NATIONAL RESEARCH UNIVERSITY
HIGHER SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS

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TO INVENT OR COPY: ETHNIC AND SPATIAL IMAGES OF THE PRE-PHOTOGRAPHICAL EPOCH

BASIC RESEARCH PROGRAM

WORKING PAPERS

SERIES: HUMANITIES
WP BRP 77/HUM/2014

This Working Paper is an output of a research project implemented within NRU HSE's Annual Thematic Plan for Basic and Applied Research. Any opinions or claims contained in this Working Paper do not necessarily reflect the views of HSE.

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The article focuses on theoretical aspects of an analysis of visual culture and the national and ethnic imagination throughout the latter part of the 18th century and the first 30years of the 19th century. Social conventions of demonstration and vision are revealed through works of art were issued by mass artistic production, such as paintings, medals, tapestries, snuffboxes, caricatures, cheap prints, theatre decorations, optical toys and glazed tableware, and sculptured symbols. At that time, the achievement of these conventions was linked to the cultural elite's desire to determine the boundaries of the Russian nation and to distinguish it from the other tribes and people of the Russian Empire. The author also scrutinizes the cognitive abilities of the image and its abilities to shape of national consciousness

JEL Classification: Z.

Keywords: Russian empire, visual culture, national imagination, ethnic consciousness, Russianness, natural knowledge

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[2] The results of the project «The construction of the past and forms of historical culture in contemporary urban spaces», carried out through the Basic Research Program at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE) in 2014, are presented in this work. I wish to thank Irina Savelieva for any support and critical statements.

Research perspective

This study is focused on the links between of ethnic, national and imperial imagination of Russians in visual space. This means that my interests focuses on the Russians process of self-identification of through images which are represented in paintings, medals, tapestries, snuffboxes, caricatures, cheap prints, theatre decorations, optical toys and glazed tableware, and in sculptured symbols. The pre-philosophical and pre-photograpical period of the history on imperial self-reflection (the mid 1850s to the early 19th century) was chosen for the study because Russian anthropological thought had not yet reduced the variety of human communities to a rigid ethno-centric system, and visual images were dominant in cultural communication[3].

The Russian Empire had embraced Europeanization, which exposed Russian elites to colonial descriptions of the world, national ideologies and their visual representations. This helped shape Russian views on the structure of the world, on the stereotypes of French and German models of nation states, and provoked a reflection on the multi-ethnicity of the Russian Empire and dreams of 'one's own' nation[4]. These contexts produced images of what constituted a 'people', a 'tribe', a 'citizen', a 'subject' and a 'Russian', and therefore the motivation to turn those images into subjects of history. Representations and images played a crucial role in all of this. The Late Enlightenment period saw dramatic changes how things were seen and pictured, including the revision of the concept of horizon and perspective, and the establishment of the paradigm of panoptic visuality. Together, these created the phenomenon of the power of knowledge and visuality[5].

The chosen period encompasses the artistic epochs of Classicism (including the Empire style) and early Romanticism. At the time, the desire for 'spectacle' permeated Russian society, such as a nobleman decorating his manor, or a peasant making a toy for his children. Visual orientation led to the flourishing of architecture, sculpture, landscape pictorial and applied arts and theatre. It also stimulated people's desire to make 'beauty' a criterion for evaluating reality, which, in turn, influenced historical psychology and the models of behaviour and reactions of contemporaries[6].

The theatricality of 18th century culture has attracted a great deal of scholarly attention[7]. In Russia, this was supported by state policy through the import of plays (in the original languages

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[3] Only about 10% of the population of Russia could read texts in the period under discussion.

[4] *Seriot P.* «Ethnos» et «Demos»: la construction discursive de l'identité collective // Langage et Société. Paris, 1997. Vol. 79. P. 53–74.

[5] *Freidberg A.* The Mobilized and Virtual Gaze in Modernity // The Visual Culture Reader. London, 1998. P. 254–255.

