
BOOK REVIEWS

LITERATURE AND FINE ARTS

Vishlenkova, Elena. *Vizual'noe narodovedenie imperii, ili "Uvidet' russkogo dano ne kazhdomu"*. Historia Rossica. Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2011. 384 pp. R286.00. ISBN 978-5-86793-862-8.

How did Russians imagine themselves and how were they imagined by others in the second half of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries? Vishlenkova seeks to answer these questions by investigating a wealth of “graphic [relating to pictorial representation] images” (*graficheskie obrazy*) of the peoples of the Russian Empire. These appeared in a wide variety of media: gravures, caricatures, depictions (on porcelain plates, cups, and other utensils), medals, ethnographic portraits, *lubki*, cartouches on maps, toys, and the like. She focuses on what she calls the “pre-philosophical and pre-photographic” stage of the debates over identity because, she argues, at that time visual images were dominant in shaping cultural perceptions of the empire’s peoples, especially so given the low level of literacy among the mass of the population. Vishlenkova undertakes to decipher these images in terms of their production techniques, their creators’ aims, the message(s) projected, and their circulation between cultural settings (say, from literary journals read by the educated, sophisticated urban milieu to the *lubki* and caricatures usually more popular among the uneducated or barely literate masses of the provincial peasantry). The end result is a densely written but fascinating peregrination in the visual imaginings of Russians and (to a lesser extent) of other peoples of the empire produced by natural scientists, caricaturists, artists, and engravers at the dawn of the era of nationalism.

Vishlenkova deserves praise for attempting to trace these images throughout their “life story”: from generation and circulation, through adaptation and replication, to oblivion. As she readily admits, most of the images she studies were created in an elite cultural setting. For example, she analyzes the costume portraits (and the albums compiled thereof) accompanying ethnographic reports by foreign scientists in the employ of the Russian Academy in the eighteenth century; or the engravings appearing in literary journals, such as *Syn Otechestva*, in the beginning of the nineteenth century. She also investigates their subsequent replication, adaptation, and reuse by both domestic and foreign engravers and publishers. On occasion she even delves into their transmission to the average provincial inhabitant of the empire via flyers, ephemera, and even toys. In what is surely the most interesting part of this book, Vishlenkova discusses the manipulation of the visual images and, therefore, the revision of their messages (both for technical reasons and so as to make them more meaningful to the masses or to fit the needs of the moment). In that sense, Vishlenkova does a splendid job deciphering what the messages were, that is, what the intellectuals (the elite) thought about Russian identity and about what it meant to be Russian (*russkii*) or a Russian subject (*rossiiskii*). She argues that the “costume albums” portrayed the Russian Empire as a community of separate peoples identified as such by their outward appearance and clothing. The actual process of depiction both validated existing images of these groups and redefined the taxonomic nomenclature of the empire’s peoples at a

time when Russian scientific terminology was in its infancy. Later on, in the beginning of the nineteenth century, other authors and artists associated the costumed peoples with particular morals and ways of life. Still others were influenced by physiognomy theories in their depiction of ethnic groups. As a result, for some observers the Russians ought to have “Asiatic” characteristics, whereas others categorized them with the Europeans. A further development occurred during the struggle against Napoleon, when classical images of civic duty were synthesized with Russian and Slavic folkloric characters to produce hybrid portraits of the Russian village as a heroic community defending itself from the marauding and thieving invaders. Finally, right after the war and in the 1820s, there was a “de-heroization” of the Russian peasantry through its portrayal as a peace-loving, hard-working group. Throughout these developments, Vishlenkova concludes, the meaning of the term *narod* changed according to need. It could denote a social stratum, refer to local identity associated with regions of the empire, designate the subject peoples of the crown, or signify a cultural nation or even an ethnic group. The projection of the Russian state’s imperial character was a bit more stable. The empire was depicted as an agglomeration of distinct elements under the monarch’s protection or (and here there was a lot more variety) in allegorical terms, especially in the cases of sculpture or architecture.

It is particularly striking, though not surprising, that the majority of the pictorial messages were in fact government-approved and even sponsored. From the “costume albums” of the late eighteenth century or the portraits of individual inhabitants of the Russian Empire in the beginning of the nineteenth century, to the caricatures of the enemy during the Napoleonic invasion or the postwar return to an image of Russianness exemplified in the calm and naturalistic portraits of sturdy, hard-working peasants (men and women) created by Venetsianov and his students—in all of these cases it is very clear that the imperial government tried to have a say in what was published and where, and what its message ought to be. Simply put, the title’s *vizual'noe narodovedenie* was in fact manipulated, directly or indirectly, to fit the imperial government’s needs of the day. A case in point was the caricatures of 1812 which depicted a binary model of us (the Russian village community) vs. them (the Europeans, not necessarily only the French). Once the war was won, caricatures fell out of use and instead an image of Russia as the sacred empire of the Slavs was projected in a variety of media (for example, medals and porcelain products). Vishlenkova’s book, therefore, focuses on the visual images produced by the elite under the government’s watchful eye. And despite her tantalizing efforts at tracing how some of these images were in fact “translated” into *lubki* or into toys for the lower classes, the extent to which the peasants were receptive to these messages or to which they absorbed them necessarily in the way intended by their creators still remains open to question.

Vishlenkova knows her primary sources and modern theorizing about the visual well. In fact, she firmly situates her investigation in the framework of the new imperial histories, advocated in the field by, among others, the journal *Ab Imperio*. She shows clearly that “Russianness” (*russkost'*) in the context of the Russian Empire was a contested, malleable, and ultimately time-conditioned notion that was negotiated, argued about, and facilitated primarily by the empire’s educated classes. And she makes a cogent and convincing argument that the visual images and their imaginings were instrumental in the associated efforts.

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