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book review of

Art and Commerce in Late Imperial Russia by Andrei Shabanov

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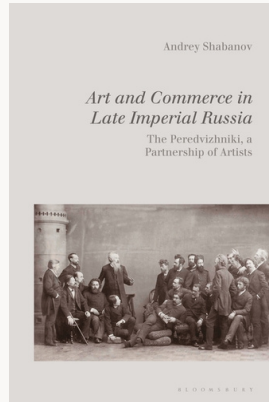
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Andrei Shabanov,
Art and Commerce in Late Imperial Russia.
New York and London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2019.
265 pp.; 59 b&w illus.; appendices; bibliography; index.
\$120.00 (hardcover)
ISBN: 978-1-5013-3552-5

It is all Ilya Repin's (1844–1930) fault, or at least it is according to scholar Andrei Shabanov. In a 2019 monograph off of the Bloomsbury press, Shabanov at last fleshes out an institutional history begun by the Marxist art historian Aleksei Fedorov-Davydov in the 1920s, arguing Russia's *fin-de-siècle* Partnership for Touring Art Exhibitions was not an alliance of rebellious painters united by a coherent aesthetic agenda, but a group of profit-driven professionals pursuing common economic goals decades ahead of similar secessionist movements in Western Europe. That 150 years of scholarship has not recognized this Partnership—known variably as the Wanderers, Itinerants, or *Peredvizhniki*—as a market-minded arts service organization is mostly the result of a trio of scandals surrounding Repin's canvases *Easter Procession at Kursk* (1880–83), *They Did not Expect Him* (1884–87), and *Ivan the Terrible* (1885) at the exhibiting society's eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth annual shows. In Shabanov's account, the Partnership diligently struggled to shed an association with radical art that “provokes you to think” (179) and to offer themselves as upright, family-friendly entertainment—nevertheless going down to this day as tendentious, critically-realistic populists.

Duly noting essentialist paradigms that would characterize the crisp, illusionistic easel painting produced by the Partnership's artists as a kind of quintessentially Russian art, Shabanov suggests that if the group manufactured ‘Russianness,’ it did so only as a commercial strategy and little more. The monograph chooses instead to focus in carefully and conscientiously on the Partnership's first twenty-five years and the pragmatics of privatizing exhibition practice in an authoritarian country where such personal initiative could easily and counter-productively be interpreted as political. Making a quick note that the organization remained active through 1923 and that its art was contemporary with the heights of Soviet modernism, Shabanov is content to leave the later Stalinist falsification of the group's historiography to the American scholar Elizabeth Valkenier and revisionist art historian David Jackson.^[1] He alternatively points out that no writer has until now thought to

extensively question the Partnership's status as a "realist" art movement, in open confrontation with Russia's neoclassical Imperial Academy of Art.

Shabanov proceeds to advance a kind of 'just the facts, ma'am' art history to substantiate his claim that the Partnership had "something to sell but nothing specific to declare" (28) and that it took the group the better part of a decade and a half to produce anything near a proper manifesto. Keenly aware that the institution—his object of study—only survives by its representations, his book cleaves into two archival analyses: first, of the group's judicious self-styling in its catalogues, ads, and group portraits, and then, the St. Petersburg reviews of the Partnership's yearly touring exhibitions. Outsourcing the ekphrasis of the exhibits themselves primarily to those critics who first beheld them, Shabanov reserves his interpretive skills for the humbler objects of visual culture: the covers of illustrated guidebooks and studio photographs.

Shabanov's reluctance to look much at the painting of the Partnership reads as a logical outcome of his decision to treat the art object itself as a commodity, as a generalized good. On the one hand, Shabanov's choice shifts the aesthetic interest of the monograph to the 'art of commerce' rather than his titular *Art and Commerce*. Shabanov generously assumes the techniques of disciplinary professionalization are in themselves aesthetic, and that the popular print media, which were frequently the vehicles for this promotional program, were intentionally composed. He does not go so far, for example, as to call the publications produced by the group's bibliographers Herman Goppe, Nikolai Sobko, and Karl Fischer *beautiful*. Nevertheless, Shabanov still tracks how these artistic albums responded to the continent-wide phenomenon of *Japonisme*, varied in the quality of their paper stock and deployment of innovative autotype technologies, or compared in genre to the Partnership's earlier, loosely-bound premium portfolios as well as similar French *Salon* catalogues by Francois Guillaume Dumas and the Paris dealers Boussod et Valadon.

On the other hand, emphasizing how the Partnership sold its exhibits to its public as "simply another of the many commercial products and services on the market" (47) such as those of lawyers and dentists and doctors threatens to make what is already a remarkably niche subject—hardly known beyond Russian academic communities, and almost never taught as part of current nineteenth-century surveys on the history of art in the west—downright deadly boring. Shabanov is plenty aware of the risk and states early in his introduction that though his history of the Partnership is "far less romantic" than the dominant Soviet narrative of renegade bohemians it is "no less exciting" (3). Nevertheless, despite his theoretical overtures to Pierre Bourdieu, Alois Riegl, and to the procedures of media studies and sartorial history, Shabanov is unable to 're-present' the Partnership's sharply dressed men—in their morning coats and dinner jackets—as scholastically sexy. They remain dour, bearded, demi-bourgeoise, which Shabanov, to his overwhelming credit as a scholar, ably argues is exactly how the Partnership would have liked it.

