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“I am going to the artists...”

Monarchy, Modernization and Art Market in Late Imperial Russia

In the reign of Alexander III (1881-1894) the visual arts were gaining increasing public attention. The Great Reforms yielded an unprecedented growth of the art market with a new type of collector, the self-made entrepreneur, challenging nobility's century-long monopoly on art patronage. Emergence of mass circulation press and development of techniques for mass reproduction of images provided cheap and effective media for visual representations of a new national agenda set by this new key player. In this context, how did the Russian monarchy change its approach to the art patronage? What were the strategies it applied to answer new challenges? What was the role of monarch's personality and how did the tsar's 'personal' art policies play out against the ideological agenda of the state?

In my paper I will attempt to answer these questions focusing on Alexander III visits to the Wanderers' (*Peredvizhniki*) shows associated with the new national art. The case study provides examples of the shifts in the practices of art marketing and art collecting as responses to the rapidly developing art market.

Purchases from exhibitions as a main source of building the royal collection are characteristic of the period after Alexander's ascendance to the throne when he gained a more elaborate political persona. However, the transition from bourgeois-like practices of collecting art for the private museum in the heir's Anichkov palace to 'collecting for the nation' also stems from the tsar's experience at the 1882 All-Russian Industry and Arts Exhibition in Moscow. The most popular section of the show, the Art pavilion, was to demonstrate the success of Russian artists over the previous 25 years rule, thus putting the arts within a broader context of Russia's economic and industrial growth. However, while the latter could be easily associated with the effects of the Great Reforms, the success of the arts in Russia had less obvious explanation - the Imperial Academy of Arts was one of very few institutions that avoided significant changes during Alexander II rule. The case of 1882 exhibition highlights

the importance of public sphere and art marketing in Alexander III shift towards Russian artists. The new Tsar had to catch up with the new trends in art entrepreneurship.

A detailed inquiry into Alexander's attendance of the Wanderers' exhibitions reveals, in Geertz's terms, a sophisticated net of significances spun by the artists themselves, the emperor's new key rival in the field Moscow merchant and art patron Pavel Tretyakov and the Ober-Procurator of the Holy Synod Konstantin Pobedonostsev. Playing on the threat of newly launched censorship of art exhibitions, Alexander used his position, or rather let the Wanderers use his position, to protect problematic paintings from being censored out of the exposition. In return, Alexander obtained a priority in choosing the pieces he wanted to buy from the exhibition, thus leaving Tretyakov with the second choice option.

A regular attendant of art shows, Alexander III became the key censor, patron and collector for Russian artists. It is most likely that his initiatives grew from his personal preferences he developed when he was the heir but with the accession to the throne each of his comments or silent approvals became the object for careful attention both for the artists and the bureaucrats in charge of the ideological agenda of the state. Thus the launch of art show censorship might be connected to the unprecedented royal attention to contemporary art, or the Wanderers' exhibitions, to be precise. The emperor's persona would sometimes play against the agenda of the state as it was seen for example by Konstantin Pobedonostsev. This noticeable reinforcement or interest in the sphere of visual arts and personal power illustrated by his disregard of bureaucratic institutes, whose bloom is usually associated with the preceding rule, is part of the more general tendency of Alexander III's reign to accumulate the reins of government in one hands.