East Versus East: The Failure of Ilya Repin's Parisian Café at the 1875 Paris Salon

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Abstract
The 19th century in Europe was characterized by the canonization and de-canonization of various painters. My paper deals with the failure at 1875 the Parisian Salon of a painting by the great Russian realist Ilya Repin (1844–1930), who exhibited a social genre work – a cafe scene – to a French audience for the first time. That same year another Russian painter, Alexei Harlamoff, (1840–1925) also participated in a Parisian salon with a great success. for This striking difference in reception was due to the reactions of two of the most significant figures associated with the Russian national culture heritage: Ivan Turgenev, the leading realistic author and cultural icon, and culture critic Vladimir Stasov. I analyze portraits of Turgenev by Repin and Harlamoff to demonstrate the essential disparity between the approaches of the two artists, both of whom were graduates of the Russian Academy of Arts. I contend that rejection of Repin's *Parisian Cafe* by the two Russian ideological groups had a profound influence on the canonization of Russian realistic art and its visibility beyond the Russian Empire.

Keywords: Russian Academy of Arts, Repin, Turgenev, Realism, *Parisian Café*, Paris, Stasov, Canon, Realistic Art, Social Genre

Introduction

In a 1942 article on the revival of the Le Nain brothers' works, Stanley Meltzoff wrote that the loss of a painter should be as important to an art historian as the loss of a battle is to a political historian.[1] In the following I examine one case of intentional disregard of a work, the reasons for it, and the result.

The case of *Paris Café* is the loss of a single work (Fig. 1). If that painting had captured public attention, things might have been very different and Russian art might have been brought on to the world stage in the person of Ilya Repin.

Figure 1: Ilya Repin, Parisian Café (Le Cafe du Boulevard), 1875, oil on canvas, Museum of Avant-Garde Mastery (MAGMA), Digital Image: Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain.

In 1875 Ilya Repin, who was staying in Paris at the time on a grant from the Russian Academy, exhibited his massive work (192 cm × 120 cm) *Parisian Café* at the Paris Salon. The painting depicts a typical bustling café in Paris. Repin was so confident that the work would be a success, that he broke the Russian Academy's rules by showing it in Paris, as recipients of its grants were not supposed to exhibit outside of Russia.[2]

The painting did not garner much attention in France, but it sparked furious outcries in Russia. The artist Arkhip Kuindzhi (1841–1910), who saw the work in Paris Salon, described Repin's experience as seriously embarrassing for the painter. The realist painter Ivan Kramskoi (1837–1887), Repin's teacher and the leader of the Itinerants (Передвижники), roundly criticized Repin and wrote to him saying that he must have chosen such a subject

[1] Meltzoff, S. (1942). The revival of the le Nains. *The Art bulletin 24, 3, 259*.

[2] Repin wrote about the process of working on the painting with great enthusiasm. See Repin's letter of 4 March 1874, to Stasov, in I. Repin, & V. Stasov (1948). In A. Lebedev (Ed.), I. E. Repin, V. Stasov. Perepiska 1871–1876. Moscow and Leningrad: Iskusstvo, pp. 88–89.

during an attack of insolence.[3] The Russian art critic and outspoken Russian nationalist Vladimir Stasov, who was Repin's mentor and up until then had praised Repin's work, wrote that the painter should return to Russia because he was obviously not achieving anything worthwhile during his stay abroad. Stasov went out of his way to undermine Repin's chances of success outside Russia because he wanted to see the artist working in Russia to help strengthen the Russian nationalist school. These and other commentators urged Repin to return to his own field: realistic national Russian subjects.

As I will show in this paper, the criticism that was directed at Repin came from two opposing ideological Russian camps: moderate liberal and social democrat. The moderate liberal camp was represented by Ivan Turgenev, who as I mentioned above was the leading realistic author and a cultural icon. On the one hand, Turgenev, who was very influential in various cultural circles in Paris and believed that Russian art outside of Russia should speak in a Western 'language,' saw evidence of a social realism, which he abhorred, in Repin's work. On the other hand, Vladimir Stasov believed that Russian art had to develop independently, separately from the art of the West.

