



# Pursuing Independence: Kramskoi and the Peredvizhniki vs. the Academy of Arts

EVGENY STEINER

On November 9, 1863, a minor incident in the Council Hall of the Russian Imperial Academy of Arts marked the professional and public debut of a group of artists—some of whom would dominate the Russian arts scene in the last three decades of the nineteenth century. Although this incident, popularly called the “Revolt of the Fourteen,” posed a direct challenge to the monopolistic authority of the Academy of Arts to bestow commissions, ranks, and monetary awards upon artists, these “democratic” artists (often misleadingly called the Itinerants or Wanderers) had no desire to fundamentally alter society. Instead, they sought an independent avenue to achieving professional and economic success within existing social parameters. This article will explore the sociocultural situation of the Petersburg Cooperative of Artists (Artel) and the Peredvizhniki—or what I call the “Kramskoi generation,” after their most representative member, Ivan Kramskoi (1837–87)—and in doing so will interpret the nature of Russian realist (in many respects, populist) art through the prism of the new reality artists of the time faced: the commodification of art and the commercialization of art’s circulation and distribution.

From the first appearance of the Peredvizhniki, and throughout the course of the Soviet regime, scholars and critics of Russian art of the 1860s–1890s have used such expressions as “democratic cause,” “national motifs,” “social responsibility,” “condemnation of the tsarist regime,” and so on, more often than they have evaluated the artistic merits of artworks. In this respect, Soviet authors followed the trail blazed by Vladimir Stasov (1824–1906), an ardent supporter of Russian “national” art from the very onset of the Peredvizhniki “movement” in the early 1870s. The tenacious “Peredvizhniki myth” is basically his creation.<sup>1</sup> After the collapse of the USSR, the artistic culture of the 1860s–1890s had

This article is based on the materials from my lectures as a Leverhulme Visiting Professor at the University of Manchester in 2007.

<sup>1</sup>“Along with Kramskoi, Stasov ... was the ideologue of this association.” See A. K. Lededev, *Vladimir Vasil'evich Stasov* (Moscow, 1965), 41. For the few other prerevolutionary writers who pursued a nationalist agenda see A. Novitskii, *Peredvizhniki i ikh vlianie na russkoe iskusstvo* (Moscow, 1897).

*The Russian Review* 70 (April 2011): 252–71  
Copyright 2011 *The Russian Review*



practically disappeared as a subject of study, and no viable reexamination has been offered by Russian authors in the past twenty-five years.<sup>2</sup> In the West, the very few publications on this period of Russian art follow in the vein of Soviet historiography.<sup>3</sup> The best study remains Elizabeth Valkenier's, but that was published more than thirty years ago.<sup>4</sup> The very few general Western art books that mention Russian artistic groups tend to have more than a few misconceptions.<sup>5</sup>

I shall try to reconstruct the situation with both the artists and their art by looking at it within the framework of cultural institutions. In the process, the intricacies of the strong symbiosis of the young artists with the Academy of Arts will occupy a major place. We shall see that the artists never acted uncompromisingly for the sake of their aesthetic ideals against the establishment, and that the authorities were never unambiguously oppressive and dictatorial regarding either subject matter or exhibitional policy.

Kramskoi is best known for his role as the leader of a group of young dissenters who later played a crucial role in the organization of two art groups—the Artel and the Peredvizhniki. He was an eloquent talker, and he also penned many of his pugilistic (and sometimes strikingly outspoken and even blunt) opinions in a voluminous corpus of epistolaric and essayistic writings. The most prominent artist who for a while was a member of the Peredvizhniki, Ilya Repin (1844–1930), knew Kramskoi since early 1864. He recorded the following utterance by Kramskoi:

The Russian [artist] should finally stand on his own feet in art. It's time to throw away those foreign diapers—thank God, we've grown a beard already but we are still walking in an Italian toddler's harness. It's time to think about the creation of our own Russian school, about our own national art! ... Our art dwells in slavery to the Academy [of Arts], which is itself a slave of Western art. Our task now—the task of Russian artists—is to get free of this slavery.<sup>6</sup>

Kramskoi would make pronouncements of this type throughout his career. At that time (1864) Repin was a student of the Academy, and he harbored quite different recollections:

Next to each other, rubbing shoulders, were a disheveled lad in a peasant shirt and a gray-haired general in his uniform; next to them was a bearded man in a tail coat (a gorgeous artist with a goatee); further along there was a university student; a tall naval officer with a big beard; on the next step there was a whole pack of blond fellows from the Vyatka region; a corpulent lady—a rare view in those days in the Academy; big-eyed Georgians and Armenians; a Cossack officer; stiff Germans in impeccable suits and hairdos à la Capoul.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>2</sup>This is true even in the more balanced account by S. Ekshtut, *Shaika Peredvizhnikov* (Moscow, 2004).

<sup>3</sup>See David Jackson, *The Wanderers and the Critical Realism in Nineteenth Century Russian Painting* (Manchester, 2006).

<sup>4</sup>Elizabeth Valkenier, *Russian Realist Art. The State and Society: The Peredvizhniki and Their Tradition* (Ann Arbor, 1977).

<sup>5</sup>See, for instance, Richard R. Brettell, *Modern Art 1851–1929: Capitalism and Representation* (Oxford, 1999), 40.

<sup>6</sup>Il'ia Repin, *Dalekoe blizkoe* (Leningrad, 1982), 169.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 145–46.

**“THE REVOLT OF THE FOURTEEN”**

And in such an Academy, which was the magnificent palace of High Art, occurred that minor incident at the end of 1863. Because this “Revolt of the Fourteen” was the first act of organized resistance to the authorities in the artistic sphere in Russia, and has been proclaimed by leftish critics as the beginning of independent democratic art, we should examine the event closely.

According to established practice, a number of Academy graduate students who completed the full course of study were allowed to compete for the Grand Gold Medal, an honor that carried a six-year fellowship to work abroad—in Italy or Paris. Contestants had to create their own compositions on a given topic, usually one the Academic Council had gleaned from classical (sometimes Russian) antiquity and the mythological repertoire. Such was the case for the students specializing in historical painting; those who specialized in genre painting were allowed to portray the lives of contemporary (Russian) people. For years, many students and critics had complained about these “antiquated” subjects, so in 1863 the Academy departed from tradition and announced that students would not be given explicit subjects but, rather, general themes such as joy, anger, or love for the motherland. This, the Academy reasoned, would give each student a better opportunity to demonstrate his abilities and inclinations. The specifics of rendering were left to the contestant, who could decide whether to depict a scene “from modern life or life passed by a long time ago,” as Kramskoi later wrote.<sup>8</sup> In other words, the Academy opened up the subject matter for the historical painters. The genre painters had always had more or less free reign. This announcement, however, came with less pleasant news: “Contestants will be allowed to participate only once, and for all the contestants there will be only one golden medal of the first class.”<sup>9</sup> To further complicate matters, an unusually large number of graduate students qualified for the contest that year. As a result, while in previous years fewer contestants competed for more medals (and could compete again the next year if unsuccessful), in 1863 the competition promised to be very tough, the chances for success were slimmer, and failure would be final.

Kramskoi, unfortunately, had reason to worry that his own chances were not so good. He was an excellent draftsman but was particularly weak in composition, a predicament he would struggle with until the end of his career. He also was known to be a terrific procrastinator who could not finish many of his paintings, something that would be true during his academic years and beyond. Being very ambitious and an acknowledged leader of his fellow students, he would not take a probable defeat easily. He also worried that the rector of the Academy, Fedor Bruni, held some grudges against him. In a letter to his friend Mikhail Tulinov he confided that Bruni and Pimenov (an Academy professor and member of the Academic Council) had their own protégé, while the professor who protected him, Aleksei Markov, might, he feared, be absent because of illness.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup>Ivan Kramskoi, “Sud'by russkogo iskusstva” (1877), in his *Pis'ma, stat'i*, comp. S. N. Gol'dshtein (Moscow, 1966), 2:319.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Kramskoi letter to M. Tulinov, August 21, 1863, in his *Perepiska I. N. Kramskogo*, comp. S. N. Gol'dshtein, 2 vols. (Moscow, 1953–54), 1:8–9.



