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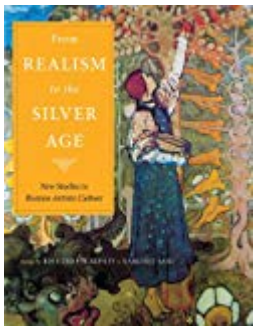

Rosalind P. Blakesley, Margaret Samu, eds. *From Realism to the Silver Age: New Studies in Russian Artistic Culture: Essays in Honor of Elizabeth Kridl Valkenier.* DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2014. xiv + 226 pp. $40.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-87580-703-4.

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Some would say the trouble began with Clement Greenberg. After all, there is something about having *the* preeminent American art critic categorically denounce the work of one of Russia's greatest nineteenth-century Russian realist painters as “kitsch” that is difficult to recover from. In the now famous 1939 essay titled “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” Greenberg stated: “[Ilya] Repin predigests art for the spectator and spares him effort, provides him with a short cut to the pleasure of art that detours what is necessarily difficult in genuine art. Repin, or kitsch, is synthetic art."[1] This is blistering rhetoric. In the years since, fortunately, a number of scholars have dismantled the argument and its own author even eventually rejected much of it. But it has proven damaging nonetheless. Russian artists and the works they produced during the long nineteenth century have much more rarely received the kind of intense investigation and diversity of methodological approaches that have characterized writing on Western European art. Of course, Greenberg's negative assessment was not the only problem. Cold War tensions, the difficulty of the Russian language, and the centrality of the early twentieth-century Russian avant-garde to histories of modernism all contributed to the marginality of Russian art in earlier periods.

But one scholar in particular forged a career against these difficulties. Elizabeth Kridl Valkenier's pioneering monographs *Russian Realist Art* (1977) and *Ilya Repin and the World of Russian Art* (1990) helped carve out the field of nineteenth-century Russian art in the West and her works served as inspiration to a generation of historians in Europe and America. And now a new volume of essays edited by Rosalind Blakesley and Margaret Samu has emerged to further correct Greenberg's long erroneous assumption and to deepen the attention paid to this fascinating cultural era. *From Realism to the Silver Age: New Studies in Russian Artistic Culture*, a collection of ground-breaking essays in honor of Valkenier's many contributions, freshly tackles the period and brings a new vibrancy to this critically ascendant field of inquiry.

The thirteen essays in this volume represent the latest research on artworks produced from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century by both art historians practicing in the West and leaders in the field in Russia itself. And this is the first boon of the collection. By including translated essays from Russian art historians such as Elena Nesterova and Eleonora Paston side by side with those of American and British scholars, the book provides a special insight into the subtle methodological differences remaining between art history as it is practiced in Russia and the West. Thus while Nesterova's essay on the brothers Konstantin and Vladimir Makovskii has perhaps the strongest appeal to nonspecialists out of all the essays in the volume, it contains the kind of tendentious encomiums and sweeping personality judgments that were more common in Soviet-era art historical writing. Repeated laudatory statements without a great deal of evidentiary support abound in this essay: "the surface effect and elegance of [Konstantin's] art, the ability to make everything his paintbrush touched beautiful, if not splendid, contributed to his popularity" (p. 30). Her writing is energetic and accessible, but the lack of justification for statements such as "Konstantin was a lively optimist who admired beauty in all its manifestations" (p. 30) or "both artists wanted to touch the viewer's feelings but in different ways" (p. 34) prove problematic. While these statements may be true, greater evidentiary support would have strengthened this work.

Both Galina Churak's essay on the reception of Repin's solo exhibition in 1891 and Paston's essay on the Abramtsevo circle show greater hybridity in their methods. Paston utilizes voices of the time to support the claims she makes about some of the individual personalities within the circle. And this refined use of contemporary criticism proves a binding thread through many of the essays--demonstrating an evolution towards more sophisticated social historical practice in the field. Margaret Samu's piece on female nudity in Russian satirical images of the 1860s is particularly good in this regard; she creates a lush blend of paintings, graphic works, caricatures, contemporary criticism, and the writings of the liberal press (as well as its censorship)--in the end creating a stunning and evocative tapestry of the time. Hand in hand with this practice of high-level social history are footnotes accompanying each essay in the volume that will prove a boon to students and scholars of Russian art. Each author takes great care in providing footnotes that lead to other sources and will serve to grow this field exponentially. Rosalind Blakesley, writing on the Moscow School of Painting and Sculpture at midcentury, is particularly conscientious in providing such detailed notes, as is Alison Hilton throughout her essay on the classicism of Valentin Serov and Lev Bakst and Wendy Salmond in her wonderfully detailed account of Pavel Tretiakov's icons.

