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THE NEW ERA IN RUSSIAN CULTURE: THE 18TH AND FIRST HALF OF THE 19TH CENTURIES

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Russian culture did not pass through the age of antiquity and thus did not know the rich spiritual achievements of ancient civilization that served as an inexhaustible resource in the development of Western European culture. When it acquired Christianity from Byzantium, Russia essentially leapt from tribal archaism directly to Christian civilization. By selecting the Eastern Orthodox variant of Christianity in the tenth century and at the same time establishing their own state system, as well as written language, the Russians revised the canons of Byzantine culture in their own way, creating a synthesis of lofty Orthodox spirituality that strove for absolute perfection, pagan realism, and Slavic sensitivity toward beauty and the diversity of life. The results of that synthesis were such significant cultural phenomena as ancient Russian icons and pre-Mongol religious architecture. The originality of Russia's cultural development became clear within two centuries of the conversion to Christianity.

But just as quickly, problems arose, which Russia had to solve in a most unfavorable historical situation. The translation of the Bible into Slavonic in the ninth century promoted a manifestation of national specifics within the Byzantine spirituality that Russia chose as a cultural and intellectual system of norms and values, but it also deprived Russian culture of any reason to master the original sources of its Greco-Roman legacy, thereby minimizing its universal orientation.

This could have been compensated by free cultural contacts with the Western Christian world, if not for the growth of the schism in the church, the military expansion of the Teutonic knights, and the military expansion from the East culminating in the Tatar-Mongol conquest. As a consequence, Russian culture developed in isolation. The issue of retaining national and religious identity blocked any desire in Russia for intercultural dialogue and precluded any attempts to disseminate universal intellectual values (for example, the trial of Maxim the Greek[1]). Peter the Great (Peter I) understood with unusual clarity that Russian culture and civilization could stagnate if Russia continued on this isolated path. A comparison with Western Europe is illuminating. When analogous problems (though not as acute) presented themselves, Western European nations turned to their heritage, the ancient world, in order to renew and enrich their own culture. It was the epoch of the Renaissance, an era that became a true cultural watershed and established the foundation for further spiritual, scientific, ideological, technological, and artistic renewal throughout Europe.

There was no Renaissance in Russia because there had been no period of antiquity. There was nothing to revive, because the archaic, tribal past could not offer solutions to the problems that faced Petrine Russia; it did not hold the answer to the challenge of the new era. Western European antiquity was unfamiliar to Russia, and it was perceived as being "alien," so it could not stimulate a local renaissance, as it had in Western Europe. Russia in the early eighteenth century found its own way of compensating for the inadequacies of its cultural development, of enriching and transforming the sources of its

historical experience. Since it was impossible to turn to its own past, the inspiration for transformation had to come from "alien" and contemporary experience.

Peter the Great led Russia in the direction of modernization. Peter's reforms, which touched every aspect of the country's life, were truly revolutionary. In the eighteenth century, as in the tenth, Russia chose a course that would determine the nation's history for many centuries. A new state, a new society, and a new culture began to be constructed. Peter's transformations were truly irreversible in the cultural sphere. The cultural cohesiveness of the traditional society, which had been held together by the overwhelming influence of Christian values, was shattered.

The determining factor for the future of Russian culture was a complex, yet not fully investigated process of acquiring, mastering, and transforming the most varied forms, models, genres, and institutions of European culture. Many cultural innovations in eighteenth-century Russia were influenced by the West. However, the results of this process—evident enough in the nineteenth century—allow us to say that mastering Western European cultural forms did not involve a simple transplantation of Western achievements onto Russian soil. The most significant cultural process in Russia during the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth was the transition from learning and imitating to reworking Western cultural forms to make them applicable to Russia and the creation of an original national image and specific national system of values on the new cultural path that Russia followed from the early eighteenth century. By the middle of the nineteenth century there was not only an equal cultural dialogue between Russia and the West, but also one that was based on the synthesis of domestic and Western cultural traditions that in one and a half or two centuries would form a new Russian cultural identity no less unique and expressive than the culture of pre-Petrine Rus. But it was completely different in spirit. It was no accident that the Westernization of Russian culture created, at a certain point, an independent culture different from that of medieval Russia. There appeared a new—though no less Russian—mentality. There are several reasons to stress Russia's independence from the West, and its multifaceted process of learning from Western Europe.