Some of this admittedly cannot be helped. Much of his primary evidence comes in the form of letterpress charters and box wood engravings and is interpreted by spreadsheets and pie charts that look as good in black and white as in CMYK, making the book as charcoal-colored as the Partnership's business attire. Shabanov is adamant in his refrain, however, that the stylistically heterogenous nature of the Partnership's exhibits makes it impossible to

consider them a coherent art movement. The structure of the book's later chapters seems mostly to establish that the average Partnership exhibition was a mixed field of aesthetically dissimilar paintings against which one or two scandalous, if masterful puncta, then erupted into notoriety. The illustrations that accompany these chapters reinforce this impression: reproducing a seemingly random sample of paintings from the exhibitions as a scale-sized line-up across the top half of several two-page spreads.

This argument that the Partnership was not an art movement threatens to cut the ground out from beneath Shabanov on multiple occasions. Why should Shabanov, an art historian after all, waste time with something that does not qualify as an art movement? This is not an idle question. The Anglophone scholarly world—the world at which this English-language version of Shabanov's first book[2] is ostensibly addressed—should have no trouble digesting his claim the Partnership marketed its exhibitions as “a genuine form of cultural, respectable, and affordable entertainment suitable for a wide audience, from tabloid readers to . . . the upper class” (78). Thanks to the ineradicable presence of the modernist critic Clement Greenberg in curricula, the one point of contact most students have ever had with the Partnership's art is via Greenberg's hatchet job on the painting of Ilya Repin in *Avant Garde and Kitsch* as “synthetic,” “predigested” art, “ready for the” masses’ “unreflective enjoyment.”[3]

The animus for this overcorrection mostly flows from the outsized influence of another critic, this time from Russia's nineteenth century, the equally indefatigable Vladimir Stasov. Shabanov tracks how Stasov wrongly attributed to the Partnership “a coherent ideological and artistic program coupled with a strong altruistic and enlightened commitment to public service” (1) that Soviet scholars—eager to cast the allegedly realist Partnership as the painterly precursors to Stalinist neo-classicism—could handily align with revolution. In a deft act of epigraphic jujitsu, Shabanov presents Stasov as a crank columnist without rehearsing too many of his arguments, shrinking the reporter's impact to size. Shabanov instead builds up the broader journalistic landscape, surveying approximately twenty reviews for the group's inaugural show in 1871 and working his way up to forty-five different articles on the occasion of the press firestorm surrounding the Partnership's thirteenth annual exhibition in 1885. This milieu frames the incendiary Stasov as a statistical outlier—the most vocal exponent, perhaps, of a much broader critical re-appraisal of the Partnership that Shabanov explains occurred between its fifth and eleventh exhibitions.

Shabanov shows how critics initially misconstrued the Partnership for Touring Art Exhibitions as an undertaking sponsored by the Imperial Academy of Arts. Held on the premises of the Imperial Academy, these first few shows were similar in format but smaller in scale, exhibiting a little over forty paintings compared to the 400 exhibits the Academy would hang in crowded salon-style configurations at its regular shows of student art. Columnists conservative and liberal alike hailed the Partnership for its commitment to quality over quantity, praising the painters for their “sobriety, simplicity, and naturalness” (142) and little else. When the Partnership changed its venue to the Academy of Sciences for its fifth show, the journalists again failed to apprehend any substantial conflict between the private artists and the royal institution, merely coining the group's iconic collective noun (i.e. *Peredvizhniki*, the Wanderers) and playing up its commitment to moving merchandise.

It would take half a decade of political de-liberalization, the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881, and three blockbuster canvases from the painter Ilya Repin before a majority of critics perceived the Partnership as anything approaching socially, critically realist. The highlight of *Art and Commerce in Late Imperial Russia* comes in chapter 7 and its discussion of how Repin caused state censorship to come crashing down on the heads of his colleagues—a development that would appreciably eat into the Partnership’s bottom line in the years to come. Between 1883 and 1885, the canvases *Easter Procession at Kursk*, *They Did not Expect Him*, and *Ivan the Terrible*—“exceptionally large, politically sensitive, and aesthetically superior in the eyes of the critics” (194)—brought the Partnership’s mercantile interests into conflict with politics for the first time in its history. Shabanov elaborates this narrative to emphasize the Partnership’s painters were neither wild-eyed radicals consigned to their historiographic fate from the start, nor the unwitting subjects of an overzealous Stasovian spin, but rather victims of their own success.