[6] *Turchin V.S.* Aleksandr I i neoklassitsizm v Rossii: Stil imperii i imreriya kak stil. M.: Zhiraf, 2001.

[7] *Elizarova N. A.* Театры Шереметевых. Teatry Sheremerevykh. M.: Ostankinskii dvorets-musei, 1944; *Fishman D. E.* Russia's First Modern Jews: The Jews of Shklov. New York, 1995; *Svirida I.* Teatralnost kak sinteziruyuschaya forma kultury XVIII v. // XVIII vek: Assanbleya iskusstv. Vzaimodeistvie iskusstv v russkoi kulture XVIII v.: cb.st. M., 2000. P. 5–18; *Roosevelt P.R.* Emerald Thrones and Living Statues: Theater and Theatricality on the Russian Estate // The Russian Review. 1991. Vol. 50, № 1. P. 1–23; Idem. Life on the Russian Country Estate: A Social and Cultural History. New Haven; London: Yale University Press,

and in Russian translation), education at home and at school, recruiting foreigners for Russian services and through educational grand tours. In the latter half of the 18th century, this turned the imperial space into a scene to perform a play about the Russian 'Eden'[8]. Yury Lotman and Boris Uspensky have demonstrated that, unlike in Europe, where theatre linked reality and the world of fantasy, in Russia it acquired an additional political dimension[9]. Here, an elite culture associated with 'Europeanity' ('progress') fought symbolically against a traditional culture which was understood as parochial and archaic ('backwardness'). The theatre scene demonstrated modes of life and behaviour that the authorities thought were the norm for nobility. Therefore, 'changing oneself', equated to 'self-perfection', and was re-interpreted as a political and social task for the Russian elites. However, the essence of this transformation did not remain the same in the throughout the century. Instead, it shifted from the task of being a Russian European to that of being a European Russian.

Another specific characteristic of this communicative space was its artistic multilingualism. Along with the 'high' style of 'fine arts', which was subordinate to the European aesthetic canon and used its conventions, a 'sacral' language of Russian icon painting also existed, with its own Byzantine symbolism. The 'coarse' language of Russian everyday speech corresponded, in the visual dimension, to the language of minor art forms; cheap prints, peep box pictures, amateur sketches, drawings, engravings, lithographs, and figurines. The variety of 'social' languages was enhanced by the local 'dialects', such as the traditional manner of work of the bone carvers from Archangelsk, the Palekh icon painters and the cheap print artists from Moscow. If one adds the representations of numerous confessional (for example, the Old Believers) and ethnic groups, then the visual space of the Empire would become discontinuous, made up of a considerable number of linguistic and other communities.

This should have impeded the rise of imperial 'macro-solidarity'. If the people who lived in Russia were to feel solidarity, numerous translations of appeals to unity into various languages were needed, and first, into the languages of mass circulation. In the visual space, every such procedure was followed by the re-encoding of the original, by the adaptation of visual messages, and by the creation of new meanings. The desire to be understood (that is, to be heard and seen) in 'popular' culture forced Russian elites to create an 'all-Russian' language. As a result, the

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1995; *Sennett R.* The Fall of Public Man. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977; *Stites R.* Serfdom, Society, and the Arts in Imperial Russia: The Pleasure and the Power. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005; *Wortman R.* Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995. Vol. 1–2; *Werrett S.* The Panopticon in the Garden: Samuel Bentham's Inspection House and noble theatricality in eighteenth-century Russia // Ab Imperio. 2008. № 3. P. 47–69.

[8] *Baehr S. L.* The Paradise Myth in Eighteenth Century Russia. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991. P. 66.

[9] *Lotman Yu. M.* Teatr i teatralnost v stroe kultury nachala XIX veka // Idem. Izbrannye stati. Tallin, 1992. V. 1. P. 269–286. Idem. Poetika bytovogo povedeniya v russkoi kulture XVIII v. // Ibid. P. 248–268.

period under consideration saw both the emergence of a national literary language, and of the visual language.