Following for Local: Repin in Anticipation of Success

Before I go into the reasons why the painting was rejected in Paris, I want to explain what Repin was trying to achieve with it. The work expresses Repin's enthusiastic reaction to Paris and presents a Russian artist's perspective on the Parisian cultural milieu. Repin was not trying to imitate a Western genre and he was not presenting a Russian subject. The work's schematism and narrative style reflect a clear and characteristic template that Repin used throughout his career, thanks to which his works speak to viewers on different levels. Using an academic genre, Repin painted a Parisian group portrait with great skill from the perspective of one familiar with the local scene. Today *Parisian Café* is considered to be one of his most fascinating works and in 1875 was sold at at Christie's auction in 2011 for more than 4.5 million pounds.[4] It is set in a café, a venue that was shortly to become a symbol of Parisian cultural life and a focus of works by the French Impressionists. The identity of the café in the painting is disputed: I think it is the famous Café Guerbois, the gathering place in the new Bohemia in 19th century Paris. One can see a poster for the Folies Bergère, a famous site that was featured in a work by Edourd Manet (1832–1883) (Fig. 2).[5]

[3] For Kramskoi's letter of 20 August 1875 to Repin, See Kramskoi, I. (1888). In Suvorin Aleksey (Ed.), Ivan Nikolaevich Kramskoi. Ego Zhizn', Perepiska I Khudozhestvenno-Kriticheskie Stat'i 1837–1887. St. Peterburg: A. S.Suvorina.

[4] See on Christi's website: Authors. Ilya Repin (1844–1930). A Parisian Café. 2011 [cited 02/07/ 2022]. Available from https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-ilya-repin-1844-1930-5441544/.

[5] An interesting point is that the only mention of Repin's painting in the press was in the December 1876 issue of the magazine *La Voix*, where it was described as depicting vulgar characters. In 1882, Manet's *The Folies Bergère* was also placed in the vulgar showcase genre with static figures . More about the attitude toward Manet's *The Folies Bergère* in: Iskin, Ruth E. (1995). Selling, seduction, and soliciting the eye: Manet's bar at the Folies Bergère. *The Art Bulletin 77, 1, 25–44*.

Figure 2: Édouard Manet, Un bar aux Folies Bergère, 1881–1882, oil on canvas, Courtauld Gallery, London. Digital Image: Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain.

The accepted scholarly approach, which is based on Repin's own statements, is that the reason for the work's failure was that it was hung high up in the Salon, so the critics could not see it easily. Good hanging locations were reserved for artists with connections, which Repin claimed that he lacked. But the artist's claims of anonymity were unjustified. By the time he arrived in Paris in 1873 he was already a well-known painter, holder of the Russian Academy's gold medal, and creator of the iconic *Barge-Haulers on the Volga*, which had been exhibited in an international exhibition in Vienna in 1873. Repin was in everyday connections with all the Russian art milieu and specific with Turgenev.

The Triangle of Realism: Turgenev, Repin and Harlamoff

Turgenev knew Repin earlier in St. Petersburg, and when the latter came to Paris, he often visited Turgenev at home. During that period the Russian 'crowd' in Paris was not limited to Russian speakers. Turgenev used to take part in the monthly "Sunday afternoon" discussions attended by Émile Zola, Gustave Flaubert, Alphonse Daudet, and Edmond de Goncourt. The author and his opinions were widely respected and acknowledged in French cultural society.

Repin had visited Turgenev in Paris at the salon of Pauline Viardot, whose name was linked to Turgenev's in a romantic context for many years. Her salon was a gathering place for French intellectuals, and her husband Louis Viardot was an art collector, critic, and historian, and was an influential figure in French cultural circles. So, at this stage Repin's future seemed secure in terms of connections. In April 1874 the Russian collector Tretyakov commissioned a portrait of Turgenev from Repin (Fig. 3). Before Repin began work on Turgenev's portrait, the author described him as the great hope of the Russian school in the West.