In order to level the playing field, Kramskoi organized a collective letter to the Academic Council. On October 8 they wrote about their “heartfelt desire” to be given “the free choice of subject” and to not be “limited by the set theme,” something “the Council itself acknowledged” was desirable, in certain cases. After the students’ petition was rejected (on October 10), they sent a more detailed letter to the president of the Academy, Prince G. G. Gagarin, emphasizing that, due to the natural difference in characters and temperaments, some contestants would be in more advantageous positions than others.<sup>11</sup> It also pointed out that since “from now on the contest for the Grand Gold Medal will take place only once, and that only one of us would get the gold medal, which confers the right to go abroad,” the Council should “permit us, on a trial basis, the full freedom of choice of subjects.”<sup>12</sup> When this letter, with its rather weak arguments, was not answered, a new letter was written to the chairman of the Council, Rector F. Bruni, and on top of this the students went to the homes of at least four professors to ask each one personally to change the rules. As a result, the Council decided not to implement broad themes, and instead reverted to the usual practice of assigning specific topics.

In the context of this article, the key fact here is that these letters included nothing about democratic subjects or national themes. Indeed, the young artists were given an opportunity to choose a topic from contemporary life, since the assigned subject for the genre painters was “The Emancipation of the Serfs.” But on the morning of the contest, before the subjects were disclosed, an academic secretary asked the contestants to identify who among them were genre painters and who were historic painters—all declared that they were “historians.” Kramskoi later explained this in an article by saying that the students did not know what to answer because they did not make these distinctions among themselves and, moreover, they wanted to enter the Council hall together.<sup>13</sup> This appears to be a weak explanation, especially since in the same article, two pages earlier, he revealed that the young artists had tried to persuade their professors by arguing that “because half of us are genre painters who gained Minor Gold Medals for compositions made on freely chosen subjects, and thus it will be unjust to subject them to the contest alongside the historic painters, we ask the Council to leave us our old right or allow all of us the freedom to chose our own subjects.”<sup>14</sup> Quite possibly, had the students told the truth—that half of them were actually specializing in genre painting—they could have found “The Emancipation of the Serfs” an appropriate subject for their progressive, democratic, and nationalistic leanings, and they would have had no trouble seeing the contest as decent and just. But the problem was that Kramskoi himself previously had won minor medals for historical painting, so he could not easily pass for a “peasant” painter.<sup>15</sup> This contradiction—“half of us are genre painters” vs. “we are all historians”—has not been commented upon in the scholarly literature.

<sup>11</sup>RGIA, f. 789, op. 4, d. 101.

<sup>12</sup>Kramskoi, “Sud’by,” 319; Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi istoricheskii arkhiv (RGIA), f. 789 (Arkhiv Akademii khudozhestv), op. 4, d. 101. The letter of October 8 was published in Sof’ia Gol’dshstein, “Kramskoi i artel,” *Iskusstvo*, 1937, no. 4.

<sup>13</sup>Kramskoi, “Sud’by,” 322.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 320.

<sup>15</sup>Earlier that year (1863) Kramskoi had completed *Moses Striking Water from the Rock* and was awarded a Minor Gold Medal for that, which opened the way for him to enter the contest for the Grand Gold Medal.



There is another interesting point of omission as well. Despite Kramskoi's penchant for verbalizing his experience in letters, essays, and speeches, he offers no hint about the kind of subject he had in mind for the contest, in case he was given a chance to choose. Probably he had none. Nor did any of the other "rebels" leave a record about the type of work they would have preferred to create.

And so, the young artists who proclaimed themselves historical specialists were ushered into the Council hall where they were informed that the subject of the competition would be "The Feast in Valhalla," with the focus to be on the posthumous bliss of the fallen heroes from the Nordic sagas. The posthumous bliss of fallen heroes was even less attractive than the Grand Prix, which was hard to attain anyway, so the young artists decided not to fight a losing battle: Kramskoi delivered a short speech declaring their refusal to compete, and the students (except for one who lost his nerve at the last moment) left the Council hall. On their way out the door each student left a letter, prepared in advance, announcing that he would not take part in the contest (for personal reasons) and asking to be granted a diploma as a ranked artist (something to which each student was entitled regardless of his success or failure in the contest).<sup>16</sup>

The "revolt" was a singular incident that would not be repeated—although some students would later refuse for personal reasons to take part in the contest for the foreign scholarship—which lends weight to the belief that it was a random action provoked by a constellation of reasons, among which the importance of Kramskoi's personal interests and charisma should not be underestimated. Kramskoi's role in the mutiny was broadly discussed by contemporaries, including Repin, who recalled that "bad people found the demarche of these independent artists a cunning subterfuge." The rebels knew, Repin conveyed these opinions, "that the medal was but one, that Grand Gold one. Thus Kramskoi plotted a mutiny to make it unavailable to anybody—by no means that he could get it himself! There were fourteen of them—and all were so strong! Shustov or Peskov—they would've probably gotten it."<sup>17</sup>

But whatever the personal reasons of Kramskoi and the other artists, it was clear that for the most part they were not dissatisfied with the lack of artistic freedom to depict their own subjects. Prior to 1863, Academy students had produced a steady flow of peasant scenes or critical depiction of everyday life, or iconographically innovative religious compositions. Just two months before the "revolt" Nikolai Ge had done precisely that in his *Last Supper*—and in return the Council of the Academy bestowed upon him its highest academic title. Nor was "The Feast in Valhalla" a traditional and boring theme: it held all the potential for being depicted as a tragic drama on a grandiose Wagnerian scale, and indeed, Richard Wagner had been working on it—his *Ring of the Nibelungs*—since 1854.

<sup>16</sup>The artist Grigorii Miasoedov (1834–1911), who had won the contest the previous year (1862), and had gone to Italy shortly before the "Revolt of the Fourteen," wrote years later to Stasov that "there was nothing consistent in their protest; they received their ranks and their medals according to the *Statute*, however, they wanted to get the Grand Gold Medal without conforming to the same statute. This is outrageous and incongruous." See Miasoedov letter to V. V. Stasov, June 15, 1892, in S. Gol'dshtein, *Kommentarii k izbrannym sochineniam V. V. Stasova* (Moscow-Leningrad, 1938), 128 (the letter is housed in the archives of the Institut russkoi literatury (Pushkinskii Dom) (IRLI). As we will see, Miasoedov was a founding member of the Peredvizhniki Association and by no means a reactionary Academic.

<sup>17</sup>Ili'a Repin, "Ivan Nikolaevich Kramskoi: Pamiati uchitelia," *Russkaia starina* (May 1888): 22.



