



# From Russia WITH LOVE

## Some Highlights of Russian Realism from the Golden Age

In the last decades of the nineteenth century a group of Russian composers, known as The Mighty Five<sup>1</sup> (or just The Five), banded together with the goal of creating a strictly and distinctively Russian musical style, based on traditional folk songs and often with

exotic Asiatic melodies. The music of Borodin, Mussorgsky, and Rimsky-Korsakov, especially, is well known in America. A similar motivation existed among some Russian artists of the period, yet their names are scarcely known here. Among these was the

painter Ivan Kramskoi, who believed that “The Russian [artist] should finally stand on his own feet...It’s time to think about the creation of our own Russian school...Our art dwells in slavery to the Academy, which is itself a slave of Western art.”

In 1863, the same year that disaffection with the Paris Salon reached such a pitch that Napoleon III felt obliged to mount the Salon des Refusés, concurrent with the official Salon, a minor insurrection took place in the Imperial Academy in St. Petersburg, but one that would go down in the annals of Russian culture as a turning point and a milestone in the history of Russian art. A group of art students at the Academy, largely led by Kramskoi, refused to take part in a competition for a gold medal, which included the prize of a scholarship to study abroad, in Paris or Italy. The reason given had to do with certain rules of the contest and wanting the freedom to select one’s own subject matter. This was the first time the students stood up to the authorities, though the real upshot was rather indefinite. Eight of the rebels would go on to become officially acknowledged Academicians, including Kramskoi. In fact, the Russian Academy seems largely to have been much more kindly and encouraging to gifted artists with fresh ideas than their Parisian counterparts.

One example is Vasili Pukirev (1832-1890), best known for *The Unequal Marriage*. There were lots of scenes of daily, often peasant life (“genre” paintings), being done at the time but this representation of a marriage between a leering old man of station and a young woman who was less than thrilled at the match broke new ground for its reflections on some unhappy results of social conventions. The artist was awarded an Honorary Professorship by the Academy for his efforts.

Described as charismatic, vocal and a prolific writer, Kramskoi was also an organizer of artist’s collaboratives, most notably The Company of Traveling Art Exhibitions, or the *Peredvizhniki*.<sup>2</sup> Usual English translations—the Itinerants or the Wanderers—are misleading because



Vasili Pukirev (1832-1890)  
*The Unequal Marriage*  
1862  
oil on canvas  
68.5 x 54”  
Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

The figure on the far right is thought to be Pukirev.

they weren’t wandering or traveling artists. The group was founded as a cooperative venture in order for members to exhibit their works apart from the auspices of the Academy, and one of their main intentions was to bring their work to the awareness of audiences in provincial cities, not just St. Petersburg and Moscow. In other words, the artists didn’t travel, their works did. These artists were not ideologically or stylistically bound together and the endeavor was basically economically motivated.

Nevertheless, a persistent myth grew up around them. The prominent and

influential critic Vladimir Stasov (1824-1906) was an ardent proponent of the idea that Russian artists should eschew European modes and influences in favor of specifically Russian ones. (He also played a major role as advisor and encourager to the Russian Five composers.) In his mind the “Revolt of the Fourteen” was a “protest against the classical subjects...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.

**Ivan Nikolayevich Kramskoi (1837-1887)**  
*The Mermaids*  
1871  
oil on canvas  
34.65 x 52"  
Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov composed an opera based on the same story by Gogol called *May Night* between 1878 and 1879. While it never became part of the standard operatic repertoire in the West, the beautiful overture and some arias, indeed the entire opera, can be found online.

According to scholar Evgeny Steiner,<sup>3</sup> it was Stasov, the ardent Russophile, who was mainly responsible for a slant on the nature of the “revolt” and the motivations of the group of Itinerant artists, notably Kramskoi and great realist painter Ilya Repin. This ideological slant would become the conventional wisdom of post-Revolution Soviet ideology—the notions that these later nineteenth century Russian artists represented a fundamentally democratic cause and social responsibility, with a condemnation of the Tsarist regime.