Hypothesis

When first attempting to analyse the visual sources, I believed that the specifics of their language was defined by the specific character of production, reproduction, and consumption of images in any culture, and in Russian culture in particular. This hypothesis has been confirmed in the course of further study[10]. The most difficult problem was the problem of translation. When studying a visual world, one has to represent and describe it through verbal categories. Many scholars used categories created in the context of modern knowledge, which emerged considerably later than the epoch in question and turned the latter into an 'archaic' one. In order to avoid the modernization of this period, and the fanciful interpretation of the cultural phenomena, one has to bear in mind the ontological irreducibility of an image to verbal terms, on the one hand, and the breaking of linguistic continuity, on the other.

This procedure of semantic translation does not have a stable 'algorithm'. Limitations of the approach used by art historians are in the images' narrative descriptions and free interpretations. I also see a weakness in the semiotic method of the analysis of non-linguistic phenomena through direct analogy with verbal language, and in the domination of pro-linguistic arguments[11]. I offer a procedure of translation, based on the analysis of changes in the imagination of the contemporaries, produced by visual images. This approach links to Benedict Anderson's idea of the 'nation as an imagined political community'[12]. In order to see, or not to see, a human community, to ascribe a corresponding meaning to (or recognize it in) artistic objects, to be moved by them, to be made to speak and act in a certain way, the contemporaries needed a twist of fantasy, and the rise of an ability to translate particular relations between objects from spatial to temporal (for example, an ability to transform a 'local population' into a 'modern people', or a 'historical nation').

Artists played a key role in stretching the imagination of their contemporaries. It is no coincidence that they acquired a particular social duty during the Age of Enlightenment. Aroused by passion or the energy of creative impulses, they were to illumate concealed worlds to their viewers and to 'lay new roads'. It was implied that their works would be more than just

[10] *Vishlenkova E. A.* Vizualnoe narodovedenie Rossiiskoi imperii, ili uvidet russkogo dano ne kazhdomu. M.: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2011.
[11] *Bel M., Braison M.* Semiotica i iskusstvoznanie // Voprosy iskusstvoznaniya. 1996. № 2. P. 521–559; *Лотман Ю.М Lotman Yu. M.* Kultura i vzryv. M.: Progress: Gnozis, 1992; *Eco U.* A Theory of Semiotics. London: Macmillan, 1977; *Schapiro M.* Words, Script, and Pictures: Semiotics of Visual Language. New York: George Braziller, 1996.
[12] *Anderson B.* Voobrazhaemye soobschestva: Razmyshleniya ob istokakh i rasprostranenie natsionalizma. M.: KANAN-Press-Ts: Kuchkovo pole, 2001. P. 30.

reflections of reality; they were to create the desired reality[13]. This would penetrate into the minds of the viewers through seeing, and the viewers would put it into words (thus recruiting more followers) and then embody it through relationships, and their actions.

In accordance with this, the production of art was followed by an intense reflection upon images and demands for it, from public and literary thought. The institutional framework was provided by the Academies of Art, which emerged, one by one, in most European countries.

Following this logic, we can discover certain narrative and non-narrative situations that provoked fantasies and reflections of the XIX-century contemporaries on the human diversity of the Russian Empire; reconstructed the artistic worlds created by them, and finally, revealed the ways for literature to appropriate these ephemeral creatures, used in this culture. This approach forces a person to work not only in a single language register (visual or verbal) but in both at the same time. It requires an analysis of the communicative potential of various languages, the specifics of their creation of meanings and the search for the areas of mutual strength and conflict.

Notes and assumptions

I can be now be certain that the rich cognitive and communicative potential of visual images determined its crucial role in regulating human diversity and in the identification processes in the poorly structured and barely literate Russia of the latter half of the 18th and the early 19th century.

Most natural philosophers who write about the Russian empire, and the authors of expedition drawings and creators of the costume engravings were foreigners in the service of Russia. They thought and wrote in German, French, or Italian. Russia's Europeanized political elite would certainly have been able to read their works in the originals. However, since the mid-18th century ethnographic and geographic descriptions were viewed as a means of boosting patriotism, some parts, or at times all of those scholarly treatises were translated into Russian. In order to make these texts accessible for mass readership, their fragments were published in Russian journals.