For subjects such as these young artists would receive medals and the titles “Academician” or “Professor.”<sup>18</sup> It is important to note here that, strangely enough, Kramskoi himself admitted the Academy’s “good” behavior on this score:

There was still a Grand Gold Medal for the little genre pictures. . . . It was possible to be awarded all medals, even silver ones, for this kind of paintings, done outside the classes. For instance, there appears a talented lad. He studies up to a live drawing class, tries his best, and disappears somewhere for the summer break. Coming back in autumn, he brings with him something like *A Blessing of the Newlyweds*, or *Arrival of a Sheriff [for Investigation]* or *A Peddler of Oranges* (by Iakobi). Everybody sees clearly that it’s humorous and talented, and they would give him a minor silver medal—just for encouragement. The next year the same young man would come back with something bigger: *A Peddler of Dressing Gowns* (Iakobi) or *The Payday*. The professors laugh again and, because of misconception, award him a big silver medal. At the same time, in order not to disadvantage the historians too much, they would rule: not to admit [to the competition] for the gold medals those students who do not have silver medals for their classroom works. A [yearly] exhibition comes, and [the professors] see pictures like these: *The First Rank* by Perov, *The Holy Feast of a Beggar* by Iakobi, *Rest at a Harvest* by Morozov, *Homecoming of Drunken Father* by Korzukhin, *A Clerk’s Proposition* by Petrov. The rule is forgotten, and the gold medal of the second degree goes to the “bast sandals” (*lapti*) and “peasant coarse coats” (*sermiagi*). The further into the forest, the greater the firewood. The next year here come *The Last Spring* by Klodt, *Prisoners’ Stopover* by Iakobi and *A Village Sermon* by Perov. Even the professors are carried away. And the Grand Gold Medal flies out, by misconception, to the young artists! Looking at what is going on, even the committed draftsmen of a live drawing class or so called “historians,” who still possess a live sparkle of talent, declare to the Council their intention to transfer to the genre [class], submit their sketches for approval (Konstantin Makovskii, Peskov, Shustov), get permission—lo, these go with a breeze too.”<sup>19</sup>

The above requires a short commentary. First, of the artists named here, Perov, Iakobi, and [M.P.] Klodt in due time were awarded Grand Gold Medals for their genre paintings and went abroad as academic pensioners. Second, all the rest were “official” genre painters and could have worked on the subject of “The Emancipation of the Serfs” but, led by Kramskoi, chose to withdraw instead. Third, Kramskoi himself did not “declare to the Council” his “intention to transfer to the genre [class].” His prerequisite for the contest was his composition *Moses Striking Water from the Rock*. We can only guess what he felt about his more daring comrades. Finally, although Kramskoi twice attributed the granting of awards to “misconception” (*po nedorazumeniiu*), these “misconceptions” occurred

<sup>18</sup>For example, Grand Gold Medals were awarded to A. Popov for *The Tea Warehouse at the Nizhegorodskaiia Fair* (1860), V. Perov for *The Sermon in a Village Church* (1861), and V. Iakobi for *The Rest Stop of the Prisoners* (1862); V. Maksimov earned a Minor Gold Medal for *A Village Scene* (1864); and the title of Professor was conferred upon V. Pukirev for *Unequal Marriage* (1863) and N. Ge for *The Last Supper* (1863). Although Ge’s work treated an established religious subject, its spirit and iconography were highly untraditional (rather Renanian), with a clear contemporary subtext.

<sup>19</sup>Kramskoi, “Sud’by,” 318–19.



consistently enough that we might surmise that it was Kramskoi himself who, perhaps, was missing something crucial.

Stasov's very different pronouncements, meanwhile, entered the canon of Soviet writings on the history of Russian art. He virtually created the myth of the "progressive" nature of Kramskoi and Co.'s activities, writing in 1885 that "the motives" behind the "Revolt of the Fourteen"

lay deeper and further. The same with the fact of protest against the classical subjects. It was dictated not by a shallow arrogance, nor by unruly behavior, or haughtiness, or an intention to blow off a petard, or a wish to play opposition—no, all these small and petty motifs did not play any role in the brave resolution of the tiny handful of poor, weak youngsters. They simply could not bear to succumb to the ludicrous ways of the school, to the silly choice of good-for-nothing subjects. They protested against "the old" for the sake of "the new," which they already clearly felt and brightly envisioned.<sup>20</sup>

This pronouncement became conventional wisdom, and it is repeated to this day: "This choice became a turning point, which predestined the fate of Russian art for years to come"; "November, 9, 1863, was a milestone in the history of Russian art."<sup>21</sup>

#### "WE WERE HOLDING HANDS TIGHTLY"

Discontent with the old Academy of Arts commissions system led the newly minted professionals to form a new organization: the St. Petersburg Artel of Artists, a "working cooperative" that owed at least some of its inspiration to the working communes described in Chernyshevskii's *What Is To Be Done?* A number of other communes and artels were organized around that time as well, such as the artel of young artists led by P. Krestonostsev.<sup>22</sup>

The Statute of Kramskoi's artel clearly set out the goals of the venture, among which were "to establish and secure, by joint efforts, [its members'] material situation," to "secure venues at which to sell our works to the public," and "to accept commissions for art production of all kind."<sup>23</sup> The advertisement the artists placed in the *Sankt-Peterburgskie vedomosti* on January 3, 1864, welcomed commissions for icons, shop signs, photograph retouching, portraits done from photographs, and so on.

Throughout its lifespan the artel was responsible for only a modest number of truly creative artistic works, but thanks to its members' willingness to do anything that could be

<sup>20</sup>V. V. Stasov, "Dvadsat' piat' let russkogo iskusstva" (1882), in his *Izbrannye sochineniia v trekh tomakh* (Moscow, 1952), 2:410. Stasov used the same expression, "the tiny handful of poor, weak youngsters," almost ten years later when referring to the same people.

<sup>21</sup>Ekshut, *Shaika Peredvizhnikov*, 81, 87.

<sup>22</sup>See the memoirs of a member of this artel, Vasilii Maksimov, in *Golos minuvshogo*, 1913, no. 6:161–76. Other members besides Maksimov (1844–1911), who later joined the Peredvizhniki, were Aleksandr Kiselev (1838–1911), another future Peredvizhnik, and Nikolai Koshelev (1840–1918), who left a double portrait of Kramskoi and his wife and who helped Kramskoi to do the murals at the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow.

<sup>23</sup>"Ustav S.-Peterburgskoi arteli khudozhnikov, S.-Peterburg" (1866), quoted in *Tovarishchestvo peredvizhnykh khudozhestvennykh vystavok: Pis'ma, dokumenty*, 2 vols. (Moscow, 1987), 1:5.



accomplished with brushes and paint—as long as they were paid for it—economically the artel was rather successful. By 1870 business was booming, according to Stasov, who reported that the artel was “flooded with commissions for all kinds of ‘mundane needs’ from the provinces.”<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, the artel followed a clever business strategy that today would be called “outsourcing.” In 1864, for example, Kramskoi confided to an acquaintance that the artel had received a commission from the Caucasus to paint icons of all the religious feasts. “We wrote him back [with] the price of 150 rubles, and what? He transferred the money, and we asked someone else to do the job for 60 rubles. He did it very well; the customer should be pleased.”<sup>25</sup> Thus, the rebellious artists proved that they could survive through their skills without the help of the Academy of Arts or the Ministry of the Imperial Household to which the Academy belonged. However, the fact that paintings inspired by contemporary events or simple folks’ lives were only a tiny part of their production (contrary to Kramskoi’s numerous pronouncements about the need to create a national school of painting, as opposed to the academic one) demonstrates that neither these artists nor their collectors developed any sustainable interest in topical or stirring themes.