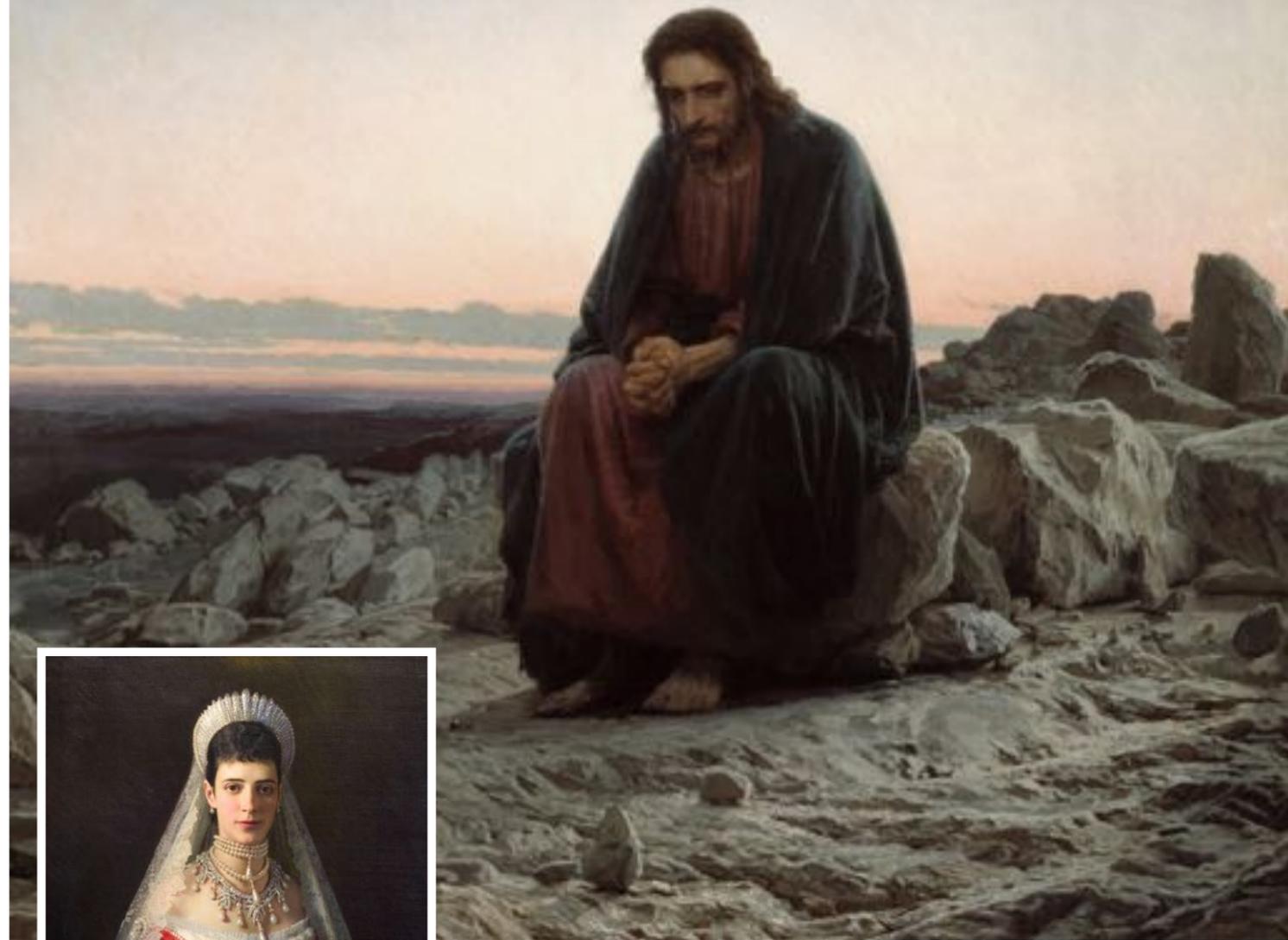
But these artists weren’t revolutionaries looking to change the existing political and social order. Nor were they in a hurry to fully break from the Academy. They worked cooperatively with it when it suited them. Curiously, the first several exhibitions of the so-called Itinerants were held on the premises of the Academy in St. Petersburg!