The procedure of translation created technical (the work of translators, additional publication and censorship) and cognitive problems, such as the absence of relevant terms and notions in Russian or the interpretation of an author's text by a translator. Besides, the written form certainly limited the social space in which scientific knowledge could circulate.

[13] *Arass D.* Khudozhestvennyi mir Prosvescheniya // Mir Prosvescheniya: istoricheskii slovar/ pod red. V. Ferrone b D. Rosha. M.: Художественный мир Просвещения // Мир Просвещения: исторический словарь / под ред. В. Ферроне и Д. Роша. M.: Pamyatniki istoricheskoi mycli, 2003. P. 197–198.

Drawing had a number of advantages in this respect. At the time, it was cheaper to make an engraving than to print a text. Unlike a book, a graphic image could be reproduced even at a small rural workshop. Moreover, any album of costumes could be disassembled into separate engravings, which could then lead independent lives in culture. Since a graphic image could be reproduced in a number of materials (not only in paper but also wood, clay, porcelain, cloth, or bone), it was able to circulate among various social strata and within a large geographical space.

The contemporaries believed that although the depth and adequacy of an interpretation of a visual image depended on the viewer's experience, a picture could be understood independently by anybody, even if one did not have much knowledge of art, as well as by a viewer who thought in a different 'language'. Besides, it seemed easier to teach consumers to read visual signs in a more or less similar way, rather than to foster their interest in book learning or foreign languages. Therefore, images were thought to be a design medium more suited to Russian life, than text. Thank to images, Russians were exposed to the ideas of different communities; the dwellers of particular localities, tribes, peoples, nations and the Russian Empire as a whole. It is no coincidence that many current Russian notions and categories that describe group identity were born out of the captions or texts that were originally linked to pictures.

It is possible that this sequence of the establishment of the units and categories of nationalizing discourse was determined by the different cognitive potentials of images and words. Images gave form to abstraction but left space for interpretation. This was why the original was enriched by the process of artistic reproduction, as it acquired new details and was corrected according to the changing image of the world. Identification captions that were applied to types and groups shown in the engravings imposed the semantic limits of an image upon the viewer. The emergence of new figures in the visual catalogues of the 'peoples of Russia' prompted the viewer to consider their own place within the Empire's human diversity, and to evaluate Western theories of civilization. When we deal with a graphic illustration of a well-established Russian ethnonym, the contemporary either had to accept the offered artistic version of the group, or to reject it, thus forcing the author to search for his own relevant criteria of classification. Therefore, images performed a double function; they introduced new (previously unknown) ethnonyms and redefined the existing Russian ethnonyms.

Conclusions about the difficulty and length of time required to achieve these semantic conventions is supported by new information on copying and changing some images and rejecting (forgetting) others. Selective artistic reproduction helped both acquire and preserve empirical information, but also created conditions for its assortment and classification.

The principles of the costume genre allowed an artist to mark human communities according to material attributes which were typical for these, and to determine their boundaries. Manipulating characters' poses (gallant or non-gallant) and their bodies (distortion of the proportions of the body, tattoos, placing a figure in the foreground or background, a view 'from behind' or 'in profile') allowed an artist to link the depicted object with the worlds of civilization and barbarity. Usually 'costumes' were strictly related to localities, which resulted from the character of expedition studies and sketches. This perspective allowed contemporaries to familiarize themselves only with those peoples that had retained their geographic localization.

It is likely that a graphic package of acquired ethnographic knowledge proved to be a form which was flexible and easy to use. It was helpful to build sketches from nature into 'big theories' (the taxonomy by Carl Linneaus and racial typologies). An engraver was required to fit the direct observations of Russian artists into Western standards of viewing, and to the ways of representing human communities which had been designed by colonial scholars. Albums and tables offered the viewer a representation of Russia as a territory which was suitable for enlightened development, with a large number of peoples that were different but equally distant from Western civilization. Consumers who viewed the images generalized by Roth saw the Empire as an immense heterogeneous space[14]. Viewers who were familiar with the European engravings of this genre could find parallels with some European colonies overseas.