Of far more interest when it comes to the matter of artistic independence vs. state (academic) domination is the question of where the artel’s members showed their work, and the answer might come as a surprise: at the Imperial Academy of Arts. The young rebels had no qualms about presenting their works at academic exhibitions, if only for lack of any other suitable venue. Repin wrote that “at the academic exhibitions of that time a group of works by the members of the Artel—commissioned icons and portraits—occupied the most honored place.”<sup>26</sup> A high-minded and very well-meaning man, Repin did not notice how ironic his praise sounded. The much more acerbic Grigorii Miasoedov, who was strongly predisposed against the Academy’s rules himself and who masterminded the creation of the Peredvizhniki Association, expressed quite a different opinion: “When [the Fourteen] achieved their liberation, it appeared that they did not cost a halfpenny. ... Their free creativity did not go beyond painting the tsar’s portraits, holy icons, and portraits copied from photographs.”<sup>27</sup>

In addition to giving to the artel’s members a space to show their work, moreover, the Academy continued to award them with official ranks and titles. By 1869, eight of fourteen “rebels” had been made Academicians: A. Morozov (1864), N. Shustov (1865), N. Petrov and K. Makovsky (all 1867), A. Korzukhin, A. Litovchenko and N. Dmitriev-Orenburgskii (all 1868), and Kramskoi himself (1869). Four others had the rank of Class Artist of the First Degree conferred upon them. In fact, the members of the artel even admitted that the Academy paid due respect to those who possessed real talent. When the young Academy student Repin showed his works to Kramskoi at the artel’s studio, “all the artel was impressed by the Academy’s liberalism and its tolerance.” “Let’s be fair,” said one of the members,

<sup>24</sup>Stasov, “Vystavka v Akademii khudozhestv” (1870), in his *Izbrannye sochineniia*, 2 vols. (Moscow-Leningrad, 1937), 1:168.

<sup>25</sup>Kramskoi letter to Tulinov, April 21, 1864, *Pis'ma* 1:20.

<sup>26</sup>Repin, *Dalekoe blizkoe*, 33.

<sup>27</sup>See Miasoedov letter to V. Stasov, June 15, 1892, in Gol'dshtein, *Kommentarii*, 128 (also available in Stasov’s archive in IRLI).





“the Academy would always treat originality with deference.”<sup>28</sup> Even more comical-sounding, in light of his life-long battle with the Academy, is Kramskoi’s confession that the professors of the Academy

always eagerly supplied [us] with advice to borrow from Poussin and Raphael, but meanwhile they could not resist awarding Perov, when he first came with his little picture, poorly painted with dull colors, *The Arrival of a Sheriff for Investigation*. . . . It was all deep truth, captured by the young artist directly from life.<sup>29</sup>

It is true that Perov’s painting betrayed immaturity, but awarding him a Grand Silver Medal for it in 1858 was meant as a gesture of encouragement. More amusing still is that Kramskoi talked about “all deep truth, captured . . . directly from life,” not realizing (as did the better-educated Academy professors) that the whole composition iconographically resembled the classical subject “The Magnanimity of Scipio” (or similar stories with a handsome youth begging the seated king/prince/father), or that Perov borrowed the figure of this peasant lad who committed some petty crime from Classicist gentle effeminate youths—in its posture, gestures, facial expression, general proportions, and even in a perfectly draped tunic.

#### “THE HANDFUL OF BRAVE AND MAGNANIMOUS YOUNGSTERS”

Despite their “revolt,” then, it is clear that the young artists of Kramskoi’s artel managed to coexist quite profitably with the Academy. But they were not the only ones who wanted new advantages from the Academy. The initiative came from Moscow in 1869, where a small group of middle-aged artists were trying to create an organizational structure for their exhibitions.<sup>30</sup> It result two years later the formation of a new group, much bigger and more prominent than the artel: the Peredvizhniki. As Vasilii Perov, then a professor of the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture, wrote to Kramskoi in 1877, the initial impetus to organize the new association was the fact that the Academy collected the entrance fees for the exhibitions, whereas artists themselves could get the money if they ran the exhibits themselves. “This is the foundation of the association. . . . As for any humanistic or patriotic sentiments, there were none.”<sup>31</sup>

Perov sounds a bit bitter here (and whatever enthusiasm he might have had earlier, he did not show it), but he was basically right. Miasoedov, who was the first to come up with this idea, and the other members of the initiative group (among whom where a few former

<sup>28</sup>Repin, *Dalekoe blizkoe*, 144.

<sup>29</sup>Kramskoi, “Sud’by,” 317–18.

<sup>30</sup>An emotional Stasov called the artists “a tiny handful of brave and magnanimous youngsters” (“Tormozy novogo russkogo iskusstva,” *Izbrannye sochineniia* [1952], 2: 613). At the time the First Traveling Exhibition, which opened on November 28, 1871, Bogolubov was 47, Ammon was 45, Savrasov and Gun were 41, Ge was 40, M. K. Klodt and Shishkin were 39, Perov and Kamenev were 38, Miasoedov and Iakobi were 37, M. P. Klodt and Korzukhin were 35, and Kramskoi was 34. So ten of the nineteen founding members were beyond 35. In Russian, *iunosha* means “not fully mature adult” and is normally applied to people between the ages of 15 and 21.

<sup>31</sup>Vasilii Perov letter to Kramskoi, April 13, 1877, *Tovarishchestvo* 1:142.



academic pensioners like Perov himself or Ge) were well established in their profession and felt that they could achieve more without the state exhibitions and purchases.<sup>32</sup> Perov also admitted that the idea behind traveling exhibitions was to attract more publicity and to make them more profitable. After long discussions with their Petersburg colleagues the initiative group completed their statute and officially registered their new organization: The Company of Traveling Art Exhibitions (Tovarishchestvo Peredvizhnykh Khudozhestvennykh Vystavok). The members later were dubbed Peredvizhniki—a Russian neologism formed from the adjective *peredvizhnoi* (“movable”). The English terms for Peredvizhniki, “Itinerants” and “Wanderers,” are misleading: the artists did not travel themselves. It was their works that were sent to circulate. Thus there were no poetic auras of romantic wandering for inspiration and self-realization.

### THE ARTEL REDUX?

Another misapprehension that clouds the origins of the Peredvizhniki group is the assertion that they organically evolved from Kramskoi’s artel. In Soviet historiography, the artel was universally called the forerunner of the Peredvizhniki, and its history usually begins from it. A typical pronouncement (and highly authoritative, given his position in the official Soviet hierarchy of art critics) belongs to Viktor Vanslov: “The secession of the Fourteen ... was the initial moment for creation of the future Peredvizhniki movement.”<sup>33</sup> Surprisingly, even Valkenier’s serious study argues that “their secession from the Academy set the stage for the initial period of Peredvizhnichestvo.”<sup>34</sup> This part of the Peredvizhniki myth can be traced back to Stasov, who in his programmatic “Twenty-Five Years of Russian Art” (1882–83) created a linear history of “democratic” Russian art and claimed that “when the artel, due to various external reasons, was dissolved, these very young men allied with new comrades and founded a new society, to wit, the Company of Traveling Exhibitions, which in its own turn united artists together.”<sup>35</sup> Three years later Stasov wrote even more decisively that “several years later, the Art Artel transformed into the Company of Traveling Exhibitions, and everything that was talented, thinking, independent, bright, and progressive among our artists was united there.”<sup>36</sup> And in an article devoted to the twentieth anniversary of the Peredvizhniki (1892) he claimed that “the image of the [Peredvizhniki] Association has endlessly much in common with the Secession of the fourteen from the Academy and with everything connected to it.”<sup>37</sup>

<sup>32</sup>With one brief interruption Miasoedov was an Academic pensioner in Western Europe from 1863 to 1869. While there he learned about the British system of traveling art exhibitions that had been set in motion after the less-than-desirable success of the British art show at the Great London Exposition of 1862. This inspired Miasoedov to organize something similar in Russia. See G. G. Miasoedov, *Pis'ma, dokumenty, vospominaniia* (Moscow, 1972), 30–31; and I. N. Punina, “Iz predystorii Tovarishchestva peredvizhnykh khudozhestvennykh vystavok,” in *Khudozhniki-Peredvizhniki*, ed. Viktor V. Vanslov (Moscow, 1975), 39–40.

<sup>33</sup>V. V. Vanslov, “Esteticheskaiia programma peredvizhnikov,” *Kudozhniki Peredvizhniki*, 75–76.

<sup>34</sup>Valkenier, *Russian Realist Art*, 33.