In the First Traveling Exhibition of 1871, Kramskoi exhibited his *Rusalki*, translated *Mermaids*. The subject derived from a story called “May Night” by Ukrainian-born dramatist Nikolai Gogol (1809-1852), whom the artist admired. In Slavic mythology and folklore, the rusalki were a sort of water nymph, often identified with the spirits of drowned maidens who haunt ponds and waterways. The painting does not illustrate any particular incident in the story but instead, intent on capturing the effects of moonlight on the landscape with its woeful company, creates a poetically haunting, eerie mood.



**Ivan Nikolayevich Kramskoi (1837-1887)**  
*Moonlit Night*  
1880  
oil on canvas  
dimensions unavailable  
Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

# Ivan Nikolayevich Kramskoi (1837- 1887)



**Ivan Nikolayevich Kramskoi (1837-1887)**  
*Portrait of Maria Fyodorovna*  
1881  
oil on canvas  
42.9 x 29.1"  
Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg

Maria Feodorovna (1847-1928), born Princess Dagmar of Denmark, was Empress of Russia, the wife of Tsar Alexander III, and the mother of Tsar Nicholas II.

At the Second Exhibition, also held at the Academy the following year, Kramskoi showed a non-Russian subject with his powerful Realist composition of *Christ in the Desert*, derived from the story of the Temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. According to the texts, Jesus was led to the desert after his baptism to fast for forty days and be tested by the devil. With profound psychological penetration, the artist conveys a sense that the battle of Jesus with the flesh and the devil was an internal one.

**Ivan Nikolayevich Kramskoi (1837-1887)**  
*Christ in the Wilderness*  
1872  
oil on canvas  
72.44 x 84.25"  
Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

Both of these paintings were purchased by successful Moscow merchant Pavel Tretyakov, one of the major collectors of Russian art at the time. One of the major problems facing Russian artists was the fact that there really were no art dealers and commercial galleries, such as began to emerge in Paris in the later 1800s. As it turned out, Kramskoi largely supported himself with portraiture.

# Ilya Repin (1844-1930)



Younger than Kramskoi—for a time his student until he entered the Academy, and a sometime member of the Itinerants—Ilya Repin has been called “Russia’s Rembrandt,” and the first Russian artist to have found notoriety in the West while painting Russian themes. Repin was reportedly Stalin’s favorite artist and was held by the Soviets to be a precursor and catalyst for Socialist Realism, the officially supported style of the USSR.

The painting that first brought Repin acclaim was his *Barge Haulers on the Volga* (1870-1873). Begun while he was a student, the artist had first seen barge haulers while out on holiday and was so taken by the sight that, in part through help from the Academy, he traveled to the Volga River with some companions, where he found some real barge haulers to use in his masterpiece. A comparison of Repin’s painting with the utterly matter-of-fact Realism of Gustave Courbet’s *Stone Breakers* reveals a marked difference; the latter figures are essentially soulless, whereas each of the barge haulers is highly individualized. Although the painting has been taken as

an indictment of working conditions under Tsarist rule, it received glowing praise in official quarters and, while Tretyakov tried to buy it, the picture was acquired by a son of Tsar Alexander II, Grand Duke Vladimir Alexandrovich, who immediately sent it to be shown in Vienna, and it was later hung in his palace.

The style of Repin has been called “Critical Realism,” an example of which is his *Easter Procession in the District of Kursk*.

**Ilya Repin (1844-1930)**  
*Barge Haulers on the Volga*  
 1870-1873  
 oil on canvas  
 51.8 x 110.6”  
 Russian Museum, St. Petersburg

**Ilya Repin (1844-1930)**  
*Easter Procession in the Region of Kursk*  
 1880-1883  
 oil on canvas  
 68 x 110”  
 Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow



**Ilya Repin (1844-1930)**  
*The Zaporozhye Cossacks Replying to the Sultan*  
 1878-1891  
 oil on canvas  
 85.4 x 142.1”  
 Russian Museum, St. Petersburg



**Ilya Repin (1844-1930)**  
*Leo Tolstoy Barefoot*  
 1901  
 oil on canvas  
 81.5 x 21.74”  
 Russian Museum, St. Petersburg

This depiction of a now bygone world falls somewhat into the same category as the paintings of French peasant life by Jules Breton and others, which were also starting to fade away. But this procession is marked by extreme class distinctions that the artist has taken pains to point out.