Le Prince, Geissler, Atkinson and their followers enriched the 'costumes collection' of the Empire which were made in the 1770s through the notions of culture and mores[15]. According to the wishes of Catherine II and of the political elite, the viewers saw Russia as an organized landscape, a 'blooming garden' with peoples and cultures flourishing there. This policy of viewing revealed non-localized communities, such as 'Tatars' and 'Russians'. Artists identified the discovered 'cultures' through the specific rituals of everyday life, such as games, church ceremonies and folk entertainments. The visual folklorization and infantilization of human groups allowed them to represent the state as a caring parent, and enabled them to legitimize the

[14] *Roth C. M.* Vorstellungen der Kleidertrachten der Nationen des russ. Reiches, zusammen mit Schlepper. St. Petersburg, 1775; *Georgi J. G.* Beschreibung aller Nationen des Russischen Reichs, ihrer Lebensart. St. Petersburg, 1776–1780. Bd. 1–4.

[15] Euvres de Jean Baptiste Le Prince, peintre du roi, conseiller en son Académie Royale de peinture & sculpture; Mort en août 1781. Contenant plus de cent soixante planches gravées à l'eau-forte, & à l'imitation des dessins lavés au bistre; le tout d'après ses compositions, représentant divers Constumes & Habillements de différents peuples du Nord, où ce célèbre Artiste a sejourné quelque temps. Ce procédé du lavis a été poussé par M. le Prince au plus haut degré de perfection. Cette suite intéressante se vende en entier ou séparément, au gré des Amateurs, a Paris, Chez Les S. Basan & Poignant, Marchands d'Estampes, rue & hôtel Serpente. F. Chereau, aussi M. d'Estampes, rue des Mathurins. 1782; *Atkinson J., Walker J.* A Picturesque Representation of the Manners, Customs and Amusement of the Russians in One Hundred Colored Plates with Accurate Explanation of Each Plate in English and French. London, 1803. Vol. 1–2; *Geissler C. G. H.* Mahlerische Darstellungen der Sitten Gebräuche und Lustbarkeiten bey den Russischen, Tatarischen, Mongolischen und andern Volkern im Russischen Reich. Leipzig, 1803. Vol. 1–4; *Geissler C. G. H., Richter J. G.* Strafen der Russen. Leipzig, 1805; *Geissler C. G. H.* Spiele und Belustigungen der Russen aus den niedern Volks-Klassen. Leipzig, 1805; *Geissler Ch. G. H.* Second voyage de Pallas. Planches. Paris, 1811. Кроме того, его гравюры изданы в следующих публикациях: *Hempel C. F., Geissler C. G. H.* Abbildung und Beschreibung; *Geissler C. G. H., Hempel F.* Tableaux pittoresques des moeurs, des usages et des divertissements des Russes, Tartares, Mongols et autres nations de l'empire russe. Leipzig, 1804; *Geissler C. G. H.* Beschreibung der St. Petersbourgische Hausierer heraus gegebenen Kupfer zur Erklärung der darauf abgebildeten Figuren. Leipzig, 1794.

imperial paternalism This led to the visual signs of ethnography used as decorative elements of imperial representations of Catherine II.

The addition of the concept of historical progress to the description of human diversity complicated the contemporaries' imagined geography by adding more layers to the dichotomy of 'civilization – barbarity'. This picture was differentiated by the stages and areas of cultural development. Since drawing could not convey temporal relations, visual language now depended on the narrative. After that in publications by Clark and Porter, the costume and genre engravings played the role of illustrations to the text[16]. At the same time, the semantics of these images became dependent on discourse, and this, together with the sequence of their representation in the book (and, accordingly, to the order of viewing) allowed one to link the newly discovered peoples to the scale of progress that reproduced the movement of the Sun from East to West.