<sup>35</sup>Stasov, “Dvadtsat' piat' let russkogo iskusstva,” 409.

<sup>36</sup>Stasov, “Tormozy,” 612.

<sup>37</sup>Stasov, “Dvadtsatiletie Peredvizhnikov” (1892), *Izbrannye sochineniia* (1937), 1:440.



When reviewing the Peredvizhniki's first exhibition, however, Stasov wrote something very different. The initiative group of Moscow artists, he noted, "approached the Petersburg artel of artists, but the latter, being engrossed in its own activity, looked at the new unusual endeavor indifferently, and shamefully stayed apart from this new useful business. It all was accomplished without it."<sup>38</sup> Kramskoi himself testified that not only was the Peredvizhniki Association founded independently from his artel, but also that the majority of the artel's members opposed the creation of the new artistic organization: "The Association was established in 1870. The idea emerged outside of that circle of young men [the artel], and out of fourteen there were only *five* who joined the Association—and just nominally at that. Now there are only *three* of them in the Association."<sup>39</sup> Kramskoi actually inflated the number: only four artel members became founding members of the Peredvizhniki (Korzukhin, Konstantin Makovskii, Lemokh, and Kramskoi). Korzukhin never exhibited with the Association (and was purged in 1872), while Lemokh and Makovskii did not take part in the first two exhibitions, had their memberships cancelled in 1872, were reinstated in 1878 and 1879, respectively, and finally left forever in 1884.<sup>40</sup> This makes Kramskoi the single active member of the Peredvizhniki coming from the artel.<sup>41</sup>

The rift between the two organizations was significant from the beginning. It is possible that the artists of the artel regarded the new group as business rivals—similar to the apprehension Kramskoi felt when Krestonostsev founded his artel. But even more important was the schism between Kramskoi and the other members of the artel, which in 1870 was engulfed in a full-blown feud. The occasional frictions and personal disagreements one might expect in the early years, when members were only beginning to acquire professional and personal maturity, turned into open conflict when Kramskoi learned that one of the members, Nikolai Dmitriev-Orenburgskii, was privately negotiating with the Academy to receive a belated foreign pension. The Academy had informally promised it to Dmitriev-Orenburgskii, after which he submitted a formal application. An enraged Kramskoi shot off an angry letter to Dmitriev-Orenburgskii demanding that he withdraw his application, and when the latter refused, Kramskoi urged all the members to condemn the renegade.<sup>42</sup> Imagine his surprise when his undisputed authority proved hollow: his former comrade-rebels-in-arms saw nothing wrong with one of their colleagues wanting to advance his professional education abroad. They also reminded Kramskoi that he himself had his own contacts with the Academy: he exhibited every year at academic exhibitions; just a year earlier, in 1869, the Council of the Academy had conferred the rank of Academician upon him; and he had asked for, received, and freely utilized an academic studio. Realizing that he had become a general without an army, Kramskoi left the artel in November 1870 and turned his attention to the inception of the new artistic organization.

<sup>38</sup>Stasov, "Peredvizhnaia vystavka 1871 goda" (1871), *Izbrannye sochinenia* (1937), 1:194.

<sup>39</sup>Kramskoi, "Pis'mo v redaktsiiu 'Novogo vremeni,'" *Pis'ma* 2:380.

<sup>40</sup>It is interesting to mention that out of fifteen founding members only six did not leave it.

<sup>41</sup>For the record we should add here that Aleksandr Litovchenko, one of the fourteen rebels and a member of the artel, joined the Peredvizhniki in 1878 too (and exhibited as many as twelve works over the next fifteen years).

<sup>42</sup>Kramskoi letter to N. D. Dmitriev-Orenburgskii, October 1870, *Pis'ma* 1:75.



As a result, the Association was created without any involvement from Kramskoi's artel. When the fervent Stasov shamed the *artel'shchiki* for their indifference to the new endeavor, the remaining members of the artel wrote an open letter to the critic claiming that their busy life prevented them from joining. Stasov already had pilloried them a year earlier for using the same excuse: "It is no good if the whole Artel of artists is creating fewer and fewer works of art. Why they are not doing it? Because, they say, we have no time, we were busy with urgent commissions. There is, to tell the truth, nothing artistic in these commissions, not for a halfpenny; deep in our heart we ourselves do not respect this at all, but what can we do?! Money is money."<sup>43</sup> The offended artists castigated Stasov for blaming the artel's members in a way "unworthy of a public figure," and for acting "as an instrument of an embittered person who hated the Artel and acted behind the scene and so cunningly that he was able to induce his own dirty intentions to the author."<sup>44</sup>

Kramskoi did not sit quietly, either. In a letter to his younger friend, the artist Fedor Vasil'ev, he crowed that "the exhibition brought a profit of 23 percent. I got 490 rubles, Shishkin—390, Ge—more than 700 ... in short, as you see, this is the business that one should go on with. And as for certain inept and ossified (*zaskoruzly*) enemies, they can only salivate."<sup>45</sup>

#### PICTURES AT AN EXHIBITION: WHAT AND WHERE THEY SHOWED

Of course, the Peredvizhniki insisted that their demand for independence from the Academy was about much more than gaining unmediated access to collectors, or raking in admission fees. Kramskoi often had proclaimed the need to create a national school with democratic and patriotic (*natsional'noe*) subject matter. Stasov drew such a vigorous opposition with the Academy that a few artists were concerned that the authorities would consider them revolutionaries after reading his diatribes.<sup>46</sup> In fact, the Peredvizhniki did not limit themselves to nationalistic or contemporary, subjects. At the First Traveling Exhibition (1871), Kramskoi showed a work that would fit perfectly in an academic Salon—*May Night (Mermaids)*.<sup>47</sup> At the second show a year later he presented a religious composition, *Christ in the Desert* (more Renanian than traditional, but still far from a "Russian" subject). Ge showed his *Peter I Interrogates Tsarevich Alexei Petrovich in Peterhof*, a powerful rendering of a tragic episode from Russian history. This exhibition was also graced by an early gem of a Russian landscape, Savrasov's *The Rooks Have Come Back*. At the same time, however, Bogolubov and Gun, who participated in several of the earlier exhibitions, not only lived

<sup>43</sup>Stasov, "Vystavka v Akademii khudozhestv," 167.

<sup>44</sup>Quoted in Sof'ia Gol'dshtein, *Ivan Nikolaevich Kramskoi: Zhizn' i tvorchestvo* (Moscow, 1965), 68. The open letter was published in *Golos*, 1871, no. 344.

<sup>45</sup>Kramskoi letter to F. A. Vasil'ev, November 30, 1872, *Pis'ma* 1:125.

<sup>46</sup>See Miasoedov's forceful rejoinder to Stasov's "Dvadtsatiletie Peredvizhnikov": "You insinuate that it wasn't moving [the pictures] that was important for the Association, but something else. What? ... A protest against Academic routine? At this point you are wrong, too. ... We do not want [you] to create for us, against our will, this stupid reputation." This letter to Stasov, from June 15, 1892, is quoted in Gol'dshtein, *Kommentarii*, 130, and is housed in Stasov's archive in IRLI.

<sup>47</sup>I analyze this composition in "Rusalki? Kramskogo i poetika smerti v russkom iskusstve vtoroi poloviny 19 veka," in *Memento Vivere, ili, Pomni o smerti*, ed. V. L. Rabinovich (Moscow, 2006), 168–95.



abroad for the most part (and were members of the Academic Council) but also showed French landscapes and scenes from French history. And if readers are wondering what relevance Musorgskii's masterpiece (1874) has to the Peredvizhniki, I must confess to having chosen this section's subtitle with a grain of salt, for it has no connection whatsoever. *Pictures at an Exhibition* was inspired by a posthumous exhibit of the works of Musorgskii's friend Viktor Gartman (1834–73), a major proponent of the "Russian style." Gartman's exhibition took place in the Academy of Arts.

