états & du rang*" as the *Encyclopédie* would have it. When it came to portraying Kalmykova and Sheremeteva, Ivan and Nikolai Argunov pushed the limits of portraiture in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries precisely by combining the idioms of public and private, individual and ceremonial. There were few artistic precedents to refer to when portraying these unusual sitters—a forcibly removed Kalmyk child and an enserfed performer turned countess (and mother of Nikolai Sheremetev's child, whom he was desperate to legitimize)—so each Argunov had to invent his own.

Conclusion: considering the Kalmykova portrait in the context of the Sheremetevs' artistic projects

Argunov's portrait was not the only work of art in the Sheremetev household that depicted or addressed differences in social status. The Sheremetevs evinced an interest in serfdom and the arts that was unparalleled among their peers. Not only did they oversee scores of enserfed artists, but they also commissioned art about their own serfs throughout the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth. Multiple portraits of Sheremetev serfs are listed in household archives, from paintings of "favorite" actresses to portraits of senior household administrators. The family commissioned original operas whose plots were pastoral fantasies about rural serfs; titles included *The Nymph of Kuskovo* (1782) and the

⁵² Iu. M. Lotman, *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*, trans. Ann Shukman (London: I. B. Tauris, 2001), 66.

The Coachman of Kuskovo (1781).⁵³ Images of Sheremetev land, including a hand-painted atlas of their holdings and a series of garden prints by Makhaev and Laurent, also include the presence of serfs dressed in peasant clothing.

There is no evidence that the Sheremetevs engaged directly in any apologetics regarding serfdom. This is not surprising, since discussion of serfdom in the eighteenth century focused overwhelmingly on practicalities, which could sometimes be debated despite state censorship. Catherine II even sponsored an essay question through the Free Economic Society about the future of serfdom and allowed the publication of the winner's piece, which argued for benevolent treatment of serfs, including allowing them to keep moveable property.⁵⁴ The most notable public work questioning the foundation of serfdom, Aleksandr Radishchev's *Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow*, was a formally complex work of fiction that caused Radishchev to be sentenced to death, a penalty that was commuted to Siberian exile.⁵⁵ The dearth of critique meant that apology was also rare. So, one would not expect the Sheremetevs to write texts or commission artwork directly defending their ownership of serfs.

Instead, the family's art about serfdom played out in a similar vein to Catherine's essay contest, highlighting supposedly proper treatment of the family's serfs and emphasizing their perceived wellbeing. Enserfed sitters portrayed by the Argunovs and other painters are uniformly depicted as content and dignified, often wearing expensive, European-style clothes. The family's operas and landscapes were not intended to be naturalistic but were, nevertheless, populated with serfs whose work was light and who appear prosperous and happy. In Makhaev and Laurent's prints, well dressed peasants wander at leisure through the gardens of Kuskovo while a few gardeners tend to the flowers. In the family's commissioned operas, the subtext is made even more clear as peasant characters literally sing the praises of the Sheremetev family.⁵⁶ These are all conciliatory, sanitized depictions of a violent and exploitative institution.

Portraiture in the Sheremetev household complicated this dynamic. The operas were public performances in every sense of the word, meant to broadcast ideas about the Sheremetevs to their audiences. The prints, while they were a more private medium, reflected the purpose of the family's vast gardens, which were open not just to noble guests but to commoners in a series of public festivals. Like the family's operas, the gardens were a site of socioeconomic propaganda. But Kalmykova's portrait (like the Praskovia

⁵³ Lia Aleksandrovna Lepskaya, *Repertuar krepostnogo teatra Sheremetevykh: katalog p'es* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennyi tsentralnyi teatralnyi muzei im. A. A. Bakhrushkina, 1996), 130-131.

⁵⁴ Paul Dukes, *Catherine the Great and the Russian Nobility* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 95.

⁵⁵ David Moon, *The Abolition of Serfdom in Russia: 1762-1907* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002), 29-30. Irina Reyfman has argued that Radishchev's difficult—almost impenetrable—prose is a deliberate formal strategy. Alexander Radishchev, *Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow*, trans. Andrew Kahn and Irina Reyfman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), xxx.

⁵⁶ For example, in *The Gardener of Kuskovo*, the eponymous gardener explains to the peasant protagonists of the opera, who have arrived at the estate: "When we walk through the garden, we may find the owner. Do not be shy [...] dare to stroll about. He's quite pleased that everyone is free to wander." (*Когда по саду пойдем, хоть хозяина найдем. Не робейте [...] гулять смейте. Он тем лишь и доволен, что гулять всякой волен*). See, N. A. Elizarova, *Teatry Sheremetevykh* (Moscow: Izd. Ostankinskogo dvortsa-muzeia, 1944), 144.

Sheremeteva cycle a few decades later) was relatively private, found in the family's bedchamber, and it lacks the bombastic quality of some of the family's other self-referential art. This is not to suggest that the painting was immune to propagandistic impulses, but rather than the propaganda occurred on a more intimate scale. The Sheremetevs were clearly interested in flattering portrayals of themselves across media. Furthermore, their interest in including a portrait of Varvara Sheremeteva within every iteration of the Kalmykova portrait makes clear that they saw these depictions as a means to communicate messages about themselves and the way they viewed their relationship with the child. They—and their household artist—seem to have understood that a portrait could not only represent the likeness of a smiling, radiantly painted girl, but could fix her within the hierarchy of her “adopted” family and the society into which she was forcibly assimilated, hierarchies that Argunov keenly understood and was therefore able to map. The painting reveals a great deal about his own artistic practice, his influences, and the milieu in which he worked, but ultimately very little about its sitter as an individual person despite the skillful facture of her face. Kalmykova's letters from this period have been lost, and we know little about her life before (and even after) her marriage. Because the name that was given to her at birth remains unknown, perhaps it is fitting that her portrait contains the names and titles of an empress, a countess, and an enserfed painter, but not her own.