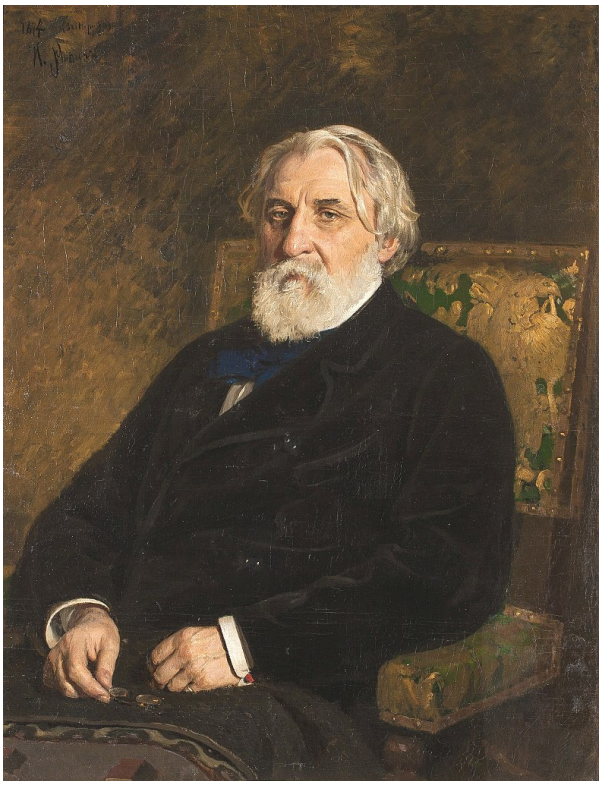

Figure 3: Ilya Repin, Portrait of Ivan Turgenev, 1874, oil on canvas, The State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. Digital Image: Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain.

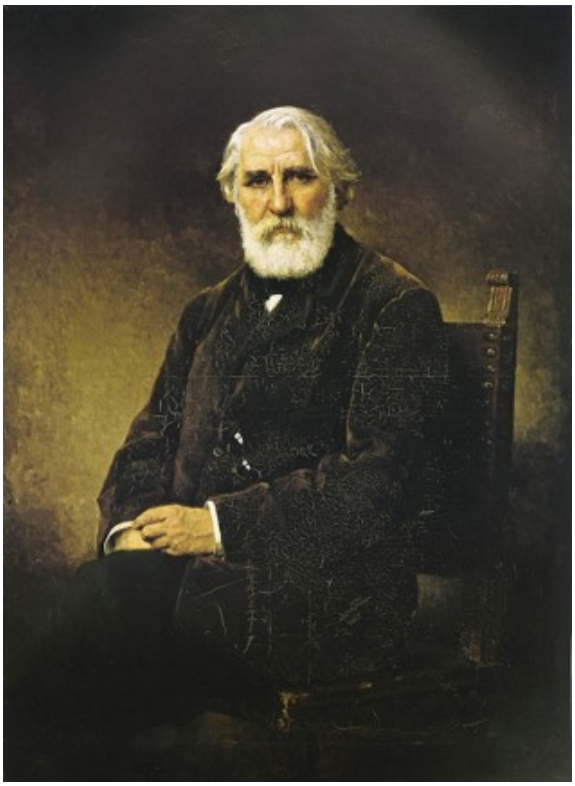

Figure 4: Alexei Harlamoff, Portrait of Ivan Turgenev, 1875, oil on canvas, State Russian Museum, Saint Petersburg. Digital Image: WikiArt, Public Domain.

But at the same time Turgenev took an interest in another holder of a grant from the Academy of the Arts, Alexei Harlamoff, and commissioned another portrait (Fig. 4). The two artists' starting points were almost identical: two exceptional portrait painters with highly developed techniques. After Repin completed his portrait, Turgenev transferred his patronage completely to Harlamoff, leaving Repin with no assistance in promoting his works in Paris. What was so unacceptable about Repin's portrait and why was it Harlamoff who became Turgenev's chosen representative of Russian art in Paris?