First of all, in absorbing Western cultural influences and inviting artists from the West to visit, Peter the Great, and subsequently the Russian elite, made a free choice that was not related to any form of political, military, or colonialist coercion. Russia herself "chopped a window into Europe," to paraphrase Alexander Pushkin's *The Bronze Horseman* (1833), not the other way around. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, Russia was an independent country with a powerful ideology and a strong national spirit. Russia's problems and needs regarding modernization were determined by the excesses of isolationism. Freedom of choice determined the absence of political complexes among Russians.

In addition, two variants of Christian culture came into contact, promoting an organic acquisition of learned lessons. A common ground and cultural compatibility were based on the cultural and genetic closeness of the core religious values.

Also, Russia and Europe were neighbors and their mutual contacts had their own history. And since the tenth century Russia had been forging its own values out of alien influences.

This was the general historical and cultural context of the unique Russian cultural trajectory at the start of the new era that followed the Renaissance.

Russian art of the eighteenth century illustrates significant cultural shifts. There is, first of all, the appearance, and ultimately the dominance, of secular genres, primarily portraits. The transition of influence and power from the church to the state during this period also influenced artistic monuments. There was a boom in the construction of administrative and private architectural complexes in the European style. The new, secular regime needed confirmation of its own significance by immortalizing its own image. The icon, in its sacred function as representative and substitute for the saint on earth, could no longer satisfy the new ethics. The icon is a divine, spiritual representation of the holy, a window into eternity. Its creation is a ritual process: preparation of the board, covering it with *levkas* (gesso), selection of a proper model for the painting of the face, and finally the painting of the icon, accompanied by prayer and fasting. An icon generally took a long time to make, and was often created by more than one artist. The depiction of a real, living person demanded a different approach—hence, the appearance of portraits in oil paint on canvas or metal at the end of the seventeenth century. This was both necessary and logical.

Simon Ushakov, The Vernicle, 1677. Tempera on panel, 37.5 x 32.5 x 3.5 cm. State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg

Parsuna (from the Latin persona), as such early depictions of eminent figures are known, is a unique phenomenon in the figurative culture of late-seventeenth-century Russia. Its sources can be seen in the icon painting of the mid-seventeenth century. Simon Ushakov and other masters of this period moved away from the traditional depiction of saints. For example, Ushakov's depiction of Christ (*The Vernicle*, 1677) takes on a certain portrait quality. His face has volume and features that resemble those of an ordinary person.

The masters specializing in *parsuna*, who worked primarily at the Armory in Moscow, worked to create a resemblance to a real person, an image of an earthly being. The names of the painters of what came to be called *parsuna* in the nineteenth century are still unknown. There are approximately thirty extant works of this nature. Others were lost over time. The surviving *parsunas* are an amalgam of old icon traditions with European methods of portrait painting.

The same qualities are retained in such later works as an entire group of portraits of Peter the Great's associates, known as the Preobrazhensky series. It was painted on Peter's commission between 1692 and 1700 for the Preobrazhensky Palace, built in 1692. The series includes portraits of Peter's closest friends, with whom the tsar enjoyed various festivities, often of symbolic significance. They were a sign of the rejection of church rules. The parodic, ironic character of the events invented by Peter was made clear by their name: "Most Drunken Synod of Jesters and Fools of the Prince-Pope." These festivities with masquerades, fireworks, drunkenness, gluttony, and other forms of revelry often took on rather crude guises. But the fact that Peter had the participants depicted in portraits suggests how important these anticlerical "synods" were to him. The portraits of the Preobrazhensky series are severe and austere in style (see plate 44); the compositions are static and the figures are represented in majestic poses. These elements reinforce the resemblance to icons. But the faces are nonetheless true portraits. The buffoonish symbols given to the subjects (robe, sash, head gear), imitating and parodying the attributes of saints, reveal the roles of specific

individuals in Peter's assemblies. The irony, theatricality, *épatage*, and travesty that characterize the attitude in Peter's age toward the church and the traditions of the previous era are expressed vividly and blatantly in the portraits of this series.

