CHAPTER THREE

SOLNTSEV’S ROLE IN PRESERVING THE TREASURES OF THE MOSCOW KREMLIN

Irina Bogatskaia

Among the many thousands of items preserved in the Moscow Kremlin, the collection of graphic art entitled Antiquities of the Russian State perhaps best personifies the history of the pre-Petrine era. These watercolor and India ink drawings—plus a small number of prints and some articles of Asian or European origin—seemingly illustrate every aspect of Russian culture from the eleventh to the eighteenth centuries. While many artists participated in this work, no one devoted as much of his labor to the project as Fedor Solntsev, a graduate of the Imperial Academy of Arts.

Compiled in the first half of the nineteenth century, the collection reflects that era’s interest in the scholarly analysis of ancient cultural monuments or landmark memorabilia (pamiatniki). In 1804 under the auspices of Moscow University, the Moscow Society of Russian History and Antiquities was created with the purpose of assembling, studying, and publishing such artifacts of ancient times (starina) as coins, medals, and chronicles. While the Napoleonic wars stalled the work of the historical society, the victory over Napoleon stimulated its activity. Its members included many luminaries of the scholarly world including the litterateur and historian, Nikolai Karamzin; the learned Maecenas, Count Aleksei Musin-Pushkin; Konstantin Kalaidovich, the prolific antiquary; and Aleksei Malinovskii, author of many works on Russian antiquities. In the same spirit, in 1806 Alexander I issued an imperial decree to establish Russia’s first national museum for antiquities, which would center historical and cultural treasures in the Kremlin Armory.

Scholars at this time also turned their attention to ancient literary texts. Beginning in 1817 Pavel Stroev, a member of the historical society, with sponsorship from the noted antiquary Count Nikolai Rumi-antsev, headed archaeological expeditions for finding and collecting ancient documents. Stroev also led the Archaeographical Expedition of the Academy of Sciences (1829–1832), and later an Archaeographical
Commission was established to publish these materials as well as others related to the history of pre-Petrine Russia.

These developments in historical scholarship prompted the birth of a new sphere of art, artistic archaeology. At this time, archaeology was broadly conceived to include not just the study but also the drawing or recording (фиксация) of national treasures of antiquity. Since photography did not yet exist, the representation of antiquities was possible only through pictorial means. Thus, in 1809–1810 the archaeologist Konstantin Borozdin organized an expedition that included an antiquary, Aleksandr Ermolaev, as well as an artist and archeograph. Their task was to try to find “various memorabilia that could serve to fill and decorate the Kremlin Armory.”1 Connected directly with the repair work being done in the Moscow Kremlin, the expedition was supervised by Petr Valuev, the head of the renovation project who in 1806 had championed the idea of a national museum, as well as by Aleksei Olenin, at the time an assistant to the director of the Imperial Public Library but also an honorary member of the Kremlin Armory and the person to whom Borozdin directed his letters describing the expedition.2 Alexander I directly financed the enterprise, whose official goal, Valuev announced, was “to discover national monuments that would signify in deep antiquity the greatness and power of Russia.” The Borozdin Expedition visited a series of old cities in the north and south of Russia and put together four albums of sketches and drawings.3 The participants rendered plans of cities, architectural sites, ecclesiastical objects, and items of ethnographic interest such as native costumes. Valuev presented the findings to the tsar, and a decision was made to publish them, but the war against Napoleon interfered with this project as well as plans for similar expeditions.

Nonetheless, the idea of artistic archaeology—located at the intersection of artistic creativity and historiography—was timely, and its appearance organically flowed from the problems facing artists

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1 “Именные указы (6 March 1809),” Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv drevnykh aktov (Russian State Archive of Ancient Acts), fond 1239, opis’ 3, chast’ 2, delo 5745, list 2.
2 Otdel rukopisei Rossiiskoi natsional’noi biblioteki, hereafter OR RNB (Manuscript Division of the Russian National Library), f. 487: “Sobranie Mikhailovskogo,” n. 394; “Puteshestvie po Rossii v 1809 gody”; “Pis’ma K. M. Borozdina (1809)”.
3 OR RNB, f. 550. Also, Osnovnoe sobranie rukopisnoi knigi Otdela rukopisei Rossiiskoi natsional’noi biblioteka (The Primary Collection of Manuscript Books of the Manuscript Division of the Russian National Library), hereafter OSRK, f. IV, n. 204, 1–4 (1809).