Repin was also a masterful portrait artist, painting many members of the intelligentsia of the day. His consummate mastery of character and expression can be seen in his *The Zaporozhye Cossacks Replying to the Sultan* (1880-1891), a subject drawn from the perhaps apocryphal story set in 1676 that involved an exchange of letters between the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire and members

of a Ukrainian ethnic group that had been giving the Ottoman Turks trouble in battle. Sultan Mehmed IV had demanded that the Cossacks stop their antics and submit to Ottoman rule, identifying himself with words like, “the Sultan; son of Muhammad; brother of the sun and moon; grandson and viceroy of God; etc.” it was a kind of high sounding cease-and-desist letter. The fiercely independent Cossacks are portrayed in the process of answering the Sultan with the most raunchy and insulting mimicry they could come up with. While there is no solid evidence that the episode is true, the rendering of the personalities in the group is brilliant. Tsar Alexander III bought the huge canvas for an astronomically record sum.

Not all great Russian artists were pushing the envelope. The marine painter Ivan Aivazovsky (1817-1900) was a thoroughgoing academician, whose style has usually been termed Romantic, though perhaps bordering on Realism. The power and poetry of his seascapes arguably rank him among the greatest maritime painters of all time. During his life he became one of the most prominent artists of the century, not only in Russia but abroad. His many international honors included prestigious awards from Poland, to the Ottoman Empire, and he was the first Russian to receive the French Legion of Honor.



## Ivan Aivazovsky (1817-1900)

**Ivan Aivazovsky (1817-1900)**  
*The Ninth Wave*  
 1850  
 oil on canvas  
 87 x 130.71”  
 Russian Museum, St. Petersburg

Konstantin Makovsky (1839-1915), a founding member of the Itinerants, was an academic historical painter whose subjects included representations of an idealized Russian past. It was stunning to see the very large *Russian Bride's Attire* in San Francisco some 30 years ago, just after it was cleaned and brought out of storage. Beautifully painted, emotionally charged, and compositionally brilliant, the title seems inadequate. Here are depicted ages of woman and of man, from the little boy chewing on his cookie beside his mother on the bottom left, to the groom who can't wait to see his bride, but is told he's not allowed in the chamber by some elder aunt, while the dignified, matronly grandmother dresses the beautiful bride's raven hair. The picture exudes a kind of poetic mystery.



## Konstantin Makovsky (1839-1915)

**Konstantin Makovsky (1839-1915)**  
*The Russian Bride's Attire*  
 1889  
 oil on canvas  
 110 x 147”  
 Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco

## Nikolay Alekseyevich Kasatkin (1859-1930)



**Nikolay Alekseyevich Kasatkin (1859-1930)**  
*Orphaned*  
 1891  
 oil on canvas  
 20 x 34.65”  
 Russian Museum, St. Petersburg

**Nikolay Alekseyevich Kasatkin (1859-1930)**  
*"Who?"*  
 1897  
 oil on canvas  
 dimensions unavailable  
 Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

**Nikolay Alekseyevich Kasatkin (1859-1930)**  
*Poor People Collecting Coal in an Abandoned Pit*  
 1894  
 oil on canvas  
 32.6 x 42.1”  
 Russian Museum, St. Petersburg



The emotional contrast could scarcely be more strident when the foregoing is compared with the painting by Nikolay Kasatkin (1859-1930), entitled simply *Who?* A soldier has returned from his service to find himself in the company of his wife and her child by another man.



Just as anyone can relate to the feelings of the mother of the bride, clutching her handkerchief as she contemplates the momentous family change about to take place, so is the viewer empathetically drawn into a different kind of timeless pathos with the man who wants to

know whose child this is and the woman's evident pain. Kasatkin's was a stark form of realism, but his characters remain very much human and emotionally sympathetic. The artist would become one of the founders of Socialist Realism.

<sup>1</sup> Mily Balakirev, César Cui, Alexander Borodin, Modest Mussorgsky, and Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov

<sup>2</sup> There are pronunciation sites online where one can hear this.

<sup>3</sup> Evgeny Steiner. "Pursuing Independence: Kramskoi and the Peredvizhniki vs. the Academy of Arts" *The Russian Review*, Vol. 70, No. 2 (APRIL 2011), pp. 252-271.