Culture under Peter the Great's reign was not, however, limited to such amusements. Peter cared deeply about contemporary forms of culture. He took a personal interest in Western art during his trips abroad. He often brought back works by European masters. And, of course, he dreamed of creating a school for Russian architects, sculptors, painters, and graphic artists. In the absence of such a school, the Armory in Moscow, the Chancellery of Construction in St. Petersburg, and printing houses attended to a wide variety of artistic matters. Nonetheless, the few Russian masters working in those organizations could not handle the growing need for the construction and design of new buildings.

Since he lacked the artists and craftsmen required to satisfy the country's growing artistic and architectural needs, Peter the Great and his successors throughout the eighteenth century were forced to invite artists and architects to Russia from abroad. Johann Gottfried Tannauer, Louis Caravaque, Pietro Rotari, Etienne-Maurice Falconet, Georg Christoph and Johann Grooth, Johann-Baptist Lampi the Elder and the Younger, Jean-Baptiste Leprince, Domenico Andrea, Pietro Antonio and Giuseppe Tresini, Jean-François Thomas de Tomon, Bartolomeo Carlo and Francesco Bartolomeo Rastrelli, Johann Georg Mayr, and Gérard Delabart form an incomplete list of the foreign artists who left notable traces of their presence in Russia in the eighteenth century. Many set out for Russia—cold, grim, and unknown—with natural trepidation and the hope that they would not be staying for long. But after a while, many grew accustomed to the terrible cold and lack of basic comfort and convenience. Many of the artists created their best works in Russia. In the early eighteenth century, for example, the Swiss architect of Italian descent Domenico Trezzini (1670–1734) designed the Cathedral of St. Peter and St. Paul in St. Petersburg, the building of the Twelve Colleges (today the St. Petersburg State University), the palace for Peter I in the Summer Garden, and other edifices that defined the look of eighteenth-century St. Petersburg. In the same century an Italian, Rastrelli, built the Winter Palace (today, the State Hermitage Museum), the Smolny Cathedral, the Summer Palace at Tsarskoe Selo, and other architectural masterpieces in which the Western European baroque is softened in a marvelous way by the plasticity of Russian church design.

Painters, carvers, and sculptors who came to Russia from Italy, Switzerland, Holland, and Germany not only executed commissions for new buildings for the court and nobility, but also had contracts that tended to include a paragraph on teaching Russian artists. Certainly, Peter I and his followers were not happy about this forced dependence on foreign masters. Peter personally selected talented young Russian artists who were considered worthy to be sent abroad to study at government expense.

The first holders of such stipends were Andrei Matveev (1702–1739) and Ivan Nikitin (ca. 1680–ca. 1742). Nikitin was Peter the Great's favorite. Upon his return to Russia, Nikitin painted the tsar and members of his family from life. It was Nikitin who depicted Peter on his death bed (*Peter I on His Death Bed*, 1725, State Russian Museum). We can assume that Nikitin's works appealed to Peter not only because of their mastery, which was equal to that

of Western contemporaries, but also because they combined a fully European level of execution and concept with clear indications of Russian styles. But his *Portrait of a Field Hetman* (1720s, plate 47), for example, is not, of course, a *parsuna*. It is more than a diligently painted, three-dimensional representation of a person with distinctive individual features. The portrait of the hetman suggests character and individuality. This is a portrait image created in the baroque era—austere, even severe. The subject's character is suggested by a palette dominated by red, which reveals the artist as a former icon painter.

Nikitin, like other eighteenth-century Russian artists, worked on many different commissions. While painters of that era continued to work on churches, they often also executed purely decorative commissions such as paintings for triumphal arches erected to commemorate a particular occasion and subsequently taken down. They also painted walls and ceilings in palaces and mansions.