The Peredvizhniki chose to have their first exhibition in the Academy too. They had other options, but when the Academy offered its rooms, they accepted.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, because the Peredvizhniki wanted to have their own shows "independent" of the Academy, the fact that their first exhibition opened in the Academy's halls appears shockingly improbable. It also illuminates, to a certain extent, the degree of their independence from the establishment. Stasov commented upon this in a conciliatory way:

The first exhibition of this Association opened several days ago in the halls of the Academy of Arts because the Academy (it must be said, to its credit) has not been envious of this new undertaking, and has understood that the exhibition does not damage or undermine it, that it contains nothing that is contrary to its own efforts and principles, and that one must try one's utmost to help those who want to do something new and good.<sup>49</sup>

The members of the new Association felt it acceptable to be exhibited in the Academy, as long as they could remain formally "independent" and did not have to share any possible gains—moral or material—with it.

The Academy, it must be said, took an extremely tolerant position. Just as it did for many of the "rebels" in Kramskoi's atelier, it bestowed academic ranks and titles upon the members of the Association. Ivan Shishkin, for example, earned the title of Professor for the landscapes he showed at the Second Traveling Exhibition in 1872, and the Academy bought his works after the exhibition. M. P. Klodt was given the same title in that year as well. It is interesting to note that, of the fifteen founding members of the Peredvizhniki Association, three bore the title of Professor and seven had the title of Academician; four others held various lower academic ranks (such as "Class Artist of the First Degree"), while only one, Nikolai Makovskii, signed his name as "an independent (*svobodny*) artist." This is yet another indication that the Peredvizhniki were not against the Academy of Arts in principle. They belonged to the Academy in many respects; they just wanted to be free to show and sell their work independently.

The Academy provided the Peredvizhniki with exhibition space for the next several years, until it finally proposed that the two groups join forces and exhibit together in order to give viewers the most representative overview of Russian art possible.

<sup>48</sup>*Tovarishchestvo* 1:60. Kramskoi gave more details in his letter to F. Vasil'ev: "The Academy itself offered the space for our exhibition, and before that the Society for the Encouragement of Artists invited us, so we can choose anything" (Kramskoi, *Pis'ma* 1:100).

<sup>49</sup>Stasov, "Peredvizhnaia vystavka 1871 goda," *Izbrannye sochineniia* (1952), 1:206. For a translation of Stasov's essay see Carol Adlam, "Russian Visual Arts: Art Criticism in Context, 1814," at <http://hri.shef.ac.uk/rva/texts/stasov/stas09/stas09.html> (accessed on April, 7, 2008).



In December 1873 the vice-president of the Academy, Grand Prince Vladimir, asked the four members of the Peredvizhniki who were Professors of the Academy and thus formally reported to him—Bogolubov, Ge, Gun, and M. K. Klodt—to discuss the offer and to find a way to reconcile the goal of academic exhibitions, which was to represent the achievements of Russian art, with the goals of the Company, “without violating the rights and interests of the latter.”<sup>50</sup> At a general meeting of the Association on January 3, 1874, the members rejected the offer, explaining that the Association had been created in part to enable its members to achieve “more expedient sales of works of art.” Because of this, the Association “needs to have separate exhibitions, with its own separate admission charge, because this income will allow it to travel.”<sup>51</sup> A week later the grand prince tried again, assuring the artists “with the most gentle expressions ... that his sincere wish was to match the interests of the company (material) with the interests of the Academy (artistic).”<sup>52</sup> But the artists would not budge, and the Academy chose not to press the matter and allowed the Peredvizhniki to open their third exhibition later in January. One more followed the next year, until the Academy had the temerity to inform the company that it would no longer provide them rooms for their separate shows.<sup>53</sup> Thus the Wanderers had to wander away. Henceforth, their exhibits in St. Petersburg took place primarily in the Conference Hall of the Academy of Sciences, while in Moscow they used the School of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture, and occasionally private residences.

## THE COMPETITION

Around the same time, another artists’ association was founded in St. Petersburg—The Society (Obshchestvo) for Artwork Exhibitions. In December 1873 this group wrote to the Academy of Arts that it would like to be “closely associated” with the Academy. This Society was antagonistic to the Peredvizhniki. Among the twenty-three founders, some (Krestonostzev and Bobrov) had belonged to the earlier rival artel, four were among the fourteen “rebels” and, consequently, had belonged to Kramskoi’s artel (Grigor’ev, Zhuravlev, Korzukhin, and Morozov), and two had been signatory founders of the Peredvizhniki but never had exhibited with them and quit in 1872 (Korzukhin and Iakobi). This mixture of broken allegiances (with former comrades-in-arms) and reforged ties (with the Academy) demonstrates once again that there was no substantive schism between academic and “democratic” art.

Most of this Society’s members were even less interesting aesthetically than the Peredvizhniki, and after seven rather unsuccessful exhibitions it died out in 1883. Whereas Peredvizhniki exhibitions in Petersburg attracted anywhere from six thousand to twenty thousand paying visitors in the years up to 1883, this new competing Society only once

<sup>50</sup>*Tovarishchestvo* 1:95.

<sup>51</sup>See the minutes of the general meeting of the Company of Traveling Art Exhibitions, January 3, 1874, in *Tovarishchestvo* 1:97.

<sup>52</sup>Recorded by the conference secretary of the Academy, P. F. Iseev, *Tovarishchestvo* 2:546.

<sup>53</sup>See Iseev letter to the Council of the Company of Traveling Art Exhibitions, April 7, 1875, *Tovarishchestvo* 1:127.



attracted comparable numbers—when the celebrated master of seascapes, Ivan Aivazovskii, took part in one of its exhibitions (twenty-two thousand attended).<sup>54</sup> With the dissolution of this Society, the Academy launched traveling exhibitions of Russian art under its own aegis.

These competitors were a matter of great anxiety for the Peredvizhniki. “The people would not get it—where the real art is,” Kramskoi wrote, and he had little confidence in the public’s ability to discern the difference.<sup>55</sup> And he had reasons to be concerned: in many cases it is hard to tell where “democratic” art ends and academic Salon art begins—it is enough to look at his own compositions. The academic language of many other Peredvizhniki, particularly K. Makovskii, Gun, Bronnikov, Kharlamov, Lemokh, and Leman, is even more evident.

### **SUBVERSIVE ART IN THE ACADEMY AND THE PALACE: *BARGE HAULERS ON THE VOLGA***

In order to understand the complicated and ambiguous relationship that populist artists had with the authorities in general and the Academy in particular, it would profit us to examine the case of Repin’s *Barge Haulers on the Volga* (1870–73). Repin had begun to work on this project while still a student of the Academy and had joined the Peredvizhniki as an exhibiting member only later, in 1874 (showing two portraits, of O. Poklonskaia and V. Stasov, at the group’s third exhibition). But since he is widely considered one of the most talented of the Peredvizhniki, and since this particular painting is an icon of “democratic” and anti-establishment art, this choice is legitimate.

For many generations, *Barge Haulers on the Volga* epitomized not only the people’s unbearable destitution and oppression by tsarist authorities but also the simple workers’ inner beauty and indestructible spirit. But while the painting is regarded as a fearless condemnation of officialdom, the facts—if we are to believe to Repin’s own recollections of how he worked on this painting—are rather different. Quite by chance, in the late 1860s Repin saw barge haulers for the first time in his life, outside St. Petersburg, and his imagination was struck by the unusual sight. Since he did not see these haulers again, he began asking about them and was told that he could find barge haulers on the Volga River. So Repin decided to go to the Volga region during his summer vacation. He did not have enough money for the expedition, so along with fellow artist Fedor Vasil’ev he applied for financial support and was duly sponsored by the authorities. Repin received two hundred rubles from the Society for the Encouragement of Artists, thanks to an endorsement of the project by the Society’s chairman, Count Stroganov. The Academy, acting through Secretary P. F. Iseev, pitched in by providing the entire group of four travelers (one of whom was not an artist but Repin’s younger brother) with free return tickets on a Volga steamboat.