A look at the two portraits reveals the differences that Turgenev saw inn them. On the one hand, in Repin's portrait the writer is sitting back in an armchair, with a red nose and greasy hair, and with his hand, holding his spectacles, resting on his covered knees. It is a realistic representation of an elderly man, not in the best of health and growing weaker, far from his homeland, a man who loves eating and drinking. Harlamoff's portrait, on the other hand, presents a different personage: the writer, who is sitting up straight, has tidy white hair, one leg crossed over the other like a young man, and is looking out toward the viewer, his pose indicating his breadth of thought. The subject's unrealistically dark eyes, a common feature in Harlamoff's portraits, meet the viewer's with intensity. (Harlamoff's portrait is definitely more flattering, a kind of ideal of an author and thinker. Harlamoff's images, in accord with the academic tradition, generally express a kind of ideal of beauty: his female figures look more like actresses wearing costumes rather than real people, like representations of an idea of romantic beauty (Fig.5).

Figure 5: Alexei Harlamoff, Russian Beauty year, unknown, oil on canvas, Private collection. Digital Image: Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain.

Harlamoff also painted portraits of Louis and Pauline Viardot and from that time onward Turgenev proclaimed Harlamoff as the poster child of the Russian Oriental School in Europe. Emil Zola, following repeated requests from Turgenev, praised the artist in the press. Turgenev's enthusiastic support for Harlamoff is all the more surprising in light of the fact that the painter did not need the writer's support. He conquered the Salon in 1875, where his works were prominently and highly praised in the French press. This determination to support him can be explained by Turgenev's wish to present Harlamoff as the representative of the Russian school rather than as a successful foreign painter in Paris. For him Harlamoff was the successful prototype of a Russian academis painter.

Repin's portrait of Turgenev is similar in kind to Manet's *Good Glass of Beer*: like Manet's protagonist Emil Belo, Turgenev appears in Repin's portrait not as a spiritual image but as flesh and blood (Fig. 6).

Figure 6: Eduard Manet, A Good Glass of Beer, 1873, oil on canvas, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia. Digital Image: WikiArt, Public Domain.

Figure 7: Ilya Repin, Portrait of M.P.Musorgsky, 1881, oil on canvas,. Digital Image: Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain

Repin used social realism to connect the viewer to the figure in his painting rather than as a way to criticize the social order. Compare for example the portrait of Modest Mussorgsky, a composer Repin admired, painted in the hospital shortly before the composer's death in 1881(Fig. 7). Repin did nothing to hide the indications of the composer's illness, and the seizures racking his dying body. The emphasis on contrast and the human frailty of his subjects eventually became a central feature of Repin's portraits.

The Triangle of National Identity: Stasov, Repin and Turgenev

Repin's position in Paris was also challenged by Stasov. In 1873 Stasov had proclaimed Repin as *the* national painter and made long-term plans for his young protegé. He worked hard to gain Repin's support in his battle with the Russian Academy of the Arts and to enlist him in the Peredvigniki.[6] To ensure Repin's allegiance to the Russian nationalist realist camp, Stasov published an article on Repin in the periodical *Pchela* in 1875.[7] The first part of the article praises Repin's extraordinary talent, whereas the second part talks about the painter's personal attitude to classic Italian and contemporary French art and was not intended to be read by strangers. Repin described Italian classic art as empty and outdated, statements that were quoted from private correspondence with Stasov, and their publication provoked a scandal, which led to the artist's rejection in both Russian and European circles.