These petty assignments distracted them from their painting, which many former icon painters were working on by the mid-eighteenth century. In that sense, the most fortunate artists were those with only one or very few patrons, such as Ivan Vishnyakov, who worked for the Fairmore family. His portraits of the Fairmore sister and brother (ca. 1749 and 1750s, plates 52 and 53) are his most famous works and suggest his considerable talent.

Vishnyakov had never been outside Russia. Thus he could have seen examples of Western European formal portraiture only in the collections of his benefactors and their friends. While using the typical attributes of formal depiction in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries (column, landscape in the background), Vishnyakov created works of a completely different emotional tenor than those by European artists of this period. He transformed the young Fairmores into adults, a gentleman and a lady. Wigs, formal dress, and ceremonial poses hide the sweet seriousness of the childish faces. The exquisitely painted moiré fabric of the girl's dress, the laconic combination of red, black, and yellow-gold in the boy's costume, and the static poses somehow resonate with Goya's future masterpieces. In the Russian tradition those qualities have their source in icon images. The flatness of the figures and their disconnectedness with the background also come from icons, but these archaic features do not interfere with the figurative composition. On the contrary, they heighten their directness, purity, and simplicity

The mid-eighteenth century in Russian art is known as the "Age of the Portrait" for good reason. Until 1764, when the Academy of Arts (also known as the Academy of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture) opened its doors in St. Petersburg, the main genre—although not the only one—was portraiture. Alexei Antropov, Vladimir Borovikovsky, Dmitry Levitsky, Fedor Rokotov, and Vishnyakov are the most famous portraitists of that time. They are united primarily by the fact that none of them studied at the academy. Their professional methods were based on those of church painters and the advice of foreign mentors. With talent and ability, each portraitist reflected the era in which he and his subjects lived. The sound, slightly heavy portraits by Antropov suggest a Russian version of the baroque. The light refined faces and characters captured by Rokotov are animated by the rococo style. Levitsky is a typical artist of the reign of Catherine the Great (Catherine II). The Enlightenment ideals of society are evident in the list of people Levitsky painted, which

Dmitry Levitsky, Portrait of Ekaterina Nelidova, 1773. Oil on canvas, 164 x 106 cm). State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg

Dmitry Levitsky, Portrait of Glafira Alymova, 1776. Oil on canvas, 183 x 142.5 cm. State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg

includes Denis Diderot (Museum of Fine Arts and History, Geneva); Nikolai Lvov (1780s, State Russian Museum), a philosopher, scholar, architect, artist, and poet; the empress herself, depicted as befits an enlightened monarch with the symbols of various spheres of activity (*Portrait of Catherine II as Legislator in the Temple of the Goddess of Justice*, 1783, State Russian Museum); and many other outstanding figures of the day. Service to one's country was the ideological postulate that determined the content of art in Catherine the Great's era and in particular the work of Levitsky.

Even Levitsky's cycle of portraits of the young charges of the Smolny Institute for Young Ladies of the Nobility (late 1770 to the 1780s, State Russian Museum) commissioned by Catherine II is, in essence, an ensemble of virtues as depicted by the artist. Each of the young ladies is shown in a specific guise: harpist, actress, scholar. Levitsky's portrait of young Alexander Lanskoi (1782, plate 62), Catherine's favorite, represents him first and foremost as a worthy citizen loyal to his empress. Her bust and Lanskoi's military uniform leave no doubt as to the state significance of this man, who, in real life, was simple and merry, completely uninterested in formal show.

As Catherine II's reign drew to a close, so did the aging empress's ideals of enlightenment. Russia was quick to learn about world events. The French revolution and its consequences stunned Russia along with other countries. Faith in an enlightened despot, in reason, and in the civic virtue of politicians was shaken. Russian society, like that of Western Europe, sought refuge in the idea of the individual, his life, feelings, and personal attachments. Sentimentalism, which turned into Romanticism in the early nineteenth century, entered Russian art in the late eighteenth century.