One of the stated aims in the introduction to the volume is "to showcase the latest methodological approaches and subjects of inquiry" (p. 3). Great success is achieved on both of these fronts throughout the volume. Some of the essays are overviews of a particular period or type of art-making--such as Alla Rosenfeld's superb investigation of Russian illustrated children's books from 1800 to 1917. Other essays present in-depth new research on specific artists or works--such as Molly Brunson's fascinating work on Repin's ***Ivan the Terrible and His Son, 16 November 1581*** and Marian Burleigh-Motley's theosophical reading of Vasilii Kandinsky's sketch for ***Composition II***. This diversity of subject styles and methods could have produced unevenness across the volume, but the variety and mixture instead lends a superb vibrancy to the collection as a whole--demonstrating the rich hermeneutical range that characterizes this ever-growing field. Only John Bowlt's essay on Marianne Werefkin feels somewhat out of place within the collection. It is the shortest piece conatined therein and suffers from a somewhat disjointed writing style not usually characteristic of Bowlt.

The focus in this volume as a whole also shows the field of study moving away from heavy comparisons between Russia and the West--a nice evolution to see developing. Many of the authors make comparative nods to Western European artistic practice--Samu mentions how ***Iskra (The Spark)*** was modeled on French periodicals of the 1830s such as ***Le Charivari*** and Paston makes a comparison between the Abramtsevo circle and the French artists' colonies founded in Barbizon, to name just two examples. But these feel natural and necessary in the moments they occur throughout. Jefferson Gatrall is particularly good in this arena--his essay on the Christ image in the works of Lev Tolstoy, Nikolai Ge, and Ivan Kramskoi cycles very effectively between not only literature and art, but Western Europe and Russia as well. The focus in the volume always remains firmly placed on questions of national identity and the definition of "Russianness"--enough that this becomes a sub-theme of the collection in its own right. Rosenfeld is particularly good on this topic as she seeks in her contribution to investigate how "the fusion by Russian artists of native traditions and foreign sources reflected their creators' efforts to express a sense of Russian national identity" (p. 168). In each of the essays the spotlight is reserved for Russia--its artists, the works produced there, and the writings and relationships that proved so integral to artistic culture in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

For all the diversity of methods and subjects however, an area of slight deficiency shows in the lack of attention to sculpture here. Just one essay devoted to sculptural works in this era would have provided a nice turn away from painting and the graphic arts. But perhaps this reflects the fact that, as Ronald Meyer states in his brief foreword: "The present volume … is a testament to the influence of Elizabeth Valkenier's scholarly work and … a tribute from colleagues, students, and friends" (p. xiii). Valkenier herself was devoted primarily to the study of painting, thus the lack of sculpture ultimately feels like a further testament and honor to the work of this preeminent scholar. Along these same lines, several of the contributors to the volume provide some of the richest formal analysis this field has seen in English to date. Blakesley's descriptive prose in particular is both vivid and masterfully concise--a nearly impossible balance to strike--especially given the fact that many of the paintings she is describing will be unfamiliar to many readers. Likewise, Brunson's essay on Repin contains some of the most evocative ekphrasis ever brought to bear on the works of this major figure. Such characterizations as the "ghostly trace of the human body" (p. 101), "coaxing forth the human" (p. 101), and "history disappear[ing] behind the paint" (p. 104), ring with heartbreaking beauty as they seek to put into words the particular effectiveness of Repin's realism. This is light-years away from Greenberg's characterization of Repin as the "predigestor" of art's difficulties, the producer of kitsch.

This entire volume of essays shows the future of this field of study as it exists suddenly in our present. And it is a dazzling present-future indeed--not only filled with exciting subjects in the form of understudied works ready for analytical plunder, but poised too for an assault with the armament of methods which have been developed by historians of nineteenth-century French and American art. And which have already made that area of study so richly diverse and fascinating. Reading the essays in this volume, one feels very much on the verge--walking a tightrope with the authors as they bring together the best techniques of such luminary figures as Michael Fried and T. J. Clark--but now bringing them to bear on Russian works rarely ever considered with such depth and seriousness. Absorbing the collection as a whole feels like being on the cutting edge, tracking something just beginning to come into its own. Each author has a hand in this in his or her own way and the editors did a superb job in bringing this group of writers together over this particular subject. ***From Realism to the Silver Age: New Studies in Russian Artistic Culture*** will no doubt draw young new

scholars to the field and force those who have never thought seriously enough about Russian art before 1917 to reconsider its value afresh.

Note

[1]. Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in *Art Theory and Criticism: An Anthology of Formalist, Avant-Garde, Contextualist and Post-Modernist Thought*, ed. Sally Everett (London: McFarland, 1995), 35.