Turgenev and Stasov actively sought ways of developing the style of Russian art that began to take shape in the 1860s. Both were witness to the increasing harshness of the Czarist regime in response to the revolutionary activity in the period of "Reakcia" to the French Revolution, all the more so after the assassination of Czar Alexander II in 1866. In consequence both thinkers adopted a highly activist political position: Turgenev, as the philosopher, who as Merezhkovsky described him, was the "genius of moderation" and supporter of measured change.[8] In contrast, Stasov's aesthetic approach took shape around the writings of Belinsky, who was involved in propaganda for the Russian people's central historical role and supported ideological realism, populism, and the idea that the objective of true art is to serve ideas working toward changing society for the better.

In the book *Repin and Turgenev*, the researcher of Russian art Zilberstein attributes Turgenev's rejection of Repin to the fact that he was Stasov's protegé, so the writersaw Repin's whole oeuvre as a direct implementation of Stasov's national realist agenda. But we know that Repin's Parisian period was not marked by excessive Russian nationalism, and his reputation in that direction was formed during the decade after he returned to Russia and joined the Itinerants. Turgenev did indeed examine Repin's works in order to understand the nature of his art. In his own portrait he identified a humdrum domestic realism, embarrassingly concrete, which was an antithesis to his concept of the national role of art. Turgenev believed in integration of Russian talent and skill into worldwide concerns. A liberal in the style of old-school British liberalism is how Turgenev used to define his own political views. This liberalism was based on principles of human liberty from restrictive dogmas imposed by political movements and religion alike. It is no coincidence that Turgenev was seen by followers of French culture in the 1860s as the ultimate representative of Russian literature and the characters in his works were well-known; even though they were seen as "Russian" and Turgenev wrote only in Russian, their ethical and emotional upheavals were also well understood by Westerners. The Russian element in Turgenev's work is expressed in language and geographical location, but his plots are universal. Turgenev's political philosophy led him to look for art that would express a political agenda in a similar

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[6] On Stasov's contribution to shaping the final form of the Peredvigniki movement : Valkenier, E. K. (1975). The Peredvizhniki and the Spirit of the 1860s. The Russian Review (Stanford), 34(3), 247–265.

[7] Stasov Vladimir. (1937). In Gutman (Ed.), . V.V.Stasov.Izbrannye Sochineniya V Dvukh Tomakh. Moskva, Leningrad: Iskusstvo. Vol 1, pp. 808–818.

[8] In this way Meregkovskiy defines Turgenev in relation to Russian writers Tolstoy and Dostoevsky .See: Meregkovskiy, D. (2007). Vechnie Sputniki. Saint Petersburg: Nauka. p. 303-310

way to his writing: a cosmopolitan art expressing itself via Russian technique and Russian forms.

The location where Repin's work was displayed also contributed to its failure: I am referring here not to its physical location in the exhibition, but to the choice of the Paris Salon itself. This was a response to his more successful rival Alexei Harlamoff. There is no doubt that Harlamoff's works were different from many others in the 1875 Salon in terms of execution and form. I believe that the *Salon des Refusés* , which was not only relatively liberal in terms of subjects but also exhibited fewer works. would have been more appropriate venue for Repin's work.[9] It was a place for experimental art, which is exactly what P*arisian Café* was: an experiment with a new genre unfamiliar to the Parisian viewer, an expression of social realism through the eyes of a foreign painter. Repin wanted to perpetuate his success through the representation of Bohemian figures and by declaring through his work that he, the Russian painter, knew them and they were happy to be his models. That he, the Russian painter, knew where to go to find the contemporary Bohemia.

Conclusions

I see *Parisian Café* as a turning point, a time when academic Russian art went in two opposite directions: international Orientalism and Russian nationalism. I believe that the appearance of *Parisian Café* was a decisive moment for the visibility of Russian art in the West: it displays a very Russian perspective based on Russian academism, Russian satire side by side with appreciation, a desire to engage in the actual through alien lenses.

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[9] Salon des Refuse first established in 1863. The Salon did not have uniformity and it met in 1864 and 1873. For more about Salon des Refuse in the article: Boime, A. (1970). The Salon Des Refuses and the Evolution of Modern Art. *The Art Quarterly,* 411–426

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