Repin describes in many picturesque details this trip and life in a Russian village, replete with misunderstandings and frustrations that arose from too-close encounters between

<sup>54</sup>*Tovarishchestvo* 2:631.

<sup>55</sup>Kramskoi letter to Stasov, July 16, 1886, *Tovarishchestvo* 1:315.



the visitors and the aboriginal peasants. More than once a situation would become less than pleasant, and sometimes the young artists found themselves in outright danger. Each time the Academy and other higher authorities from the capital would come to the rescue. Thus, when peasants suspected Repin and his friends of being foreign spies as well as agents of the Devil (for peasants, creating a likeness was equal to catching a soul) and reported them to the police, rescue arrived in the form of a letter of protection from the Imperial Academy of Arts with the imperial seal and later a telegram to the governor of the province, which dramatically changed the situation.<sup>56</sup> The peasants became less threatening, but remained no less hostile. Repin wrote that he and his party were treated as foreigners, and that their reluctant hosts “felt gleeful when we had some misfortune”—for example, a river accident in which two of the artists lost their rowboat, and very nearly their lives.<sup>57</sup>

As for the barge haulers, Repin characterized them as “criminal (*otpetye*) mugs” who “laughed violently,” even as he perceived these outcasts through the same Romantic aura in which the imagination of artists and writers had enveloped them.<sup>58</sup> Here we can recall the passage from Gogol’s *Dead Souls*, where Chichikov ruminates on the possible destiny of the runaway serf Avakum Turov: “Or, maybe, you ended up on the Volga and enjoyed a free life with a barge haulers’ gang”? In short, it was an image of wild and marginal creatures—different from regular country folks. The barge haulers were quite popular in “democratic” poetry and Repin was not the only painter to depict this subject; there were at least four other artists before or alongside him. One of them was Vasilii Vereshchagin’s *Barge Haulers on the Volga* (1866), made by the artist known for his uncompromising honesty and rejection of any association with the Academy (as well as with the Peredvizhniki). He criticized Repin’s painting: in reality, Vereshchagin insisted, hauling one barge took 200–250 haulers—the quantity he depicted himself—whereas Repin represented only twelve.<sup>59</sup> Vereshchagin was not alone. However significant in its psychological portrayal of a group of people pushed to their extreme, Repin’s subject and its treatment was considered by many as outdated at best, not to mention unrealistic and ideologically skewed. To begin with, the haulers were clothed in rags too poor even for peasants—as Dostoevsky noticed. He (rightly) thought that Repin dressed them that way for pathos. Many critics observed that the whole scene was anachronistic; a sarcastic Anton Ledakov wrote that, at that time, steamers were running up and down the Volga, and barge hauling survived only in the stories of bygone days.<sup>60</sup> (Repin was not oblivious to the steamers himself—and depicted one in the right

<sup>56</sup>Repin, *Dalekoe blizkoe*, 259. The telegram required all local authorities to provide support to the Academy’s students.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 282.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., 264.

<sup>59</sup>I suggest that this is not a chance number: this is the number of the apostles. At that, only eleven of them actually are hauling the barge—the twelfth stands on board shouting orders. Repin recollected that there was really such a member of the gang, a very unpleasant type, so he could quite naturally assign him the role of Judas. And there is one more figure on the barge—the helmsman—which makes for the perfect number of thirteen. Religious symbolism of this kind was quite common at that time, and Repin used it himself at least once: *Gathering. At the Lamp Light (Skhodka. Pri svete lampy*; 1883), where he depicted twelve revolutionaries at a psychologically charged meeting in a dark room.

<sup>60</sup>Quoted in Stasov, “Tormozy,” 615 (originally published in *Sankt-Peterburgskie vedomosti*, 1880, no. 59). Similar sentiments were expressed by the Russian minister of communications, Zeligson (Repin, *Dalekoe blizkoe*, 293).





corner of the painting. It is interesting to note that his haulers are retreating from the steamer, as if they are totally unconvinced that its immaterial smoke can really deliver them from their yoke. Compositionally this steamer occupies the same place as the rescue ship in Gericault's *The Raft of the Medusa*, but, unlike the French castaways, the Russian outcasts do not greet the miracle on the horizon.) On this point, then, we can only agree with David Jackson that Repin's "theme itself is selective to the point of misinterpretation."<sup>61</sup>

Bearing all this tendentiousness in mind, one might surmise that the academic authorities were greatly displeased with the outcome of Repin's summer expedition. Not exactly. Upon his return from the Volga, the Academy encouraged him with a two hundred-ruble bonus. Iseev organized a private show of Repin's sketches and studies for the vice-president of the Academy, Grand Prince Vladimir (1847–1909), who immediately expressed his willingness to buy the canvas when it was finished. In March 1871, Repin finished the painting and entered it in a contest sponsored by the Society for the Encouragement of Artists—and received the first prize. After that he continued working and re-working the canvas and was paid an advance of three thousand rubles in installments from the Ministry of the Imperial Household until the painting was completed. In March 1873 he finished the new version and sent it to an annual academic exhibition. Pavel Tret'iakov wanted to buy *Barge Haulers* for his gallery, and for a while Repin conducted parallel negotiations with Tret'iakov and the Ministry of the Imperial Household. The latter prevailed, and the owner, Grand Prince Vladimir, immediately sent the work to the World Exhibition in Vienna. From that time until the October Revolution, *Barge Haulers of the Volga* hung in Vladimir's palace, venturing out often for exhibitions and copying. The latter was done in the Academy, in a room specially designated for this purpose. In short, this populist and seemingly rebellious composition was effectively sponsored, praised, and canonized by the Academy.<sup>62</sup> In light of this, we should not be surprised by what Repin revealed to Vasilii Polenov in a letter from early 1877:

Back then I supported Kramskoi, I mean, his idea of the private initiative in art. At that time, I was a champion of this idea myself. You defended the Academy, or the institution based on a broad foundation, with huge resources and possibilities of support. ... The Academy shines as a bright, beaming star, ours in every respect. ... Even the Peredvizhniki look to be losing out [compared with it]. There is something shallow about them.

A year later, in March 1878, Repin nevertheless became a full member of the Peredvizhniki (he quit in 1891 but rejoined in 1897).

Some minor differences notwithstanding, there was no aesthetic antagonism between the Academy, the state, and the Peredvizhniki. The Peredvizhniki's populism was matched by the Academy, which, following the Court's lead, embraced "national protectionism" in the mid-1870s, encouraging the depiction of the common people in genre scenes. Thus, even on the subject level, the difference between the two groups was largely reduced. And there was never a marked difference in style.

<sup>61</sup>Jackson, *The Wanderers*, 40.

<sup>62</sup>Repin letter to V. D. Polenov, February 8, 1877, quoted by Savinov, "Akademiiia khudozhestv i Tovarishchestvo peredvizhnykh khudozhestvennykh vystavok," in *Khudozhniki-Peredvizhniki*, 97–98.



