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On the Question of National Identity: Printmaking Practice of Gavriil Skorodumov and James Walker in the Context of British-Russian Cultural Relations

Anglophilia, the interest in all things English, was a significant phenomenon in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century Russia, which impacted all the spheres of Russian culture including the art of printmaking and significantly affected the careers of the two celebrated engravers – Gavriil Skorodumov (1754 – 1792) and James Walker (c. 1760 – c. 1823).

In 1773 Gavriil Skorodumov as an outstanding graduate of the Imperial Academy of Arts in St. Petersburg was dispatched to London where he attended classes in the schools of the recently established Royal Academy and learned the art of stipple engraving. In 1782 he returned to Russia to become Imperial Engraver and Keeper of Engravings in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg.

Meanwhile in 1784 an eminent British mezzotint engraver James Walker came to St. Petersburg at the invitation of Catherine II, who appointed him Engraver to Her Imperial Majesty. During his nearly twenty years in Russia Walker executed a large number of fine mezzotints after the Old Master paintings in the Imperial Collection and engraved portraits of the Imperial family and the Russian Aristocracy. He returned to England in 1802.

Although there were periods when Skorodumov and Walker stayed in London and in St. Petersburg at the same time there is no evidence that they knew each other. But due to certain characteristics of their careers, closely associated both with Great Britain and Russia, these masters played a significant role in the process of the artistic interchange between the two countries.

The creative activity of Skorodumov and Walker has been examined by scholars. However some important issues still remain unresolved, and among the most intriguing is the one of national characteristics. How did moving to another country affect the personalities, life styles and artistic production of Skorodumov and Walker? Were the prints they created in Great Britain different from those executed by them in Russia? And if it is yes, why so and what caused the changes? And finally would it be appropriate in the given context to speak of the Englishness and the Russianness as applied to the notion of style?

In this paper I would argue that the question of national characteristics in relation to the artistic production (particularly concerning printmaking practice) was connected with the political, socio-economical and cultural conventions inherent to a specific country rather than with where the artists were born or educated. Predominantly middle-class society of the constitutional monarchy of Great Britain suggested considerably different strategies of artistic expression than the absolute monarchy of the Russian Empire. We can observe how having crossed the borders of states artists were deeply influenced by these conventions either losing or acquiring in their works certain traits of 'Englishness' or 'Russianness'.