While creating his own version of human teleology, an artist Korneyev used the conventions of ethnic physiognomy. Their use introduced Russia to the genre of the ethnographic portrait, implying that an image acquired certain cultural and psychological qualities through an artist's work with a sitter's face. This technology allowed the image to be freed from geographical dependency. Now it became possible to represent the stages of cultural development without the 'symbols of the place'. The wider interpretational potential of this procedure became clear after the publication of alternative versions of the Russian Empire portraits (the Paris editions of the works by Korneyev and De Rechberg[17] and Breton[18], 1812-13). Physiognomy offered a good opportunity for the ethnic mark to be freely modelled. With the help of physiognomy, Korneyev placed the human diversity of the world, and of the Russian Empire, in the shape of a tondo with a centre made up of 'European characteristics' and Breton created the ethnic portrait of the Russia with 'Asian characteristics'.

Addressing the commoners during the war against Napoleon allowed cartoonists to master the symbolic language of the Russian cheap print. Their desire to boost Russian patriotism led to a combination of the Classic images of the public spirit (Russian Scaevola, Curtius and Hercules) with the folk types of Slav heroes (Sila Moroz, Sila Bogatyryev, Vassilissa) in the visual narrative[19]. To convey cultural meanings, artists used both Western

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[16] *Porter R. K.* Traveling Sketches in Russia and Sweden During the Years 1805, 1806, 1807, 1808. London, 1809. Vol. 1; *Clarke E. D.* Travels in Various Countries of Europe, Asia and Africa. London, 1810–1816. Vol. 1–2.

[17] *Rechberg Ch. de.* Les peuples de la Russie ou description des moeurs, usages et costumes des diverses nations de l'empire de Russie, accompagnée de figures coloriées. Paris, 1812–1813. Vol. 1–2.

[18] *Breton M. J.* La Russie, ou Moeurs, usages et costumes des habitans de toutes les provinces de cet empire. Ouvrage orné de… planches, représentant plus de deux cents sujets, gravés sur les dessins originaux et d'après nature, de M. Damame-Démartrait et Robert Ker Porter. Extrait des ouvrages angl. et allem. Paris, 1813. Vol. 1–6.

[19] *Vereschagin V. A.* Russkaya karikatura. [V. 2] Otechestvennaya voina (Terebenev, Venetsianov, Ivanov). SPb., 1912; *Norris S.* A War of Images: Russian Popular Prints, Wartime Culture, and National Identity, 1812–1945. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2006.

artistic conventions (such as the refinement of commoners) and the symbolism of the icon painting (where the hero is a giant). Caricatures of the enemy enriched Russian culture with ethnic stereotypes extracted from Western written sources and from Russian 'common' speech.

Cartoonists gave satirical broadsheets propaganda and mobilization value, and therefore become the translators of information and the systems of rational European knowledge about human diversity, into the categories of Russian popular culture. As a result, the Western idea of the 'nation' was applied to Russians and expressed through metaphors of Russia as one big village, a community of peasants who rose to protect their land from a band of marauders. This version deviated from the official interpretation of events as a Holy war, the conflict of Good and the Evil.

In the 1820s, work from the 'Venetsianov School' de-heroicised the Russian social space. In contrast to the post-war producers of cheap prints and painted items, where folk heroes' representations ranged from the defender of their home to that of an odious brigand, Venetsianov steadily freed the 'national character' from aggression. He 'calmed down' the peasants by presenting them in a beautiful landscape, in an idealized contemplation, peace, kindness and everyday work, and played down the cultural differences between landowners and peasants. Venetsianov defined himself and his followers as the artists of the 'people'; he rejected the costume symbolism, facial or bodily stereotypes, and social or local attributions of a chosen object. On the canvass, group solidarity was created through the principle of picturesqueness ('admiration for simple things') and naturalness (work from nature and taking the distortions of perspective into account). As a result, works by artists of the Venetsianov School offered the viewers a set of behavioral stereotypes, social taboos and life models for ethnic mobilization[20].