## THE VICTORIOUS ROAD TO ECLIPSE

Any remaining differences between the Peredvizhniki and the Academy were grounded in economics, or in personal antipathies. Academy-related artists received commissions from the Ministry of the Imperial Household and other official institutions, while the “democratic” Peredvizhniki placed their bets on the private market. To a certain extent the Peredvizhniki were right: this period witnessed the emergence of the first Russian private collectors from the merchant class. But aside from Tret'iakov and a handful of other merchant collectors, the pool of buyers was very small. And these merchant patrons sometimes were difficult to deal with (they routinely asked to change this or that in a picture they were going to buy). Kramskoi confided in a letter to Repin that he dreamt of a day when artists would be free of the whims of merchants. The present situation he dubbed as the “morass ... of merchant monsters.”<sup>63</sup> Without state commissions and purchases, often through the Academy, it was impossible to survive. Kramskoi made his living by commercial portraiture, often of the nobility, and frequently of the members of the tsar's family. “The tsar's portrait always represents a banknote of greater or lesser denomination, which depends on the execution,” he wrote to Tret'iakov. But it is “always a matter of money.”<sup>64</sup>

In the 1880s, under Tsar Alexander III, the drive to protect and encourage “national” art intensified, and Court purchases soared.<sup>65</sup> It was a unique situation: the Peredvizhniki were “for the people” and were known as “champions of democracy,” but were in fact reaping the benefits of official patronage—be it direct commissions and sales, exhibition space, or official ranks.

The Peredvizhniki were the most popular artistic organization, highly desirable for many young artists to join but difficult to enter. It was a closed club, to which applicants had to wait years to be admitted as full members. In the late 1880s the Peredvizhniki became an “Academy” of their own—outdated, rigid, intolerant, and acrimonious toward new talents and new styles. When the first exhibition of Russian Art Nouveau artists opened in St. Petersburg at the end of the nineteenth century, the Peredvizhniki's mouthpiece Stasov titled his review “The Compound of the Lepers,” and one of the Peredvizhniki's original members, Miasoedov, called the same Mir Iskusstva group “the foreign locusts.”<sup>66</sup>

Even Kramskoi wanted to give up his membership in 1886 because the group had become “the second Academy.”<sup>67</sup> He wrote to Stasov, “This is the time for the Company as

<sup>63</sup>Kramskoi letter, December 26, 1877, *Pis'ma* 1:435–36.

<sup>64</sup>Kramskoi letter to P. M. Tret'iakov, November 10, 1876, *Pis'ma* 2:72. Kramskoi executed more than thirty portraits of the members of the Imperial family, and twice as many of members of the nobility.

<sup>65</sup>For example, the tsar bought Repin's *The Reply of the Zaporozhian Cossacks to the Sultan of Turkey* for the enormous sum of forty thousand rubles, which Repin used to buy a country estate.

<sup>66</sup>Stasov published his review in *Novosti i birzhevye vedomosti* on February, 8, 1899. The review was widely disseminated during the Soviet era; the Miasoedov quote is in Iakov D. Minchenkov, *Vospominaniia o peredvizhnikakh*, 5th ed. (Leningrad, 1965), 158.

<sup>67</sup>Kramskoi's life-long diatribes against the Academy evoke almost Catonian obsession: *Carthago delenda est*. Possibly it was the result of non-reflective trauma of forceful separation—the “revolt” of 1863—and suppressed feelings that he chose the wrong way. Note the opinion of his life-long collaborator Miasoedov, expressed in a letter to Stasov in May 1887, two months after Kramskoi's death: “His real place is the Academy. The uniform would have made him look noble. He would have painted beautiful portraits and marvelous



an idea to die.”<sup>68</sup> As it happened, Kramskoi himself died suddenly early the next year. Repin resigned in 1887, claiming that he could not bear the atmosphere of bureaucracy, which was no better than the academic officialdom, and the Peredvizhniki’s behind-the-scenes scheming.<sup>69</sup>

In such an atmosphere, it was only logical that the Court suggested that the Wanderers merge with the Academy. In 1890 a Committee for Discussions of Changes Needed in the Emperor’s Academy of Arts was established. The Peredvizhniki were invited to sit on this Committee and join the Academy as professors or members of the Academic Council—Repin, Kuindzhi, Shishkin, Miasoedov, V. Makovskii, et al.—virtually all but two or three less-important figures. Makovskii, a member since 1872, became Rector of the Academy in 1895.

So it was seemingly a happy end for the rebellious young artists. They had reached prominence and material success; many adopted the lifestyles of the gentry or bourgeoisie. But in other respects, the rebels lost: they had failed to create a school of followers. From the 1890s onward their art looked as deplorably time-worn as that to be found in the worst kind of academic salon—a salon filled by pseudorealistic peasant types and *petit bourgeois* genre scenes. There were times when an artist (Firs Zhuravlev, for instance) would undergo a remarkable evolution from tear-jerking “socially-charged” images (*Begging Children*, 1870, State Russian Museum) to a pseudo-seductive *Nude* (late 1880s, State Russian Museum—a kitschy epigone of Goya’s *Naked Maja*). Stylistically, the Peredvizhniki’s painting was very close to the French Salon artists of the middle of the century or to realists of the same generation—quite passé in the 1880s–1890s. At the same time, a new group of talented young academists reached the utmost popularity in Russia in the 1880s–1890s (especially Semiradskii and Bakalovich). Even the greatest supporter of the “Russian school,” Pavel Tret’iakov, began to buy new academic Salon artists toward the end of his life, in the 1890s.

The young Russian artistic dissidents of the 1860s felt alienated from official art and institutions, but they were neither professionally nor socially bold enough to strive for serious change. Theirs was the road of opportunism, and it led them to a dead end. After the 1890s talented young artists turned away from the Peredvizhniki. “I was amazed,” the young artist Leonid Pasternak wrote after viewing a Peredvizhniki exhibitions in the 1890s, at “how weak in drawing even distinguished artists were (excluding, of course, such masters of form and drawing as Repin, Polenov, Serov, and V. Vasnetsov). Neither form nor draftsmanship, but only subject—that is, ‘a story about something’—was then the chief concern of the Wanderers’ works.”<sup>70</sup>

---

icons.” (Savinov, “Akademii khudozhestv,” 100; the full letter can be found in Rossiiskaia natsional’naia biblioteka, Rukopisnyi otdel, f. 738, op. 1, ed. khr. 8).

<sup>68</sup>Kramskoi letter to Stasov, July 16, 1886, *Tovarishchestvo* 1:315.

<sup>69</sup>Repin letter to K. Savitskii, September 28, 1887, *Tovarishchestvo* 1:331.

<sup>70</sup>Leonid Pasternak, *Zapisi raznykh let* (Moscow, 1975), 42–43, quoted in Jackson, *The Wanderers*, 156 (I have modified the translation).



## CODA

The Peredvizhniki trudged on sluggishly until 1923 and then officially died out, but thanks to Comrade Stalin they enjoyed a curious afterlife. In the early 1930s, after the suppression of the revolutionary avant-garde, the Peredvizhniki with their “critical realism” were declared the progenitors of Soviet “Socialist Realism,” and their style became the single officially allowed mode of painting until the post-Stalin “Thaw.”<sup>71</sup>

<sup>71</sup>But even at the height of the Thaw the Peredvizhniki-style pedestrian realism tried, and rather successfully at that, to attack the new (they called it “abstract” and “pederastic”) art. One can only wonder at virtually mystical recurrent motives in Russian culture. Exactly one century (minus eleven months) after the Revolt of the Fourteen another scandal between a group of fourteen dissident artists and state authorities happened—the infamous Manezh exhibition in December 1962, when this group was publicly scolded by the irate Khrushchev and his clique. As it was in 1863, most of these artists were nice fellows who left virtually no trace in the subsequent history of Russian art, and now even art historians can recall only three or four names. As in 1863, they were led by a charismatic chrysostom with very limited talent as a painter (Elii Beliutin); as in 1863, one of the heroes of the 1962 debacle acquired notoriety and received commissions on the highest level (Ernst Neizvestnyi, who was asked to create a monument to Khrushchev a few years later). And as in 1863, the ideological battle in 1962 was a thinly veiled struggle to get the biggest piece of the pie.