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Image “Reflections”: the Question of Relationship between Russian Portrait Painting and Engraving in the Second Half of the 18th Century

In eighteenth-century Russia, as in other European countries, portraits were held to be not only works of art: under certain circumstances they could also become substitutes for the persons depicted and were often understood as their reflections in mirrors. However, if any painted portrait can be seen as the reflection of the sitter, the translation of such a portrait into an engraving is a reflection of a reflection, and the portrait painting created after such an engraved original becomes the triple reflection...

Such a state of affairs prompts a researcher of eighteenth-century portraiture to elaborate a certain methodological approach, focusing not as much on the works of art individually as on the relationship between the images represented in separate kinds of art. As applied to the art of painting and engraving it involves such important issues as the question of correlation between an image and a word, the role of frames and the problem of “backward reflection”. What kind of metamorphosis did portrait images go through, when transitioning from the canvas surface onto fragile sheets of paper and back again into painting? What were the reasons behind and the main characteristics of this process? And how were images of people who lived in eighteenth-century Russia reflected in such sophisticated “mirrors”?

In seeking answers to these questions, I suggest focusing on the comparative analysis of portrait paintings and engravings created in St. Petersburg in the second half of the eighteenth century by F.S. Rokotov, D.G. Levitsky, V.L. Borovikovsky, G.F. Schmidt, E.P. Chemesov, D.G. Gerasimov, G.I. Skorodumov and many others in the context of European artistic practice of the period.

The translation of the painted portrait onto thousands of sheets of paper enabled people in distant countries to get an idea of what the original painting looked like. Nevertheless, the process of translating an image from an oil painting into etching, stippling, engraving, aquatint, mezzotint and other media should not be understood as a metamorphosis of technique alone. Engravers often took the liberty of changing the design and providing the portrait with a sort of graphic frame which included architectural and ornamental motifs, inscriptions and signatures or emblems and symbols. Engraved frames reflect their cultural context visualizing the actual

content of the portrait images and giving clues to the way the latter were perceived by contemporaries. Though interactions between painters and engravers and artists and consumers varied slightly across different European centers, portrait prints are less endowed with national features than their painted originals and convey the characteristics of a common visual culture.