Borovikovsky represented this movement in portraiture. Like the others, he had painted icons in his youth. Without an academic education, he studied with Levitsky as well as with Lampi the Elder. He soon became famous as a portraitist and his work was highly valued by many patrons. The focus on the quotidian qualities of his subjects and on the natural atmosphere surrounding them distinguishes Borovikovsky's portraits. He also made formal portraits, of Paul I, Count Alexander Kurakin (1799, plate 72), and a few others, in which he stressed their state functions. These works, regardless of the time of their creation, tie Borovikovsky to the eighteenth century and its enlightenment ideals.

Russian art of the eighteenth century was more European than Russian. That was the course set by Peter the Great. It was followed in different ways by Catherine the Great, a German princess from Anhalt-Zerbst who became empress in 1762. Voltaire and Diderot also had a strong influence on the aesthetic and ethical views of educated people of the period. By the end of the eighteenth century, Russia had fully cultivated European forms in many spheres of life. "Who could have said in 1700," wrote Voltaire of Russia, "that a magnificent and enlightened court would appear in the ends of the Gulf of Finland, that a state that was almost unknown to us would in fifty years become enlightened, that its influence would extend to all our courts and that in 1759 the most fervent patrons of the humanities would be the Russians."[2] Voltaire was seconded in this view by Diderot, a philosopher of the same level and also a witness, who wrote to the sculptor Falconet, "The sciences, art, and reason are on the rise in the North, and ignorance and its fellow travelers are descending to the South."[3]

During Catherine II's reign, many European cultural phenomena, forms of behavior and social exchanges, artistic standards and models (from antiquity to the present time) were mastered and reworked. There was the first public museum since Peter the Great's reign, the Kunstkamera, public—and not just court—theaters, newspapers, journals, as well as academies of science, literature, and the arts. The elite, like their lower specialized brethren, the free scholarly and scientific societies, lived a natural life, multiplied, and took on professional qualities. Previously unknown or little known in the seventeenth century, art and cultural forms—tragedy, comedy, the ode, the narrative poem, lyric genres, instrumental music, opera, ballet, historical and fictional narratives, and satire—found a footing on Russian soil, steadily absorbing national specificity and originality. Russia mastered not only contemporary European styles—the baroque, classicism, and rococo—but also Western art history, most importantly antiquity and the Renaissance. Russian culture grew considerably more complex in the social plane (secular and church, elite and popular, high and mass) and was enriched by the cultivation of a multiplicity of genres, styles, types, and themes.

The most outstanding monument of the Enlightenment was, of course, the capital of St. Petersburg itself. The scope of its design and execution and the freedom with which the best of the sciences and arts of the world were used to serve Russian needs demonstrate the breadth and depth of thought that characterized Russia's new era. One of the most important stages in Russia's cultural development was the creation of the Academy of Arts. In opening the academy in 1764 in St. Petersburg, Catherine II solidified the Western path of development initiated by Peter I. The Russian academy, modeled on comparable European educational institutions, quickly established itself.

In the late eighteenth century and particularly in the first half of the nineteenth, quite a few artists who represented Russia in the international artistic community came from the academy. During the mid-eighteenth century, the general educational program was mandatory for students. Historical subjects, which included the Bible and mythology, held the central place in the hierarchy of genres. Anton Losenko and Pyotr Sokolov were among the first and best graduates of the Academy of Arts. Their biblical and mythological compositions fit the European context perfectly. Losenko's *Vladimir and Rogneda* (1770, plate 57) is distinguished from Russian art of the time not so much for its use of a subject from national history (which was hardly unprecedented), but because it depicted a moment of personal drama between its characters. And even though the representation of the suffering Rogneda borrowed much from theatrical productions, the very attempt to go beyond a mere revelation of the theme is remarkable for its day.

History painting had a difficult development in Russia. This genre, always programmatic, rarely found patrons and buyers. History canvases, usually painted on the initiative of the academy, remained in the building. Many graduates of the class of history painting found no application for their skills and worked in other genres, most often becoming portraitists while leaving their history compositions on paper. A rare few, like Karl Briullov, successfully combined history and portrait genres in their work.