Admittedly, to speak of victimhood might over-state the case. It is not as though the onerous censorship preview to which the subsequent Touring Exhibitions were subjected in any way bankrupted the Partnership. Shabanov concludes in part by noting how the group’s business manager Grigorii Miasoedov (1834–1911) took pains to emphasize that even twenty-five years after its inception, the Partnership for Touring Art Exhibitions remained Russia’s most recognizable cultural brand, competitive with any number of knock-off, copycat organizations that had risen in its wake. Still, Shabanov’s monograph reads like a tragedy. It is the irony of the history Shabanov pens that Repin’s great masterworks worked against his parent Partnership’s project of sly, gradualist reform, abrogating the injunction—per the words of Miasoedov himself—“to be as cunning as serpents and as innocent as doves” (13). In Shabanov’s account, the Partnership labors mightily to align the arts and economic prosperity and recast painters as outstanding citizens who contribute substantively to their society. Yet Repin’s bloody-minded *Ivan the Terrible* ruins this reputation with its “staggering realism” (193)—its illusionistic gobs of gore and its Aesopian message against the execution of political prisoners—inciting headlines such as “Murder in the halls of the 13th touring exhibition!” (189) and catching the group out red-handed.

It is unsurprising that Repin, who is singularly the most well-known artist from the Partnership, ultimately plays such a pivotal role in Shabanov’s account. In his own way, Shabanov swaps Repin for Stasov, placing the painter above his publicist—assigning all agency, and thus, all the blame to the artists themselves. This act of empowerment is consistent with Shabanov’s earlier account of how the Partnership’s painters took the manipulation of their public image into their own hands. Repin’s prominence undercuts, however, Shabanov’s groundbreaking recovery of previously marginal or lesser-studied figures like Miasoedov, and runs against the Partnership’s overarching commitment to equality among its membership. Shabanov spends a considerable amount of time elaborating this latter theme, examining the Touring Exhibition’s egalitarian, eye-level hang and recapitulating the tensions between the Partnership’s voting members and its affiliate exponents. Shabanov, nevertheless, does not entirely escape the gravity well of Repin: the canonical Ukrainian painter dominates his book’s second half (if Miasoedov the first).

Shabanov's passing hypothesis that the organization itself was "an entrepreneurial response to a specific technological innovation" (26) is one of the more understated claims of the book that deserves additional attention in subsequent projects about the Partnership. Hungry for "the flavor of modernity" (101), Shabanov describes how the painters were early adopters of Russia's expanding railroad network and of cutting-edge advances in reproductive printmaking techniques and one of the first groups to exhibit under electric light in the glass-and-steel surrounds of the *Bol'shaia morskaiia* residence of St. Petersburg's Society for the Encouragement of the Arts. The Touring Exhibition would have been neigh-well impossible without the steam locomotive, which enabled "reasonably quick" transport "within a predictable timeframe . . . cheaply all year round" (24) across the vast expanses of the Empire's western interior. More so than the cross-cultural comparison Shabanov offers with the Paris Split and Munich Secession in his conclusion, this analytic of the Partnership's painters as possible 'agents of modernity' could do more to suture the Wanderers to Western art history than any other argument in his monograph, aligning Russia with those better-recognized sites of nineteenth-century contemporaneity—France and Britain.

Focused as it is on the Empire's twin capitals, the book leaves open an avenue of investigation into the Partnership's hired exhibition attendants (e.g. Aleksandr Chirkin, Egor Khruslov, Pavel Ivachev). Said to possess a love for the Partnership's art second only to Miasoedov himself, these men accompanied the Touring Exhibitions' packing crates from rail depot to the very doorsteps of Russia's provincial gentry, bringing the latest in contemporary art to twenty additional cities that had never before hosted an art show. Shabanov riffs off a litany of alternative, pop-up spaces the Partnership developed between 1871 and 1895: city council halls, stock exchanges, clubhouses, universities, and gymnasia. Taken together with his reproductions of late-century wood engravings that illustrate the making of the exhibits, *Art and Commerce in Late Imperial Russia* hints at a rich and dynamic history of arts advocacy in the Empire's countryside.

Characterizing what had historically been a monolithic group of tendentious easel painters as a multitalented collective engaging the nineteenth century's new apparatuses for the circulation of information and material, Andrei Shabanov thus lays the groundwork for further institutional histories that can explore with greater detail the Partnership's pioneering role in cultural outreach. Founded with the intention of "developing a love for art in society" (21) necessary to market their art, a turn towards the technologized Tour might well replace the paradigm of realism Shabanov's new corporate portrait doubts, electrifying the study of the Partnership in a way that finally does justice to the painters' historical record. Whether the twentieth century's image of the Partnership as a prerevolutionary avant-garde will develop into an overexposed picture of flashy art-entrepreneurial 'disruptors' drawn from our own twenty-first century remains to be seen, but the ensuing debates promise to be anything but boring business as usual.

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Notes

[1] Elizabeth Valkenier, *Russian Realist Art: The State and Society: The Peredvizhniki and Their Tradition* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1977) and David Jackson, *The Wanderers and Critical Realism in Nineteenth-Century Russian Painting* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006).

[2] Andrei Shabanov, *Peredvizhniki: Mezhdru kommercheskim tovarishchestvom i khudozhestvennym dvizheniem* (St. Petersburg: Press of the European University of St. Petersburg, 2015).

[3] Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 25.