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## “THERE IS SOMETHING THERE . . .”: THE PEREDVIZHNIKI AND WEST EUROPEAN ART

The nature of the dialogue between the Peredvizhniki and West European art has been viewed largely through the prism of modernist concerns. Thus their engagement – or lack of it – with French modernist luminaries such as Manet and the Impressionists has been subject to much debate. Such emphasis has eclipsed the suggestive, and often creative, relationship between the Peredvizhniki and West European painters whose practice is seen as either anticipatory of or inimical to the modernist camp – to wit, Andreas Achenbach and his circle in Düsseldorf; artists of the Barbizon school; certain Salon regulars; and various Realist groupings in France, Germany and Victorian Britain.<sup>1</sup> My intention here is to explore the subtle connections between such artists, but not as part of any wider art historical concern to challenge the hegemony of modernism, for the position of Russian artists vis-à-vis Western modernist discourse – before, during and after the time of the avant-garde – is of ongoing concern. Rather, my aim is to question the still prevalent interpretation of the Peredvizhniki as “national” art-

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All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

1. These parallels have not gone unremarked. Alison Hilton, for example, writes: “Aside from the Russian settings, the work of Perov and his colleagues shows the same general concern for rural and urban poverty, alcoholism, prostitution, and other mid-nineteenth-century problems that troubled many European artists and writers.” (“Scenes from Life and Contemporary History: Russian Realism of the 1870s-1880s,” in Gabriel P. Weisberg, ed., *The European Realist Tradition* [Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1982], p. 188.) But such observations have rarely been analysed in depth. There are two notable exceptions: Elena Nesterova’s seminal research on Franco-Russian artistic exchange in the second half of the nineteenth century in publications cited throughout these notes; and the chapter “Russkaia realisticheskaia zhivopis’ vtoroi poloviny XIX veka i ee rol’ v evropeiskom iskusstve” in Dmitrii V. Sarab’ianov, *Russkaia zhivopis’ XIX veka sredi evropeiskikh shkol: opyt sravnitel’nogo issledovaniia* (Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1980), pp. 107-140. The second half of Sarab’ianov’s chapter compares Courbet, Menzel and Repin, following thought-provoking lines of enquiry which complement those pursued here.

ists pursuing a distinctly Russian path, and to consider whether or not they can be viewed instead as part of a mainstream trajectory of Western European art.<sup>2</sup> I shall concentrate on the period from *c.* 1860 to *c.* 1885, encompassing as it does the immediate pre-history of the Association of Traveling Art Exhibitions, and the organisation’s golden years.

As a starting point, I would like to consider anew Russian attitudes towards Western European painting in the 1860s, when the ideas which would later underpin the Association of Traveling Art Exhibitions were beginning to take shape. The decade is best known in any narrative of Russian painting as that which saw the first open revolt against the academic system when, denied the right to choose their own subject for the annual gold medal competition, fourteen students seceded from the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts in 1863. Historians have understandably focused on the topic of the Academy’s choosing, on what the young renegades wanted to paint, and on what had led to their discontent.<sup>3</sup> What seems to have slipped our attention, however, is the fact that the dissenters never questioned the institution of the gold medal competition itself, success in which was rewarded with a scholarship to live and work in Europe. They may have wanted to develop an ethnocentric iconography which they felt could contribute to the social, moral and cultural concerns of modern Russia, but they still wanted to take part in a competition which would enable them to travel abroad.

Whether through the auspices of the Academy or otherwise, many future Peredvizhniki traveled to Italy, Germany, Switzerland and/or France in the 1850s and 1860s.<sup>4</sup> Ivan Shishkin, Vasilii Perov, Grigorii

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2. For engaging research by Russian scholars on the nature of Russia’s cultural position between East and West, see Dmitrii V. Sarab’ianov, ed., *Russkoe iskusstvo mezhdû zapadom i vostokom: materialy konferentsii, Moskva. Sentiabr’, 1994* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennyi institut iskusstvovedeniia, 1997), though none of the contributions deals explicitly with the art of the Peredvizhniki.

3. Elizabeth Valkenier argues that the young artists’ apostasy stemmed as much from their quest for professional autonomy as it did from their frustration with academic pedagogy. See Elizabeth K. Valkenier, *Russian Realist Art. The State and Society: The Peredvizhniki and Their Tradition* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1989), pp. 33-37.

4. For Russian artists working in Paris (the most popular destination from the 1860s onwards), see Tatiana Mojenok, *Les peintres réalistes russes en France (1860-*