The academy also stressed landscape; the reality of Russian life at the turn of the nineteenth century dictated a need for views. The conquest of new territories required that they

be fixed on canvas. The construction of cities, particularly St. Petersburg and its environs, were also obvious subjects. Until Russian landscape painters appeared on the scene, however, Moscow and St. Petersburg were drawn and painted by foreigners—Delabart, Mayr, John Atkinson, and others. But by the end of the eighteenth century, a number of Russian artists had mastered the landscape view. One of the most prolific and talented of these was Fedor Alexeev (ca. 1753–1824). His *View of the Palace Embankment from the Peter and Paul Fortress* (1794, plate 69) is one of the first urban landscapes in Russian art.

After that, Alexeev created a kind of portrait of St. Petersburg, a city he adored. He rendered the broad expanses of the Neva, its embankments surrounded by palaces and mansions, with great authenticity. The artist found a wonderful balance between water, sky, and architectural mass. His views of St. Petersburg are majestic and formal and as emotionally restrained as the city itself. Alexeev used a very different palette and mood for his paintings of Moscow. Crowds and bright colors predominate. For Alexeev, and many others of the time, Moscow personified the old, pre-Petrine Russia. The architecture and the atmosphere of the city in the late eighteenth century were associated with national traditions. Alexeev took delight in the colorful old architecture and its simple mores, and that is the Moscow he rendered on canvas for future generations.

This artist, who began his career under the influence of classicism, ended it during a period when Romantic tendencies were very strong in Russia. Alexeev's student and successor in landscape views was Maxim Vorobiev, who painted one of the most poetic visions of a corner of St. Petersburg next to the Academy of Arts. The Egyptian sphinxes set there in 1834 are the main motif of the work. In fact, this landscape has no view of St. Petersburg, but it shows an image of the city with its monuments, appearing unexpectedly and organically fitting into the moisture-laden atmosphere. Vorobiev's *Neva Embankment by the Academy of Arts: View of the Wharf with Egyptian Sphinxes in the Daytime* (1835, plate 86) was also one of the very few pure landscape paintings produced in Russia between 1810 and 1830 (most of these were, in any case, views of Italy, done by Fedor Matveev, Semyon Shchedrin, and others). The landscape as a fully fledged independent genre was not known in Russia until the second half of the nineteenth century. For the first three decades, landscape images, like views, included genre elements that added an emotional component.

This combination of elements also characterized the works of Silvester Shchedrin, painted for the most part in Italy. Ivan Aivazovsky's *The Ninth Wave* (1850, plate 100) is built on the same principle. It is landscape and genre painting merged into one, giving rise to a thematic canvas of epic character. A similar mix of genres seemed to reflect the worldview of the first half of the nineteenth century, an attitude revealed in Russian art in the first three decades of the century and most clearly evident in the portrait. The most conservative genre in function, the portrait, in its best examples, nevertheless effectively illustrates contemporary tendencies in Russian art.

Portrait of Colonel Evgraf Davydov by Orest Kiprensky (plate 75) was painted in 1809. At that point the artist had not yet traveled abroad and naturally could not have seen the work of Gérard or David. Of course, he had read extensively and studied the old masters, including Rembrandt, in the Hermitage and in private collections in St. Petersburg. By 1809 Kiprensky

had produced quite a few Romantic portraits and landscapes. His *Portrait of Davydov*, whose subject had fought in the campaign against Napoleon's army, became a symbol of Romanticism in Russia. It showed not so much a war hero as a man who lived by his senses. The state of emotional uplift or concentration was developed in the works of Kiprensky (*Portrait of Ekaterina Avdulina*, 1822–23, plate 74; *Portrait of Count Alexander Golitsyn*, ca. 1819, plate 77) and of his younger contemporary, Briullov. The essential difference is that the brilliant maestro Briullov, particularly in formal works, places the accent on theatrical effects rather than on the inner world of his subjects.