A group with the characteristics of "Russianness" was first singled out of the category of 'subjects' in genre engravings. There, it was shown as an autonomous or even prevailing element of the Empire's syncretic culture. An 1812 caricature interpreted the 'Russian people' as a group based on public consent and a shared past. The 'Magic Lantern' demonstrated the manifestations of patriotism during peacetime. At the same time, the official visual discourse re-encoded the images of commoners, which were active in the public sphere, into folk personifications of the peaceful 'Slav', through the sculptured figures of pagan deities and dancers, ethnic dolls and 'cartoonish' images in graphic arts. In this respect, work by artists from the Venetsianov School deviated from the emerging tradition, because these transferred the visual debate of 'Russianness' into the field of 'serious' representation, where portraits were painted in oil in authentic genre scenes. Unlike the 'people', 'Russia' as the body of the Empire was created

[20] *Savinov A. N.* Khudozhnic Venetsinov. M LХудожник Венецианов. М.; Л. : Iskusstvo, 1949. P. 100; *Alekseeva T. V.* Khudozhniki shkoly Venetsianova. M.: Iskusstvo, 1958.

either by the combination of elements (such as cartographic cartouches, and scenes in the 'Russia Discovered' and 'The Peoples of Russia'), or by allegoric representations on medals, in church architecture, on the arches of triumph and in sculptured compositions.

It is likely that the iconographic forms of knowledge taught Russians to imagine and think of human groups as abstractions. A pioneer in the description of human diversity – the costume genre – bore symbolic images that represented groups. Unlike the icon that referred to the ideal essence of a Biblical character, the 'costume' represented not a person but a group of people. A viewer required a certain imaginative skill to see a group symbol in a graphic image. This was likely shaped by the experience of viewing cheap prints, including those with war themes, where the Cossack was perceived as the personification of all the soldiers of the Empire, and the Turk as a symbol of all their numerous enemies. However, it was a dichotomy of 'us versus the Other'. The costume engravings made the situation more complex by creating an indefinite number of non-opposing groups. While looking at these, the viewer became used to the idea of the existence of a multitude of 'others', which could be recognized through certain characteristics.

The emergence of albums at first, and then of tables, and finally of illustrations with costumes by Roth persuaded the contemporaries that Russia was a multinational state. The captions of illustrations pointed out the various places in the Empire where these groups lived. Therefore, a habit emerged of linking an imagined people to a 'land', and the viewers acquired a new territorial conscience. They imagined the space of their own country as a combination of populated spaces; the 'lands of Laplanders', the 'isles of Kamchadals', or the 'Mountains of Kabardinians'.

Genre engravings required an even higher level of abstract thought from the viewer; the recognition of a human group through 'customs and mores'. Only making a habit of looking at these scenes could allow a contemporary to recognize those engaging in fisticuffs or playing touch-last as Russians; those competing in horse racing as Tatars or Bashkirs; falconers as the Kirghiz, and those riding dog sledges as Kamchadals.

Artistic fantasy stretched the contemporary imagination, and the emergence of the convention of perception formed the basis for the next creative breakthrough., The ethnographic portraits of the peoples of Russia which were then presented to the viewer (engravings by Korneyev) required a study of corporeality. The experience of viewing these images and their discussion gave people the skill to recognize groups through characteristic poses, facial structure and mimic.

Caricature made the commoners into history-makers and shook contemporary views of social hierarchy in the Empire. The reproduction and copying of these images by local artisans

and cheap prints, testified to the fact that this 'world turned upside down' was liked and accepted by popular culture. It was only afterwards that it became possible for commoners to speak to the enlightened viewer/reader in the name of the 'Russian people (in the images of the 'Magic lantern'[21]).

The stages of learning abstract categories prepared the audience for an appreciation of the portraits of peasants by artists from the Venetsianov School as symbols of 'Russianness'. In contrast to Classical images, where an image was a sign of an individual action, the detailed, naturalistic, psychological and easily recognizable images in the paintings by Alexei Venetsianov was a collective representation, a 'drop that reflects a sea'. The art lovers taught the contemporaries to recognize 'our Russians' in the portraits of a boy, a crone, a girl or an old man, as a group human being whose behaviour and feelings were determined by this.

