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*Narrating the Histories of National Art in Imperial Context: Towards an Entangled History of Art Writing in the Romanov Empire*

My paper addresses discursive impacts of 1882 All-Russian Art and Industry Exhibition in Moscow. Not only was this show instrumental in promoting the idea of national art museum to Emperor Alexander III but it also influenced the grand narrative on Russian art — Twenty Five Years of Russian Art by Vladimir Stasov. First published in *The Herald of Europe* in 1882-1883, this piece was later republished in late imperial and Soviet periods, and is broadly believed to have had a formative effect on the narrative of Russian art in Soviet and even Post-Soviet eras. As the title of the piece suggests, Stasov seemingly subscribed to the traditional in the 19th century Russian historiography “rule-by-rule” pattern of periodisation of (art) history thus echoing the Art Section’s agenda to celebrate the achievements of Russian art during the 25-year rule of Alexander II. As artificial as it might seem today, this anniversary made a strong case for Stasov’s and subsequent attempts to narrate the history of Russian art. The development of what Stasov welcomed as ‘the New Russian art’ with realism and narodnost’ (nationality) as its key characteristics, was put in context of the modernization of the Russian Empire under the rule of Alexander II, popularly known as the Liberator. In this respect, I would like to investigate the role of narratives of ‘national’ art in the ‘nationalising empires’<sup>1</sup> and try to compare those to establish whether there were other Eastern and Central European narratives of ‘national’ art that follow similar ‘rule-by-rule’ pattern and what was the role of national or international/world exhibitions in shaping these narratives.

In his narrative, Stasov also made an attempt to outline the key ‘milestones’, that is seminal works of art, on the path towards ‘the New Russian art’. In doing so, however, he violated the chronological framework he himself suggested in the title. The reign of Alexander II extended

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<sup>1</sup> S. Berger, A. Miller, *Nationalising Empires*. Budapest: Central European University Press, 2014.

between 1855 and 1880 but Stasov referred to the pictures that had been executed several years or even decades before 1855. Within the context of my presentation I suggest to discuss the role of these ‘precursors’ or ‘harbingers’ in various national narratives to establish whether they always signal of the teleological character of the narrative and/or the invention of a tradition, or it is their ‘structural’, or ‘anachronic’, quality that earns them this status.<sup>2</sup> Can we develop a typology of art objects that are more likely to become such ‘precursors’?

Another issue that I would like to address in my presentation is the issue of the ‘founders’ of the national schools of art, and the ‘first’ artworks that are considered ‘representative’ of these schools. Here I will talk about one of the key paintings in the Russian pictorial canon, *The Appearance of Christ Before the People* (1837—1857) by Alexander Ivanov. I argue that the Art Section at 1882 Exhibition was critical in presenting Ivanov as the ‘first’ modern Russian artist. For the curator of the Art Section, Mikhail Botkin, this appointment was a way to reconcile, if not to consolidate, opposing artistic and intellectual parties at the official art exhibition of great ideological importance. As one of the commentators of the exhibition argued, Ivanov’s work was a shining example of ‘the unique combination of pure realism and pure idealism’ which was ‘characteristic of Russian art’. According to Nagel and Wood, this ability to hold ‘incompatible models in suspension without deciding is a key to art’s anachronic quality, its ability to really ‘fetch’ a past, create a past, perhaps even fetch the future’.<sup>3</sup> Nagel and Wood’s concept of ‘anachronic picture’ seems a pertinent tool for the discussion of Ivanov’s magnum opus and its place in the narrative on Russian art.

‘Realism’ as one of the ‘defining characters’ of (Russian) national school of art is yet another discursive element that I will address in my presentation. Commentators of the Moscow show, for instance, debated about the (in)dependence of Russian realism from its French version. It is time to finally juxtapose European realisms and their place in national narratives and reconsider the centre — periphery metaphor used to describe the transfer of realism from France to European artistic ‘peripheries’.

When comparing centres and peripheries, it is also important to discuss the diverse imperial situations in which national art narratives developed. Russian national art narrative was crafted at the imperial centres, St Petersburg and Moscow. At the same time, Western peripheries of the Russian Empire had also been nationalising and were in fact closer to the artistic centres of Europe than the imperial center. This sets a very important questions for my project: was the art and artists from the Western peripheries in- or ex-cluded from the narrative on Russian art?

While exploring my case, I traced the birth of a narrative at the imperial centre and now I am looking forward to develop a more nuanced understanding of my and other cases by juxtaposing the stories and contexts from imperial centres and former imperial peripheries.

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<sup>2</sup> A.Nagel, Ch.S. Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance* . New York: Zone Books, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> A.Nagel, Ch.S. Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance* . New York: Zone Books, 2010. P. 18.