As with Kiprensky, Briullov's best portraits are like novellas. They are more than simply full-length representations or busts. A countess is shown leaving a ball swiftly and unexpectedly, sisters are seen descending steps outside their house, the poet Alexei Tolstoy prepares for the hunt (*Portrait of Countess Yulia Samoilova Leaving the Ball with Her Adopted Daughter Amazilia Paccini*, before 1842; *Portrait of Sisters Shishmarev*, 1839; *Portrait Alexei Tolstoy in His Youth*, 1836, plate 89; all in the State Russian Museum). These plot motifs add drama to the portraits, in some manner replacing a profound exploration of character. In this respect they represent one of the facets of Romanticism, as brilliantly interpreted by the artist.

Karl Briullov, Portrait of Sisters Shishmarev, 1839. Oil on canvas, 281 x 213 cm. State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg

Briullov's *The Last Day of Pompeii* (1833) is one of the most famous history paintings of a Russian artist, a Romantic embodiment of tragedy. The theme of life on the edge was very popular at the time, not only among artists but also among poets and writers (Mikhail Lermontov, Pushkin). In that sense, the figurative arts in Russia in the first half of the nineteenth century fit right into the fertile culture of the period. The first thirty years of the nineteenth century are called the "Pushkin era." It was the classic era in Russian literature, which not only produced Pushkin but also Fedor Dostoevsky, Nikolai Gogol, and Lermontov. Russian figurative art reached its maturity during this time. The artists who opened the nineteenth century were the third generation of Russians brought up by the Russian school of art, the St. Petersburg academy. They were the direct heirs of a growing tradition; they achieved artistic skills of a Western European standard and were capable of astonishing Europe with their art. The scandalous mistake of Italian connoisseurs was to claim that a Russian artist could not have painted works like those Kiprensky showed in 1831–33 in Naples and Rome, works that were an unexpected and vivid proof of the equality of Russian art.

The high regard in which drawings and watercolors by Russian artists were held by Italians, French, and Germans is further evidence of their quality. The incredible popularity in Western Europe of the work of Briullov at last persuaded everyone that Russian art had earned its place in the sun. *The Last Day of Pompeii* was exhibited in 1834 in Milan with resounding success before it was shown in St. Petersburg.

Back in Russia, realistic tendencies were ripening as early as the 1820s. The Russian War of 1812 against Napoleon and the decisive role in it played by ordinary people, particularly the peasantry, heightened the interest of artists in a previously unpopular theme. The Academy of Arts, which had satisfied the demands of society's upper classes, was unable to handle the new interest in peasant themes. Alexei Venetsianov, who worked in a land-assessment office and was an amateur painter who took an accelerated course at the

Karl Briullov, The Last Day of Pompeii, 1833. Oil on canvas, 456.5 x 651 cm. State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg

Alexander Ivanov, The Appearance of Christ to the People, 1836–after 1855. Oil on canvas, 172 x 247 cm. State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg

academy, devoted his life and work to the peasants. He left St. Petersburg for an estate near Tver in order to study peasant life there. Venetsianov created a school that accepted only peasant children, including serfs, who were not able to receive artistic training at the academy in those years.

The result was the appearance of a unique genre of paintings that took peasant life as its subject. In general, these scenes were not painted from life. Venetsianov, who was very familiar with the art of antiquity and the Renaissance, created a generalized picture of peasant life. The metaphorical nature of the images was part of the artist's concept. He was not as concerned about the truth of Russian peasant life as he was with demonstrating its significance and its value as an artistic subject. Many of his students followed in his footsteps, including Grigorii Soroka and Nikifor Krylov, who made quiet depictions of Russian peasant life that resonated in their translucent purity.

Besides Venetsianov's favored peasants, Russian artists of this period liked to paint merchants, actors, and craftsmen (Vasily Tropinin's *Portrait of the Music Lover Pavel Mikhailovich Vasilyev*, 1830, plate 78). Exhibitions from these years displayed a great variety of genres and themes. Nevertheless, history painting remained the most respected genre, especially among artists.