This skill certainly could not appear suddenly and everywhere. It required intellectual effort. This is evident from reading the publications in the 'Journal of Fine Arts'. The debates of Vasilii Grigorovich and his followers with Pavel Svinyin and members of the Academy of Arts marked the break between one level of abstraction and the other. Svinyin's supporters considered the world in terms of the discourse of civilizations and therefore saw the peasant portraits by Venetsianov as decorative symbols of the Empire that could establish its status in the world of arts. Grigorovich's approach to works of art was defined by Romantic ideas. He saw the people in the portraits as himself and those like him. Therefore, the critic thought that he had the right to correct the artist's hand and eye (as if he were commissioning a portrait of himself), and advised him to choose the sitters more carefully. This was the advice of a man who was interested in the relevant representation of 'his' group, since he already had an idea about what this group meant. Accordingly, this imagined community served as a criterion for his evaluation of works by artists from the Venetsianov School, and other portrayers of 'Russianness'.

The ability of some viewers to perceive personal portraits as collective 'Russians' marked the moment when ethnic conscience was born. The shared perception of artistic images created a circle of like-minded people, which later verbalized the sentiments they had acquired, and began to promote Russian unity as a political problem. The characteristics of the 'Russian School', as formulated by Grigorovich, constituted the first step toward the rationalization of group solidarity. These became viewed as an accepted norm, thanks to the activity of the Society for the Promotion of Russian Artists, and to the selection of works for the Russian gallery. In the 1830s, these also formed the basis for the creation of an authentic language for artistic

[21] Volshebnyi fonar, ili Zrelische S. Peterburgskikh rashozhikh prodavtsov, masterov i drugikh prostonarodnykh promyshlennikov, izobrazhennykh vernoyu kistiyu v nastoyaschem ih naryade, i predstavlennykh razgovarivayuschimi drug s drugom sootvetstvenno kazhdomu litsu i zvaniyu. SPb., 1817–1818.

descriptions of the ‘Russian’ past, such as historical costumes and elements of a past life, and the Russian style of Imperial architecture.

At the same time, the study of preconditions and the consequences of using visual language have not led to a one-dimensional picture,, or a simple explanation of its functions. It seems that the visual language determined a more or less unambiguous vision of human diversity only when it had not yet acquired the importance of a political problem, when there was not a linguistic convention of categories, or a clear understanding about the forms of human group life and the criteria of classification. In these circumstances, the artists were the creators of ethnic and national discourse. Their historical leadership was born out of the ambivalent character of the cognitive structure of visual symbols. In order to justify dividing people into groups, a motivation, which was understandable to the viewers and based on their life (primarily visual) experience, was required.

However, when referring to the clarity of the vision, this does not mean conventions. During almost the whole of the 18th century, we examine the specific perception of the iconic signs of a group, in the absence of ready-made language conventions to express the meanings it bore. A 21st century viewer is unlikely to have this perception. It seems that this disappeared by the end of the 18th century, when Europeanization and the graphic demonstration of Russia’s heterogeneity problematized this theme and, consequently, moved into the literary mode of debate. The intrusion of an author’s and a publishers verbal comments (such as the description of an image, its dependency on the context of the edition, participation of linguistic elements in artistic composition) created a polyphony of meanings, rendering artistic images dependent on words. As a result, individual creative work (of costume artists and a number of people connected to them) was replaced by the collective constructing of the ’peoples for the Empire’ . The authorities, artists, engravers, scholars, publishers, sellers and consumers of the pictures all took part.

The discussion of the artistic canon in 1820s was the first articulation of various visions of the national and the first conflict between early Romanticism and the paradigm of the Enlightenment. This set the task of accepting the conventions of viewing and discussing this theme and of the search for new normative languages to describe the Empire.

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