Alexander Ivanov was the preeminent history painter. Before graduating from the Academy of Arts he painted several works on mythological and biblical subjects. But his life's work became the painting *The Appearance of Christ to the People* (1837–57, page 105; smaller version, 1836–after 1855). The artist worked on this painting for more than thirty years. This was mainly due to the ambitious nature of the project Ivanov set for himself—to convey the various emotional states of people who receive new and vitally important information. The artist also wanted to present the scene of Christ's first meeting with mankind as a real, existing fact. To achieve this he made endless painted studies of water, stones, trees, and foliage (for example, plates 96 and 97). Besides the landscape, in which Ivanov wanted to achieve extreme authenticity, he sought to represent the psychological condition of each individual in the scene. The portrait studies, like the landscapes, form an enormous and almost separate body of work. The painting was completed and brought to St. Petersburg to be shown in 1858. The public reaction at the time was mixed. But for artists of later generations the painting and all the preparatory works for it became examples of artistic daring and discovery in the process of creating a canvas.

Ivanov, with his highly contemplative nature and philosophical clarity, summed up the era, encompassing the most fruitful tendencies of the past. In *The Appearance of Christ to the People*, Ivanov effectively completed the era of high classicism in Russian art, attempting to achieve a utopian ideal. He closed the era on the highest possible note at a time when the ideological basis and worldview of Russian classicism had narrowed dramatically. That foundation had crumbled gradually after the 1830s as a result of historical, social, and aesthetic influences. Nicholas I's personal interest in art and the taste imposed by the ruling elite, the bureaucratization and petty regulation of culture, and the ideological program that curtailed all possibility of creative dialogue between the individual and the state were not conducive to the continuation of classical traditions. Russian art took on a conflicted aspect. Briullov's

statements, and particularly Ivanov's, show that the contradictions in artistic life were perceived not only as personal and professional but also as social and historical. The growing self-awareness of artists gave rise to acute inner conflicts and a previously unknown relationship with the environment. Forced to fester under the reign of Nicholas I (1825–55), the conflict finally burst out in the rebellion of the "Fourteen,"[4] a socially significant action by the future Wanderers, who laid the foundation for a new era in the history of Russian art and for new principles in the practical sociology of artistic life. They brought to Russian art a new—not classical—type of artistic thought that had been anticipated by the realistic tendencies of the period between the 1820s and 1840s.

The focus on nature "as it is" and the rejection of the system of selection employed by artists who were brought up on classic ideals led art toward naturalism for a while. Of all the artists of the new generation, Pavel Fedotov remained closest to the old principles. His room on Vasilyevsky Island in St. Petersburg was filled with plaster casts of classical sculptures. There was also a chandelier hanging from the ceiling that Fedotov had borrowed temporarily from an inn for his painting *The Major's Proposal* (1848, page 103). However, a diligent study of antiquity did not keep the artist from painfully accurate depictions of the grim realities of his time. On the contrary, classicism taught him about beauty and harmony and selection, which made every detail expressive and necessary. The rest—subjects, situations, costumes, interiors—were inspired by life. Fedotov, more than any other artist of the first half of the nineteenth century, realized in his work the call to vitality and verisimilitude, which resounded in art from the very first years of the new era. Perhaps, he was one of the last artists of the classical tradition. Artistic imagination and the ability to compose and invent were part of his creative process. Indeed, Fedotov represents the start of a new era in Russian art.

Translated from the Russian by Antonina W. Bouis.

1. Maxim the Greek (ca. 1475–1556) was invited to Russia in 1518 by Basil III to translate church books. He was condemned by the Synod in 1505 and exiled to the St. Joseph of Volokolamsk Monastery.

2. I. I. Ioffe, "Russkii Renessans," *Uchenye zapisi Leningradskogo Gosudarstvennogo Universiteta Series: Filologicheskie nauki* 9, no. 72 (Leningrad, 1944), p. 265.

3. Ibid.

4. In 1861 a group of fourteen students refused to paint examination pictures on mythological themes and demonstratively left the Academy of Arts, forming Russia's first ever commercial art association.